

THE
ADVENTURES
OF
DOD

DARK HOOD AND THE LAIR

Also by Thomas R. Williams:

The Adventures of Dod,

Confronting the Dread

THE ADVENTURES OF DOD

DARK HOOD AND THE LAIR



THOMAS R. WILLIAMS



Zettai Makeru

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For my fans
who have persisted
in seeking the secrets.

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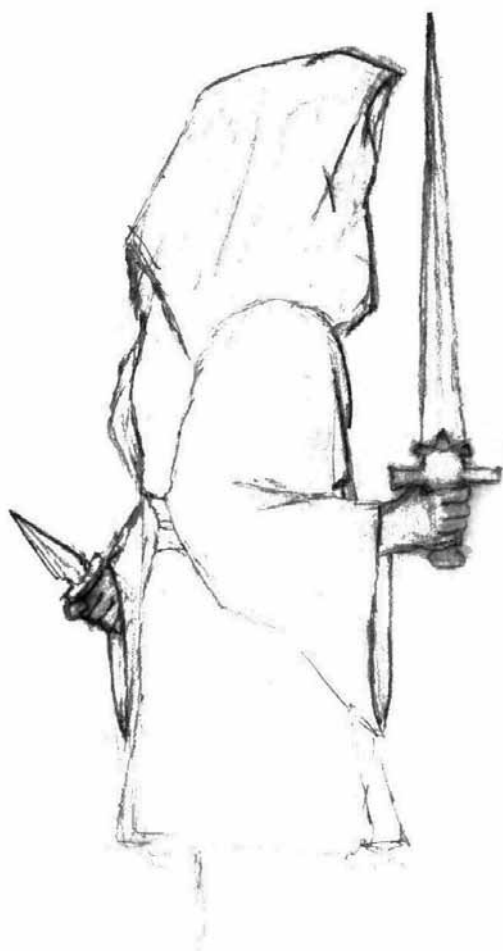
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PROLOGUE

As you've been told before, this story is almost too amazing to believe, but it's true! One seemingly insignificant boy did change the future for everyone. It's a tale that is filled with intrigue and mystery, loyal friendships and blackened betrayals.

Cole's first visit to Green left him feeling satisfied that all was well, since The Dread — the very man who had instigated the murder of his grandfather — was on his way to a living-death sentence at Driaxom. However, Cole was naïve to think the forces of evil were contained by the imprisonment of one man, especially considering the lure of powerful hidden secrets.

If you dare continue reading the adventure, beware! Who's a friend and who's a foe? Can you tell? Can Dod tell? Know this, some people will stop at nothing to get what they want!

CHAPTER ONE



THE FUGITIVES

“He’ll understand, won’t he?” whispered a woman, her head wrapped in a scarlet shawl. Her steps were sluggish and labored as she left the safety of her carriage and followed two rag-tag soldiers into the moonlight. “It’s not like it was my fault. I took every precaution imaginable. They were just too strong.”

The night air was wet and thick, fed by the mist of a murky pool. Tree frogs peeped and chirped from their hiding places in the dense foliage and bullfrogs croaked obstinately from the water’s edge.

“And my sons — they’re all dead now,” continued the woman, pleading her case. “At my age, you’d think at least one of the seven could be answering for me.”

The officers didn’t respond to her. It wasn’t their place to decide what to do. Someone else was in charge of the mess.

“Please, boys,” she begged, stopping under the shadow of a giant fir tree. “How does this work? What will he do?” Her eyes met theirs momentarily. Their worn, dirty clothes and scarred, somber faces did little to instill hope of a civil conversation with their boss.

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Up ahead, on the swampy banks of the pond, two ghoulish torches made of skulls flickered sporadically, crackling and hissing as they burnt the unwary bugs that crossed too close. Behind them, a tar-black castle rose four stories from the mud. Moss and vines shrouded the lower half of the building, as though the bog would consume it.

One soldier, a hefty three-hundred-pounder, nodded his head toward the castle's entrance. When the woman continued to hesitate, he grabbed for her arm.

"I'm coming," she barked, prickling up. But before she moved, a giant brown snake, eighteen feet long, crossed the stone path in front of them. Its bulbous, glowing eyes searched the horizon while its forked tongue licked the night air. Three lumps in the snake's otherwise sleek form indicated it had fed on large prey.

No sooner had the serpent's tail left the path than a hearty nudge forced the woman to walk.

"Can't you tell me anything?" she begged, melting with fear. She wrung her hands in torment, whitening her bulgy knuckles.

The smaller of the two soldiers shook his head and looked away.

In front of the castle, a rickety bridge crossed a twenty-foot moat that encircled the building. Muddy, bubbling water filled the ditch as alligators fought over space. They seemed hopeful that someone would fall through the rotten timbers and feed them.

Before entering, the two guards straightened their shoulders, drew their swords, and clanked a dragon's-head knocker.

"Arrival's here, sir," yelled the larger soldier, sucking in his gut.

The giant double doors swung open slowly, revealing a smoky hall. Dozens of poorly dressed warriors sat around four

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sprawling banquet tables. They looked like pirates. Up the center of the room, ten-foot poles held oil lamps that burned dimly, revealing the remains of dinner — carcasses from a couple of pigs so picked at that a crow would strain its eyes to find flesh on the bones that were left.

“Bring her here,” yelled a burly man, dressed in dark leather. He sat at the back of the room on a throne made of bleached bones.

“Murdore — it’s good to see you — ” began the woman, but her voice was lost in the vaulted hall. The rats that scurried across the trusses were louder than she was.

“I very much doubt that!” thundered the man, rising to his feet. He was the most formidable of the group, and it wasn’t just his size — his face was terrifying, pocked with scars, and his eyes were threatening, as remorseless as the devil’s. The hilt of his wicked sword had the mark of a gruesome skull.

“Oh, sir — ” said the woman, bowing over. Her knees knocked together as she was hurried through the maze of clutter to the base of Murdore’s throne. She didn’t look him in the eyes.

“I thought we had an agreement!” he raged. “Didn’t you sign with your knife?”

“Yes, but — ”

“And your kin, too?”

“Yes Murdore, but please — ”

“Then we’ll follow the law of the billies,” declared the man, raising his fist in the air.

“THE LAW OF THE BILLIES,” thundered the men in the hall, lifting their fists in agreement. Scars and tattoos littered the sunburned limbs that waved in unison for her demise.

“But please,” she begged. “My sons are all dead now — three from the raids and four more from this — ”

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“And your kinfolk?” demanded Murdore, his eyes beating down on her angrily. “The whole clan of Tool agreed to take part. If the pact is broken, they must all be punished!”

“THEY MUST ALL BE PUNISHED!” roared the mob.

“But the ones they left behind are all dead — ” explained the woman, cowering pathetically.

“Left behind?” barked Murdore. His face darkened and the room took a chill. “I didn’t authorize any raids this week. Whose cities are they plundering?”

The woman bent lower to the ground and remained silent. She trembled under her shawl, waiting for the thunder of his judgment.

“WHERE?” demanded Murdore. “Tell me where they went!”

“I-I don’t know for sure,” she squeaked. “They all packed up and left — except the ones they saved for my help — the ones that died during the break.”

“And they thought I wouldn’t notice!” scoffed Murdore, snorting through his nose like an angry ape.

“They thought you’d be pleased,” pressed the woman, taking her chances. “I told them I didn’t think so.”

“Pleased?”

“Yes sir. They’ve joined forces with a few of the strongest men from the closest islands and intend on bringing honor to the noble billies at Bollirse.”

“By playing a game?” gasped Murdore. The room filled with grumbled chuckles of disapproval.

“Yes sir,” said the woman. “I’ve heard that they call themselves the Raging Billies. They’ve gone to play against the teams to the north and west of us, sir, in hopes of progressing to the matches at Carsigo.”

“Fools!” raged Murdore. “Humans like us don’t play games.”

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“Right, sir,” agreed the woman, beginning to lift her head. “But they had a plan—one brimming with gold.”

“Hmmm,” grumbled the leader, and the room filled with small chatter. “What say you, men?” he demanded of the motley bunch.

A particularly hairy man, whose bushy brown beard nearly hid his chest, spoke up first, saying, “Gold’s not bad, sir.”

“AYE!” rumbled the crowd, clicking their mismatched, empty cups against the tables.

“And perhaps a little rum from the mainland couldn’t hurt,” added another man, whose mouth had more gaps than teeth.

“AYE!” roared the men.

“And Tredder ladies—” blurted a darker-skinned human, whose braids dangled to his waist.

“AYE! AYE! AYE!” thundered the bunch.

“Then the alligators will wait!” boomed Murdore, glancing at the woman. He bent down slowly and looked her in the eyes. “You may live for now—we’ll call it a loan. But let me know of their letters. I must be informed of this plan. Perhaps my connections will be pleased.”

The double doors boomed open with a crash, and a gust of wind made the frail flames flicker.

“They’ve been spotted, sir!” yelled a one-armed man who stood at the doorway with a small company of guards. “And they’re heading toward the docks. We’d better take action now. What say you?”

“The docks already?” choked Murdore, looking concerned. “Arise men. Get your clans and head to the ships. It’s better to overwhelm them with our numbers than to fight this lot. We’re squeezed with our orders to keep them locked from the world, but living all the same.”

“AYE!” rumbled the crowd.

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“Leave your swords and spears at home for this one, men. We must take them alive. Now go!”

“But sir,” gasped the one-armed man, scratching at his matted dreadlocks, “shouldn’t we bring precautions. I just witnessed—well—”

Murdore’s glare seized the man and shushed his tone.

“I-I mean, s-sir,” stuttered the man at the door, “a lesser group was in their way—as they were dashing—and now they’re all dead—and *they* used their swords!”

“It doesn’t matter!” shouted Murdore. “Get your ropes, get your nets, get your sticks, and get your clans—we need to take them alive! The consequences are too great if we don’t!”

A rumble of chatter filled the hall with noise. The one-armed man’s words were strong enough to sway the otherwise loyal group.

“LISTEN!” boomed Murdore, his face reddening with frustration and anger. “You fools don’t realize what would happen if we let them escape—or if we kill them. They’re not normal prisoners.” He searched the group with his bloodshot eyes and then added, “Do we look like common wardens to you? I say no, men, we’re not!”

“AYE!” grunted the pack.

“We’ve been entrusted with a charge—a tricky one at that—but it pays well!”

“AYE,” responded the mob less enthusiastically. A few of them glanced at their worn clothes, while others looked to their empty cups.

“Not enough, of course—”

“AYE!” surged the men, once again fully in agreement.

“But this man—our boss—he’s as soft as a nap on a bed

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of nails and as kind as the itch for water when you're months from port without rain. His glare alone could kill you—and he'd sooner do that than hear any excuses. He'd feed your young ones to the alligators for sport and then whine that the fun was over too quickly. I'm not lying. And my only stretch is that I've portrayed him on his kindest of days."

The group was silent as Murdore continued to explain what manner of man they served.

"And he rules the lands in secret—all of them! His order is rising as surely as the moon, sneaking past the eyes of the fools who sleep upon their comfy beds of democracy. If we were to cross him—"

Murdore shuddered.

"If we fail him, we're all dead! This whole island—all of our cities and every last member of our clans would be gone. He'd wipe the earth with his dark hand and we'd join the fools in the afterworld—and even there, I'm sure he has his connections."

From the corner of the room an old man, bald and fragile, leaned upon his cane and rose to his feet. His eyes were gone, so he pointed the wrong way when he spoke, saying, "We're billies. We fight. We've raided and been raided. It's just the way things go. If your boss becomes angry, I doubt he'd do any better than the other roaming billies that have attempted to plunder our cities. With weapons in hand, we're a strong bunch of souls!"

"AYE!" agreed the group loudly. Many of them drew their swords and pounded the tables with their hilts.

"And even if he does seek us out," continued the old man, "perhaps he'll punish a different lot—there are so many to choose from—and to mainlanders, we're all the same, just a bunch of ship-scrubbing, bilge-sucking, noble billies."

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“Not to this man—” began Murdore when the blind man interrupted.

“Don’t forget about the wrath of Durgon! His threats caused such alarm that we hardly dared sail out to catch fish—and what became of *them*? NOTHING!” The man re-situated his weight and staggered forward, adding, “Has your mainlander boss ever been here before?”

“No,” scoffed Murdore.

“Then he wouldn’t find us, would he?” blared the old man. “We’re as far from *anywhere* as *anyone* could possibly be. Their maps don’t even show we exist!”

“But this man you so lightly blow off,” argued Murdore, filled with rage, “he doesn’t go away when he’s angry—he stalks and plots and waits, and then, when we least expect it, he strikes! He could hire four other islands of billies to destroy us, or he could get Dreaderious and his poorlings to do the job—or...I wouldn’t put it past him to trick Pious into mashing us. This man—this *monster*!—he’s impossible to stop.”

“Then go recapture our guests, Murdore!” ordered the hunching man, pulling rank. “But don’t leave our clans helpless against them. Swords and spears are necessary if you hope to set things right.”

Murdore moaned and groaned and fumed as the room silently watched the showdown of sorts.

“As you wish, *father*!” conceded Murdore bitterly. “Rise up with your might, men! Gather your clans and we’ll stop them. It’s better to get paid in gold than in wrath!”

“AYE! AYE! AYE!” roared the whole room, as the warriors jumped to their feet and stormed out the door, leaving a catastrophic mess. The lady with the scarlet shawl crept for the

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exit, too, but was stopped short by Murdore. "We'll have you start with this disaster, woman, as the rest of us go to clean up the one your clumsy clan left afoot." He plucked his shield from the wall, threw a gigantic coil of rope over his shoulder, and tapped the hilt of his sword three times for good luck before following after the one-armed guard.

Down by the wharf, thousands of men merged, creating a sea of glittering swords and shields that outshined the moon. A dozen full-sized battle ships were anchored in the bay, a safe distance from the rocky shore, and another three dozen boats of smaller sizes were tied to the pier.

"SEARCH THEM ALL!" yelled Murdore, trying to be heard over the howling wind. A storm was coming. In the distance, black clouds hid the stars, while bursts of lightning streaked the sky. The unsettled water crashed mercilessly against the boats, wave after wave, grinding them into each other and the dock.

Like an army of ants, the men flooded the coastline, searching the piles of wreckage, the supply shacks, and the docked boats. The fugitives were gone. They hadn't stolen any of the smaller vessels, which led the soldiers to assume that they'd opted for the swamps, hoping to steal away from the island after the weather had settled.

But before the throng of men had cleared the first bluff toward the mires, someone noticed that one of their battleships had lifted its anchor, posted its sails, and was heading out to sea.

"I thought you counted boats!" raged Murdore, nearly drawing his sword on his own men.

"We did, sir," reported the leaders. "They're all tethered in place. The blazing brutes must've swam the length and overpowered the men-at-ready aboard the ship."

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“In a storm like this?” barked Murdore angrily. He doubted that the escapees had paddled the distance without a boat, but it didn’t matter—with or without a smaller vessel, they had successfully taken control of a battleship and were well on their way to freedom.

“We’ll need every able man to load the barges and head to the dashers,” ordered Murdore, leading toward the wharf. “Launch the whole fleet! We must overrun them in time!”

But the plan was faulty from the start; the waves were so hard against the billies that their smaller boats struggled to reach the larger ships, and once they did set sail, the pounding rain and howling wind killed their ability to track the fleeing fugitives. By the middle of the night, two of their dashers had been driven by the tempest onto treacherous rocks and had sunk.

Just before dawn, the unthinkable happened. Murdore watched it all through his noculars from a distance. The very ship that they had been pursuing all night was struck by a massive bolt of lightning, splitting the mast down the center and creating a gap in the hull. Within a few minutes, the dasher tipped precariously on its side and sank out of view.

“No!” cried Murdore, blaring his venom at the wind. He cursed the waters and the skies and the powers of evil that had hedged his way, and he kept his course and sought diligently to find any survivors, but his efforts were all in vain.

Weeks later, hidden beneath better clothing than they were typically accustomed to, Murdore, and a valiant billie warrior, and the woman with the scarlet shawl nervously produced a pile of papers and entered High Gate. They had traveled for thousands of miles to bring the unwanted news. It was a frightful chore.

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With somber steps, Murdore led the way. He had brought the woman in hopes that her clan's curious plan would appease his boss, and if not, that her death would cool his rage. And he had brought the daring warrior to be the next in line, if two deaths were required. And he had brought his best shoes for running and his best sword for fighting if three or more bodies were the price of forgiveness.

However, when he timidly sought his boss, he was met with a shocking report—he was told that Sirlonk was imprisoned at High Gate, caught the night before by a nobody named Dod, and that he was about to be escorted to Driaxom for the crimes he had committed as The Dread!

The news changed everything.

With a new lease on life, Murdore sighed. Perhaps things weren't so bad. Perhaps with The Dread gone, the noble billies' little disaster wasn't important anyway. Perhaps the gaping hole in the ranks of evil would be filled by someone who cared less about the loss of a handful of fugitives.

Only time would tell.

CHAPTER TWO



SOMETHING'S MISSING

Cole looked out his window and watched the rain come down in torrents. It was unusual for southern Utah to get so much water. He would have taken the time to think that it was odd if his mind hadn't been preoccupied with something that was far more extraordinary.

Thoughts of Green flooded Cole's mind, and at the forefront were his beloved friends, Boot, Buck, Dilly, and Sawny, as well as others who had included him in their circle of camaraderie. He was happy to be home and very glad to see that his world had remained untouched, yet it actually made him feel melancholy to know that his friends were in Green and he wasn't.

"They're waiting for me," muttered Cole to himself, reaching for the medallion around his neck. He pulled on the chain and drew it out of his shirt. Both sides of the golden object were worn, so the faint inscriptions were hard to see. It resembled an ancient coin.

"As long as I keep this on, time will stand still in Green," Cole sighed reassuringly as he slid it back. He looked his bedroom over

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with new eyes, having been gone for months, and was surprised to see how small and tattered it was when compared to the one he had shared with Boot and Buck. The walls were covered with pictures and posters, hung to hide the holes and cracks in the plaster, and the floor was draped with a worn, secondhand rug that bunched up against the base of his younger brothers' bunk bed. Everything in the room seemed to limp along on its last leg, ready to give out. Even Cole's computer looked ratty, having been obtained as a trade for mowing Miss Emily Holbrook's lawn the prior summer.

At least Dilly can't see this, thought Cole, suddenly grateful for the barrier that separated him from the other Coosings. With the wealth at Twistyard, he couldn't imagine Dilly would understand.

"Water," groaned Alex, mumbling in his sleep. "Help. I can't swim." He appeared to be dreaming about the flashflood that had nearly claimed their lives. Cole approached his sleeping brothers and fought off the urge to embrace them. After having been away for what seemed like a long time, he wanted to wake them up and tell them about his adventures, even if they had only napped a short while. He knew Josh would insist on hearing every detail.

A quiet knock interrupted his thoughts. Cole crossed the room with two steps and greeted Aunt Hilda. He couldn't help giving her a big hug.

"Are you okay?" she asked, stepping back. Her eyes prodded his.

"I'm fine," he said. "I just wanted to tell you thanks for everything." Cole looked down and sheepishly added, "It wouldn't be the same around here without you."

"So, you're thinking about running away, are you?" responded Hilda wryly. "I did when I was fourteen."

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“No,” laughed Cole. He realized he was acting weird for a teenager who had just barely finished fighting with his mother, and Aunt Hilda had watched the whole thing unfold.

“Nope. Leaving is the opposite of what I’m thinking,” said Cole. “And...um...I’m sorry for the way I acted downstairs.” Cole searched for the apology that he’d rehearsed in his mind while in Green. “I shouldn’t treat you and Mom like that. I’m going to be better. I promise.”

Hilda reached out and drew Cole back into her arms, giving him a big squeeze that buried his face in her long, curly brown hair. Cole winced in pain. One of her hands had found the wound on his shoulder, causing it to bleed.

“What’s this?” said Hilda, tugging at the neckline of Cole’s shirt. “You didn’t say anything about getting hurt in the flood this morning.” She inspected his gash as well as she could with him squiggling. “I think we need to visit the hospital. This looks pretty serious.”

“I’m fine,” contended Cole, finally shaking himself loose. “I already had someone look at it. He wrapped it up and...”

Cole’s voice faded. He remembered that the medical people in Green had attended to his injury from Sirlonk with strange bandages, but returning to Earth had stripped them off. They were gone. And Aunt Hilda’s hug had reopened one corner of the wound.

“Josh doesn’t count!” insisted Hilda. “Now hold still and let me get a good look.” She reached over and plucked the last tissue from a box on the top of Cole’s dresser and wiped the blood away until she could see the cut better. “Huh. That’s weird,” she stammered, standing on her toes; her trim frame was shorter than Cole’s. “It looks like most of it is sealed-up. Just this one

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spot is oozing. Come downstairs and I'll fix you the way Pap always did."

Cole knew what was coming. Pap cleaned his abrasions with alcohol and then pulled them closed with the sticky part of bandages, after cutting the padded centers out.

The commotion drew Josh and Alex to the main floor. They followed Aunt Hilda, having been awakened by the fuss over Cole's laceration. The two gangly brothers looked like twins. Eleven-year-old Alex curled up on the couch with a blanket and sleepily gazed, while ten-year-old Josh leaned over Cole's shoulder, begging to help.

"What did that?" asked Josh, surprised to see the three-inch wound across Cole's left shoulder. He scratched at his straight brown hair and fidgeted impatiently.

"Don't you mean who?" responded Cole, grinning. His eyes flashed at Josh with excitement. "You'd never believe what happened."

Cole began at the beginning and spent the next three hours retelling his adventures in Green, including all about Twistyard, the Coosings, Bollirse, and his near fatal encounter with The Dread. He would have gone on longer if it hadn't been for Josh's piano lesson that cut the story short.

Hilda listened while she busied herself around the kitchen, tidying up and doing laundry. She never once commented on how outlandish and crazy it all sounded; and when she did finally remark, she simply stated that Cole was becoming more like Pap each day. It was a compliment.

Alex tried to stay interested in the story, from his cozy spot, but eventually gave in to the tug of heavy eyelids. Josh, on the other hand, was so involved in the account that hardly two

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minutes went by without him asking questions. He frequently interrupted with comments of envy, adding over and over, “You’ll bring me there next time, won’t you, Cole?”

Part of Cole wished he could bring Josh with him—that is, if he ever figured out how to get back; going to Green and returning to Earth were two moves he hadn’t mastered. But another part of Cole was grateful he had an impassible barrier between his safe life on Earth and the precarious circumstances in the other realms.

The following weeks flew by faster than any Cole had ever known. His computer stayed mostly dormant, while other activities took the bulk of his time, which is really saying something considering he was a self-proclaimed computer geek. After having faced The Dread, everything else seemed less daunting, including being teased by Jon. Cole felt like a whole new person, liberated from his fears and driven to succeed.

When Cole was at baseball practice, he was really there. Of course, it didn’t hurt that he had a new-found love for Bollirse and his teammates back in Green. Thinking of them and the upcoming Bollirse matches, including the regulation play against Raul Hall, drove him to practice hitting balls like never before. He set up a strange configuration of three old tarps in his backyard and spent hours whacking stuff Josh threw in his direction. Around the block, people joked that Josh would become a star pitcher by the end of the summer if Cole continued at the pace he was going.

And it wasn’t just baseball that received attention from Cole. His positive attitude and excitement for life breathed fresh air into everything he did—and he did a lot! He read twice as much

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as before, researching all sorts of things he had wondered about while in Green, and he joined a local fencing club of mostly older men. He even took part in an emergency-preparedness program that developed his basic skills in first-aid.

His mother, Doralee Richards, was getting used to being asked what had happened to her son. It appeared to the neighbors as though aliens had abducted him and left someone in his place, because he was so different.

But Cole didn't see it that way. He felt like he was finally showing to the world what he had hidden inside for years.

The only thing that bothered him enough to grumble was that his mother continued to occasionally date Coach Smith. Somehow, the closer she became to him, the more he tried to be Cole's father—and nobody could take the place of his father or grandpa.

Every night during the summer, before Cole fell asleep, he attempted to return to Green. He wanted to learn how to zip back and forth, as Pap had done. But his medallion didn't seem to work. All of the time he spent staring and thinking only made him tired—and paranoid that he had accidentally broken the charm.

One particular evening, his efforts began to appear promising. As he lay on his bed in the darkness, he focused on a speck until it grew bigger and bigger.

I'm heading back, thought Cole, bracing himself for the journey. Shortly thereafter, he realized it was a spider descending on him.

Weeks turned to months, and fall came without Cole ever revisiting Twistyard. He began to really miss his friends and wish to be with them, and since the arrival of cooler days brought the

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rigors of school, his desire to return only increased. Yet nothing proved effective at getting rid of his obligation to attend the ninth grade; fate, it seemed, kept him trapped with no way to avoid the daily lectures or the piles of homework.

At school, things were busy enough that there wasn't time for thinking about Green. Josh was the lone person he continued to speak with about the other realms, since he didn't want people to think he was loco. So it came as a shocker when a girl in his science class asked him about the subject.

"Hey, how do you get there?" she said, staring at Cole with one hand on her hip. She was skinny and tall, the same height as Cole, whose summer of growth had boosted him up to five-foot nine.

"What?" asked Cole, trying to smile. A quick brush with his right hand reassured him that his medallion was hidden beneath his shirt. The circumstance was past bizarre. He had never met the girl before, and until that moment, when they were paired together for an experiment, he had never heard her voice. He didn't even know her name.

"Tell me," said the mystery girl, nodding her head. "What do you do to get there, wherever it is?"

Cole racked his brain to think of how she could have heard of his experience. Josh had promised to keep it a secret and his other family members had quickly dismissed his original tale as just that—a story, nothing more. The only logical explanation was that she was referring to somewhere else. It was an awkward way to say hello.

"I'm Cole Richards," he responded, nervously trying to force a comfortable look. Inside, he was hoping she'd say something that would direct his mind to whatever she was really talking

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about. When his intro fell flat, he instinctively stuck out his hand to shake. It was a big blooper. The girl raised an eyebrow and left him hanging.

“That’s a nice dress you’re wearing,” Cole quickly said, feeling like he was in a sinking hot-air balloon. He drew back his hand and stuffed it clumsily into his pocket. The girl’s gaze was intimidating. “Not very many people fancy-up when coming here,” he added. “It’s refreshing to see you—well—like that.” Cole cringed. His words felt wrong and old-fashioned or foreign. He was awkward at introductions, especially to cute or popular girls, and his lab partner was both. Cole vaguely recalled having seen her around with older, high school guys—the football team.

“Fancy-up?” she said, smirking. She twisted her head and her straight brown hair whipped the air, then draped over her shoulder, halfway to her waist. “You’re funny.”

Before either of them could say anything else, the teacher came walking over and tapped his watch. “Time’s a-wasting,” he grumbled, scowling. His wrinkly forehead and bushy eyebrows made him look comical, despite his serious intent. “Get going on this or you’ll get a bad grade.”

Mr. Brewer meant what he said. He wasn’t a nice teacher, and from what Cole had observed during the first three weeks of class, he’d happily give both of them lousy scores for incompleteness if they missed finishing the smallest part of the experiment. So, with the warning they got, Cole proceeded to work feverishly, explaining out loud what he was doing, while his nameless partner watched, half-interested.

About thirty minutes into the task, Cole noticed that his cohort wasn’t even pretending to pay attention anymore. She kept reaching into her expensive backpack, texting. It wouldn’t

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have mattered if Cole had four hands to work with, like Dungo. However, as he had only two, and was approaching the fun part where it became obvious why they were in pairs for the assignment, Cole spoke up and asked for her help.

She ignored him, giggled to herself, and flipped her hair with one hand while grabbing for her phone with the other.

Cole begged, this time with greater urgency. Still no response. Finally, brown goo bubbled over the top of a beaker he couldn't reach, a beaker his partner could have poured into the other two larger ones he was carefully balancing and the experiment would have been complete.

"Oh!" groaned Cole. He was terribly frustrated and wanted to scream when suddenly something strange happened. A flash of unusual images raced through his mind, much the same way they had in Green. They flowed like lightning and were his first experience of that kind since returning to Earth. The message was clear: Back up, NOW!

Cole moved forward, partially spilling one of the beakers' contents on the counter as he attempted hastily to free his hands of the messy liquids before retreating. Unfortunately, the dreaded event happened too fast to avoid. The last thing Cole could remember was feeling something heavy hit the back of his head.

When he awoke, he was lying on a stretcher, being carried to an ambulance.

"What happened?" whispered Cole. He felt dizzy and nauseous. He glanced around at the spinning world. Slowly, two men's faces became clearer.

"Can you see us?" one man asked.

Cole nodded.

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“Don’t move,” insisted the other. “We need to check your neck at the hospital. It might be broken.”

“What? I’m fine,” argued Cole. He lifted one of his legs and wiggled it in the air, proving he still had mobility.

Regardless, the medical team loaded him into their emergency vehicle and hauled him away.

At the urgent-care facility, doctors ran a series of quick tests to determine the extent of his injuries. Fortunately, the prognosis was good: He was fine, except for a nasty bump on the back of his head.

After the drama of being attended to, a nurse escorted him to one of six cubicle spaces, partitioned off by drab-green curtains, and had him lie down with an ice pack on his goose egg. He wasn’t there long before Principal Robinson arrived—huffing and puffing—spouting all sorts of things, explaining how the accident had happened, or at least what some people claimed had happened. Cole listened to the story, while waiting for his mother to arrive.

His lab partner had swung her bag, trying to avoid the messy experiment gone wrong, and in doing so, had bumped others into Mr. Brewer’s prized bronze of an elephant perched on top of a pole. The metal statue had taken a detour across the back of Cole’s head before making its way to the floor.

Principal Robinson apologized repeatedly for the incident and insisted that Mr. Brewer should have retired when he left Salt Lake for his native town of Cedar. “He’s worked his last day in my school!” he grumbled adamantly, tugging at the sleeves of his pinstriped suit coat that didn’t quite fit him. “I can guarantee you that much.”

“It wasn’t really his fault,” said Cole, starting to feel sorry for

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Mr. Brewer. Despite the teacher's mean streak, Cole didn't want to be responsible for his dismissal.

"Yes it was!" snapped the principal, his portly face turning redder than it already was, matching his flaming hair. "He's got his personal junk all over that room, like a museum. By the way he collects and displays trinkets and gadgets you'd think he was the curator of some dusty auction-house. It's a problem when teachers allow their hobbies and part-time employment to creep into the classroom. He can have all the rubbish he wants in his own residence, and that's where it's going to be, starting tomorrow!"

A sick feeling settled in the pit of Cole's stomach. He felt awful about getting his teacher fired, even if he hadn't liked him. And Cole knew what everyone else didn't: He knew he could have avoided the whole dilemma if he would have immediately backed up, as he had been warned to do.

Principal Robinson continued his apology speech, as though he lacked an off button, when Cole overheard a familiar voice. It was his mother's. She was at the reception desk inquiring about him, and judging by the tone she used, she was drenched with concern. "I'm...uh...Doralee Richards," she said, a bit frail in the lips. "Where's my son? Is he going to be all right?"

Cole stood up, parted the squeaky curtain, and hustled to greet her. His head hurt and his clothes were a mess; nevertheless, he didn't want his mother to worry any more than she already had, so he quickened his steps and played the part of feeling fine.

"Sorry Mom," said Cole, putting one arm on her shoulder as soon as he found her. She smelled like burnt fries and dish soap, suggesting she'd come straight from the Truck-Stop Diner. "You know how schools are these days," continued Cole, forcing

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a smirk. "If you get a scratch, they rush you in. It's crazy if you ask me."

Doralee trembled and hugged him. Her slight frame looked as though it would give out if she weren't being steadied by Cole.

"They called me at work and said you were seriously injured," sobbed Doralee, her blonde curls jiggling with her shaking shoulders. "They said you had a broken neck!"

"I'm fine—really, Mom," assured Cole, partially lying. His head was throbbing and he needed to sit down.

Principal Robinson began again at the beginning of his apology lecture and continued circling the issues until he felt Doralee was plentifully informed of how regretful he was that the mishap had occurred. The swirl of words found their way past Mr. Brewer's dismissal four times, with each including a pledge that disruptive and dangerous classrooms would not be tolerated by him.

At home, Cole did his best to sleep off the headache, laying down at 4:30 p.m. and not rising until the next morning. He didn't even stir. He slept so soundly that when he awoke on the floor beside his bed, he hadn't the slightest clue of when he had fallen there. And strangely, his right hand hurt more than his head. One knuckle was swollen and tender.

Alex showed concern during breakfast, asking a few questions before inspecting Cole's injuries. Josh, on the other hand, was more interested than concerned and prodded deeper, insisting Cole was holding back the true rendition of what had happened, the one about being wounded while fighting some horrid creature in Green. The conversation continued, with Josh persistently digging for additional information, until Cole nearly

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missed his bus—which wouldn't have been entirely bad, since the ride to school was more awkward than usual; not only did he sit alone, the chorus of whispers seemed to lead people's eyes in his direction.

As the day went on, from one period to the next, bits and pieces of a peculiar tale emerged—a story that only slightly resembled the things Principal Robinson had told—an account that included Cole swinging his fists and kicking his feet while yelling insane things.

Given the rumors, it wasn't surprising at lunch when nobody wanted to sit by him. Even Coach Smith's son, Bumbling Bobby, who was his usual tag-along lunch-pal, found somewhere else to eat. And that was strange, considering that after Cole had returned from Green and had practiced baseball like an obsessed maniac, his standing on the team had risen near the top while his empathy for Bobby had remained the same.

Tension was mounting, building up to the moment of truth: Sixth period. Stewing over it stole Cole's appetite like a case of the stomach flu, rendering him incapable of even nibbling. He couldn't stop worrying about whether Mr. Brewer would still be there, pending dismissal; and if so, what would he say to Cole? He'd still be mean—and he'd be mad as well! The only thing that made the wait bearable was knowing that at last he could ask his classmates what had really happened and get a reliable answer.

Cole's thoughts pestered him as he pushed his food back and forth, never raising a bite of country-fried steak to his mouth. Even his fudge-frosted brownie was untouched when he gave up trying and left the cafeteria.

With questions nagging, Cole headed to his science class. He hoped to get there early enough to talk with others about

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what had happened, but late enough to avoid being alone with Mr. Brewer.

Room 125 was the correct door. He took a deep breath and strode in, searching for his seat. The room was completely different. The desks were orderly, placed in straight rows, which hadn't been the case before, and the mounds and mounds of stuff—the awards, piles of paper, scrolls of maps and charts, statuary, tools, boxes, and ancient artifacts—were all gone. The room looked and felt gutted, like a thief had raided the place during the night and had brought a team of men to strip it of everything. Even Cole's favorite inspiration, an African wooden mask, was gone. It had hung precariously above the chalkboard with its scarlet tongue sticking out.

"Find a seat, dear. Take your pick," said a lady that sat in the corner. She looked mid-forties and stylishly dressed. Her straight-backed posture, black hair, and dark brown eyes reminded Cole of Juny Chantolli. Across the top of the board, 'Mrs. Tupper' was written in big letters.

Cole surveyed the empty seats. He was the first student, so he did have his pick.

"Whoa, he's gone!" gasped Jon, entering the room behind Cole. Jon was Cole's baseball nemesis. He had made fun of Cole for years and had gotten a lot of other guys to join in—that is, before the change. Once Cole started performing better at sports and didn't seem bothered by teasing, the ridicule had died down.

"Hey, Jon. This is pretty weird, isn't it?" said Cole, feeling one hundred percent better than he had in the cafeteria. He was relieved that he didn't need to face an angry Mr. Brewer.

"Yeah," said Jon nervously. He looked Cole up and down with his smoky-blue eyes and then moved back out into the hall.

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Cole took a seat in the middle, figuring he'd have a better chance of sitting next to someone he could casually ask about the day before, but it didn't work. As other students entered, they too acted irregular, like there was a monster in the room—and Cole was the monster! Nobody wanted to get near him.

To make matters worse, the whole class, for the first time, was completely silent. Even the bubbly girls who always sat on the front row were speechless. It left no leeway for Cole to strike a conversation without being the center of attention.

Mrs. Tupper began by explaining that she was not a substitute, she was their new science teacher. The announcement created a quick moment of whispers followed by a return to silence. She then went over an unusually long list of rules before settling into a monotonous discourse on the value of bees, wasps, and hornets to Earth's sensitive ecosystem.

Except for occasional coughs, the students could have been made of stone. They were hardly the same bundle of people who had attended the previous science class taught by Mr. Brewer. They behaved so dissimilarly that Cole actually spent half of the lecture glancing around, trying to piece together who was different. Finally it hit him. The nameless girl was gone. She and Mr. Brewer were the only deletions—and there were no additions.

After class, Mrs. Tupper asked to speak with Cole for a few minutes, promising to provide him with a note for his gym teacher if he'd stay. She didn't have a seventh period and was looking for answers as to why the students all appeared so averse to being by him.

"I have no idea," confessed Cole, feeling more than confused. He hadn't had so much as one normal 'Hello' or 'How are you doing?' from anyone, which was the exact opposite of what he had expected, given his unfortunate injury the day before. "You

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probably know more than I do,” said Cole, his hesitant voice hinting at the frustration he felt. “Since yesterday’s little episode, everybody has been treating me like I have the plague.”

“What happened yesterday?” asked Mrs. Tupper, chilling Cole with her gaze. She had obviously already made up her mind that he was the problem, and by her questions, she was clearly attempting to ‘help him’ discover it for himself.

Cole was shocked. He couldn’t believe she had misunderstood the circumstance—he wasn’t a troublemaker—and he certainly wasn’t dumb enough to think for one second that Mrs. Tupper was unaware of what had transpired the day prior. Principal Robinson had surely filled her in; after all, he would have explained about Mr. Brewer’s untimely retirement while hiring her on such short notice.

When staring in amazement didn’t work, Cole finally answered her question by saying, “This!” pointing to the large goose egg on the back of his head. He wished she would stop playing dumb and get on with her lecturing if that was her intent.

Mrs. Tupper didn’t flinch, so Cole repeated what the principal had recounted to him. Cole even walked over to the counter where he had been mixing his experiment and pointed out where Mr. Brewer’s large elephant statue had been.

“You’re kidding, right?” said Mrs. Tupper, dumbfounded.

Cole looked into her eyes to see if she was being sarcastic. She wasn’t.

“I just don’t understand,” she continued, sizzling Cole with her stare. “You had an elephant hit your head yesterday, and now everybody hates you?”

It didn’t make sense to Cole, either. He felt stupid trying to explain it that way, but it was the truth, as far as he knew.

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"And this room had some guy's stuff in it?" asked Mrs. Tupper. She didn't even attempt to hide her doubts; her voice said it all — "You're a liar!"

"It was his classroom!" argued Cole, getting angry.

"Whose?"

"Mr. Brewer's!"

"Your substitute brought a large statue of an elephant?" scoffed Mrs. Tupper. "I doubt that. At least make your story believable, Cole. This conversation is ridiculous."

"He wasn't a substitute!" contended Cole, feeling maligned. "He's been here for two years. He started teaching ninth when I entered seventh."

"Do you honestly think I'm going to believe that?" choked Mrs. Tupper, shaking her head. "Mr. Robinson hired me last spring as the result of a larger couple of grades. Your group has eighty-five more students than last year's, and next year has a dozen or so more than that. When he hired me, he promised to fill the first three weeks with alternates—to help things fit my schedule."

"Mr. Brewer *wasn't* a substitute!" insisted Cole, feeling overwhelmed. He hadn't ever raised his voice to a teacher, much less needed to defend himself against one. "You can ask anyone," begged Cole. "I know for sure he's taught here for two years. He's got a reputation....Anyway, Principal Robinson told me he was firing Mr. Brewer, and it looks like that's what he's done."

The conversation ended abruptly with Mrs. Tupper showing Cole to the door. It left him wishing for more information and wondering where his normal life had gone.

That evening, a few answers finally trickled in. Cole's mother had invited Coach Smith and his son over for a Friday

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night barbeque, so when Bobby showed up, Cole cornered him about the rumors. It took a bit of persuading before Bobby was convinced that Cole was really himself and not a dangerous person. Some people at school had suggested that the bump on his head had made him go wild.

"They say you went nuts—completely loony—" said Bobby, still looking apprehensive. His eyes kept glancing toward his father, who was standing by the smoking grill, polishing off his third hamburger.

"Hardly," interrupted Cole, feeling the sting of Bobby's words. "It wasn't like that. Once the elephant smacked my head, it was lights out. The next thing I remember was being carried on a stretcher."

"That's not what I heard," divulged Bobby nervously. He kept scratching at his ear. "They say you went down and looked like you were out cold—maybe dead—and then, once your teacher was getting everyone to exit the room, you popped up and started doing freaky things—making noises and hitting people..."

"Hitting who?" barked Cole, shocked by the news. "And why would Mr. Brewer ask everyone to leave the room? Doesn't that sound strange to you?"

"I don't know," said Bobby. "I'm just telling you what I heard. They say a student stayed in the room to help your teacher, and now he's all thrashed. They took him away in an ambulance. That's why people were freaked. It was like a different you...like an evil twin came leaping out..."

Bobby glanced down at Cole's sore hand and backed up.

"They've got it all wrong," complained Cole. "I know they do. I counted heads today in class, and guess what? The

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only person missing was my lab partner—a *girl*! And the only ambulance was the one that carried me—and me alone! There's no way I 'thrashed' someone."

"But Mr. Brewer was gone, just like they said. He was so beat-up that he couldn't come back."

"Right. I don't think so. I personally heard Principal Robinson say, over and over, that he was going to fire him for bringing his junk to school."

"Really?"

"Yes!" said Cole, disgusted. "Go ahead and ask my mom. It's pathetic to see how quickly things get blown out of proportion. I'm the one who was injured and now everybody thinks I'm bad? Go figure."

"That does sound pretty lame," admitted Bobby, softening.

"Yeah," blared Josh, weaseling his way into the conversation. He had only heard the ending part, yet he figured he probably agreed. "Two-on-two basketball—me and Cole against you and your old man," said Josh, jumping around.

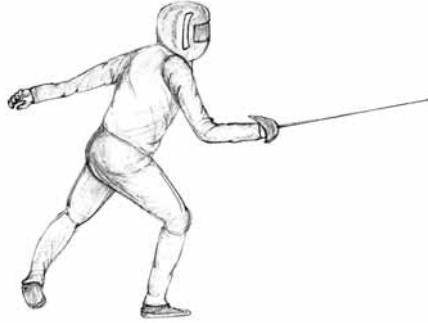
Cole looked over at Coach Smith. All three boys wouldn't stand much of a chance against him, let alone just Cole and Josh.

"Will you tell people I'm not crazy," added Cole, nudging Bobby before they went off to play ball.

Bobby nodded his head and cracked an uncomfortable grin.

Cole could feel something critical was missing, something he should have known, but didn't; however, at least one person in the ninth grade didn't completely hate him.

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All weekend long, Cole obsessed about how to convince the entire ninth grade that he wasn't prone to hurt people. Everyone in his family had advice on what to do. His mother suggested he ignore them and they'd eventually forget about the whole thing. Aunt Hilda told him to get the principal to announce that Mr. Brewer had been fired and that Cole hadn't punched anyone. Alex said he should consider dropping out, since that's what he would be wishing to do if he were caught in Cole's predicament. And Josh, like always, had an interesting twist to his counsel. He told Cole to enjoy the moment, insisting that it was a rare honor to be mistakenly dubbed the number one bully of the school.

Monday morning approached like a snail, and when it finally arrived, it came without Cole ever deciding how to handle his situation. Fortunately, he didn't need to. When he arrived at school, Principal Robinson met him in the front hall and expressed regret profusely for the way everyone had been acting. Apparently, he had just gotten done with hearing an earful of

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Aunt Hilda's mind—not a very pleasant experience—and, therefore, was more than aware of how dreadful the rumors had been on Friday. Given the mix-up, he promised that he would personally make things right—and by second period, he had.

During a school assembly, Principal Robinson gave a speech that did wonders; it cleared the air sufficient to raise feelings of guilt in nearly everyone. As a result, people thronged Cole the rest of the day. Some even breathed disparaging remarks about anyone who swayed slightly in the opposite direction, to the extent that his science class associates who had before claimed to have heard screaming, miraculously recanted their testimonies. It was unbelievable.

Mrs. Tupper also made an announcement, but it wasn't to the whole school as Principal Robinson's had been. She informed her sixth period students that she had decided to make Cole her class president for the entire year, which position, in her hierarchy, included participating with her in determining their grades. It was like handing Cole a magical friendship-wand. She also took Cole aside and informed him that Principal Robinson had corrected her misunderstanding; for, even though she had been hired the prior spring, Principal Robinson had decided to keep the excellent substitute, Mrs. Whittwer, and have her continue teaching the science class he had intended on giving to Mrs. Tupper, while using Mrs. Tupper's timely arrival as the solution to his firing of Mr. Brewer.

Monday couldn't have been better—that is, until Cole discovered something truly dreadful. As he lay in his bed at night, he thought it would be a perfect time to take a break from ninth grade and visit his friends in Green. So he began concentrating, determined this time to keep trying until he was

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transported—even if it took all night. After a while, without any perceivable results, he reached for his luck charm, hoping it would work better if he looked at it. That’s when everything went wrong. His medallion was gone!

Cole hopped out of bed and searched frantically. It had to be somewhere. He ran down the hall and checked the bathroom.

“How could I have taken a shower and not noticed it was gone,” muttered Cole. “It must have happened after this morning.”

The next three hours were spent exploring every inch of the house. Nothing was left unturned, and everyone joined in. They knew how much Cole loved it, even if they didn’t understand its importance. He had told them of his adventures in Green, but had never shared that they were in part due to his special gift from Pap. It would have been pointless to add that bit. Only Josh believed that the tales were real, and had Josh known that the necklace was essential, he would have borrowed it for himself.

“I can’t believe it’s gone,” groaned Cole, settling back into bed when their meticulous combing had failed. He smacked his flat pillow with his fists, wishing it was puffier, and tried to get comfortable, despite the nagging anxiety that tore at his insides like a blender. Losing his only ticket to Green was ten times worse than being ostracized by his classmates and deemed a school menace.

“I think you’re still lucky,” called Josh from his bunk. Alex was already snoring in the bottom half, so Josh had to raise his voice and lean over the edge to be heard from the top. His faded-gray flannel pajamas were oversized hand-me-downs from Cole so they hung on him like Spanish moss. “Besides,” he continued, popping his hand in and out of a hole in the sleeve, “I bet you’ll find it’s in the lost-and-found at school. Maybe it slipped off when you hit your head.”

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“That’s it!” snapped Cole, his face lighting up. “You’re right, Josh. The last time I remember having it was before I started that dumb experiment.”

Cole’s thoughts continued to run a million miles an hour. He began to think of how the nameless girl had been bugging him about Green. It was mysterious that she had known anything concerning the other realms, but as unexplainable as it was, since she had been prodding right before his necklace went missing, she looked pretty guilty.

“I’ll talk with her tomorrow,” mumbled Cole, deep in thought. He was halfway to getting his medallion back.

“With who? Aren’t you going to check the lost-and-found?” asked Josh, playing with his childhood blanket. He wrapped it around his arm and pretended it was a cannon.

“Nope. That’s not where it is,” responded Cole. “But I think I know who has it.”

“The Dread!” exclaimed Josh, bursting with excitement. He tore his wrap from his arm and draped it over his head, pretending to be a cloaked villain. “He’s come for your necklace and tracked you down. He probably thinks you’ll lose to him now that he’s got it....I’ll be your luck. Can I help you fight him this time? I’ve been practicing that move you taught me.”

Josh deserted his blanket and hopped off the top bunk without using the ladder, waving his arms in the air like a karate master. It looked silly, not scary—especially when he hit the floor.

“No. The Dread’s long gone,” assured Cole, trying to hold back a sneeze. “They’ve locked him in the worst of places. Criminals go in, only corpses come out. And what happens in between is real torture.”

“Then who’s got it?” begged Josh. “Let me come with you.”

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I'll bring you twice as much luck as that trinket from Pap ever did. By the time we get it back, you'll want to wear me around your neck, not that thing."

Josh proceeded to do a series of hi-yahs and karate chops to the overflowing dirty-clothes bag that hung from a dresser-drawer knob. Eventually, it conceded to his prowess at martial arts by spilling laundry out its top.

Cole felt like it was pointless to explain to Josh that he didn't plan on fighting someone for the medallion; Josh was already bopping around the room, showing off his stuff, imagining a villain of monstrous proportions, not an ordinary, ninth-grade girl.

"If I run into trouble," said Cole sleepily, "you're the one I want at my side. We could take them."

"Thanks, Cole," erupted Josh. "You won't be sorry. I'll let 'em have it with my fists..."

Cole jumped in to settle him down. "Save your strength, Buddy. Who knows, maybe The Dread has a brother. We'd better get to sleep."

The clock on the wall showed 12:55. Cole had been too concerned about his lost treasure to get tired until he realized where it was. Somehow, knowing who had it made him feel slightly better.

The rest of the week, Cole was the first to arrive for sixth period. Daily, he waited at the entrance to room 125 for the nameless girl, only to be repeatedly disappointed. By Friday, she had been absent five days, going on six. It felt like he would never get a chance to ask her to give his medallion back. And then, while sitting in class, a plan crept into the back of his mind.

"Mrs. Tupper," he said, noticing that sixth period was almost

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over. “I feel bad about all of the things my lab partner has been missing. She’s skipped six days in a row. Would you like me to deliver some homework to her?”

It felt canned. And that’s because it was. But fortunately, Mrs. Tupper didn’t detect it.

“That would be great,” she sighed, flipping through a few stacks of papers. She began to compile the past week’s assignments as Cole slipped up beside her. He eagerly peered down the roll, searching for the mystery girl’s name.

“Wait a minute,” said Mrs. Tupper, looking into the air. “Nobody’s been gone for that long. I thought you meant Suzy.” She straightened a wrinkle out of her polka-dotted dress, glanced at Cole, and continued, “Do you mean Suzy? She’s only been gone three days.”

“No,” responded Cole, deflated. His hopes had been dashed before she spoke, because his eyes had already noted that every name on the teacher’s list of students was familiar. None of them belonged to his strange lab partner.

“There used to be another girl in our class,” reflected Cole cautiously. “I didn’t realize she had checked out.”

“Well, if she’s not on my roll, then she won’t need this homework, will she?” said Mrs. Tupper. She smiled and began re-situating her piles of papers.

Within minutes, the bell rang and it was time to go. Cole attempted to ask around, to see if anyone remembered the girl’s name, but no one even recalled her at all, let alone her name. It was frustrating. It was as though she didn’t exist—as though she hadn’t been his lab partner—as though she was only in his mind.

After school, when Cole approached the office as Mrs. Tupper’s class president, claiming a faulty roll, the office quickly

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confirmed the same—that there hadn't been anyone else in Cole's sixth period. If the girl had attended, she had done so without proper approval. It was devastating news. It meant she had purposefully been there, stalking him, waiting for the right time to swipe his medallion.

In the weeks that followed, Cole sorrowed over his loss. He kept hoping that he would find and confront the girl. He even stepped far from his comfort level to meet people that he thought might have known her. Still, nothing worked. She was like a ghost.

Fortunately, despite his failed attempts to recover the charm, something inside him whispered he would find it and return to Green.

As fall weather set in, Cole spent more time with his fencing buddies. He learned a lot of new tricks and got a chance to practice them daily. 'The Guys,' as he referred to them, were quite a group of people to be around. The average age in their crowd was over sixty, with only one man being younger than fifty, except Cole. They wouldn't have allowed Cole to join if it weren't for his impressive first day.

Back in early July, he had gone to the fencing club assuming anyone could enroll. He hadn't known that it was a private group of friends, not an open organization. So when one man laughed at him for trying to sign up, Cole had remarked in a respectful way that the man was scared of being beaten. The comment had led to a duel with the man, whose sword skills were amazing, but somewhere in the process of losing, Cole had gained enough friends to sway The Guys into letting him stay.

The club met in an old brick building on Main Street that was solely dedicated to fencing, or at least that's what the sign

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said. It read in big letters, 'FENCING CLUB,' with a statement below it in italics, '*Dedicated to Excellence in Swordplay, Members Only.*' In truth, though, it was a hang-out joint for a bunch of old men. In one room they had a big screen TV that was always blaring the latest game, and surrounding it, enough couches to comfortably hold two dozen people. The kitchen was set up with three fridges, each brimming with sodas and junk food galore. And the rest of the rooms had fencing equipment and places to practice—equipment that mostly sat unused since The Guys spent a majority of their time talking and eating.

Cole loved to linger at the club. He would go from one guy to the next, having them each teach him about swordplay. And by spreading the role of tutor around, nobody ever felt overly used, even when Cole stayed long hours on Saturdays.

Many of Cole's best friends were in the club. Of course, that's not saying much since he couldn't get back to Green where his real best friends were. One man in particular was endearing. His name was Jack Parry. He reminded Cole of Pap. He was five-foot seven with radiant white hair. At ninety-two years, he was the oldest member of the club and probably the nicest member, too. Nevertheless, Jack was as tough as nails when sword fighting. Over the years, he had proven his place was at the top. Nobody would dare dispute that.

Cole spent a lot of time with Jack, hearing his stories and learning how to duel effectively. It helped fill the void in Cole's life that his father and Pap had left. One of the things he could always count on from Jack was good advice, especially the kind you get from one-liners. He'd frequently say things like "Don't forget, you're not alive until you're really living," and, "If you want something bad enough, you'll fight with all you've got to get it."

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As a World War II veteran, Jack knew what it was like to fight hard for something worthwhile—and he told Cole plenty about it.

“Son,” Jack said one afternoon. The old man was climbing on his favorite soapbox. “There are only two kinds of people in the world. The kind that do stuff and the kind that always talk about doing stuff. Nobody’s in between. Now you strike me as the kind of boy that’s destined to be doing.”

Jack was responding to a string of comments Cole had just made about how messed-up his life was. The real thing bothering Cole was that he hadn’t even seen a glimpse of the nameless girl, let alone reacquired his medallion. With Halloween approaching, he had mostly given up on the idea that the girl was anywhere near Cedar City. Over a month of searching had led to nothing. And to make matters worse, without the necklace, Cole knew time in Green was moving on. Things were happening there—Bollirse games were being played, friendships were being strengthened, all sorts of fun things were being done—and Cole was left out of them all.

“I know,” Cole admitted somberly. “I need to do stuff if I want stuff.” Cole’s attitude was below healthy and Jack’s hype wasn’t working.

“Well,” continued Jack. “If you’re a doer, then prove it! If things aren’t working out the way you planned—change your plans! Sitting around here moping won’t make you any happier.”

“But what do you do if you’ve tried everything?” explained Cole, feeling the conversation was bordering on pointless.

“You can never try everything,” said Jack. “There’s always something more you can do if you’re still interested in pursuing the path you’ve chosen. And if you think you’re done trying, it’s

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not because there's nothing more you can do, it's because you've given up on the path." Jack looked at Cole and then spoke with gentle firmness. "It's okay to change your course a little. Just choose something else worthwhile and get doing."

"I wish it were that simple," complained Cole.

"It is!" snapped Jack. He reached down and pulled up one of his pant legs, past the knee. A wicked matrix of scars ran from mid-thigh to ankle. The muscles on his leg were disfigured and awkward.

"I used to be fast," insisted Jack, searing Cole with his penetrating eyes. "So fast at running that some people joked they'd send me an Olympic gold medal before I could enter just to keep me from humiliating all of the other runners. It was my dream to stand on the highest podium and hear our national anthem. I could smell it, taste it. And then in my prime, this happened!" Jack patted his deformed leg.

"The war cost us a lot more than time. But I didn't sit around blubbering about how hopeless my life was. I learned to do other things—" Jack held up a pair of fencing swords and smiled. "And I've got a whole room filled with junk in my house that proves I'm pretty good...because I'm a doer!"

Jack set the swords down and staggered to a chair before readjusting his pant leg. "What is it, Cole?" he asked. "Is it math, or sports, or what?"

Cole tried to think of how to explain his problem. "I lost something really important to my family—a family heirloom. I brought it to school and someone stole it."

"Then ask around—go get it back."

"I already have," responded Cole. "It's just gone."

"Well it's not gone, it's hidden," said Jack. He didn't try to

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soften his words like a mother might. “Either forget about it and apologize to your family for losing the thing, or figure out what you haven’t done and start doing it.”

Jack made the solution sound simple. If Cole hadn’t already struggled for a month, he would have been invigorated by Jack’s words.

“Was it only valuable to your family?” asked Jack. He was trying to route Cole in a useful direction. “If someone took it, they either did it because they didn’t like you, or they’re looking for cash. I’d bet they’re trying to sell it to someone who’s willing to pay. Have you checked around—like pawn shops and antique dealers?”

Cole perked up when Jack mentioned motive. Even if the nameless girl had swiped it, what were her chances of making it to Green? Cole had tried and tried all summer and hadn’t successfully returned. After a frustrating month of attempts, maybe she would sell it.

“I hadn’t thought of buying it,” replied Cole, starting to smile. He felt a burst of hope returning. “Thanks a lot,” he said, scurrying toward the door.

“Be a doer,” called Jack, giving him a wave goodbye.

Cole was off, rushing home to make some calls. And when the local places didn’t turn up any leads, he phoned the surrounding towns, including Salt Lake to the north and Las Vegas to the south. He even sketched a rough draft of the two sides of the coin, as much as he could recall. Most of the inscriptions had been hard to see, but he remembered a very specific marking that would easily identify the coin—a ten-point star in the center on one side.

It took weeks to communicate with the different dealers.

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At first, many of them bragged that they had it in stock, until Cole informed them that he was looking for one specific coin, an heirloom that had belonged to his grandfather. Once they knew it was an original, they altered their story and said it would take time to check around.

Days turned to weeks with little change. Cole was busy enough searching that he didn't allow himself to think of defeat. He placed want ads in the local town papers, declaring his willingness to pay top dollar for a special coin, and each time he included his black-and-white sketch. He also posted flyers around the school offering a \$400 reward for the return of his medallion, no questions asked. It was pricey for Cole, whose funds were limited to a meager savings obtained by mowing lawns during the summer and shoveling walks during the winter, but as Jack had said, either you're a doer or you're not. And Cole had decided to be a doer.

Thanksgiving arrived with turkey dinner, stuffing, potatoes, rolls, and all the fixings, yet no good news to be grateful for. Still, many people reassured Cole that his coin would surface for the right price, so he continued to make weekly calls, waiting for that day.

Eventually, information did come. It wasn't directly about his coin. It was about Green! On a cold, snowy night in early December, Cole awoke around 3:00 a.m. Sweat drenched his face and clothes. He was shaking all over. What he had just seen was awful.

In his dream he saw Twistyard. It looked the same as when he had left, complete with drat soldiers camped at the base of the wall below Dilly's quarters. He saw Boot, Buck, Dilly, Sawny, Bonboo, and many other people he called friends. They were carrying on with life as though not much had changed. Suddenly, the dream became convoluted. Something black and mysterious lurked in the darkness of the night. It would emerge,

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take soldiers, then disappear. One here, two there. Twistyard was under attack from a silent and mysterious enemy!

Cole grabbed for his sword. A beast was approaching him. It was horrible. It could nearly look right through him. It was a beast that seemed to peek across space and time. It knew Cole was Dod, and it was searching for him, hungering to catch him, driven by an unusual compulsion. Cole could feel that the beast wouldn't stop until it had destroyed Twistyard and all of his friends.

"It's just a dream. It's just a dream," repeated Cole to himself. His heart was pounding in his ears. "It's just a dream."

"Must have been one heck of a dream!" said Josh, looking at Cole from only a few feet away. His eyes were wide open, and he was shivering. "You were saying all sorts of things and swinging your arms around. It's amazing Alex is still asleep. I sure couldn't snooze through it. Once you yelled 'The Dread!' that was it for me."

"The Dread?" said Cole, confused. "I wasn't dreaming about The Dread. I had a nightmare about something else, something I've never seen before."

"Well, while you were dreaming about that other stuff, you mentioned The Dread...you said, 'I know you—you're The Dread.' And then you mumbled about how much you hate the water."

"See—that proves it was just a crazy nightmare," declared Cole, reassuring himself as well as he could. "We both know I don't hate the water. Do you remember the summer Mom couldn't keep me out of the community pool? I must have gone there at least five times a week. My hair turned blonde from the chlorine."

Cole began to feel better knowing how faulty some parts of the dream had been. It gave him hope that the other parts—the parts about the creature wanting to kill him—were just made up, too. "So, you really heard me say stuff about hating the water?"

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“Yup,” answered Josh. “I was beginning to think you were going mad—like The Dread’s ghost had come to get you, and I couldn’t see him. Maybe he was drowning you or something.”

“No!” said Cole, fearing his brother’s imagination was heading out of control. “It was just a nightmare. Trust me. The Dread’s long gone, and ghosts don’t really haunt people.”

It took a few minutes before Cole was able to convince Josh back to bed, and even longer before either of them was ready to fall asleep. After all, it had been a scary experience for both boys.

The following weeks became known as ‘the December of Sleepless Nights.’ The Christmas season was ruined by all of the bad dreams Cole had. And despite none of them being as horrid as the first, and most of them not even leaving any images in his mind when he awoke, they all released doom and gloom into the air. It took a toll on everyone else in his family, too.

On the other hand, Cole’s obsession with getting back to Green was curbed. Even if the dreams were wrong, the feelings they left were convincing: Twistyard had become a dangerous place, and bad things were happening there. Cole felt sorry for his friends and wished that he could help them. Nevertheless, he wasn’t as excited to return to them as he had been before, when he had imagined everything was wonderful and fun.

As the 25th drew near, Coach Smith frequented the house more often than he had before, sometimes with Bobby and other times alone. It was easy to see he was trying to win Doralee’s heart, using the holiday season to his advantage. The only thing that slowed his schedule of visits was when he suggested that they exclusively date each other. Cole wished he hadn’t heard that part. It meant his mom was heading toward marriage. Fortunately, Doralee refused to consent, stating she

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thought things were moving too fast as it was and she needed more time.

But with Coach Smith around so often, trying to prove his genuine concern for the whole family, it created some unwanted attention. One such time was when he invited Cole to accompany him to Las Vegas for an all-day adventure, buying cars for Smith's Super Saver Slick Wheels—his used-car lot. He announced it like Cole had just won the lottery. It was scheduled for the upcoming Saturday, December 22. He would leave at 5:00 a.m. and return by midnight.

Cole new something was up when his mother consented without hearing the details and pushed him to go. She actually tried to convince Cole by suggesting that it would be a great opportunity for him to check new pawn shops in search of Pap's medallion. When Cole declined, she insisted he go. She was in on the deal. She knew what Smith was planning, and it didn't only involve cars. Smith had an acquaintance in Las Vegas that was reportedly one of the best psychiatrists in the country. Doralee hoped that Dr. Haslom would know how to help Cole overcome his nightmares.

It was useless to argue, since Cole knew he'd eventually lose to his mother's persistence, so he agreed. And though he doubted it would do any good, it was still worth a shot. At least it would make Doralee feel better.

When the day came, Cole tried to sleep during the drive to Las Vegas. He didn't want to get stuck awkwardly talking with Smith. And the feeling was mutual; when they arrived in Nevada, Smith asked Cole to wait for him in a doughnut shop while he went to conduct business.

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After three hours of reading Sir Edward Snake comic books, Cole's food was gone and the restaurant was bustling. Every seat was taken. It made him wish he had plopped himself down at a table for two, not a corner, family-sized booth. Now, with few options, he could continue glutting himself on the luxury of the spacious location, which he had occupied for so long—and in doing so, extend the displeased looks he was receiving from the standing crowd—or he could get up and leave. He chose the latter—and that changed everything!

Out in the crisp air, Christmas was on the breeze. A dusty lot filled with firs and pines beckoned to Cole. It was situated between two small casinos, and it backed onto a fenced construction site. The sign at the entrance read 'X-mas Trees.'

As Cole entered the urban forest, images zipped through his mind. They terrified him. After the horrendous experience he had gone through in his science class, he wasn't sure whether to do what he felt, or run like crazy. It was a moment of moments. He nearly bolted for the safety of the Dealer's Extravaganza down the street, until something inspired him. He could hear Jack Parry in his mind. "There are only two kinds of people. The kind that do stuff and the kind that always talk about doing stuff. Nobody's in between."

Cole clenched his fists and took a deep breath. He instinctively knew his medallion was behind the trees, somewhere on the construction site. It didn't make any logical sense, yet it was real. Men were holding it—or it was near them—or maybe it was in a pile of garbage and the people were incidental to its location. He didn't know very much, but he knew enough; Pap's good luck charm was right there in front of him, close by.

The fence was hung high, leaving a gap at the bottom

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that varied from six inches to as much as a foot in one place. Cole dropped to the ground and squeezed under, pushing the chain link until his whole body fit. Once inside, he brushed the dirt from his jacket and looked around. The project area was filled with all sorts of debris. Since it was the Saturday before Christmas, workers had been given the day off, making the location appear deserted. However, Cole knew differently. People were there—he could feel their presence—so he crept around, listening for voices.

Everything was quiet. As he climbed the metal staircase of the half-finished building, the dim light that crept into the concrete shaft made him feel as though the southern, winter sun had disappeared from the cloudy sky and left him alone to search the floors for his treasure. Cole tiptoed around the nine levels. Nothing stirred. Building materials, equipment, and supplies lay strewn around him. Though he looked with his eyes, Cole knew that his best tracking device was the nagging of his insides. They drove him to roam the maze of clutter like a tomb raider, searching the Egyptian catacombs for gold.

Finally, when the hunt proved futile, he returned to the ground level and pressed farther from the tree lot, heading toward the front, street side of the half-completed structure he had invaded. Before reaching the road, he came across a doublewide trailer. It made his heart leap. People were inside, and they were arguing about something.

“I don’t care what you want!” someone yelled. His gruff voice was easily heard through a partially-open window.

Cole moved closer and listened.

“It’s simple, don’t be stupid!” raged someone else. “We’ve got a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Let’s take it.”

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The conversation was intriguing. Cole scampered a few feet away, pried a cement-stained bucket out from under a web of discarded two-by-fours, and perched near the window. Five men were inside. They were disputing what to do. One of them seemed convinced that they should change their original plans, while another insisted that it would be foolish to cross their boss. The three other men seemed concerned, but undecided. All of them were large and rough looking. They were standing around a small card table, bunched up enough that Cole couldn't see what they were pointing at.

Finally, a sixth man—a pirate-looking fellow with a big skull tattoo on his arm—came storming into the room and punched another guy across the face, sending him to the floor. “We can’t double-back on Booze or he’ll kill us!” barked the tattooed man. “He’s been working this out for a long time. And I don’t think his contact is neutral, either. We sit tight ’til tonight and play it as planned.”

Cole gasped. When the scuffle took place, the men parted sufficient to show the table had only one thing on it: Pap’s medallion!

The men continued to argue back and forth. Ultimately, they followed the pirate into an adjoining room. Cole could still hear them. He knew they were close by, but he desperately wanted his medallion back. His heart began to beat faster and faster. He gave a shove to the window and it popped up high enough to squeeze his body through. It was a tight fit. Cole wriggled and squiggled until he plopped to the floor. There was no time to waste. He grabbed the gold coin and turned to exit when he heard one man say “Go get it and I’ll show you the mark.”

If only the window had been bigger, Cole could have

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jumped through it. Unfortunately, it wasn't. And Cole knew he'd get stuck if he tried, so he dove behind a ragged chair instead. There weren't very many places to hide in the tiny room. He knew he was about to get caught. It made him nearly pass out with distress.

"It's gone!" yelled the man.

"What?" bellowed two or three others from the neighboring room. A banging thunder of feet shook the trailer as the men rushed to see.

"It can't be far," said the pirate. "You three—go check outside! We'll tear this place apart until we find it. Whoever did this will pay!"

Cole shuddered. He wanted to cease existing. From his tight position, squashed between the old chair and the wall, the men weren't visible. Still, every word they said was clear. Cole was doomed to face six angry men, and he couldn't think of the slightest thing to say that would calm their wrath. It wouldn't be pretty. He clenched his right fist around the necklace and prepared to defend himself. When they found him, he'd punch and run—that was the plan. Perhaps the element of surprise would catch them off guard enough to escape. It was a long shot—a poor way to make up for his big mistake of climbing into the trailer in the first place—but it was his only shot.

"Right there!" yelled the tattooed man, his voice booming like a farmer ordering his hounds to attack a fox. "Get him!"

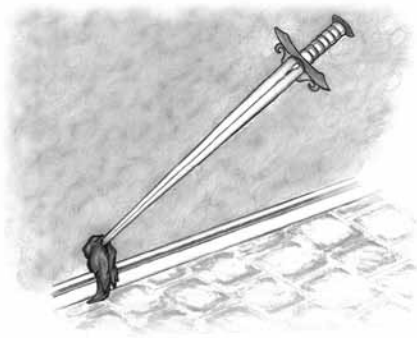
As if in slow motion, Cole looked down and noticed the tip of one of his shoes was peeking out from behind the chair. It was his fatal flaw. He stared at it in disbelief, wishing for a lot of things as he braced himself for the unveiling. He wished he were at home with his brothers, decorating the house for

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Christmas. He wished he were uncomfortably hanging out with Coach Smith, buying inventory. And most urgently, he wished he could disappear.

It was his third wish that came true! In an instant, his shoe faded from view and was replaced by a wooden canopy bathed in moonlight. Cole was back in Green, lying in bed. The big mistake wasn't his, it was theirs: They had left Pap's medallion on the table unattended!

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A wave of relief rushed over Cole when he realized he was in Green, not under attack in a construction trailer. His heart still beat rapidly. In his right fist he held Pap's necklace. Slowly, he loosened his grip and let it slip onto the bed. His respite was brief before a new concern entered his mind.

"I thought time was supposed to go on without me," whispered Cole, noticing the silence of the night. "I haven't worn the medallion for three months."

Everything looked the same as before. It would have made him happy to enter Green where he had left off if things back home hadn't included six angry men who were ready to mash him. Now, with problems on Earth, he wished he could set the necklace down for a while and let time pass by, so when he did finally return, the trailer would be empty.

Cole slid out of bed and hid the gold coin and chain in a joint of the bed frame. Even if time stood still on Earth, Cole didn't want to take a chance on returning before he was ready. "At least in Green," he murmured quietly, "I have friends that can help me fight trouble."

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A quick glimpse toward Boot and Buck left him puzzled. Their beds were empty. He walked over to inspect them. Their blankets were tucked neatly and folded, and the floor was spotless. Not even Boot's clothes were strewn about. The room was definitely different than the messy quarters he had exited a few months before.

"Maybe time has moved on," mumbled Cole, trying to think things out. He wandered around the dimly lit room in relative silence. One pat to his chest reminded him of the three keys he wore around his neck. While at home, the keys had remained somewhere else, and with his return to Green, the keys had reappeared.

Cole ventured to the bedroom door and opened it up. He could hear noises coming from farther down the hall. They weren't very loud, yet any sound was a welcoming one. At least some of the people in Green Hall were still awake. He walked to the first bedroom, where Pone, Voo, Sham, and many of the other Coosings usually slept. It was empty. Feelings of fear began to creep into Cole's mind. He no longer felt lucky to be back in Green. The dreadful dreams of gloom and doom whirled around in his mind.

Then the girls' door squeaked. *Perhaps Dilly's awake*, thought Cole. *She's a late-night owl*. He tried to push the memories of his awful nightmares aside. *I bet the guys went on an outing together, maybe fishing or something. If I walk down there, Dilly and Sawny will tell me all about it.*

Cole tried to think positively, but he couldn't extinguish the growing alarm that overtook him like a wildfire. Where were his friends? Had they gone to High Gate for safety? And if so, who was left making the noises? And something else struck him as

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being strange: the hall was dark, void of the glowing stones and candles that had perpetually lit the corridor before. Now, only a few spots were illuminated by moonlight that cheated its way into the inner hall from a couple of open bedroom doors. The whole setting reminded Cole of his experience in Pap's place, the night he had fled for his life.

"My sword," mumbled Cole. It was his only thought that provoked courage. He had fenced so much with The Guys at the club that he actually looked forward to showing Dilly what he could do and felt bolstered by how well he could fare against an enemy.

Cole rushed back to his bed and reached down deep, between his mattress and headboard. It was a tight fit. Fortunately, the sword was still there, waiting inside one of Bonboo's sheaths—the one Sawny had given him from Dilly's cache. He tugged and pulled until the sword and casing emerged. Cole drew the blade out and left the scabbard on his bed.

"Now I'll go speak with Dilly," he said. His voice was no longer a whisper. His hours of practice had boosted him enough to walk with confidence.

As he approached the entry to Green Hall, he noticed the other rooms were vacant. No Coosings or Greenlings were sleeping in any of the beds that they had occupied before. And yet quiet noises continued to come from the girls' wing. They sounded like the squeaking of boards and the shuffling of feet. Someone was awake, walking around. The closer Cole got, the more certain he felt.

"The girls must be alone tonight," said Cole, noticing that Green Hall's giant double doors were closed and the bracing beam was situated across them, completely securing the quarters

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against assault. He remembered that the Coosings had rarely locked the main entrance, but with the boys away, it made sense.

Cole knocked on the girls' door and instantly knew something was wrong: It swung wide-open!

"Dilly?" cried Cole, his thoughts racing with a surge of adrenaline. He wondered why the front entrance was secured from the inside and yet the girls' door was left unlatched. It was always locked. Concern for Dilly and Sawny jumped to the forefront of his mind. "Are you guys all right in there?" he yelled, trying to decide what to do.

When no one responded, Cole did something he'd never done before, something Boot and Buck had never done before, perhaps something no man had ever done before: He entered the girls' quarters. No sooner did he begin than a crashing sound gave way in front of him and the hall was flooded with light.

"A visitor," groaned an evil voice. It came from a hooded man who entered the passage with a leap. He wore a long, black cloak that completely covered his clothing, and on top of it, a necklace with three brightly glowing stones. His face was shrouded by a veil that hung just below his eyes. Cole's first impression was that the mystery man was The Dread; the way he drew his sword looked familiar. But the blade was different than anything Cole had ever seen. It was crimson red and luminescent.

In his retreat toward Green Hall's entrance, Cole was forced to wield his weapon. The hooded man was lightning fast, jabbing for the kill. He wasted no time with small talk or fancy moves. It was clear that he meant to end things quickly. Fortunately, the pajamas Cole was wearing were from Boot, since his others that fit him better had been horribly muddled from his ride to Higgs's house during his last visit to Green, so the larger ones

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dangled enough to lure a misplaced stab that sliced the cloth but zipped past Cole's abdomen without drawing blood.

CLASH, CLANK. CLASH, CLANK, CLANK.

Cole and the hooded man darted back and forth, slicing and stabbing. It was an amazing display of swordsmanship on the part of both contenders. Cole fought for his life, remembering all sorts of tricks The Guys had taught him. He moved better than ever before. It was as though his skills were enhanced by entering Green and heightened by the rush of a nighttime surprise and the imminent threat of death.

Something stank. As Cole fought with the man, odors poured out of his cloak like vapors from rotting flesh, or some other putrid source. It was appalling. The duel continued, with Cole moving backward, mostly on defense. Occasionally he drove forward, yet in the end he lost more ground than he gained. The hooded man was remarkable with a sword. It was terrifying for Cole. He knew if the fight went on much longer, the outcome would be fatal.

In a bold move, Cole threw Pap's sword. He was acting on an impression that led him to believe it was his only way to escape. He didn't directly hurl it at the man, but at the base of his cloak, right where it brushed against a floorboard. Since it appeared to miss its mark, the hooded man didn't even try to block it. He let out a gleeful cackle and plunged for Cole.

At the same time, Cole bolted for Green Hall's entrance. He pushed up on the barricade and flung the doors open.

It worked. Pap's sword held the assailant momentarily, pinning his cloak to the wall until he ripped it free. The trick slowed the mysterious man only a matter of seconds, but that was all Cole needed.

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Out in the hall, Cole stumbled and fell to the floor in front of three dozen drat soldiers, armed and ready, with candles burning brightly. They had been gathering for some time after discovering Green Hall's doors were locked. To their knowledge, nobody was supposed to be inside.

"We've got you surrounded, Dod!" blurted Jibb. "Don't move or we'll run you through!"

The mention of Cole's other name brought back fond memories. It was the first time he had been called Dod in months. It felt nice, even if the circumstance was precarious.

"Get *him*!" yelled Dod, "not me!"

Dod pointed at the dimly lit hallway, and to everyone's surprise, Mr. Nasty Breath came darting around the corner, expecting to finish Dod off. The drat soldiers who had surrounded Dod's retreat now turned about-face and began to fight with the cloaked man, seven against one. And when it looked as though they were gaining ground, something astonishing happened: A second hooded man, smaller than the other and wearing a drab-gray cloak, jumped from the girls' hall and began helping the first.

Together, the two intruders were ferocious. They inflicted injuries on the drat soldiers until the seven men in the front fell back, and no sooner did that happen than the doors swung closed and a clumping noise indicated that they had once again reemployed the barricade.

"Quick!" ordered Dod. "Go to the window-side! Don't let them get away!" Dod looked around, perplexed. None of the soldiers responded. They stood still, quietly waiting. The only ones that moved at all were the four injured men, who were inspecting their wounds.

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"I'm in command!" barked Jibb, glaring angrily. He approached Dod with his sword drawn and pointed it at his throat. "Why should we believe you aren't one of them?"

"I'm not," responded Dod, answering the question poorly. He didn't want to talk about anything until more action was being taken to apprehend the intruders. "At least send a few men outside to hedge their escape. We can discuss me later. Please, Jibb. Don't let them get away."

"Not so fast," answered Jibb. "I know you. You're full of tricks. The moment I turn my back, you'll disappear for another three months."

"You can watch me all you want," begged Dod, "just send somebody...anybody!" He wanted the villains caught before they caused more trouble. Not to mention, obviously they were followers of The Dread.

"Now I'm asking nicely," said Jibb, pulling back his sword a few inches. He picked at his white beard with his free hand. "Tell us the brain-load. Tell us everything. Why were you in there?"

Dod looked around and felt lonely, surrounded by drats with their beards and uppity noses. They rigidly followed Jibb's every command and didn't look the slightest bit sympathetic.

"I don't know what's going on," explained Dod honestly. "I arrived here tonight and attempted to sleep in my bed. Is that a crime?" Dod scanned the soldiers with his pleading eyes. "I have no idea why those men are in there, or who they are—though the taller one resembles The Dread, don't you think? Perhaps they came here seeking revenge against me for my part in sending Sirlonk to Driaxom—or maybe they hated Pap and I'm as close to jungo as they can get—I really don't know. The only thing I'm sure of is that they're trouble. And since we're sitting here, doing

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nothing, they're probably climbing out a window and making their escape."

"Hardly," scoffed Jibb conceitedly. He drew back his sword and put it away. "I've got four times as many men out there, with bows drawn for the kill, waiting to pluck them out. The only surprise will be if they live to answer my questions."

Jibb turned to his men and gave a cheer that they all responded to. When he was done, he smiled at Dod and added, "We've captured Dark Hood and his little helper. There's no way they'll elude us this time. And if they do live, they can show The Dread all the loyalty they want—side-by-side with him in Driaxom!"

The change in Jibb's attitude toward Dod was welcomed. One moment he was interrogating him with a blade to his throat and the next he was smiling. It was odd.

Dod rose to his feet. "So, am I okay?" asked Dod. He wanted to know whether he was still suspected of being a traitor.

"I suppose you're innocent," answered Jibb, looking down his nose at him even though Dod was a little taller. "We sure thought you were Dark Hood until just now. It's good you've decided to grace us with your presence. The past three months have been hard, with all the attacks and deserters. But seeing you and Dark Hood at the same time seems to indicate you're not him. And since you've been injured—" Jibb pointed at Dod's torn, borrowed pajamas.

"I'm fine thanks to you and your men," said Dod, feeling better to be back in acceptable standing. "Without you rescuing me, I'd be dead right now." Dod stuck out his hand to shake. At that moment, he noticed his Coosing ring was back, shining brightly. It, like the three keys around his neck, had been gone while at home on Earth.

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Jibb didn't reach for Dod's hand, which was normal considering they didn't customarily shake hands in Green, but he appeared to notice Dod's sincerity. "Where have you been?" asked Jibb.

"I had a few things that needed immediate attention—family business," choked Dod. He hated making excuses. "After The Dread was captured, it seemed reasonable to leave for a while—"

"Let us know next time!" ordered Jibb, once again grunting like a commander. "Without a note, we've all been blaming you for the problems around here. We thought you took over where The Dread left off, stepping in as Dark Hood. It'll shock the crowds tomorrow to see you're not him."

"Didn't Bonboo say anything?" asked Dod. He wondered how Bonboo would have allowed that sort of rumor to circulate when he knew better of Dod.

"He must have forgotten to mention it to us," said Jibb. "I never got your message. But it doesn't surprise me...poor Bonboo. He's had a rough recovery. I'm just glad he's doing better. We feared the worst for him."

Dod felt bad that Bonboo's health had troubled him, yet it bothered Dod even more to hear that his reputation had been slandered, especially considering he had left Green as a hero for stopping The Dread.

It wasn't until Jibb became preoccupied with his men, sending messengers around to the soldiers outside and giving orders, that Dod remembered his big question: Where was everyone?

Unfortunately, before an opportunity opened up for additional conversation, Dod was escorted by three towering drats to Youk's quarters for the night. Saluci greeted him at the

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door. It was Dod's first time meeting her. She had been gone on charity business for the duration of his last visit to Green.

Dod took one look at Saluci and could see why Youk had married her. She was beautiful and polite, quickly welcoming him in despite his late-night arrival. Her clothing was ornately beaded and her brown hair looked freshly set. She walked and talked like a person of noble blood, but not condescendingly as Sirlonk and Juny had done.

"I was nearly ready to call for bed," she said, showing Dod to a guestroom. "Youk's been out all day on important business. That man works much too hard. Of course, if he did any less, he wouldn't be the wonderful person I fell in love with. Anyway, I expect him soon."

Saluci went on and on about Youk and his great accomplishments. They were truly amazing. Hearing Saluci's descriptions of the battles he had planned was much different than the watered-down, humbler versions Youk had given. Dod remembered sitting in Youk's gathering room, listening to his tales. Recalling the incident also brought back vivid memories of scaling Youk's wall up to Pap's place. Dod poked his head out of the room, looking back toward Saluci's patio doors, while still listening to her ramble on about her husband.

"I don't imagine he'll be here to bother you tonight," said Saluci, catching Dod off guard. He thought at first she was still talking about Youk, for his accomplishments had occupied most of her conversation up to that moment, but she wasn't. She pointed at a second bed in the guestroom, a bed that was covered by two open suitcases brimming with junk.

"He's out watching again," she continued, "as he has for the past few nights in a row. He's quite a dedicated man. I've got to

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hand him the day; I'd have concluded my work weeks ago if I were him. He's everything Youk said—as thorough as they come—”

Saluci's words ended abruptly when someone down the hall began screaming. Dod shivered. The cries sounded like the ranting of a tormented soul.

“That's my baby,” said Saluci, heading for the door. “He's having another nightmare. I can't wait 'til he grows out of them. He terrifies the toenails right off my feet. If you can't sleep, there are pluggings for your ears in the top drawer of the yip-cabinet.”

As she passed Dod to walk down the hall, he begged one last question: “Where is everyone tonight? Green Hall was empty.”

Saluci gave Dod a strange look before responding. It was the kind of look that people generally give when someone has asked a dumb question.

“The Games,” she answered. She hurried down the long corridor to the end and then disappeared around the corner.

Dod slept poorly. It wasn't because of the crying boy, or the duel he'd endured with Dark Hood, or even the visitor who'd shared his guestroom for the second half of the night. It was his torment over being at Twistyard while his friends were at The Games. Dod knew plenty about The Games. It was a nickname given to the Bollirse semi-final championship series. The matches were played to determine who would represent the Western Hemisphere of Green in the final showdown for The Golden Swot. And after Dod had spent so much time practicing—all summer in Cedar City—he was sick at the thought that they were going on without him.

“I wonder if Green won this year against Raul?” whispered Dod to himself, shifting around in bed. “Probably not. Raul always wins.”

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Dod attempted to make himself feel better about being left behind. He convinced himself that Green Hall was just at The Games to support their teammates from Twistyard's Raul Hall. Nevertheless, his nighttime of mumblings didn't change what he heard in the morning.

"Hey, aren't you Dod?" asked a brown-haired, blue-eyed boy. He looked like a tall six or seven-year-old, and he was as skinny as a stick—clearly Youk's son.

"Yes," said Dod, squinting. He hadn't been tired for most of the night, but now that it was morning, his eyelids felt heavy.

"Why are you here?" prodded the boy. "I thought you were meeting Dilly and the others at Carsigo for The Games."

"What?" asked Dod. He felt a glimpse of hope.

"Two weeks ago, before she left, Dilly told me that she planned on meeting up with you at Carsigo. She said there was no way you'd miss the matches there."

"Really?"

"So why are you here?" the boy continued. He poked at Dod with a beautifully carved swot. "The tournament can't be over, and it would be poor sportsmanship to leave before congratulating the winning team."

The boy looked Dod up and down curiously. Finally, his face lost a bit of enthusiasm as he concluded, "You didn't go, did you?"

"I wanted to," defended Dod. He sat up and looked squarely at the boy, pushing sleep from his eyes. "If I could've gone, I would've—it's hard to explain."

"I know, I know," said the boy, twirling around in a circle with his swot. "You were working, doing secret mission stuff, huh?"

"Yup, you guessed it," answered Dod. "Who told you?"

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“Dilly. She knows pretty much everything. And my dad does secret stuff all the time—stuff we can’t talk about.”

Dod looked around the room and noticed that the other bed was filled. A short, stocky man lay sprawled out, wearing thick, silky pajamas. He had a large bruise on one arm and a fresh scab across his forehead.

“Who’s he?” asked Dod, pointing at the other guest.

“The Messy Man,” answered the boy. “He’s always sleeping and making messes. I know. I sometimes have to clean them up.”

“Sammywoo,” called Saluci from another room. “Breakfast is almost over and your sisters are getting anxious to make it to their lessons on time. Don’t make them late again.”

The boy bolted out of the room. Dod got up and prepared to follow. He didn’t have any clothes to change into, so he wiped the sand out of his eyes and ran his fingers through his hair twice. As he walked across the floor, trying not to step on anything important-looking, he agreed with Sammywoo that the other guest was a slob. It looked like he had randomly thrown his things from his bed, creating clutter everywhere.

“Man, that kid’s right,” said Dod, surveying the disaster that was twice as bad as it had been the night before.

“Right about what?” asked a girl, surprising Dod at the doorway. They nearly collided. Embarrassment flushed Dod’s face bright-red. He had been caught talking to himself.

“I’m Dod,” he said, awkwardly waving. The girl responded by giving the Coosings’ sign of friendship—she stuck out her hand, all four fingers apart and her thumb tucked under. But she didn’t wear a Coosing ring.

“My name’s Valerie,” said the girl. She was trying hard to hold back a chuckle. She looked like the spitting image of

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Saluci, well proportioned and beautiful. Her curly brown hair flowed over her shoulders and gracefully adorned the top of her attractive clothes.

“And mine’s Dari,” said a face that popped up from behind Valerie. The second girl was taller, about the same height as Dod, and bean-pole skinny like Youk and Sammywoo. She had bright-blonde, straight silky hair that stopped abruptly at her shoulders and clear-blue eyes. She was an anomaly among young tredders, for not very many of them varied far from having shades of brown or black hair. Neither of them looked much older than Dod, but they were tredders, so instead of fifteenish, they were likely fiftyish.

Dod noticed the girls’ smiles and thought about how lucky they were to be tredders; they got to have decades of teenage-like years before entering adulthood in their late fifties or early sixties. Of course, the more Dod thought about it, he couldn’t complain—he had a medallion that allowed time to stand still for him.

“Are you hungry?” asked Valerie.

“Dumb question,” responded Dari, blaring in Valerie’s ear. “He hasn’t eaten this morning. Obviously he’s hungry.” She bumped her gentler sister aside and said, “Give him some room.”

“Thanks,” said Dod to both girls. “I am very hungry.”

Breakfast was scrambled eggs, ham, and musash, a wheat and sweet potato pancake. As he ate, Valerie politely informed him about the latest news that she regarded as important. She spent a lot of time explaining her significant role in the upcoming Dance Delight, set to take place in a few weeks. It was a fancy occasion where boys and girls would don formal wear and then spend a pleasant evening of dancing and eating. It sounded fun. The

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best part was that Dod didn't need to specifically invite any one person, since it was assumed that he would be well-mannered and dance with a number of girls.

On the other hand, Dari interrupted plentifully, filling Dod in on the woes Twistyard had suffered over the past three months while he had been away. She mentioned Dark Hood, stating that he had caused serious trouble from High Gate to the Carsalean Sea, wreaking havoc on many people, and that to his credit, over two dozen drat soldiers had gone missing from Twistyard, assumed to be dead—or worse, turned traitor. Her comments dominated over her sister's in capturing Dod's attention.

When Dari brought up the possibility of defectors, Dod had to jump in. "Last night they thought I was on the wrong side, too—"

"That makes logical sense," said Dari. "Some drats have been claiming for months that you were Dark Hood. They supposedly found proof of it."

"Ohhhh!" groaned Dod, once again feeling slandered by Jibb and his fellow soldiers.

"But don't fret about it," added Dari. "I don't think very many people believed them. I mean—boingy-boing—you single-handedly caught The Dread. Why would you suddenly turn foul on us? How stupid can they be? And to think they're trying to help us? It's ridiculous."

"Careful now," boomed a powerful voice. It was Youk. He had entered the kitchen without anyone noticing. He wore a dark suit, not typical of Youk, who had always worn white before, and he had a flattish cap instead of his large feathered hat. Dod couldn't take his eyes off the scabbard that Youk wore at his waist. It held the longest sword Dod had ever seen.

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“Dad. You’re back,” called Sammywoo, jumping around at Youk’s feet and waving his swot in the air. “Are we going today? You promised we’d see the last match.”

Youk patted his son on the head and reassured him that he would keep his promise, one way or another, and then returned his full attention back to his daughter Dari. “The drat soldiers are doing their best, my dear. You can’t blame them for suspecting someone like Dod, here.” He reached over and rapped Dod firmly on the shoulder. It was forceful enough to prove Youk’s skinny six-foot frame had plenty of muscle. “They’re checking all of the possibilities. Many clues lead to Twistyard. Dark Hood is likely amongst us, just as The Dread was.”

“Well, I’m not The Dread!” said Dod. He meant to say Dark Hood.

“We all know that,” said Valerie, rolling her eyes. “The proofus-print has been displayed for weeks in the Hall of The Greats, right under your picture. I’ve seen it a dozen times or more. Sirlonk and Dungo are gone for good. They’ve been processed at Driaxom according to justice. You’d think Dark Hood would catch on that he’s in a lousy business.”

“They have a picture of me?” gasped Dod, embarrassed. He was surprised to find out that Bonboo had insisted on hanging a painting of him on the wall, in company with The Greats.

“That’s where I was leading,” continued Youk. “You came from nowhere, claiming to be Pap’s grandson, and then disappeared right after The Dread was defeated—about the same time Dark Hood emerged. And your picture is sitting on the wall, day and night, reminding the soldiers that you beat them to the catch. Now, with all of that to think about, how can you blemish them for pointing a jealous finger in your noble direction? It’s common nature.”

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Saluci entered the room and drew all of Youk's attention. "You're back, my dear," she said, rushing around the table to hug him. "I worried about you all night when you didn't come home."

"Yes," responded Youk. He hugged his wife but didn't give any explanations. "I love you, too, my thimble hat."

The room turned quiet. Nobody said anything for at least a minute. It was awkward. Even Sammywoo didn't speak.

Someone broke the silence by rapping at the door. Two loud thumps—it sounded like bad news. The hushed moment had built up enough tension to expect something dreadful. Youk went to the front hall and returned with Tridacello on his heels.

"So, they didn't catch him after all," said Youk with surprise, reentering the kitchen. He turned to his family and added, "Everyone, I'm sorry to say it. We were attacked last night. Dark Hood broke into Green Hall, and it's been confirmed that he's not working alone. He had an accomplice—and they got away, so be on alert."

"It's unbelievable!" complained Tridacello. He reached up and rubbed his sunburned head, pushing the remaining white hair into place. "All night I stood with sixty drat bowmen and twenty more swordsmen, waiting by the base of those windows, and Jibb kept a watch at the entrance to Green Hall. I can't imagine how they escaped without us noticing. The windows remained closed. We had them trapped. Yet somehow, when we climbed up the wall and broke in this morning, they were gone. Fifty drat soldiers did the most complete search I've ever seen. It was like they vanished."

Tridacello nodded at Dod when he noticed him sitting at the table. "You've returned here in time for more trouble, I'm afraid."

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"I know," responded Dod frankly. "Dark Hood is wickedly good with a sword. I clashed with him last night."

"That's right. You're the one Jibb mentioned. It makes more sense now. We found Pap's sword stuck to the wall in the girls' quarters, holding a piece of black cloth."

"Sorry I didn't get the rest of him," joked Dod.

"That's quite understandable," admitted Tridacello matter-of-factly. "Dark Hood is the best I've fought. I think he's sneakier than Sirlonk, or at least more daring. About four weeks ago, he bested a dozen guards by himself at the Histo Relics Building and stole the Farmer's Sackload."

"You're kidding!" exploded Saluci. She looked ill, as did Valerie. "He has Bonboo's best collection of pure-sight diamonds? Oh no! I'd face Dark Hood by myself just to get my hands on The Sparkle, let alone everything else in the Farmer's Sackload. Youk, my dear and faithful, why didn't you tell me of this? Did Dark Hood really take them?"

Youk looked guilty. As a master of deception, he poorly executed a defense of innocence against his wife. Still, he didn't have time to plead his case before his friend continued on.

"He took them, all right!" explained Tridacello, shaking his head with disgust. "I tracked him along the shoreline of Lake Mauj, a short distance up from Zerny and Jibb's place. It was night and the moon was full. Tinja and Strat were both with me. We finally stopped him by the rocky outcropping and all three of us fought with him, clanking and jabbing our best. I even tried my zip-rope whip. He cut the metal line like it was nothing. In over fifty years of using a zip-rope whip, that's the first time someone's blade has sliced through it—and plenty have tried."

Dari and Valerie sat nervously on the edge of their seats as

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Tridacello finished his tale. “And then in a flash, he dove off the rocks into Lake Mauj. He disappeared into the water with his blood-red sword and his pack full of loot. After that, he never surfaced, not even for air—”

“Not that you saw,” added Youk with skepticism.

“We would have seen him rise if he had,” argued Tridacello. “The night was extremely calm—a flea would have turned our heads. He didn’t rise!”

“Regardless,” said Youk, not wanting to fight with Tridacello, “it’s no wonder we have had so many drat soldiers disappear since then. He’s probably buying their loyalty, raising an army right under our noses. Dreaderious has done it for years. Of course, it’s different for him—his help is farther away, where it’s much cheaper.”

“Or he’s killing them one by one as a night stalker,” squeaked Dari. Her bolder voice had left her.

“No, honey,” insisted Youk. Saluci was giving him the *‘Don’t-terrify-my-kids-any-more’* look, which prompted him to smooth things over. “I’m sure we haven’t had any casualties. He’s injured a fair number of our men, but they’ve all survived. Dod faced him last night—and look, is he dead?”

Youk pointed at the rip in Dod’s pajamas. The girls both gasped and stared at the hole in horror, imagining how close the villain had come to running Dod through with his unstoppable sword. It didn’t help Youk’s case any, so he quickly continued.

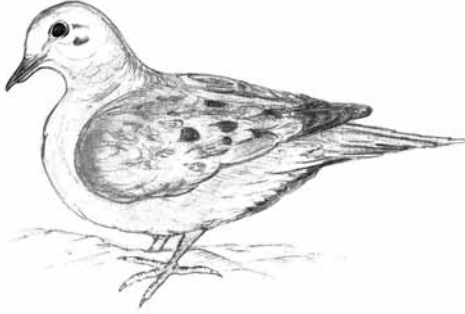
“If Dark Hood were killing people, he wouldn’t take the time to carry them off. That’s a pretty big burden for a man who’s busy fighting other soldiers. He’d leave them for us to bury. I’m sure he’s just buying the weaker sorts, the desperate traitor types from among our troops. He’ll have a hard time fighting with that

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caliber of an army, if they stick around at all. Don't be afraid. We'll stop him."

The conversation ended hastily when a small crowd of The Greats came and asked Youk and Tridacello to join them for a meeting. Dark Hood had made another unbelievable escape, and nobody could explain it.

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LUCKY ENOUGH

“Did I miss something?” called a scratchy voice from down the hall, becoming louder as it neared the kitchen. It was the Messy Man. He stood five-foot three, short enough to show most everyone the bald patch on top of his head, which was circled by coarse black hair that stuck straight out. His build was stocky and muscular, with mounds of hair on his arms and feet. He had a rough-looking face, chiseled chin, and bushy eyebrows. He would have passed as a tough guy if it weren’t for the sloppy food stains down his front and a well-used sock, protruding out of the side rim of his collar.

Everyone sitting around the table said nothing, but smiled when they saw his disheveled appearance. It was a welcome change after the frightening conversation about Dark Hood’s attacks.

“What did I miss?” he repeated, scratching one leg. “Not more bad news, is it? After hearing of Polomious’s death last week and Rootber’s death the week before, if another representative from my part of Green dies, I’m leaving this place to go run for office.”

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He continued to read their faces and knew something was amiss with his wardrobe, particularly after Sammywoo hopped up and down, pointing his swot at the man's shoulder. Slowly the man turned and inspected himself in a large window that faintly reflected his image.

"Very funny," he said, spinning back around. He made a goofy face and danced on one foot while singing, "I'm in the circus, a gobby-goofus, a morning-sleeper, a bombling-beeber."

He twitted at himself as he bobbed around, seeming to have a jolly time, until he noticed Dod.

"I'm Rot Fieldmaker," he said, bowing his head toward Dod in jest. "Though you can call me whatever you'd like. It won't hurt."

"This is Dod," said Saluci, jumping in to give formal introductions. "He's the one that—"

"I know, we all know," sang Rot. "Dod, Dod, Dod. We all know Dod. He poked and jabbed and also stabbed. We all know Dod."

Saluci rolled her eyes and shook her head apologetically toward Dod. "This," said Saluci, pointing with her whole arm, "is Mr. Rot. Youk invited him to join us for a spell in order to study the decline of our rare varieties of singing doves. They've dropped dramatically over the past few years and much worse recently. The hills used to be filled with their beautiful songs. Now, even with our rooftop gardens as a sanctuary for nesting, and the added breeding programs in place, their numbers are continuing to dwindle."

"That's very true," chimed Rot happily, starting into another round of singing. "They're here today and gone away, the doves can't sing or walk or play, and who can solve the mystery, he's standing here, his name is me."

"Have you met Bowlure?" asked Dod, chuckling.

"I have," said Rot. "We're thinking about starting our own trio."

"And who would the third voice be?" chimed Dari, flicking her short blonde hair. She was beginning to lighten up and was the last one in the room to smile after hearing the troubling news about Dark Hood.

"We were hoping you'd volunteer," he responded.

"Then I guess you'd better keep watching birds," she said half-jokingly. "But find someplace else to stay. You've been here too long already."

"That's not true," said Saluci, embarrassed that her daughter had jabbed at the truth. "Mr. Rot may continue here if he'd like. He's very particular about things being done properly—that's a good quality."

"Your daughter's right," confessed Rot, moving alongside of Valerie. He smelled of garlic and mud. It was strong enough that Valerie retreated, leaving him her seat. He quickly filled it and began to pick at the remains of Sammywoo's half-eaten breakfast.

Dari, too, got up and vacated the table, a safe distance from his smell. Dod followed.

"Have you had anyone take a look at that?" asked Saluci, changing the subject entirely. She pointed at Rot's fresh scab across his forehead, while sliding the last of the musash onto his commandeered plate.

"No, I'm fine," he said. "Sometimes you fall in the night. It's easy to do when you're stalking birds. I take my job very seriously—all kidding aside. I think I may be onto a big breakthrough. We'll see—"

"Dark Hood came back," blurted Sammywoo, "just like you said."

"I knew he would," mumbled Rot with a full mouth.

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“Dod sworded him,” added Sammywoo, swinging his swot back and forth like a weapon.

“That’s enough talking,” interrupted Saluci. “You kids need to hurry. I promised Mr. Clair you wouldn’t be late any more. It’s a real favor to have him here right now, and with the way things have been, a little preparation could make us all sleep better.”

When Saluci mentioned sleep, she looked right at Sammywoo. He had erupted into sobbing and screaming at least half-a-dozen more times during the night after his episode that had ended Dod’s greetings. It was nothing short of astonishing that Saluci was able to be up and well after having had such a dreadful bout of caretaking.

The girls tugged at Sammywoo and headed for the front door. Dod followed them until Valerie informed him that it was hardly proper to be walking about the halls at Twistyard in pajamas. She suggested that if he wished to join them for their lessons, he could do so after preparing more appropriately for the day. They would be in the little ribble-barn.

“But I didn’t bring any other clothes,” complained Dod, feeling like it was becoming a common problem. It brought back memories of spending his first few days in Green wearing the same outfit before begging old clothes from his friends. He had intended on digging into Pap’s closets, but hadn’t found the time.

“Oh, stuff it,” said Dari, giving Valerie a shove. “You take Sammywoo and tell Clair I’ll be down in a minute.” She brought Dod back to the guestroom and started opening closet doors. There were five of them along one wall, each bulging with their contents. “Do you see anything that might fit?” she asked.

Most of the stuff was not clothing. All sorts of toys and books and gadgets dripped from sagging shelves. Dari stooped

down and picked up a number of items that had escaped the moment she opened the doors.

“Maybe that,” suggested Dod, pointing to a cream-colored pair of pants that were different than the others—they were folded nicely.

“Fabuloo,” chirped Dari, grabbing the pants and tossing them at Dod. She dug deeper in the wall of clutter and plucked out a matching shirt.

Dod didn’t need to ask Dari to leave the room for him to put them on. He didn’t even need to tell her to turn around. They were way too big. By the time Dod caught them in the air, they had spread out full, showing that they hung from his chest to the floor.

“Maybe not so fabuloo,” teased Dari, chuckling.

“I need my own clothes!” complained Dod, feeling dumb that the pants were much bigger than anything he could wear.

“*Well-o*, my little *friend-o*,” continued Dari, putting her hand on her brow. She was having fun teasing Dod, pronouncing each word carefully.

“Little? I’m as tall as you.”

“Like *that-o* means *anything-o*.”

“I’m taller than Mr. Messy Man,” said Dod, tripping over Rot’s stuff that nearly filled the floor.

“But his *mom-o* was a *bobwit-o*, was *yours-o*?”

“He’s a bobwit? I thought they didn’t crack much above four feet.”

“His *dad-o* was like *you-o*, a human.”

The conversation drew memories of places and people Dod couldn’t clearly identify, but he instantly remembered a lot about the subject. A large number of humans and bobwits

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and tredders were intermingled. They weren't all human or all bobwit or all tredder.

Many people, such as the nobles possessing royal bloodlines, were predominantly of one race, yet not completely. And based on the close similarities of the different races of people, it didn't matter. Of course it did affect their height, and life cycles, and other traits that were characteristically found in the blood of one group or the other. However, from one location to another, there were already many differences within the races, as in the most notable example where a grand society of humans, called The Mauj, substantially outlived all of the other humans and other races, living up to five hundred years; though at the present, tredders had an upper hand on longevity over the existing races.

The big exception to intermarrying was with drats. Although physically very similar, humans and bobwits and tredders weren't typically attracted to women with beards, and drats weren't usually fond of those without them.

"So, do you have any human blood in you?" asked Dod, returning the teasing. He vaguely remembered hearing that Youk did.

"One of my great, great-grandfathers on my dad's side was a human," said Dari, scowling playfully at Dod. "But don't talk about it in front of my mother. My dad's still a good pick for Chief Noble Tredder when Bonboo dies—human blood or not. Besides, you're a human and you're not that disgraceful, and the best of The Greats was human, too."

"Yup, Pap was incredible, wasn't he," said Dod.

"He was good, but boingy-boing, Humberrone was unbelievable!—no offense to your grandpa."

It bothered Dod that whenever the conversation turned to

Humberrone, Pap was left far below on the scale of greatness. As far as Dod was concerned, Pap was the best. And Dod did take offense when anyone suggested Pap wasn't.

"You must not have known Pap very well," responded Dod. "For if you knew him as I knew him, you'd realize Humberrone paled by comparison."

"Uh—not even *close-o*, my little *friend-o*," answered Dari. She knew that the subject got under his skin, so she laid it on thicker by reverting back to adding 'oh.'

"Whatever," said Dod, irritated. "I guess I'll go find some clothes in my closet, the kind that fit people, not seven-foot creatures like Bowlure."

Dod walked out of the room and made his way to the front hall, though he didn't leave before Dari caught up with him.

"You *might-o* at least put something on over *that-o* before walking out *there-oooo*," said Dari, pointing at Dod's torn shirt. She smiled wide.

Dod looked down and blushed. Somewhere between breakfast and that moment he had snagged the hole and ripped it much bigger, nearly all the way up.

"Perhaps a *coat-o* or cloak for my little *friend-o*?" She opened a closet that held dozens of different coats and hats. It was a room filled with attire. "You can borrow one from my *dad-o*," she continued.

Dod glanced around for anything less elegant to take. He hated the thoughts of risking harm to a part of Youk's fancy wardrobe, especially when remembering how Youk had displayed his bloody zarrick near Dod's face after the Brown Sugar incident had ruffled his feathers. But what Dod found when he flipped through the clothes was unexpected. Behind

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a cluster of dark jackets and coats, Dod saw two swords. They were mostly concealed by a leather satchel, with the tips of the hilts showing. The rapier Youk had been wearing wasn't the only weapon he kept.

"How about *this-o?*" asked Dari, pulling down a beautiful, white cloak. She held it up to him and then paused. "Yup. Fabuloo. My father's outgrown this, so it's yours."

"I couldn't," said Dod, stepping out of the closet.

"MOM," called Dari. "Can Dod have Dad's old cloak—the white one he doesn't fit anymore?"

"Sure, let's see it on him," said Saluci, appearing from around the corner. She nodded with approval when she saw Dod wearing it.

"Thank you," said Dod, feeling bad that he had gotten worked up over nothing. He called back over his shoulder as he left, "I'll catch up at the little ribble-barn after I'm *ready-o.*"

In front of Green Hall, Dod ran into a squad of soldiers guarding the entrance. When he tried to explain that his clothes were inside, they didn't seem to care. Nobody was allowed in.

Rather than attempt a struggle with drat loyalists, Dod resorted to Pap's place. He remembered the way—across the hall, through a small conference room, to the left of a wooden stage, through a locked door that was hidden by curtains, up a twenty-five story shaft, down a short hall, through another locked door, and into his house.

Pap's place was comfortable during the day. Sunlight streamed through a wall of windows that adorned the back side of the entry room. It created a pleasant ambiance. Dod looked around at the cluttered shelves filled with gadgets and statuary, and the drawers

and cupboards packed with useful contraptions, and remembered filling Boot's bag the first time he had visited alone.

"I dumped all of Boot's buster candles on the floor behind that chair," recalled Dod, talking to himself. "And that's where I found the palsarflex, behind everything else on that shelf. Maybe he's got another one."

Dod eagerly climbed on the back of the same chair he had used before and balanced his weight as he searched for a palsarflex. There was none. The one he had taken before was safely stowed in a closet, along with the rest of Boot's things. Dod didn't mind that Boot had a tendency of claiming stuff; he shared with Dod and that was good enough.

While climbing down, the chair tipped and Dod fell to the floor. He gasped. From his ground-level position, he could see that the candles were no longer in a pile behind the chair. It made his heart pound faster. Who had taken them?

"My sword," mumbled Dod, rising to his feet. He carefully worked his way down Pap's cluttered hallway, heading for the office. Dod had discovered Pap's sword collection when visiting before and knew right where to find one—or so he thought. When he reached the room, it was spotless—not robbed, just cleaned. Someone had put away all of the effects and had thoroughly dusted.

The swords were not scattered on the floor as they had previously been. Instead, they hung neatly in rows on a wall, displaying their various sizes and shapes. All of the other items that had littered the office were now stowed in drawers and re-situated in what appeared to be their proper places. The only thing that was amiss was the empty shelf above Pap's desk, where his special books had been.

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“Pap?” whispered Dod. “Pap’s here. He’s come back somehow. Maybe he didn’t die after all. It was faked, like Bonboo’s assassination.”

Dod walked over to the neatly arranged collection on the wall and picked a sword. He drew it out of its casing and admired the shiny blade. It was beautiful with intricate designs. It had the appearance of being made of gold, yet it clearly wasn’t, for the metal felt as tough as hardened steel. Pap’s insignia was engraved on the hilt and on the scabbard.

“Pap,” yelled Dod, returning to the hall. Once he knew that the office had been cleaned, he noticed that the hall had been tidied, too. It was still encumbered with all sorts of statuary and other possessions, but it wasn’t dirty.

Dod continued searching each room for Pap, or anyone else. There were plenty of signs that Pap had returned; the older food in the kitchen had been discarded and a basket full of fresh fruit had been placed on the counter, and someone had freshly laundered Pap’s bedding and fixed the back patio door.

When the house turned up empty, Dod went outside, hoping to find Pap. But the chirping of birds and buzzing of bees was as much as he found for company. Nobody was around. It was baffling. The flowers, bushes, and trees were well manicured, and the vegetable patch had orderly rows of produce ready to pick—vegetables which appeared to have been planted after Pap’s poisoning at High Gate. And a shovel with fresh dirt was propped up against a fruit tree, beside a basket of ripe apples. Everything indicated that someone had been living there for months, attending to the duties of maintenance.

“PAP!” yelled Dod. He rushed around the gardens, searching for anyone. Nobody responded. Still, the proof was abundant, and it gave him hope.

Dod hurried back inside and loaded a bag of clothes from Pap's closet. He also selected a handsome outfit and put it on, adding the finishing touch—Pap's golden sword at his waist. He scribbled a note and left it on the yip-cabinet, next to the bed. His note stated that he was in Green and that he wanted to meet with Pap. It said a lot of things and then ended with an apology if the real person staying there was Bonboo. Dod couldn't think of anyone else who would know of the secret house and care enough to fix it up.

About the time Dod entered the busy corridor in front of Green Hall, it struck him how foolish he had been in leaving a note for someone who was dead. He knew Pap was gone. He had worn a stuffy black suit and listened to sappy talks about how wonderful his grandpa had been. He had even slipped a bag of small stones from the creek into Pap's casket, right beside his lifeless body, promising him he'd keep throwing. It represented the summers Pap had spent with him fishing and camping.

Being near people in the hall brought Dod back to the realities of life: Pap was gone and Bonboo had instructed someone reliable to take care of the hideout. After all, it would be a shame to let it spoil, and Dod hadn't been doing his share of the work to keep it looking nice.

It was only a few moments before thoughts of Pap were far from Dod's mind. And it wasn't just that he realized Pap couldn't have returned, it was the patrol of soldiers who stopped him that drove the nostalgia away. They had noticed him carrying a sword at his waist—everyone was staring at it. The fancy scabbard drew attention from passers-by. The guards indicated that he wasn't authorized to be equipped as he was and that they had orders to strip him of his weapon and take him in for questioning.

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Dod felt like fighting. The drat soldiers were out to get him, he knew it. They were biased by the lies that Jibb and others had spread, saying he was Dark Hood. And even though he had been proven innocent the night before, obviously some people were still thinking he was involved. The thought raced through his mind, *You can have my sword if you can take it from me*. It was his connection to Pap and his tool that inspired courage within him. Wearing the fancy sword made him feel like he was destined to defeat Dark Hood as he had The Dread. Not to mention, Youk and Tridacello had been wearing swords.

Nevertheless, Dod backed down and began to comply. He looked around and noticed that except for the militia, everyone else was weaponless, suggesting Twistyard in general had maintained its original policies with only a few exceptions. Dod slowly unhitched the casing of his rapier.

“Ludicrous!” yelled an old woman. She stormed up to Dod and stood inches from him, hunching over and occasionally using a cane to steady her weight. She was at least four hundred pounds, which was heavy, even considering her six-foot-plus stature. Her brown and graying curls stayed close to her head as she swayed.

“Stand back,” she said, waving her cane in the faces of the soldiers. “You’re telling me he’s a threat? Stand back! I’ll fight you myself if you don’t stop picking on this boy. He’s Pap’s grandson! That’s credentials sufficient to walk with a sword. I’ve seen his face on the wall in the Hall of The Greats—go look at it! He’s the one who stopped The Dread. If you wish to take his sword, you must be working for Dark Hood yourselves. Traitors! You’re all traitors!”

She continued to wave her cane, nearly striking the noses

of some drat soldiers who didn't obey her requests. The strident ramblings of the lady attracted the attention of everyone walking by. People began to point and say, "Look, he's the one who defeated The Dread!" and "It's Dod. He's back to help us!"

Most of the people in the hall were Pots—young visitors who hoped to eventually become one of the fifty Lings, or fifteen Coosings who represented each realm. They came from all over Green, Raul, and Soosh. There were other guests, too, such as dignitaries; yet none of the hundred or more guests who began to cluster near Dod had met him before. The people who knew Dod best were preoccupied at The Games.

The guards felt pressure from the crowd. Some people pushed their way through, wanting to pat Dod on the shoulder, while others began to warmly contend with the soldiers. It was clear that the woman's words had been powerful at swaying the masses, and the masses were equally good at convincing the drat legion.

"I suppose if you're Dod," said the commanding officer, approaching him carefully and pretending to inspect Pap's insignia on the scabbard, "we'll extend you The Greats' exemption. Our apologies."

All of the soldiers had known he was Dod. They made it their business to keep an eye out for anyone they suspected of treachery, and they had suspected him. Regardless, they pretended it was an act of mistaken identity.

"Ludicrous," mumbled the lady, still shaking her cane at the guards. She scowled and watched as they walked down the hall. Her wrinkly face of baggy skin added to the look of discontent. It vaguely reminded Dod of a Halloween mask he had worn one year for a neighborhood spook alley.

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“My name’s Ingrid,” she finally said to Dod. She grabbed his arm and insisted he walk her to the kitchen.

“Thanks for helping me back there,” sighed Dod. He was relieved that the guards hadn’t hauled him off to who knows where, especially with Bonboo out of town. “They don’t like me,” he continued. “I’ve tried to be nice to them. It just doesn’t do any good.”

“They’re jealous,” grumbled the lady, leaning heavily on Dod. “I think they should pack up and leave. But who cares what I think? I’m just an old lady, and not a very popular one at that. ’Course, it is my first visit to this place. I haven’t even met Bonmoob yet. I hear he’s old like me, having all sorts of trouble with his baggage and bones.”

The more Ingrid leaned, the more Dod realized she smelled like Rot—garlic and mud. It was revolting. It made him wish to get away.

“I care what you think,” answered Dod, trying not to breathe through his nose. “And I agree with you perfectly. The drat soldiers aren’t doing their jobs very well. They’re harassing people...and spreading lies, too. They thought I was Dark Hood. Can you imagine that?”

Dod vented to the lady as he would have to Aunt Hilda back at home. He was grateful for her help and also her listening ear. She seemed to have the same views about the soldiers. It felt safe to complain to her.

“I know. It’s a shame,” said Ingrid, shaking her head until the rolls of skin below her chin wiggled. “You should talk with Bonmoob if he ever comes back. You’re cozy with him, aren’t you? Better get a word in before he checks out.”

“Bonboo was doing well when I left,” said Dod. “What happened to him?”

“He got sick and went to see my cousin Higga. He stayed there with that loyal drat friend of his at his bedside for weeks, and only got worse by the visit. And then relatives came storming in and scooped him up—took him off someplace. I think that’s the real reason Higga left. It wasn’t just the lure of research. She was offended—and rightly so! It wasn’t her fault. She didn’t poison him.”

Dod was interested to know more about the unusual events surrounding poor Bonboo’s treatments. He began to ask when he was cut off by Mercy, the moment they rounded the corner into the kitchen.

“Dod! It’s great to see you made it back. We were all getting worried about you. Don’t scare us like that. If you’ve got things to do, at least come and tell me goodbye, or leave a note. And the post works, you know. We could have used a few letters. I’ve got to hear everything. Let’s start with the morning you left. Where did you go next?”

“I went home—” began Dod.

“Good for you,” interjected Mercy. She didn’t wait for Dod to say any more before continuing on with her own list of things she wanted to tell him. She spent ten minutes blaring without so much as a break for air, all the while making food and interjecting directives to the other helpers in the kitchen. It was classic Mercy.

Ingrid sat down on a chair in the corner and breathed heavily, listening. Dod was relieved to get farther from Ingrid’s smell. He had felt like Mercy was an older woman—she did have graying brown hair and a rounder condition—nevertheless, having Ingrid in the room lent perspective. Mercy was comparatively at the top of her game.

“I see you’re staying with Youk,” continued Mercy, pointing

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at the white cloak that draped over Dod's arm. "That's a smart choice. Green Hall was besquashed last night. Good thing you weren't there! Dark Hood showed up—who knows why—and then poofed away like a baked ice-cake."

Dod was willing to keep Mercy in the shade about having faced Dark Hood, to shorten the conversation, but Ingrid wasn't. She spoke up and told the story, adding heroic details that painted Dod as a real champion. It was baffling how she knew more about it than Mercy.

"I'm glad to hear," said Mercy, patting Dod on the shoulder as she passed by with a tray of delectable cookies. "Dark Hood is trouble, no doubt. It's a good thing Bonboo can perceive his tricks, as he did with The Dread. There's no need for us to play into the hands of corrupt individuals. Bonboo's been a wonderful Chief Noble Tredder. When he passes, I'm sure Youk will do a good job, too—assuming his name's in the box."

"You think Bonmoob would choose him over Pious?" gasped Ingrid, shocked. "Pious has been winning so many battles against Dreaderious that we hardly consider ourselves at war anymore. The seas are finally safe again. And if it weren't his name, I'd expect to see Commendus written down. He's proven himself plenty while leading our democracy. Maybe it's time to combine the two positions."

"Not wise," responded Mercy. "I'd predict Voracio over either of them. As a matter of fact, I think he's more suitable than Youk. He's one of The Greats, equal to Youk, and comes from the best tredder blood-line!"

"Whose?" snapped Ingrid, getting angry. Dod stepped out from between the two snarling women. Ingrid had risen to her feet and was leaning on her thick, wooden cane.

“BONBOO’S!” boomed Mercy. She stepped closer to Ingrid, showing she wasn’t afraid of her. “Voracio is his grandson, which counts for a lot. He dropped everything and rushed here to be with us, to attend to things properly. And with Dark Hood lurking about, I’d say he’s proven himself invaluable.”

Ingrid nearly pounded Mercy over the head with her cane. It looked more like a club when she raised it up. Fortunately, before anything happened, she began to choke and cough. It brought her back to a hunching position, relying on her cane to stand. She murmured a few things and then hobbled away without striking.

“Good to be out with that!” celebrated Mercy, fanning the air. “And to think she actually wants to cook in my kitchen! That nasty garlic clings to her—I don’t want any part of it. She can keep stewing with the soldiers outside. If people like it, they can go out there to eat it.”

Mercy handed Dod a pile of cookies and insisted he come back later for more. She promised to have even better ones—chouyummy delights.

In the courtyard, Dod found that things were relatively similar to the way he remembered them. The biggest difference was that the drat soldiers had extended the borders of their camp, with their numbers reaching five hundred or more.

In the center of the tent city was a communal pavilion, constructed directly below Dilly’s window. It appeared to be the place where the soldiers ate their meals and spent their extra time. Dod wondered how Dark Hood and his associate had escaped through one of Green Hall’s windows. They all seemed to be improbable routes with the guards’ camp littering the ground below them.

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“No more sneaking out at night,” said Dod to himself. He made his way across the field of lawn and then along the tree-lined path to the little ribble-barn.

“Nice of you to come now that we’re basically done,” said Dari, faking a cross look. She picked at her short blonde hair until she drew a tree beetle out of it and then looked up at the oak they were sitting under.

“Like you’re one to be talking,” chided Valerie, positioned stiffly next to Dari on a bench in front of the barn. “You barely beat him by a few minutes.”

“Hardly,” barked Dari, flipping the beetle into her sister’s curly hair. Valerie jumped to her feet and hopped around, screaming, until the bug fell out.

Dod walked over and offered the girls and Sammywoo cookies from his stash. He set his bag and new cloak down before planting himself next to Sammywoo.

“What a challenging lesson,” teased Dod. It appeared that their course was in sitting.

“Mr. Clair’s gone to fetch his assistants,” said Sammywoo. “He’s going to show us what it’s really like.”

Within a few minutes, three men came storming from the barn, yelling horrible threats. Two of the men faced the other, swinging their swords menacingly. The man who stood alone was remarkable with his blade. He held them back, blow for blow, and finally forced them to retreat until they were trapped against the barn. With no escape, they threw their swords to the ground and begged for mercy.

“See kids, that’s the way it’s done,” said the man who still held his sword. He was tall, six-foot four or better, with midnight-black curly hair and a muscle-bound frame. He

looked late twenties, but was clearly over one hundred as a tredder.

Youk's kids clapped and clapped while Dod stared. He hadn't been prepared for the show, so during the realistic fighting, Dod had reached for his own sword. The only thing that had kept him from drawing it was the look on Sammywoo's face—the boy hadn't appeared threatened at all.

"Wow!" said Dod, standing to meet the men. "That was well planned. You had me convinced you were fighting for real."

"You don't know Clair, do you?" blurted the shorter of the two assistants, who was only an inch taller than Dod. "It wasn't planned—it was intense practice. And had we not begged at the end, I suppose we'd need patching right now."

Dod laughed like he didn't believe the man, so the man lifted his sleeves, revealing a series of scars that ran up both arms.

"Most of these came from him," said the man, pointing at Clair.

"You're exaggerating," chuckled Clair, brushing off the statement as a compliment. He spoke with a deep, manly voice as he swaggered over to Dod. "You've been gone long enough to find yourself displaced, haven't you?"

"I don't know what you mean," answered Dod.

"Well, look around—we're doing just fine without you. And since Pious has commissioned me here, I'll take care of things. You can work somewhere else...somewhere you're wanted."

"I'm Dod," said Dod, feeling confused and embarrassed. He assumed Clair had mistaken him for a different person.

Clair laughed and his assistants joined in. The taller of the two had light brown hair and stood about six-foot two, the shorter had black hair like Clair.

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“Wearing a fancy sword doesn’t make you *great*,” growled Clair, glancing at Dod’s intricately decorated sheath. “You were lucky with Sirlonk—and you’re fortunate that I’m going to pretend I believe that, or I’d show you what I do to traitors!” Clair turned to the girls and smiled politely. “Lessons for today are over,” he said in a civil voice.

The three men took their swords and disappeared into the barn the way they had come.

“I think he hates you,” declared Dari to Dod, being the only one that dared say anything after such an embarrassing episode.

It was hard for Dod to disagree.

The remainder of the day was over, despite it being only lunchtime. Dod faked ill and requested a break from the other events. He didn’t need anyone else wanting to assault him on his first day back. And in truth, he was horribly tired. It was like he had jetlag. He had tossed and turned his way through the prior night, which was really the rest of his Saturday on Earth, and now at noon was ready to sleep.

Saluci met him at the door and bid him a quick recovery before he faded off to sleep in the cluttered guest bedroom.

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ONE MINUTE TOO LATE

“**W**akeup! Wakeup!” chanted Sammywoo, poking at Dod with his fancy swot. “Wakeup! You need to eat breakfast.”

Dod rubbed his face and looked around. The room was still cluttered with stuff and smellier than before. Rot was snoring in his bed.

“I have a surprise for you. Quick, get up,” begged the little boy, his blue eyes filled with anticipation. He couldn’t wait to see Dod’s reaction.

“What is it?” asked Dod, clearing his throat.

The boy shook his head, smiling. “I can’t show you until you’re done eating. Quick! Get up!”

Dod rose to his feet and rummaged through his bag. “I’ll be there in a minute, little buddy,” said Dod. “How about you save me a place at the table. Can we sit together?”

“I’ve already eaten. Quick! Hurry!”

Dod rushed his preparations to please the boy and made his way to the kitchen. In truth, he was excited to see what the

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boy was so enthusiastic about. An afternoon and full night of sleep had bolstered his spirits back to soaring heights, making Dod ready for the day, even if it presented more mean people and slanderous remarks. But, remembering the day before, Dod wrapped Pap's beautiful sword in Youk's white cloak and carried it instead of wearing it.

The breakfast table was quiet; Dari, Valerie, and Rot were still asleep, awaiting the sun to rise, and Sammywoo had accompanied Youk out the door to their patio-garden, where they reportedly were 'preparing the surprise.' Saluci served a feast of delicious foods and insisted Dod eat them to ensure better health. She told a Humberrone story that suggested the very meal Dod was gobbling had the capacity to guarantee good luck. It was nice of her to say it, even if it wasn't true.

"Humberrone was fortunate," admitted Dod, devouring a pile of brown cubes that tasted like steak. "He seems to have done enough impossible things to have landed at the top of everyone's hero list—hasn't he? And in fifty years—it's quite amazing. So, what happened to him?"

Dod had been told bits and pieces from other people about Humberrone's mysterious death, but Saluci seemed to have an inside track. She claimed to have been in love with him at one point, when he was younger and less popular. It was about the same time she had begun dating Youk.

Shortly thereafter, Humberrone and Youk had experienced a 'falling away,' and Youk had found himself on the outs from Twistyard for a long time. Saluci didn't say what either of them had done or why Youk had been asked to stay away, but she went with Youk, not Humberrone. Dod liked hearing that. For once someone who knew Humberrone well also knew a dirty little

secret about how he had wronged Youk. It was proof to Dod that Pap was better than Humberrone, for Pap had been nice to everyone Dod knew.

"I'm not sure," said Saluci hesitantly, finally answering Dod's question about what had happened to Humberrone. "I've heard...well...I don't know exactly. He died about fifteen years ago. The...let's see...whole thing was an immense tragedy."

Dod could tell Saluci was retaining a juicy story, something she felt would be imprudent to share. It drove Dod nuts. He desperately wanted the details—whatever they were, whatever she was holding back—but Saluci's resolve to keep the information to herself was beyond the influence of persuasion.

"Are you done?" called Sammywoo, bursting through the door. "Hurry up. We won't make it in time." Sammywoo disappeared back out into the patio garden. It was an acre filled with bushes, trees, flowers, and statuary. At the edge of the garden, a beautiful, waist-high rail protected viewers from falling twenty stories to the courtyard below.

Dod shoveled the rest of his breakfast into his mouth and made haste to the door. He was more than ready for his grand surprise, though not prepared for what he saw. It was astonishing. Hidden behind a ten-foot wall of shrubs and bushes, Youk and two other men held the reins to a giant flutter. It was more than twice as big as the flutters Dod recalled from his experience with Tridacello, Dungo, and Bowlure. It was enormous, with charcoal-black wings that appeared to be covered with rubber-like skin and feathers. Its length from beak to tail was only slightly longer than a regular flutter, about twenty-five feet; however, its body-mass was more than double, and its gigantic wings spanned as far out on each side as the creature was long. Dod could imagine

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the beast carrying three or four men easily without causing it to falter—that is, if the men dared to ride it.

“You probably thought they were extinct, didn’t you?” said Youk, beaming with delight. “It’s amazing what you can accomplish if you’re one of the Zoots. My wife is both clever and magnificent.”

Saluci had followed Dod to the gathering. She waved her hand, as if to say, ‘stop teasing.’ Still, she glowed with pride in her family name.

“Yup,” said one man, who helped Youk contain the creature’s riggings. He had long gray hair, tied back in a braid. His face was wrinkled and sunburned. “The Zoots are about the only ones I know of who could pull off something like this. I confess, Youk, you’ve won again. I never would have expected Horsely to return this morning with an answer like *this*.” The man patted the lower neck of the giant flutter. “That note must have said something special!”

Dod knew Horsely. He was the lead man who controlled the beast. Horsely was a young tredder, mid-seventies, strong and handsome, a little less than six feet, with black hair and blue eyes. He looked like he could have been Boot’s older brother, though he walked slower, with a limp, and read lips because he was deaf. He had been a Green Coosing with Boot, years before, and had fought with The Dread. Unfortunately for him, the remains of that confrontation still lingered.

Horsely occasionally labored in the barns alongside his aging uncle, Stallio, who wore the braid. They handled Zerny’s special requests regarding animals, having both been personally trained by Miz as maylers. Since Stallio and his wife had no children, Horsely lived with them on a small farm outside of the Twistyard complex, combining their efforts to keep it going.

It was technically Bonboo's land; they were sharecroppers and horsemen, working a hold along the shore of Lake Mauj.

"I know, I know," answered Youk happily, tipping his white hat at Saluci. "My wife pulled it off. She asked a favor and got a stupendous reply. It just shows that I'm not the only one who recognizes how important she is." He then turned toward Horsely and added, slowing his speech, "You did a good job delivering the message. Were you scared when they responded with this big guy?"

Horsely laughed. "I was nearly born on the back of one of these! And since my accident, riding anything beats walking. Besides, I was assured that this one is well educated." He reached up with both hands and covered the nose-holes of the flutter, forcing its giant head down at his command. It was an act that clearly showed he wasn't afraid, even though he could have been—the menacing beak was colossal and would have had no trouble snipping his hands off, had the bird not been properly trained.

Dod stared. Thoughts ran through his mind of the night he had fled from Pap's place. Sawny had mentioned seeing two giant flutters leave the rooftop gardens. It made chills roll down his spine. He glanced above the forty-foot wall to the enormous fish statue Sawny had seen the riders pass. The stone sculpture was smaller than the beast that stood in front of Dod. This was a creature that even Bowlure could ride.

"Surprise!" said Sammywoo, giggling. "We're going to The Games, just like my dad promised. The last match is today, and if we hurry, we'll make the start." Sammywoo wore a white three-piece suit that matched his father's, completed by an elegant, feathered hat.

"But I thought Carsigo was days away, up the Carsalean Seashore."

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“It is by horse,” said Stallio, looking straight at Dod. He reached over and slapped the side of the flutter. “Good thing this is no horse. It can fly right over the top of Janice Pass and cut straight across the Gulf of Blue, landing at Carsigo before lunch if you hurry.”

“Go get your stuff,” commanded Youk. “I won’t be able to bring you home tonight. You’ll need to ride back with Boot and Buck.”

Dod rushed inside and returned with his bag of things over his shoulder, his sword and cloak stowed within. Horsely and Youk were already mounted with Sammywoo squished tightly between, while Stallio stood by holding the reins. Dod nervously climbed up a five-step lift to his seat. The flutter shook and clawed at the ground as Dod clamped his bag to a rack and buckled himself in.

“Fly her safely,” said Stallio, talking to Horsely. He handed him the last of the leather straps, which attached to a metal bar below the flutter’s beak. The harness jolted and readjusted the moment Stallio was no longer forcing the beast to stay in place. Dod looked forward and noticed Youk’s hat had strings that connected tightly to his shoulder clips. He was prepared for rough action.

“Please be careful and have a fun ride,” called Saluci, looking worried yet jealous; an adventurous spirit lurked somewhere within her, hidden behind a sophisticated exterior.

Dod recalled being told that he had ridden flutters, yet the experience was entirely new. He couldn’t remember the slightest detail. And the moment they left the ground, Dod had a greater respect for the original Dod, the one who had died on the cliffs, presumably at the hands of Dungo. According to Bowlure, the boy had flown well at the trials.

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Riding a flutter was not like riding a horse. It took greater skill, pulling various leather bands at the correct times to get the creature to go as desired. The birds were cantankerous and willful by nature, and the one they were riding was extraordinarily so. It started off in the wrong direction, heading straight for High Gate, and even jerked around until Horsely lost one of his bags. And despite Horsely's best attempts, it took fifteen minutes before the bird was persuaded to turn around. Slowly the flutter gave in and allowed Horsely to steer.

Thirty minutes into the ride, as they were passing Twistyard, finally heading in the right direction, Dod realized he needed to go to his room in Green Hall—he needed to wear his medallion. If Earth-time had continued while the necklace was hidden, then the men in the trailer would be long gone—it would be early Monday morning. If he waited days until a more convenient opportunity, he would miss Christmas and worry his mother to death. Not to mention, a bad feeling came over Dod as he thought about leaving it in his bed frame.

"I forgot something," yelled Dod, nudging Youk.

"Me too," he responded, turning around. "Flying's for the birds." Youk laughed at his joke. He clearly enjoyed riding, even if the flutter hadn't conformed to their plans from the start. And Sammywoo was having the time of his life, calling out all sorts of phrases about how wonderful the day was and how he'd never forget it.

"I need something from Green Hall," pleaded Dod. He spoke loud enough that Sammywoo poked Horsely until he turned around, too.

"That's impractical," blurted Youk. "We're already flying and finally making our way toward Carsigo! Whatever it is can

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wait 'til you get back.” His attitude had changed in a flash and wasn't very favorable.

“Besides,” he continued, “the drats are still carrying on their investigation—” Youk's words trailed for a moment while he thought of the right ones to say. “Well, it would impede the process if you rummaged. They'd be furious at us—mad at me! Green Hall is off limits to everyone! When you return with Boot and Buck, I'm sure they'll have it reopened.”

“Please!” begged Dod. “Help me get into Green Hall. I'd owe you the biggest favor. It means more to me than I can explain. It would only take a moment. I promise.”

Youk adamantly refused.

But it didn't matter: Horsely was deaf and couldn't hear Youk's voice, he could only read lips; and the ones facing him were Dod's.

In a flash, Horsely spun the flutter around and made it dive toward Twistyard. Youk yelled in vain. The giant bird continued its course, ending in the most precarious of positions, clinging to the rock wall below Dod's bedroom window. It wasn't until the bird stopped flying that Dod noticed talons along the wingtips; they, in addition to its clawed-feet, helped the flutter to secure itself to the wall.

The ride had been varying degrees of horizontal, like racing on a horse up and down hills, but while stuck to the wall, they were completely vertical. It was uncomfortable. Their buckles and straps were put to the test, holding them from falling to the courtyard below.

Horsely reached in a bag at his side and produced a rope with a hook on the end. He threw the line until the clip snagged on the window trim, and then he dropped the rest of the rope down, dangling it next to Dod.

ONE MINUTE TOO LATE

“Hurry,” called Horsely to Dod. “This thing might change its mind any minute.”

Dod grabbed the rope and unbuckled himself. He climbed past Youk, who was fuming and struggling to contort his body into a backrest for his son.

“I hope you’re happy!” blurted Youk. “Now all the drats down below will make issue of this and I’ll be answering jabs for ages. You and your barnyard pal have lost your freshy-minds. This is absurd!”

Dod raced up the rope, disregarding Youk’s bitterness. He only slowed temporarily at the window, to pop it open, and then entered and exited in record time. The whole ordeal, from the moment he started climbing to the moment he finished re-buckling was a minute or less. It was so fast, only a couple of soldiers down below had gathered to point. Nevertheless, it was long enough to guarantee Youk’s white suit had been noticed.

“Thank you,” mouthed Dod to Horsely, who had spun around to make sure he was properly secured.

Horsely raised his chin and eyebrows in acknowledgement, smiling. He didn’t seem bothered or intimidated by Youk’s display of anger. He appeared glad to show off his ability with the flutter, making up for the detour test flight they’d taken in the wrong direction.

When Youk turned to see what Dod was whispering, Horsely mouthed, “You owe me.” Dod knew he did. Even though he had only briefly been around Horsely in the past, he felt strangely drawn to him. There were times when Horsely had demonstrated unusual levels of loyalty to others like Boot and Buck, suggesting he would do anything for his closest friends. It made Dod want to be on his short list of them.

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After stowing the rope back in his bag, Horsely drew out a large and unusual pair of goggles. The lenses were at least three times the size of regular ones, parting in the center for his nose and dipping all the way to his mouth at the bottoms. They were held tight against his cheeks by a band that wrapped around his head. He looked like a fly-faced, crazy man.

“Now we’ll make this bird soar,” said Horsely.

When the beast launched off the wall, everything shook. They plunged backwards, falling upside-down before correcting. It was terrifying and exciting at the same time. It started off better than any amusement ride Dod had ever been on, but eventually became breezy and uncomfortable. The flutter rose to greater heights and flew much faster than it had before. Horsely’s large glasses protected his eyes against the wind. Youk had none, so he gradually slumped behind Horsely, sharing the shielded spot with his son, and Dod followed suit behind Youk.

Around noon, when the sun beamed its hottest, Dod awoke from an awkward slumber. He had been cramped over long enough, avoiding the breeze, that his stomach ached. Horsely was shouting about something down below. In the distance, positioned at the southernmost tip of the shoreline enclosing the Gulf of Blue, a monstrous arena rumbled with noise. It was filled to capacity with over three hundred thousand screaming fans that could be heard from miles away. To the northeast of the sprawling city, a giant mountain range continued east as far as the eye could see, following the coastline, a few miles inland.

“It looks like they’ve already started,” said Horsely, pointing at the stadium. “They’re early.” He nudged the flutter to dive.

“Finally, Carsigo,” mumbled Youk, trying to straighten his

back. Sammywoo cheered and squealed with excitement. He didn't seem the slightest bit bothered by the morning's ride.

Horsely guided the bird to circle the beachfront community, eventually gliding right over the top of the crowded Bollirse match. There were countless numbers of people. It was the biggest gathering Dod had ever seen. Below the sea of admirers, a comparatively small field was set for the challenge, with thirteen-foot poles topped by cone-like bots. It made Dod's heart pound faster with excitement. His friends from Green Hall were making their way down a rope ladder onto the field—the match hadn't begun yet.

"That's unusual," said Youk. "The Green Coosings have actually done it. They're competing in the semifinal game. If they win this, they'll play next month for The Golden Swot. Who would have thought they'd make it this far?"

"They're gonna win!" yelled Sammywoo. "Just as Dilly said. And then they'll claim it all. Can we go to the championship game?"

Youk was amused, but not delirious with anticipation like Dod and Sammywoo. "One at a time, my boy. Let's find a spot and see how it goes."

Horsely directed the flutter over the arena twice before landing in a grassy pasture, a few blocks away. It was disappointing. Dod had wanted to hop off and join his friends in the scrimmage. In his mind he had imagined the whole crowd rising to their feet, pointing their fingers and chanting his name as he slid down a rope onto the field. After all, the people had shown interest when Dod flew above them. However, Horsely and Youk had insisted it was too dangerous to drop a line for him while in flight.

Once inside the stadium, Dod quickly realized he was too

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late—an announcer had just barely proclaimed the start—and nobody seemed to care that he wasn't playing. It was the giant flutter that had attracted the crowd's gaze. Many spectators had never seen one before.

"Sorry," groaned Sammywoo, reading Dod's disheartened face. "A minute earlier and you could have played with them." He held his father's hand as they pushed their way to the lower front.

Some of The Greats from Twistyard were seated in a group at the very edge of the pit, enjoying premier spots with perfect views. At last there were faces Dod recognized. And right in the middle of them was Bonboo, encouraging Green Hall's players with reassuring words, looking perfectly healthy.

"Dod!" called Bonboo. His white hair glistened in the afternoon sun and his big smile doubled the wrinkles on his face. He squinted his soft, brown eyes in the sunlight to see better. "You're back. I'm so glad. I've been worried." Bonboo glanced at Youk and then added. "Come, Dod. I insist you sit beside me."

Youk glowered. He was very perturbed. There was only space for one more person, or two if it was Youk with Sammywoo on his lap, but since Dod took it, Youk had to fumble back through the countless hosts to where other Twistyard members were standing higher up. Dod watched him pass Eluxa to squeeze in between Sawb and Doochi, amidst the Coosings from Raul.

"How did you ever come by a giant flutter?" asked Bonboo, putting one arm around Dod. He leaned in to be heard over the noise.

Dod turned back around, though his mind was still focused on Youk's journey to the nosebleed regions. Dod felt awful about repeatedly making Youk mad. He wished he could patch things over.

ONE MINUTE TOO LATE

"Perhaps Youk could sit here instead of me," suggested Dod. He didn't answer Bonboo's question.

"No!" persisted Bonboo. He looked at Dod, unrelenting. "I'm pleased to have *you* next to me. Now I must know, how did you obtain a giant flutter?"

"I didn't," said Dod. "Youk got it...or I suppose Saluci helped. The Zoots provided it somehow."

"Hmmm," droned Bonboo, drifting into thought. His response indicated there were stories to tell and puzzles to solve—things Dod wanted to hear, but it was impossible with the game in progress.

"Come on! That's absurd!" yelled a man that had risen to his feet. He shifted most of his weight onto one leg, gently caring for his other that was wrapped from his knee to his hip with a strange bandage. He had been seated next to Bonboo until Dod displaced him. The man was furious. His tredder ring turned purple with blood, and part of it stuck out from under his elegant, yellow shirt. He threw his giant arms in the air, shaking them at a bad call, and then lost his balance and resorted to grabbing Dod's shoulder. He leaned on Dod and continued to rage as though the referees would hear him and change their judgment.

Dod looked to see what was happening. Boot was being escorted to a ladder. His swot was broken in half. It made Dod sick. He knew how badly Boot loved the game.

The Bollirse field had thirty poles on each side, with cone-shaped bots on the tops of most of them; three or four had been knocked down during the first few minutes of play. Buck was leading a group to attack—payback for what had just happened. A volley of globes filled the air in the direction of their opponents, the Raging Billies.

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Dod knew plenty about billies. Much like pirates on Earth, billies roamed the seas and inhabited islands, pillaging and plundering each other's cities. Occasionally their warfare crept onto the mainland, but those were the rare exceptions. The general rule was a state of truce between billies and other groups.

The Raging Billies had tough-looking players, composed mostly of twenty to forty-year-olds—their bodies tanned and tattooed, their hair long and tied back, and their muscles rippling. They were real warriors that delighted in killing, but restrained themselves enough to play within the accepted bounds of the game of Bollirse. When they hit a globe, they hit it hard, and when they blocked with their shields, you could imagine they had spent plenty of time blocking swords. They seemed unbeatable.

"No!" roared the man at Dod's side. "No! That's not fair!" He was still leaning on Dod, trying to stand. Tinja, the Hatu expert from Twistyard, was seated directly behind the man and became annoyed when he wouldn't sit down.

"Please, Voracio, you're blocking everyone's view," said Tinja politely. Dod turned and stared.

"Voracio?" whispered Dod to himself. *No wonder Youk was doubly insulted that I took his spot*, he thought. *He was probably annoyed to see 'him.'* Dod looked Voracio up and down. He remembered Mercy saying Voracio was Bonboo's grandson, one of The Greats that had been helping Twistyard fight Dark Hood. Dod couldn't understand why Mercy had thought that *he* was the most likely candidate for the position of Chief Noble Tredder—preferred over Youk.

Voracio looked and acted nothing like Bonboo. He was a foot taller, six-foot six, with dark black hair and a burly figure.

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He wore expensive, showy clothes that touted his position and bandages over his pant leg to remind people of his injury from heroic actions. He was nothing short of a braggadocio.

On the field, Buck was in the middle of a disaster. He had surged forward, persisting with his band to hit globes at the billies and their bots until, like Boot, his swot broke. The game paused while Buck was escorted to Green Hall's ladder. Apparently, there was an old, official rule on the books that stated if your swot or shield experienced a significant malfunction, you were out. It had been established to stop a disastrous trend wherein some teams had purposely broken their own equipment. They had done it, from time to time, to claim their circumstance was unfair, which in turn had led to brutal fights and fatalities after the games.

Voracio went mad. He almost fell over the edge into the pit. His language was not statesmanlike, and many of the things he yelled were threats at the refs for perpetuating an outdated regulation and at the Raging Billies for rigging the mess.

"Sit down or go to the back," insisted Tinja, firmly tapping Voracio on the shoulder. It nearly led to fists. Voracio swung around, heated and ready to brawl. It wouldn't have been much of a contest; Tinja was Twistyard's martial arts specialist, and since weapons weren't allowed in the stadium, his six-foot one, muscle-bound frame would have likely tamed Voracio.

Dod observed Tinja. He stood his ground calmly. His eyes flashed with confidence, his stubbly-shaved head suggested his no-nonsense personality, and his worn clothing fit perfectly with the crowd of commoners.

"Please!" intervened Bonboo, leaning over Dod to scold his grown grandson. "Act your age!"

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Dod agreed. Voracio hardly seemed mature, let alone Chief Noble Tredder material. His displays were not only juvenile, they were reckless.

Down below, Pone continued with the assault where Buck left off. He played well, aggressively pursuing, and all the while motivating Green Hall to fight harder. Dilly had been in the back, as usual on defense, yet with Buck's early exit, she was in charge. It made Dod smile to watch. He knew she was pleased with her opportunity to lead so early in the game, even if the circumstance that had brought it about was a misfortune.

"Hold your ground!" shouted Dilly.

With Voracio finally quieted, Dod could hear some of the things his friends were saying. He wished he could join them. It was torturous to watch. From his vantage, he could see the Raging Billies setting a trap. They moved as a larger group, appearing to stay together, when in fact they were depositing three of their best players behind strategic poles, sneakily hidden. It was a perfect illusion. When they faked a retreat, Pone fell for it, rushing in with his clan. They all focused on the mob in front and, as a result, went down together. Pone, Voo, Sham and Toos were struck by globes launched from the concealed billies.

Next, Dilly ordered her team to regroup. With six gone, she had twelve players left, while her opponents hadn't lost any. The billies stormed the mid-field and jumped the short wall that separated the two halves. They advanced slowly, lined in a row, with their shields in front. It didn't look good for Green Hall. And to make matters worse, the leader of the billies had a wicked arm. He walked directly behind four of his men and systematically popped the bots off the posts like a star pitcher, always hitting his mark.

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It was too much to watch. It looked like a pending massacre. Suddenly, someone took a bold position. One of Green Hall's players climbed the rear-center post and put the bot on his head. He then carefully stood on top of the log, holding a swot—no shield. It was crazy. From Dod's view he looked like Boot, but Dod knew he wasn't because Boot was squatting with the other ousted Coosings and Greenling in the holding yard.

The Bootish boy taunted the army of billies, challenging them to hit the bot off his head.

"It's a distraction, right?" said Dod to Bonboo.

"I suppose," he answered. Neither Bonboo nor Dod had very much faith in Green Hall's ability to survive the approaching mob.

"You've lost your freshy-mind," roared Voracio, rising to his feet again, shaking his fists. Bonboo quickly poked with his cane and beckoned for him to lend an ear. Voracio consented. He practically squished Dod to the ground when he dumped his weight on him to reach Bonboo. He was like a three-hundred-pound rock.

Whatever was whispered was unusually powerful. Voracio stood back up and glared at Bonboo. He was beyond furious, but he quietly limped out of his seat and disappeared into the crowded stadium.

"Come on, shippies," hollered the boy with the bot on his head. "Is that the best you can do?" he teased, luring their attention.

Meanwhile, Dilly led a group of six up the front, hurling globes at the enemy forces. She and the others hid behind posts, one person per log, slowing the advance of the Raging Billies.

"Shippies, shippies, wobbly-legged flippies."

The Bootish boy was amazing. As he drew the billies

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rage, their captain began zipping shots at him. He no longer attempted to hit the other bots as he had before, he just wanted one thing: To shut the boy up. However, his efforts were counterproductive. Dilly held him and his men by the mid-wall, so when they launched globes at the boy, their shots were long, easily deflected. And eight of the fastest globes were returned with incredible force. The perched boy was a homerun hitter, and three billies went down as a result.

Eventually, Dilly's six began to run out of ammunition. The billies sensed it and pressed hard, all at once. It was awful. Four more Coosings went up the ladder, leaving Dilly, Sawny, and five others huddled around the post upon which the Bootish boy was perched. The ground around him was littered with globes that he had gently deflected. Sawny filled her jung to the top and then did the wildest thing Dod had ever seen her do—she ran solo, around the approaching troops, up against the side wall and into their undefended territory. She was extremely fast. She didn't seem like her bookworm self.

Dod was so amazed that he turned to Bonboo and had him confirm that it was Sawny.

"I can't believe it either," said Bonboo, showing concern for his great-granddaughter. She was pursued by six formidable opponents, eager to make her pay.

"Oh, Sawny," groaned Dod. He couldn't help voicing his nervousness for her wellbeing. The men didn't appear to be playing anymore. "Just give up! It's not worth getting hurt!" yelled Dod. He didn't intend on shouting; nevertheless, the thoughts in his mind provoked him. They were faint memories of experiences with billies—their mean temperaments, their cruelty, their lack of fairness, their bloodthirsty natures.

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Dod's heart began to pound faster. He wanted to jump down the twenty-five feet and run to Sawny's aid with a battle-striker in his hand—a swot hardly seemed enough. But before Sawny was overcome by her assailants, the Bootish boy earned a place in Dod's book of heroes: He hit a real homerun! When the billies' best player fired a fast globe at him, he sent it long and hard, right into the back of the first man who swung at Sawny. The globe struck with such force that the man was knocked to the ground, tripping two more who followed close behind. It opened up a larger gap between Sawny and her attackers, and one of them was out.

The crowd went wild. It was the kind of moment that would live on forever in the minds of everyone present. It reminded Dod of his own less-significant moment when the crowd at Twistyard had cheered him on against Raul Hall.

The man who'd been hit made a big enough fuss over his injury that the game paused for longer than usual, while the referees helped him up the Raging Billies' ladder. It was good for Sawny. She caught her breath and was ready to run when the whistle finally blew.

Now more determined than ever, the billies' captain fired another mean globe at the perched boy, this time low, by his feet. It didn't work. The boy swung and it lobbed high into the air, bombing into the middle of Sawny's aggressors. It nearly clipped another man. The billies' defense squad slowed their pursuit, necessarily keeping half of their attention on their rear, skyward.

The crowd went wild again. It was obvious Twistyard had more fans in the audience than the noble billies. Dilly and her contingent pushed forward, claiming ground. It seemed almost equal. Every globe that went near the Bootish boy's direction was sent flying to Sawny's aid.

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“That’s the way,” said Dod, perking up. Sawny was in less danger, and with space between her and the billies, she began taking out their bots—at least those not already downed by the Bootish boy.

Amazingly, the billies didn’t cease supplying globes to the bot-topped boy, despite his uncanny accuracy in attacking their home turf. His taunting had made the billies react out of emotion, not logic, especially their leader. They truly wanted him down.

The billies surged against Dilly’s crew and took two of them out. One limped as she exited.

The billies were throwing harder, and the game neared a critical point as four were sent to the edges of Green Hall’s domain to knock bots. With such small numbers, Dilly couldn’t defend the perimeter and keep the billies far enough from the perching boy to give him a fighting chance.

It wasn’t long before Dilly, Sawny, and the Bootish boy were all that stood between the Raging Billies and their victory. One bot remained for Green Hall—the one on the boy’s head.

Ten billies against three Coosings wasn’t great odds, but with only two of the billies in the back to rush Sawny, she plunked away and directed fire from the perched boy until only four of their bots remained.

Suddenly, the game ended. A globe hit Dilly’s arm and she fell to the ground, yet instead of waiting for the referees to escort her out, three billies rushed her, swinging their swots and firing globes at close range. The boy on the pole couldn’t let it happen—even if the misconduct led to penalties, they weren’t worth letting Dilly get seriously injured. He did the honorable thing and jumped to her aid. And no sooner did he leave his post than a billie dislodged the winning bot.

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Horns blew from every angle of the field announcing the Raging Billies' victory, but the three men continued to move in on Dilly and were joined by their leader and the rest of the billies that stood by. A brawl broke out. The numbers were terribly unfair—Dilly and the Bootish boy against eight massive men. Swots were flying around like swords.

Dilly and the boy fought hard, backing up until they were against the wall. And then the tables turned. Someone slid down Green Hall's rope ladder and rushed to their aid. He carried a swot and swung it better than anyone Dod had ever watched. The billies had started the fight—and he ended it! His swot knocked three men to the ground, unconscious. The others retreated, frightened.

It all happened so fast that Dod was amazed anyone had reacted in time to save his friends from a vicious beating. But as he watched, he recognized the man by the way he stood. It was Strat, The Great Bollirse Instructor. He had rescued Dilly and the Bootish boy.

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After the Bollirse game, fans filled the air with complaints. Soldiers stormed the stadium by the hundreds, ensuring disagreements wouldn't create pandemonium. It settled things down, but also clogged the walkways. Everyone had to be patient.

Bonboo stood up and stretched. "They played better at the end than I would have thought," he said. His face beamed with relief that his two great-granddaughters were finally safe.

"I'd say," agreed Dod, watching Sawny climb out of the pit. "Dilly got her chance to lead and came close to winning the match. It's too bad things went wrong."

"With billies, you expect it!" interjected Tinja, joining the conversation. His eyes flashed with prejudice against the noble billies. "I was surprised they waited 'til the end to act out. With the mischief they've been causing Pious, it's amazing they were allowed to compete at all. If it were up to me, Green Hall would get the win. I'd send a message that violence on the field wouldn't be tolerated."

"It was deplorable how they brawled," said Bonboo. "But

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you know the league—the Bollirse Rules Board will stick to what's written in the books. The Raging Billies will be representing the Western Hemisphere of Green in next month's match. They won it."

"Then they'll need to change its location," blurted Tinja, his face reddening. "High Gate is hardly reasonable considering their natures—the team alone would be hazardous, not to mention their fans. I don't think our democracy would stand if Dreaderious used the billies and this opportunity to sack The City. Even with guards escorting people to and from Champion Stadium, as they have done in the past, it wouldn't be enough. What if the billies bolted through and successfully took out the triblot barrier—hordes of soldiers could be waiting in the forests. And I doubt anyone would be able to detect a civil spectator from the disreputable among the billies—they're all criminals! Not a one of them would pass into High Gate if I stood watch."

"Don't condemn the group for the actions of a few," answered Bonboo scoldingly. "You're being too hard on them. Besides, it's not our decision to make. I'll talk with Commendus and advise him once I've determined my own mind. Hosting the match in that arena is a tradition that goes back a long time. This year is the one-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary, so with a momentous celebration already planned, I doubt Commendus would listen even if I weighed against it. He'd block the billies' fans from entering and pull half of Pious's troops to stand guard before he'd move it."

"And chance giving High Gate and the whole democracy to the likes of them?" questioned Tinja rhetorically. "I'd hope not!"

"You give High Gate more credit than it deserves," said Bonboo calmly. "There are more than two dozen cities here

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in Green that each top a million people, if you count their suburbs—Terraboom alone has three or four. They're just as important to our freedom as High Gate, so even if the Grand City was attacked, it wouldn't be the end of everything. You young ones don't remember the days of Doss when fighting really did cover the land. What we deal with now is comparatively small—a mere annoyance—and I include the troubles Dark Hood is causing."

"What other cities?" barked Tinja incredulously. He caught Bonboo's eyes and then bowed his head, showing he recognized that he had stepped beyond his bounds. "Respectfully, sir," he added in a proper voice, "High Gate is a gem among the common stones. Aside from Twistyard, it's the last place in Green that boasts that nearly all of its inhabitants are tredders. The rest of Green's capitals are mixed in nature, with a drat majority in most, and human-bobwit numbers exceeding tredders in nearly all. If High Gate experienced trouble, don't you think revolts would emerge simultaneously?"

"Your question only emphasizes what I've been saying for many years," concluded Bonboo. "We need to financially help more drats and bobwits and humans to become sufficiently educated to be elected as representatives—noble billies included. The current high ratio of tredder leaders in the other cities is disappointing. If billies were more involved in our government, it's likely that Pious wouldn't be struggling with them right now. Democracy is a public matter—it ought to be somewhat proportional or it's not truly democracy. I believe that most citizens want the best for everyone—regardless of their blood."

Tinja's brow furrowed with disagreement. He, like many other tredders, felt that they were a superior race, and as such held a monopoly on exceptional people. In truth though,

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money, education, health, and longevity gave them a substantial advantage over the others.

“Did you see that?” squealed Sammywoo, redirecting the conversation. He popped out from behind Tinja. Youk was left far behind, struggling to follow after his son. He was much bigger, so the crowds posed more of a challenge to him.

“I told you they’d win,” said Sammywoo, looking up at Dod.

Bonboo smiled and patted the boy on his head. “The Raging Billies won today. Maybe next year Twistyard will do better.”

“That’s not what my dad said,” interjected Sammywoo, climbing on the back of Dod’s seat. He fidgeted around, getting his energy out. “My dad said the billies pulled an illegal move at the end, forcing Bowy to give up his place. If it weren’t for that, Sawny would have finished them off.”

“Really?” said Dod, intrigued. He hoped somehow his friends could still claim the victory. The match had been unfair from the beginning, with Boot and Buck disqualified by bad luck.

“Just wait,” continued the boy, swinging his swot around. “My dad’s set on fixing the problem. He’s going with my great-unc to talk to the refs.”

Dod looked up and noticed Youk had merged with the main flow of traffic and was no longer coming toward them, and at his side, he was accompanied by Neadrou.

“Yup,” rambled the boy. “My dad loves Bowy. He’ll fix things.”

“Bowy?” said Dod, turning back toward Sammywoo. “Was Boot and Buck’s brother the one that—”

“Didn’t you recognize him?” blurted Sammywoo. “He’s superior to you. My dad said it turned out better with us late...it got Bowy in the game. He’s still sort of a Green Coosing.”

“Oh,” groaned Dod. He felt replaced.

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Bonboo sensed Dod's disappointment. "Green Hall probably would have won the day if you had been down there," he said, patting Dod on the shoulder. "They've been sick with worry this whole tournament, watching for you to arrive. And I must admit, I've lost sleep, too, and had my wonders over the past few months. How's home?"

Wonders about what? thought Dod. He couldn't say anything important with crowds around. "It was nice to visit my family," he hesitantly replied. "I got things taken care of for now —"

Images flashed through Dod's mind. Bowy was in danger. It was unclear how, or by whom, though not amazingly hard to guess why. After the show he had put on and the taunting he had done, it was remarkable he hadn't already been bloodied by the eight billies that had attacked him on the field.

"I've got to go and congratulate them," said Dod, pointing to his friends in the distance. They were huddled in a group under a tree by one of the exits. Their bright-orange shirts made them easy to spot.

As Dod wiggled into the masses, Bonboo called out that he fully expected to speak with him later. He had important things to discuss.

Dod agreed and then disappeared. He made his way, ducking and dodging, shamelessly squirming past others that were patiently waiting for their turns to move. It was embarrassing but necessary: Bowy's life was at stake. Dod knew he needed to warn him.

By the time he reached the big maple, his friends were no longer there. They had exited. Two bobwits swung in the lower limbs. Aside from being only four feet, they looked perfectly human. One man, with blaring-red hair and brown freckles,

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poked fun at the other for betting his horse on the match. They were both in favor of Green Hall, for their shirts had slogans that declared themselves as such.

“Excuse me,” said Dod, looking up at them. “Did you see where the players went—the ones wearing orange shirts?”

The bobwits pointed toward a wooded area and then added that fans weren’t allowed to follow.

Dod turned to go when a holoo crawled out of a backpack that one of the bobwits was wearing. “I told you the Raging Billies would win,” teased the little man. “I like Coosings and Twistyard, but billies are mean to the core. I’ve seen plenty of them.”

The holoo was less than two feet, yet still proportionately developed like a grown human. He resembled a large, male Barbie doll, complete with dashing clothes and well-groomed hair. He was more handsome than either of his bobwit friends, just much smaller.

“So, if I say you were right, can we call it even?” asked one of the bobwits. He had wagered with the holoo.

“Nice try,” laughed the holoo.

“But my horse is awfully big for a tiny like you,” said the bobwit. “I doubt it’ll obey your pulling.”

“Boosap!” said the man. “I train flutters for Pious. Your horse will be easy.”

Dod waved and left the conversation. He was glad to have seen a holoo. They were a rare breed of human, every bit as smart and capable as the bobwits and other humans, and maybe more courageous than either of them. It baffled Dod to think of such small people daring to ride flutters, let alone tame them.

Outside the stadium, soldiers were directing the mobs—billies

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to the seashore and all others, inland. The only exception was Green Hall's Bollirse team. His friends had continued straight forward, into a thicket of trees that was heavily guarded. Men were posted every fifteen feet along a tall, stone wall that completely surrounded the courtyard they had entered, and a battalion was situated at the opening. When Dod attempted to pass through as his friends had done, dozens of soldiers insisted he couldn't. He explained that his teammates were expecting him, but his words fell on deaf ears.

"To the right, sir," is what he was repeatedly told.

When reasoning failed, Dod worked his way around the blockade, hoping he could find a second access, or at least a less guarded portion of the fence. It took time to circle the enclosure. Mobs of people were gathering in clumps all along the way to discuss the game and regroup with friends. The troops held their places, with pockets of extra men under the shady trees, prepared with weapons of all shapes and sizes. They were ready for action, turning the location of Twistyard's camp into an impenetrable compound.

"It's a fort," groaned Dod to himself, noticing the watchtowers. "Or maybe a prison."

Dod decided to give up until another warning rushed his mind. Bowy was about to be killed. Dod knew it! There was no doubt about it and no time to spare. Even a few minutes would possibly be too late.

"What can I do?" he mumbled. And then it hit him. He did have proof of his Twistyard ties.

"I'm a Green Coosing," he breathlessly declared to the guards at the front. He had jogged all the way around and now stood where he had begun. He held up his ring for them to see. "I'm one of the players. I'm just not wearing my orange shirt

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right now. My name is Dod. Ask Boot, or Buck, or Dilly, or any of them and they'll confirm it for you."

The soldiers looked skeptically at his ring. They recognized him as the boy who had attempted to enter twenty-five minutes before.

"It's a fake!" declared the man in charge. He was a large tredder, built extremely well.

"Please, it's not," begged Dod.

"Yes it is, and if you don't hurry away, I'll send you to the cribs for stealing and impersonating. It's your last warning. Be gone, boy."

Dod's heart sank into his stomach. He couldn't think of anything to do. He had tried and failed. People were beginning to stare at him. His feet felt like they were laden with rocks. Bowy's life hung in Dod's helpless hands.

"Can you deliver a message for me?" asked Dod, returning to the commanding officer. "I've got to speak with Bowy."

"I warned you," boomed the giant tredder, shaking his head. Two guards grabbed Dod, one on each arm. They hadn't waited very long.

"All right, I'll leave!" said Dod, attempting to shake the soldiers loose. He didn't want to be hauled off. The holding cages would be filled with discontent crazies, the kind of people Dod wasn't particularly craving to spend time with—especially the fighting billies.

"Too late," said the man in charge. "Take him."

"General Faller!" called a familiar voice. Someone from the crowd was attempting to speak with the tredder who had just consigned Dod to incarceration. "Do they have you working this mess?"

"Yes, and I've about had my fill," responded Faller. "Pious can send me to any of the fronts...anything but this again."

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Dod struggled to turn his head as he was being carried away. He recognized the voice. It was Saluci's uncle.

"Neadrou! Neadrou!" yelled Dod, fussing to be heard. "Tell them I'm a Green Coosing. Help me, Neadrou!"

"Do you know this boy?" asked General Faller, pointing at Dod.

"Know him...let's see—" Neadrou approached his associate and looked at Dod. "Turn him around so I can examine his face better."

The guards spun Dod and brought him back. Dod smiled with satisfaction. At last the thick-headed men would be told what he had been telling them for half-an-hour.

"Nope. I don't know him."

The words were as sharp as knives. Neadrou didn't even crack a smile. His eyes revealed something beyond recognition, but it wasn't friendly.

"He looks dangerous," added Neadrou, stepping away. "I'm glad you've caught him. Good show to you, my friend Faller. I'll sleep well tonight knowing you're on guard. Thank you...and thank your men."

Dod was dumbfounded. He didn't say anything. He expected Neadrou to recant and laugh, and then everything would be better, but without another word, Neadrou proceeded to the entrance. The two guards that held Dod captive pulled at him.

"You heard my friend," said General Faller to the soldiers. "Take him away and put him with the billies. This one's trouble. If his intent was to hurt our Twistyard guests, it won't be criminal to let the system play out."

Dod knew what he meant. Faller spoke of allowing the locked-up billies to take their frustrations out on him. It was awful. And to make matters worse, Neadrou's intent had to be

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villainous. He was likely the traitor—the one headed to harm Bowy—possibly Dark Hood, or one of his helpers.

“I know of your plan to kill Bowy!” screamed Dod. He fought back, struggling with all of his might to free himself. “You’re a traitor, Neadrou! You’re a lying coward and a traitor!”

It suddenly dawned on Dod that perhaps Youk had brought him to The Games for the sole purpose of disposing of him. Youk was part of the plan. It fit together perfectly. No wonder the Zoots had helped Youk get the giant flutter. They hadn’t run Dod through with their swords in Green Hall, the night he had arrived, and now, in the middle of the post-game confusion, they were going to finish the job.

Dod kicked with his feet and squiggled his arms to no avail. The two guards had wrapped a rope tightly around his wrists, behind his back, and they held his arms firmly. It was no use. Dod stared at a rock on the ground and did his best to escape the only remaining way he knew how—or at least he knew of: He tried to zip back to Earth.

I wish I could escape this mess, thought Dod, closing his eyes. *I wish I could make all of this craziness go away.*

His wish was granted. When he opened his eyes, he didn’t see a rock or a dirt-covered road anymore; and he didn’t see swarms of people. He only saw one thing, really close to his face—it was Sammywoo.

“Dod?” he said. “Where are you going?”

“These men don’t know I’m a Green Coosing,” gasped Dod, lifting his head so his eyes could actually focus on Sammywoo.

“He’s a Coosing!” said Sammywoo, sticking his arms out sideways, blocking the men from dragging Dod away. They would have to knock Sammywoo over to do it.

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“Oh—*that* Dod,” said Neadrou, reemerging from amidst the soldiers. “Yes...Faller, my friend. I’ve made a slight mistake. This boy is from Twistyard. And now that I think of it, I met him at Commendus’s palace once before. He’s quite a hero. You should let him go.”

“A Hero?” asked Faller, looking confused at Dod. “He’s a human boy.”

“I know,” said Neadrou. “He doesn’t look like much, but behind his mask of incompetence lies a dragon. He’d likely destroy the billies and then your men if you did lock him up. You’d never guess what he did.”

The soldiers all waited to hear as the two guards that held him began to untie his wrists.

“He’s the one who caught The Dread.”

Gasps and whispers filled the air. General Faller approached Dod and personally finished freeing him.

“Next time,” said Faller, “wear the proper sign so we don’t confuse you with everyone else.” He handed Dod a horse pin. “Don’t lose it. With all of the confusion, you can understand how we...well...how my men made this mistake.”

Dod accepted his half-apology and rushed into the fortress, followed by Sammywoo. Neadrou remembered something he had forgotten and shouted to Dod that he would appreciate his help in placing Sammywoo under Dilly’s watchful care until Youk’s return.

It didn’t take Dod long to locate his friends. They were standing around a giant table of food under a pavilion. Boot was laughing at a prank he had just pulled on Buck, and Dilly was shaming him for being insensitive.

“Dod!” said Dilly, noticing him first. She rushed over and greeted him with a big hug. Sawny followed close behind. The

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two sisters looked so much alike in their orange uniforms that it was fortunate Dilly's curly hair was deep brown and Sawny's was lighter, or he might have confused them. It took time to readjust his mind to their slight differences. Normally, their clothes would have announced them—Dilly was more fashion conscious and extravagant, while Sawny dressed stylishly simple.

"Why didn't you join us?" complained Dilly. "We could have used one of your fancy saves today."

"He's moved on," said Boot jokingly. "It's hard for him to worry about trivial things like Bollirse when he's busy riding giant flutters and fighting battles."

Boots words revealed some jealousy. And the way Buck wouldn't look straight at Dod indicated he, too, was bothered.

"I'm sorry, guys, but it's not what it looks like," said Dod. He felt sick to his stomach. "I had to visit my family. They were having problems. And I didn't mean to be gone long, it just...I had bad things happen, and Dark Hood nearly killed me. And I'm so glad to see you...all of you! And the giant flutter was Youk and Saluci's doing—you know, the Zoots pulled it off to get us here—or actually, it was to get Sammywoo here. I just lucked out and hitched a miserable ride on the back. I wanted to see you play."

Dod looked at the ground and felt like crying. He didn't explain his whereabouts very well, and in truth, he couldn't. They didn't know he was from Earth, or anything about Earth, or anything about his medallion, so they wouldn't have understood how his stolen necklace had caused him to leave Green without saying goodbye. Only Bonboo knew the truth about him and Pap.

"I wanted to join you in the big game," said Dod. His voice

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quivered and cracked. “I really did. I’ve been practicing. Sorry I let you guys down.”

“You saw Dark Hood?” blurted Pone, his mouth full of fruit. He gave Dod a pat on the shoulder and added, “Nice, bro. He must be everywhere these days. He’s been causing all sorts of trouble at Twistyard since you left.”

“Yeah,” added Voo, grabbing for a large wedge of watermelon. “Some of the soldiers even started spreading the word that you’d turned on us—became, you know...him!”

“I always knew you had a good reason for leaving,” said Boot, approaching Dod. “Welcome back!” He flashed the Coosings’ sign with his right hand.

“Thanks Boot,” said Dod, trying to swallow the lump in his throat. He lunged forward and gave Boot a hug. It reminded Dod how big and strong Boot was. His six-foot-plus frame was solid muscle. “You’ve been working out,” said Dod, attempting to chuckle as he stepped back before the hugging thing became too weird.

“Working out what?” said Boot, confused. He smiled at Dod with his blue eyes beaming and his wavy black hair moving slightly in the breeze.

“You were right!” said Sammywoo, storming up to Dilly. He danced around her in circles. “Dod did plan on being here for the match. He begged my dad to drop him from a line onto the field. Can you believe that? Horsely said he would have burst his brains on a post.”

When Dod saw Sammywoo, he instantly remembered his need to rush. He had completely forgotten about the images.

“Where’s Bowy?” asked Dod. “He’s in danger!”

“No he’s not,” responded Dilly. “My dad’s over there talking with him.” She pointed at a tall, raven-haired, middle-aged

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tredder, who had his arm around Bowy. The two of them were walking into a giant tent.

Buck finished brushing cake crumbs off his clothes as he entered the conversation. He finally looked Dod in the eyes. “How do *you* know Bowy? He’s been at home since his injury—years ago.”

“I don’t know him,” admitted Dod. “I’ve never met him, and the only time I’ve seen him was today when he played on the field. I just know he’s in trouble. I’ve got to talk with him.”

Dod took big strides as he walked to the tent, leaving his friends back at the pavilion. He wasn’t sure what to say. And when he arrived at the door, it was awkward opening it without knowing either of the people. Nevertheless, with his heart pounding in his ears, he flung the flaps and entered.

The structure had multiple rooms on the inside, with privacy walls made of heavy burlap. The roof and exterior were constructed of thicker layers of the same material.

“Bowy?” whispered Dod, walking around the first corner. Nobody was in the second section, or the third. Bedding and bags littered the floor. Dod proceeded carefully, stepping around the debris. Something wasn’t right. Dod wished he had his sword. Maybe Youk had been waiting and had ambushed Dilly’s father and Bowy. After Dod’s most recent experience with Neadrou, he didn’t trust either of them.

The tent was quiet. Unless there was a back door, the men had to be in the last quarter. Dod drew near the entrance cautiously. He heard commotion, like the sound of two people scuffling. It was terrifying. Dod searched the ground for anything he could use as a weapon. The closest thing was a wimpy, leather belt; it didn’t even have a big buckle.

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Dod jumped into action, forcing himself to enter the next room. He found Dilly's father holding Bowy in a headlock with a six-inch blade to his chest. It looked like Dod had arrived in time to see him die, and nothing more. Dod swung the belt over his head.

"Release him!" shouted Dod. "If you kill him, I'm a witness. I'll personally see you're sent to Driaxom."

It was all Dod could think of to convince the man to stop his evil designs. Perhaps the threat of torturous imprisonment would sway him to spare Bowy.

"What?" said Bowy, choking. He reached up and pushed the tredder's arm off his neck. "Oh, you thought he was attacking me for real—No! He was teaching me a move—an escape trick. Set your belt down and I'll demonstrate."

Bowy got back into position and then flung his body sideways, forcing the blade parallel to his torso, while maneuvering his arms to free his neck. It worked. Dilly's father landed on the ground and the knife bounced across a pile of blankets at his side.

"See. It's a clever one, isn't it?" said Bowy cheerfully. He stuck his hand out and helped Dilly's dad up. "Thanks for the advice and the move. I'll keep alert."

Dilly's father approached Dod and sternly glared at him. He flipped the knife up in the air with his foot, caught it, and bent the blade over. "It's a fake," he said, cracking a contagious grin. "I'm Chikada Tillius. Are you, by any chance, the great Dod we've been hearing a bucket-load of swoosh about?"

Dod liked Chikada's soft brown eyes and pleasant temperament. They reminded him of Bonboo. And the more Dod looked at the man, the more he saw a family resemblance. His

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mannerisms, and the way he spoke and smiled, were just like his grandfather. Without question, Chikada appeared and acted more like Bonboo than anyone Dod had ever met—certainly more than Voracio.

“I am Dod, but the stories you’ve heard are probably exaggerated,” said Dod, sighing with relief. It was nice to know Dilly’s father was not a traitor.

“I doubt that,” snapped Bowy. “You do look like the type that would wear your shoes to bed.” He laughed and confessed that Buck had divulged the information.

Dod enjoyed talking with Bowy and Chikada, but a feeling of danger still prevailed. It sucked the fun out of the moment. Dod looked around the room for a hiding spot. Perhaps an angry billie was waiting to pounce. He casually walked over to a pile of blankets that looked suspiciously large and kicked them with one foot.

“Are you looking for gizzlers?” asked Bowy. “Don’t bother, we all painstakingly searched the place last week when we arrived—to please Princess Dilly—and since then, the guards have kept the front watch around the clock. Besides, our efforts were empty.”

The mention of gizzlers reminded Dod of the snakelike creatures. Along some parts of the shoreline, poisonous gizzlers, with bright-red skin and sharp fangs, inhabited the waters. They frequented the land by day, bedding in cool, shady locations, and went searching for rodents and fish at night.

“Right, and you’re sure?” asked Dod, using them as an excuse to poke for trouble. He hadn’t found anything. Nobody was hiding in the one lump that was big enough to conceal someone.

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“And if you’re wondering about the smell,” said Chikada, “I heard it’ll go away soon. While we were at the game, they sprayed waterproofing on the exterior. It looks like rain tonight.”

Dod solved the puzzle. The smell was familiar. He couldn’t recall encountering it before, yet he knew it was flammable.

“It’s a trap!” said Dod to the others.

They stared at him and laughed uncontrollably. Bonboo’s grandson patted Dod on the shoulder. “The look on your face is, uh...diligent,” he finally said, regaining his composure.

“No, I’m serious. This tent is a trap! We’ve got to get out!”

“I know,” said Bowy, trying to act serious, his voice hopelessly revealing he wasn’t. “After that game, this place is bound to ensnare me for a couple of hours.” He lay down and sprawled out on a thick, patchwork quilt.

“You don’t believe me, do you?” said Dod. “You think I’m kidding. That smell is a bonfire about to ignite.”

“Oh, I see,” said Chikada. He gave Dod a fatherly look of approval. “If you practice today, you’ll be prepared tomorrow.”

Chikada was convinced Dod was attempting an emergency drill of sorts, honing his skills for the time when they would be needed. He didn’t believe Dod was serious.

“Right!” said Dod in a commanding voice, nodding to Chikada. “We’ve got a man down. Let’s get him out of this burning tent before it blows.”

Dod played along with the idea in order to accomplish his main design of coaxing them out before anything real happened.

“Grab the other end,” ordered Dod, collecting one side of Bowy’s blanket in his hands. Chikada obeyed and scooped up the remaining edge, capturing Bowy in the middle. The boy swung back and forth like he was in a hammock.

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"You're heavy," said Dod, grunting as he struggled to walk backwards with his load.

"Yup, I've just about caught up with Boot," answered Bowy proudly. He grinned, enjoying the ride.

"You're supposed to be injured," prodded Chikada, looking at Bowy. He then turned to Dod and made a suggestion. "Don't you think he looks too happy? Maybe we should drag him for a while and see if he keeps smiling." Chikada dipped his side onto the floor for a moment and let it bump into a few things before he lifted it back up."

When Dod and Chikada came hauling Bowy out of the tent in a blanket, Dilly and the others rushed to see what was wrong. They met halfway.

"I should have believed you!" blurted Dilly before she was close enough to see Bowy. "You knew something was going to happen. Was it a gizzler?"

"A gizzler!" squealed Sawny. She and a few Greenlings scampered back to the food table and climbed up. They weren't going to take any chances on a gizzler getting them.

Bowy heard her and knew how to act. "Ohhhh," he groaned. "If only you'd have warned me sooner, Dod, I wouldn't have been bitten. Please, carry me to the table."

"Sucking the venom doesn't work," chimed Sawny, not sure if she wanted Bowy close to her. "I've read plenty about it. If they've hit you, your only hope is to rub salt in the wound. Sometimes it draws the poison. But we don't have any at this table—go over there." Sawny pointed to another pavilion that hosted many of The Greats from Twistyard. She looked squeamish.

"Besides," she continued, "I think Treep is with *them*. He knows more than I do about poisons."

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"It's useless," groaned Bowy, still being carried to the food table. "I'm dying. I need that last piece of chouyummy cake. I want to enjoy the taste of death."

Dilly caught on and gave Bowy a shove, rolling him out of his cocoon. "You nearly scared me stiff," she said. "I can't stand gizzlers."

Chikada began to explain that their actions were part of Dod's emergency-preparedness activity. He had only just begun when he was interrupted.

BOOM!

The tent they had just exited exploded into flames, burning so hot that everyone standing around the table could feel the warmth from eighty feet away. It continued to sizzle and flare, determined to leave nothing but ashes.

"Did you see that?" gasped Boot, staring at the inferno. "A flaming arrow came flying out of nowhere and hit the tent...and then whoosh, the whole thing lit up."

"I know," added Buck. "I saw it, too. It looked like it came from the sky, way up there." He pointed at the low drifting clouds. Stormy weather was approaching from the sea, drenched with fog.

Tredder guards poured in from all over and the Twistyard contingent of guests gathered together for safety. Chikada and many of The Greats strapped on their swords and other weapons. Dod wanted his sword, but it was inside his bag, with the luggage.

Bonboo approached Dod. "Where did you land the flutter?" he asked urgently. Dod tried to explain. It was difficult.

"Horsely's probably still with the bird," he finally said. "And maybe Youk's there, too. They couldn't bring it in here. It's enormous."

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Bonboo directed fifteen soldiers, along with Chikada and a few other Greats, to accompany Dod to the giant flutter. He suspected it would be gone. Dod really hoped he was wrong. His things were stowed on it.

Outside of the fortress, people still meandered the streets and many more were camped in tents and wagons all over the surrounding fields. They were pointing at the plumes of smoke and discussing what they thought had happened. Hundreds of soldiers gathered around the walls of the encampment, preparing for further attacks.

Dod traced his steps back to the place where Horsely had landed. The flutter was gone. But in the distance, there appeared to be a sizable object underneath six giant oaks. When he and the others jogged over, they found Horsely resting on a blanket, taking a nap, and the monstrous bird securely leashed.

Horsely awoke and was shocked to find out that the camp had been attacked. He gladly offered to fly around in search of the enemy, since the two flutters that Pious had supplied for the soldiers were currently patrolling the waters for any signs of disgruntled billies and hadn't returned.

Dod climbed aboard and rode with Horsely, while Chikada and the others headed back to camp. Together, Dod and Horsely ventured into the clouds and dipped below to survey the busy landscape. It was impossible to tell who might have caused the problem. Throngs of people still crowded the streets.

It didn't take long for Dod to suggest they land. The flight was rougher than before, with strengthening stormy winds rolling in from the sea. Horsely consented, laughing all the way. He loved the adventure and found it wonderful to have an excuse to fly the magnificent creature in dangerous conditions.

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Back on the ground, Horsely tethered the giant flutter before helping Dod unload the bags.

“So, where will you go now?” asked Dod, wondering what Horsely had planned.

“It’s not up to me,” he responded. “I’m waiting for Youk. It’s his...well, the Zoots’ bird. Rain or no rain, I’m staying put ’til he returns.”

Dod picked up his bag and turned to go when he thought to ask something that had been bugging him. “What’s been happening between the billies and Dreaderious?” he questioned, looking at Horsely. The man hadn’t been expecting Dod to say anything more, since Dod had already begun to leave, so he didn’t read his lips.

Dod approached Horsely and asked again. This time he got an answer.

“Some of the billies have joined Dreaderious,” he said. “I think they’re sick of fighting each other, while people like us get rich off the good land. Supposedly, the ones that have caused Pious problems are seeking revenge. They claim his men sank some of their ships and destroyed a whole island—completely unprovoked.” Horsely shook his head and added, “I don’t think it’s true, but that’s what they believe...and that’s why they’re helping Dreaderious fight him.”

“Oh,” said Dod. “Are they all joining?”

“Not yet. Only a handful of billies are sailing his orders. Besides, you know them—they’ve never united under their own kind. I doubt Dreaderious will have any better luck.”

Dod thanked Horsely and turned to leave when he was handed another bag. It was Sammywoo’s.

“You should bring this to him if you can,” said Horsely. “Whether he’s staying or going, at least he’ll have his stuff.”

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Dod hefted the two bags as he walked away. They were lighter than he would have expected. And then it hit him—Pap's sword. He dug deep and unrolled his white cloak, frantic to disprove his impression. Unfortunately, the beautiful golden sword was gone!

CHAPTER EIGHT



THREE SURPRISES

When Dod realized his sword had been stolen, he feared Horsely had taken it. The man was intrepid and adventurous, not to mention dangerous. A prize of Pap's blade would be nearly irresistible. If he had remained with the giant beast all afternoon, he would obviously know what had happened.

Dod carefully surveyed his surroundings, still fumbling with his bag. The bluish-green cowgrass was matted down by the giant flutter and knee-high everywhere else. The closest person was out of hearing range, for Horsely had wisely placed the rare bird in a private field, half-concealed by hanging branches that swayed with the billowing storm. A gust of air blew past Horsely's quilt and folded it over, revealing a glint of yellow. Horsely noticed and flashed a cautious glance at Dod.

"Oh!" Horsely said, faking a chuckle, "I've got something for you." The air filled with tension. "Come and get it."

Dod wasn't sure whether he dared. Something in him screamed to run, screamed that Horsely was as evil and fraudulent