



## Drudgemore

**T**here was nothing the least bit magical about Wintervale, Connecticut. In fact, it was probably the last town on earth you'd expect a dazzling tale about magical adventures to begin.

Wintervale was little. And quiet. And dreary. And it was far too cold for a boy to have forgotten his gloves.

*“Dang it,”* Charlie Plum said.

Charlie was twelve, with carefully parted hair that he sprayed with something or other to keep it exactly in place. He wore a secondhand

school uniform and busted eyeglasses that were held together with twine. As he hurried through the Wickery Woods on his way to school, Charlie examined his freezing hands. He could barely see them through the fog on his glasses. But his fingers burned like a hundred bee stings.

“Cripes, this is bad,” Charlie said. He tried to bend his fingers. “Feels like acute tissue damage.”



He meant frostbite. But Charlie was really smart, so sometimes he sounded like an ER doctor. He searched for pockets on the raggedy coat he wore over his school uniform. But there was nowhere to stuff his hands.

Then his fingers went numb.

“Oh boy,” he whispered. “Adios, fingertips.”

“You’ll be okay,” said Charlie’s eight-year-old brother, Bean. Bean started jogging on the winding trail to catch up to Charlie. “I got an idea. Just pee on ’em.”

Bean’s real name was Benjamin, but he went by Bean because he sorta looked like one. He smiled a lot, even though he was always getting into trouble.

“Bean, that’s disgusting,” Charlie said.

“Nuh-uh,” Bean replied. “I saw it in a movie. An explorer did it in Antarctica to keep his hands warm.” Then he scratched his belly. “Actually, I think his fingers still fell off.”

Charlie grumbled. He loved his little brother, but Bean was always saying and doing the oddest things. And even though Charlie had reminded Bean three times to grab his coat before they left home, Bean had forgotten. Instead, he just wore a tattered scarf above a short-sleeved uniform shirt. The scarf flapped against Bean's bare, swinging arms while he whistled.

They left the woods and entered the snowy schoolyard of Drudgemore Academy. As they trudged up to school, neither boy had any idea they were about to begin a rip-roaring adventure. And they couldn't possibly have known that the *New York Explorer* would soon declare them "The Most Famous Boys on Earth."

They just figured they were in for another cold, boring day of classes. *Blegh.*

Drudgemore was a great big school. And it was a strict and boring-looking place indeed. Many of the gray buildings had tall

spires. Some even had gargoyles, which are statues with attitude problems.

"Hey, look, everybody!" a voice hollered from the icy basketball courts. "It's them stinkin', poor orphans."

The voice belonged to Gus Goldbrick, a senior. Gus was a six-foot-three-inch bruiser and captain of the basketball team. He wore size sixteen McSwish sneakers. And he also wore braces on his teeth that were jammed with bits of scrambled eggs.

"Did you finish my math homework, orphan?" Gus jeered at Charlie. He started for the brothers. "If you didn't, you know what's comin'."

"Oh b-b-boy," Charlie stammered in a panic.

From the corner of his eye, Charlie noticed some eighth-grade girls looking on by the bleachers. They giggled in fur-trimmed coats. (Most of the kids at Drudgemore wore expensive coats, because their parents owned

things like giant banks and jets named after their racehorses.)

Charlie couldn't stand being bullied in front of girls. So he tried to think of some clever way out of this pickle. Something brave. Something memorable. Something that ended with Gus on the ground and Charlie signing autographs.

But nothing came to mind. So Bean chimed in. "We're not poor, ya goofy giant!" he shouted. "And Charlie's not scared of you."

Charlie glared down at his brother. "Bean, be quiet."

Gus snickered as he reached them. "Oh yeah?"

When Charlie looked back . . . *whap!* Gus walloped him, knocking his glasses right off.

Charlie howled in pain. He couldn't see a thing, but he swung a fist up at Gus to defend himself. He twirled in spectacular fashion before face-planting into a snowbank.

All the children in the schoolyard laughed

at Charlie. Until—"Yowww!" Gus bawled. He doubled over and clutched his shin, where Bean had kicked him with his frozen boot.

"You stay away from my brother," Bean screamed, so upset his eyes watered. And just then—*Breeeeep!*

Blasting her whistle, the school's assistant principal, Miss Browhammer, smashed through the double doors of the administration building. All the students stopped laughing and stood up deadly straight.



“Zehr—veel—be—order!” Miss Browhammer shrieked.

Gertillus Browhammer was tiny and bony, with her hair pulled back so tight her nostrils flared. Her round little eyes glared through spectacles with yellow lenses. And her chin bent sideways from the time she head-butted Corky Wellington (apparently).

“And *what* are zee rules about fighting?” Miss Browhammer snapped as she leapt into the schoolyard.

She was a foot shorter than most of the students. And she wore a child-sized military coat along with workout leggings, giving her the appearance of deciding whether to have a stretch or go to war. In one hand, she gripped a knobby, lacquered branch that the students called her “Wicked Stick.”

As she marched between the students, she shoved a plump fourth grader out of the way—“Eeeek!”—and she snatched forbidden headphones off a sixth grader, taking a

clump of his hair along with them. “Aaaah!”

As she surveyed the schoolyard full of wealthy children, she grumbled under her breath. “Snoodly, un-dizzi-plined *twiddlevorts*.”

Charlie shot up from the snow pile and fumbled around for his broken glasses.

The other children all tried to stand completely still, but most of them shook from nerves. They called Miss Browhammer “the Hammer” for two reasons. One, because she had a horrible anger problem. And two, because she had the peculiar ability to appear whenever a rule had been broken. And once she had, she always handed down a punishment. (She loved all sorts of ways to punish misbehaving children—from forcing them to file their fingernails against chalkboards, to making them eat soggy fish fritters out of the cafeteria dumpster. There were even rumors that, several years back, she’d been responsible for the sudden disappearance of

a snobbish student named Pretensia Prigg—although the details on that one were pretty skimpy.)

Nervously, Gus saluted her. “The Plum brothers attacked me, Miss Browhammer. The little one kicked my shin.”

Miss Browhammer snapped her heels together, then sneered at Bean. “*You.*”

Bean shrugged.

Gus massaged his leg. “Now I’m not even sure I can play in tonight’s game.”

The Hammer huffed. There was only one thing she enjoyed more than punishing poor behavior. And that was watching the varsity basketball team beat up on other local squads. So she certainly didn’t love Drudgemore’s star player getting booted in the shin.

She glared up at Charlie. “Is zis true, *pimpelstilt?*” she chided, thumping her Wicked Stick against her skeletal little palm.

Terror-struck, Charlie struggled to answer. “W-w-w—”

So Bean chimed in. “Well, actually—”  
“*Versteegen!*” the Hammer spat.

By now, Bean was pretty sure that meant, “Stop talking.”

“Zis afternoon,” the Hammer continued, “for zee *both* of you *bumviggles . . .*”

As the Hammer stroked her chin whiskers, all the schoolchildren leaned in. They imagined what the brothers’ punishment might be. *Mop the gym with their tongues? Climb the frosty flagpole in their underpants?*

“Zee-tention,” the Hammer decided.

“W-what?” Charlie whispered in despair through his swollen jaw. He’d never gotten a detention in his entire life.

The same could not be said for Gus, who spent most afternoons there. He snickered at Charlie. “See you there, sucker.”

The Hammer stomped off through the snow, griping to herself, until she noticed the other students still standing at attention. “Class *beenstit!*”

The other schoolchildren all bolted straight to class. Gus hobbled off, too, still chuckling.

While Charlie wiped off his glasses, snowflakes drifted down between icy wisps of wind. “Sorry, Charlie.” Bean shrugged. “I shoulda let you handle it.”

Charlie gathered up his backpack. “Don’t worry about it,” he said. “Get to your classroom. It’s almost eight.”

“Okay,” Bean muttered.

Bean hugged Charlie tightly around the waist. Then he dashed toward the lower school building.

It was 7:58 a.m. on Monday morning, and Charlie Plum was already frustrated with himself. He was frustrated for getting smacked by Gus Goldbrick. He was frustrated for letting his brother walk in the cold without a coat. And he was especially frustrated that he couldn’t stop the other kids from calling him and Bean “orphans.”

As if they’d suddenly forgotten that fact.

Charlie waited to make sure Bean was safely inside. Then he crunched through the snow to his first-period biology exam. He tried to think of some way to make all his problems go away. But nothing sprang to mind.

“I just wish I had magical powers,” he whispered.

Charlie wasn’t serious, of course. And he figured no one heard him, because he thought he was all alone.

But on this particularly peculiar day, he wasn’t.

Behind him, at the edge of the Wickery Woods, a puffy figure stood on the branch of a maple tree. It was a magnificent golden hawk, with bushy eyebrows and a proud white neck. Quite bizarrely, the hawk was wearing a perfectly knotted pink bow tie. And a vest patterned with shimmery pineapples. And a pocket watch strung around its neck that went *thit-thit-thit*.

When Charlie disappeared into the science building, the hawk's eyes twinkled. And its beak seemed to smile.

Then, with a *whoosh* of its wings, the magical creature swooped into the wintry air.



## Escape from Detention

**D**etention that afternoon was on the first floor of the Great Library. The library was a giant two-story building, with what seemed like a million books. And like most other days, detention was filled to the brim with misbehaving students who'd been nabbed by the Hammer.

Charlie sat at the first row of reading tables. He whisked his pencil over his calculus homework. Even though he was just in sixth grade, Charlie was already getting A's in upper-school classes. He hoped this might



impress girls, especially ninth grader Sadie Maplethorpe. But all it really did was make everyone call him a “dipstick.”

Bean secretly chewed bubble gum beside Charlie. Third graders weren’t usually sent to detention. But the school made a “special exception” for Bean. And so far this school year, they’d made that special exception twenty-six times.

The Hammer’s twiggy legs stuck straight out from her chair at the front of the room. Sipping a smoothie made of radish juice and protein powder, she glared at all the children, muttering something that sounded like, “*Steeken-blitzle-schweine.*” But mostly she focused on Bean. After all, it had only been a week since Bean snuck off and flooded the librarians’ break room.

However, on this unusual afternoon, the Hammer was unusually worn out. It had been a long day of punishing naughty children. And she’d stayed up late the night

before, baking schnitzel for the basketball team. And so, for what seemed like the very first time, she removed her spectacles. Grumbling, she placed them on the table beside her smoothie, and she rubbed her weary eyelids.

Bean cocked an eyebrow.

Meanwhile, Charlie finished his calculus homework. He glanced back to see if Sadie Maplethorpe had noticed him. (She was making eyes at Gus Goldbrick, as usual.)

And then something very mysterious happened.

Bean heard the flapping of wings in the reference section next to him. He looked over.

“*Whoa,*” he whispered.

There he saw the tremendous golden hawk, perched on a pile of encyclopedias at the far end of the aisle. It wore a pink bow tie, and a vest of shimmering pineapples, and a pocket-watch necklace.

Oddly, it seemed to be smiling. When

the hawk was sure Bean had seen it, it took off into the shadows.

Bean's eyes grew as big as baseballs.

"Charlie!" he whispered, careful not to shout.

"Shh!" Charlie said, then pointed at Miss Browhammer.

The Hammer fought off a gaping yawn, then sluggishly slapped her own face.

"There's a . . . ," Bean started. But he realized Charlie was having none of it.

Bean glanced back at Miss Browhammer. Slowly, quite slowly, her eyes drifted shut. Then her impish head tilted softly toward her chest.

Snickering, Bean slipped out of his chair.

"Bean!" Charlie whispered. *What is Bean thinking?*

Bean tiptoed between bookshelves to the end of the aisle, where the hawk had taken off. He peered to the right, down a musty

corridor lined by stained-glass windows.

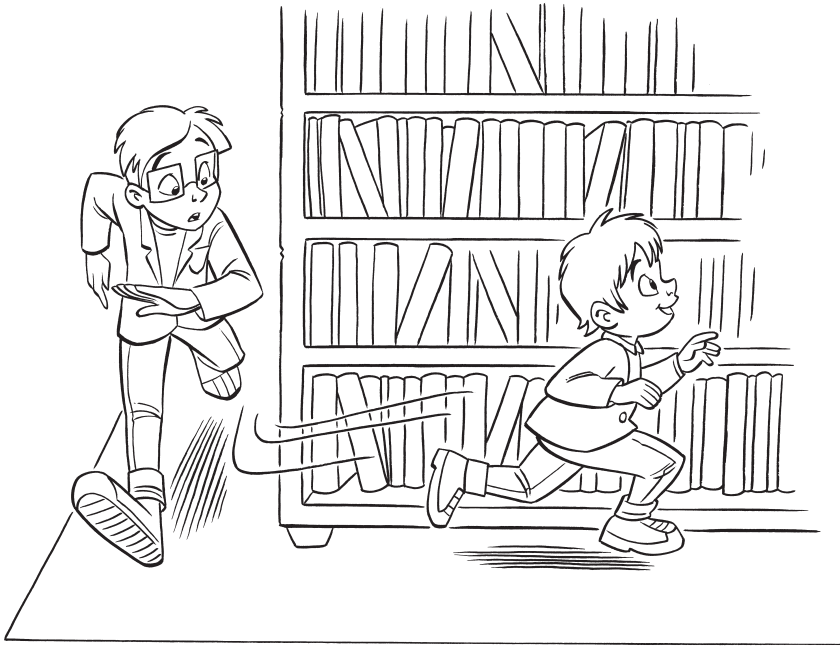
Bean saw the golden bird swoop up the staircase to the second floor. He sprinted after it.

Charlie gripped the desk. He glanced back at the Hammer.

She let out a short, grumpy snore.

Charlie glanced at the other students. Giggling, they began poking each other with pencils and shooting spitballs at each other. Hesitantly, Charlie slid from his seat in such a way that it looked like he was melting. He crawled to the reference bookshelves, then stood and tiptoed between them.

His heart was beating so fast. He had never broken the rules like this. He might get thwacked with the Wicked Stick. Or he could even be *suspended*, for goodness' sake! Then he'd never go to college. And then he'd have to spend his life scrubbing sailboats in the harbor for twits like Gus Goldbrick.



Charlie bolted down the corridor, then chased Bean up the stairs. He zigzagged after him into the shadows of the second floor.

Bean stopped at the farthest reach of the library, at the shadowy Rare Books section. A single beam of light slanted in from a narrow window.

When Charlie caught up to Bean, he spun

him around by the shoulder. “Bean, what are you *thinking?*” Charlie scolded. “We’ll both get detentions for a month—”

“I saw a *hawk*, Charlie,” Bean said. “A golden one, wearing a pink tie and a pineapple shirt.” Then he pointed at the bookshelf. “I swear it flew right into these books. And just disappeared.”

“What?” Charlie exclaimed. Now he was really getting worried. “Bean, did you bop your head on something?”

“I’m *serious*, Charlie,” Bean said.

Charlie glanced at the bookshelf. Everything looked perfectly normal. Just a bunch of ancient, leather-bound books.

“Bean—”

Bean ran a finger across the crumbling spines, reading their titles. “Boring . . . boring . . .”

And then his finger stopped on one.

“Wait a second.”

“What?”

“Look at this one,” Bean said. “There’s a hawk on it.”

They examined a bulky volume that was coated in dirt, like someone had dug it out of the schoolyard. Rusting metal vines with moonflowers weaved around its cover.

And sure enough, there was a hawk on the spine.

“Huh,” Charlie said. *What if Bean is telling the truth?*

So Charlie tugged at the book. It was super heavy. “Okay, gimme a hand,” he whispered.

Together, they dragged the book off the shelf. It tumbled to the floor and landed with a thunderous *whomp!*

Downstairs, the Hammer giggled in her sleep, then flinched and hissed like a cat.

Charlie startled. “She’s waking up. Come on!”

He bolted for the staircase. But then—  
“Um . . . Charlie?” Bean whispered.



Abruptly, Charlie stopped. He felt something strange against his back.

Something warm, and tingly, and pleasant.

He turned around. And what he saw was, without question, the single oddest thing he'd ever seen.

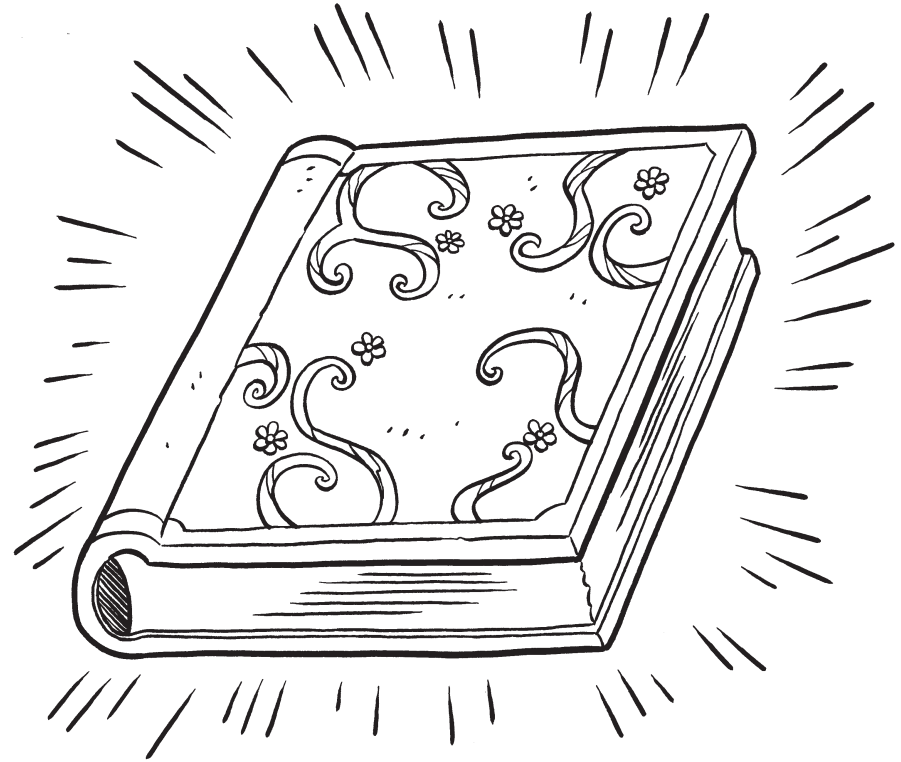
*Light* was flowing through the metal vines on the book cover, like water through pipes. It was a brilliant yellow light, with flickering sparkles.

Bean covered his mouth to hold back a burst of laughter.

Within moments, the whole book seemed to be shining. And its cover no longer seemed old and decaying. Instead, it was glossy and trimmed with shimmering gold. It wobbled and spun and bounced around like a romping puppy.

Bean could no longer contain his excitement. He stomped his feet and pointed at the glowing cover.

“Now here’s one book I gotta read!”





## A Fantabulous Invitation

Charlie rushed beside Bean. The enchanted book came to rest, then swung open. Light burst out from its pages.

“Whoa,” the boys blurted.

They glanced wide-eyed at each other.

*Is this actually happening?* Charlie thought.

And then cursive words began to write themselves on an empty page. “*Look,*” Bean whispered, pointing at the page. “It knows who we are.”

The first lines read:

*Congratulations,  
Charles and Benjamin!*

Charlie’s jitters faded away. The greeting disappeared in an inky *poof*. And a second message appeared.

*You Both Have Been Accepted—  
to the Most Wonderful,  
Adventurous, Whirlwhimsical  
School of All . . .*

Charlie shook his head. Surely they were just dreaming a fantastic dream. Books couldn’t write by themselves.

And then a new phrase surfaced.

*Professor Pennywick’s  
School of Magic!  
Where you’ll learn the Miraculous,*

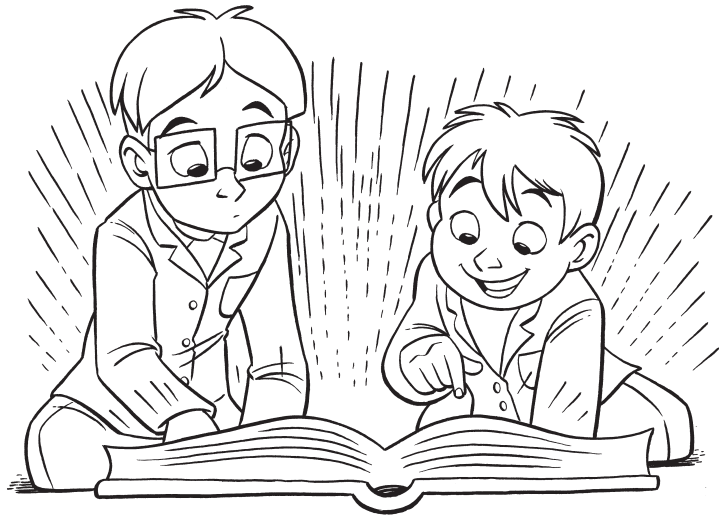
*the Astonishing, the Eye-Poppingly  
Fantabulous*

...

Giggling, Bean pumped his fist. “I like where this is headed.”

Charlie still couldn’t believe his eyes. *Magic isn’t real*, he thought. Then he clutched his throat. *Holy smokes, have I been drugged?*

“Look,” Bean said as words began to scroll up the page.



*If you successfully pass all  
Fourteen Tests,  
you will each earn the degree of  
Guardian of Magic  
a title held by  
a Rare & Spectacular Few.  
And with that degree,  
you will both gain  
Fantastical Powers  
beyond your Dittiest, Dottiest Dreams.*

“Ooh,” Bean cooed. “I’m into powers. I wanna breathe fire.”

*Oh, just one more  
Teensy, Weensy, Must-Be-Mentioned  
Thing . . .*

Suddenly the light from the pages turned a bone-chilling blue. And the brothers felt a shiver crawl up their spines.

*If you accept this Invitation . . .  
 your training will be  
 Outlandishly,  
 Nerve-Splittingly,  
 Here-Comes-Death-or-Injury  
 Dangerous.*

Shuddering, Charlie gulped.

*You have Twenty Seconds  
 to  
 Accept or Decline  
 this Gobsmackingly Rare  
 Opportunity.*

And then a fanciful silver stopwatch leapt out from between the pages. While floating, the watch's case sprang open. And its second hand ticked down from twenty.

*Tick. Tick.*

Bean rubbed his hands together. "It's go time."

"Bean," Charlie said. "This is crazy. We're talking to a book."

"Yeah. A magic book," Bean said, "that's gonna teach me how to disappear the Hammer."

Charlie raked a hand through his hair. "But—we don't know how long we'll be gone for."

"So what?" Bean said.

"Or what it means about being 'dangerous.'"

"Drudgemore is dangerous, too," Bean replied. "You get beaten up all the time."

"Bean—"

"And I keep getting into trouble. Maybe this will be something I'm actually *good* at."

Hesitating, Charlie wrung his hands.

Just ten seconds left.

"How many kids ever get a chance like this?" Bean said. "If we don't like it, we'll stop. Okay?"

Charlie couldn't help but feel a glimmer



of excitement. With magical powers, he figured, Gus Goldbrick could never mess with him again. And maybe Sadie Maplethorpe would realize he existed.

And then Charlie realized something. Just hours before in the schoolyard, he'd *wished* for magical powers. He peeked around the second floor—had somebody heard him?

Five seconds left.

“We’re the Plum brothers,” Bean said. He held out his hand. “We can handle anything.”

Charlie stared at Bean’s outstretched hand.

He wiped his sweating palm on his uniform pants.

And then, with a quivering smile, Charlie shook Bean’s hand. The stopwatch hit one second.

“We’ll do it!” Bean cried as the timer struck zero.

The watch case snapped shut. Then the stopwatch dropped—until Charlie caught it.

Briefly, he examined its weaving silver vines and flowers.

Nervously, the boys glanced at each other. Were they too late? Had the miraculous chance of a lifetime vanished?

But then—*poof*. A handful of confetti shot out of the book, accompanied by a little squeaking trumpet. Charlie relaxed. “Whew.” Without thinking, he slipped the stopwatch into his pant pocket.

The book started scribbling again.

*Oh, How Splendidly Splendid!  
Now then,  
to begin your first test,  
both of you rise to your feet.*

They shot up.

*And now face the ceiling,  
and speak these words quite clearly . . .*

The boys clenched their fists in anticipation:

*Uppitus-Huppitus, Figitus-Flight.*

“What does that mean?” Bean asked.

“I dunno—let’s just say it!” Charlie said, now so excited he felt like he might pop.

They peered up at the vaulted ceiling beams. And then, in unison, they declared the magic phrase:

*“Uppitus-Huppitus, Figitus-Flight!”*

Suddenly the light flowing from the book began to twirl around the boys. And marvelous sparks flickered inside the light. Some of the sparks even bloomed into flowers—lilies and lotuses and twirling cherry blossoms.

“Awesome,” Bean whispered.

Then the boys’ feet lifted right off the floor.

Charlie twirled his floating legs. “We’re flying!”



And then, uncontrollably, they hurtled upward toward the library ceiling, trailed by cascading sparks.

They both panicked. “Aaaah!”  
Up they flew, faster and faster—

When they were about to smash into the enormous center beam, they shielded their heads.

*“Help!”* Charlie squealed.

And then—

*Whoosh!* They vanished in a blast of sparks, just before crashing into the ceiling.

Below them, on the library floor, the magical book swung shut. Its golden light faded away, and it was old and crumbly once again.



## The World's Greatest Swordsman

**I**t was deadly silent. And pitch black, too, like a basement in outer space.

“Are we dead?” Bean said, stumbling around. He felt around in the blackness. But his fingers didn’t touch anything. “Pretty sure we’re dead.”

Charlie stepped around cautiously, with arms outstretched. His trembling hand met a surface. “Wait, I feel something,” he whispered. It was rough, and cool, and hard.

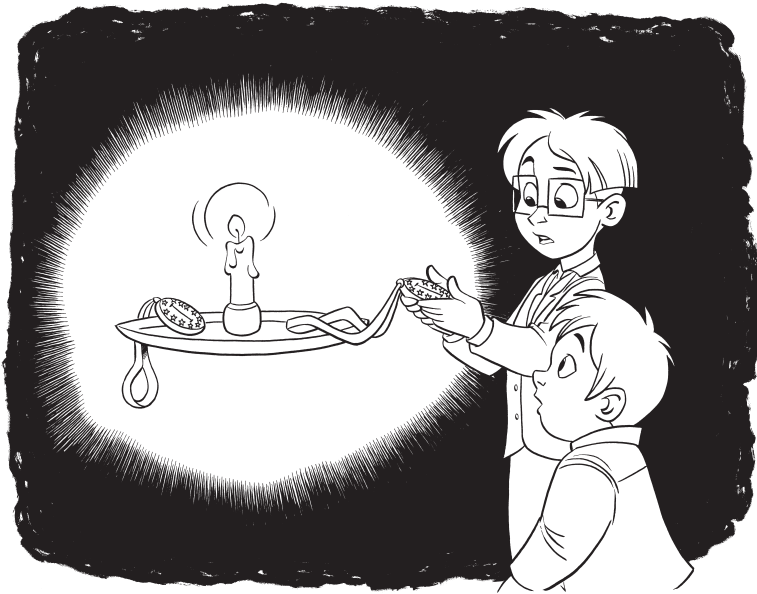
“Feels like a wall.”

*Whish!* A floating candle appeared behind them.

“Look,” Bean said.

They rushed to the candle. It stood on a hovering, golden serving tray. Resting on the tray were two leather necklaces, each with a round medallion.

Charlie examined one of the necklaces. The cursive letter *I* was engraved on its iron medallion, surrounded by a ring of stars.



“Strange,” he whispered.

“What do we do with these?” Bean asked, scooping up the other necklace.

Charlie shrugged. “I guess we put ‘em on.”

They each put on a necklace, then peered around at the blackness beyond the candlelight.

Nothing happened.

Bean stared down at his bulky new jewelry. “I look like a girl.”

“Stick it under your shirt,” Charlie said.

They both stuffed the necklaces under their collars. The iron felt cool against their chests. Bean squirmed, itching at his buttons.

And then came an ear-piercing sound—like metal scraping metal. *Shrrrrriieek!*

Spooked, Charlie and Bean ducked into the darkness.

Then a voice called out, in a gruff British accent, “Well-well, good afternoon! And

a proper special welcome to Pennywick’s School of Magic.”

The voice was followed by another series of metal shrieks, like some sort of exercising robot.

“The Professor’s told us all about you two,” the mysterious voice said. *Shriek, shriek, shriek*. “He says you both got blinding potential. One-in-a-million talents, the jolly ol’ codger says.”

Charlie and Bean peered into every corner of the darkness. But they still didn’t see anyone.

“Why,” the voice carried on, “he even said you’re as gifted as the very first Guardian.” *Shriieek, shhriieek*. “The greatest Guardian of us all.”

Then, suddenly and with a twisting *shrrriieek*, the boys discovered who was speaking.

A knight wearing a bronze suit of armor cartwheeled to the edge of the candlelight, then backflipped expertly and landed just

beside the floating candle. He rested an elbow on its tray. *Clank*.

“Whoa,” Charlie whispered.

“Well then, let’s have a look at you,” the knight said, “so I can shake the hands of two great geniuses.” The knight flipped up his eye guard—*flink*—but his face was still hidden in shadow.

Confused, Charlie and Bean glanced at each other. *Geniuses?*

Then, timidly, they edged into the candlelight—right in front of the knight. But the knight was still staring straight above them—apparently expecting six-foot athletes.

So Bean cleared his throat. “Ahem!”

The knight peered down. *Shhrrriieek*.

For a moment, there was silence. And then—

“Blimey!” the knight exclaimed. “Bloody *children?*”

Charlie picked at his shirt buttons. “Present.”

A moment passed before the knight broke into a fit of laughter.

“Why, this can’t *be*,” he blurted between cackles. “The Professor’s gone barmy.” And then he glanced around, as if to see whether someone else was watching. “Or he’s having himself a good gas at my expense.”

Charlie bristled.

“This is no place for little scraps,” the knight said. “You two won’t last a bloomin’ minute on this here island.”

*Island?* Charlie thought. *What island?*

The knight wiggled a finger at the boys. “I say, do you two have any inkling what sort o’ trouble you’re headed for?”

Meekly, the brothers shook their heads.

“Well then, allow me to expound,” said the knight. “You’re about to face the strongest, the strangest, the smartest devils you can possibly imagine. The stuff o’ storybooks, I tell you.”

Bean frowned at the knight’s snootiness.

“And who are *you*, exactly?”

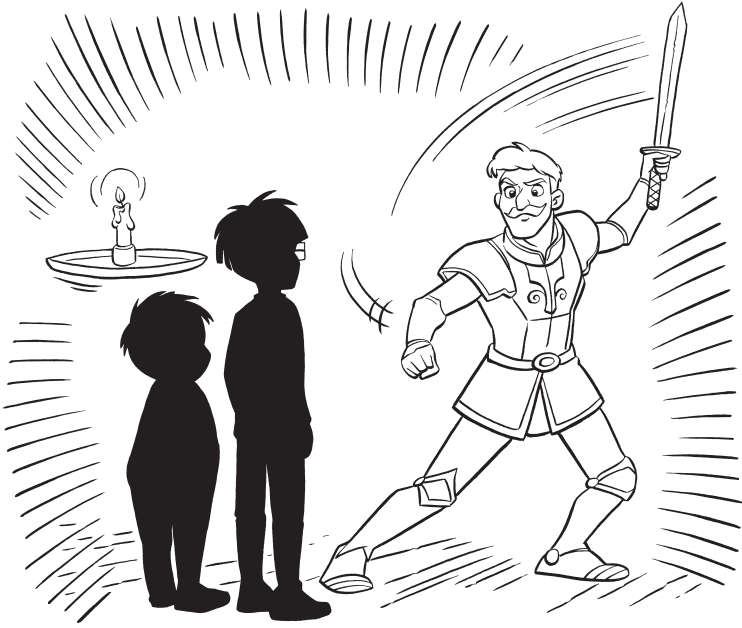
“*Me?*” the knight replied, as if Bean had just needled a big-time hotshot. “Why, I’m Sir Marlo Marvel, the world’s greatest swordsman.”

With that, the knight plucked off his helmet. Sir Marvel squinted through fierce gray eyes, with cheeks like sculpted concrete. Beneath his hooked nose, a mustache curled at the edges.

He flung away his helmet. Somewhere in the darkness, it landed cleanly on a hook. *Clink.*

“I won the Legion of Arms in Oslo,” Sir Marvel proclaimed. He drew his shimmering sword. “The Master of Swordsmanship in Paris . . .”

He lunged backward, then he twirled and thrust his sword, so quickly and professionally that the boys grew dizzy. “And the World Championships in Saint Petersburg, four years running.”



Charlie glanced at his brother. “Yeah, there’s been a mistake.”

“But my proudest achievement,” Sir Marvel added, “the greatest by leaps and bounds, was graduating from this very School of Magic.”

When the knight’s dazzling display had finished, he sheathed his magnificent sword—*shwhhink!*

“I’m now the fourteenth Guardian,” Sir Marvel declared. He dabbed his forehead with a handkerchief. “And the school’s most recent graduate.”

He bowed ever so slightly at the boys. Then he made a whipping motion with the handkerchief—it vanished in a powdery *poof*.

Bean chuckled. “Love it.”

“So let’s have it,” Sir Marvel said. “What is it that you two are masters of?”

Charlie and Bean hadn’t the slightest clue how to respond.

But they answered at the same time.

“I’m a pretty good student.”

“I’m mostly a screwup.”

“Bah!” Sir Marvel scoffed.

He snatched a dagger hidden beneath his breastplate and slung it at the boys. They ducked as the weapon fastballed above their heads.

*Thwonk!* It pierced something just behind them in the dark. The boys felt at their hair

to make sure they hadn't been scalped.

"You two suppose this is some sort o' joke?" Sir Marvel snapped.

They shook their heads.

"I'm terrified."

"I just peed a little."

"Oy, oy, oy," murmured Sir Marvel. After a lingering stare at the boys, he shook his head. "For the life o' me, I can't imagine what the ol' man sees in you two."

Grudgingly, Sir Marvel held his arms out sideways. He sighed to gather himself, then focused on the darkness.

He snapped two fingers on each hand.

"*Luxo Lumo!*" he declared.

Suddenly—*Fwoom! Fwoom!*

All around the boys, torches magically burst into flames along a curved wall. As sparks fluttered off the torches, light flooded the room. And the boys finally discovered where they were.

"Yes!" Bean whispered.

It was a medieval armory. All along the walls, weapons shimmered on racks. There were glistening swords. And crossbows. And poleaxes. And machetes with red leather hilts. And halberds. And spiky flails and clubs. And seven-foot lances.

On the floor, training dummies stood on posts—each with a target painted on its chest. Behind the boys, Sir Marvel's dagger stuck out from a bullseye.

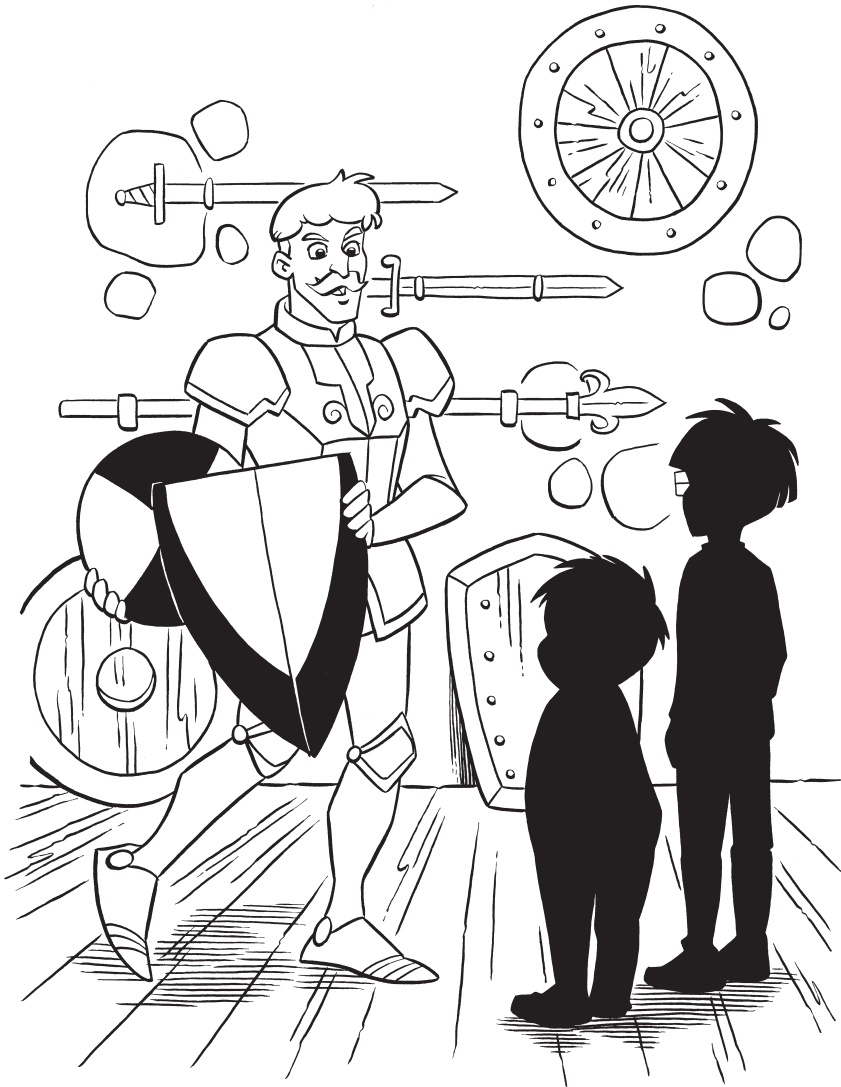
Along the wall, Sir Marvel drummed his fingers over a rack of shields. "Let's suppose you both start passing tests—which I'm certain you won't."

He hoisted a heavy shield in the shape of a triangle. "And let's suppose you both go on to become Guardians, which I'd wager my mum's house you couldn't possibly."

Then he chose a smaller round shield. As Sir Marvel carried the shields to the boys, his tone seemed especially serious.

"If that were to happen, then you two





ankle-biters would be responsible for protecting something more valuable than *all* the treasures on earth.”

Sir Marvel dropped the triangle-shaped shield in front of Charlie, and the smaller round one in front of Bean. “It’s the source of all magic. The source of all *life*,” he said.

He frowned down at them both. “So I suggest you take this all just a *trifle* more seriously.”

The boys nodded harder than they ever had.

“Good,” Sir Marvel said. “Now then. Before we get underway, here’s how the school works.”

He paced in front of the boys. “Before each test, you’ll receive a lesson, where a Guardian will teach you a magic spell. Understood so far?”

“Yessir.”

“I’m with ya.”

“You’ll need to use that spell to pass the

test. If you succeed, you'll go on to the next lesson. And if you pass all fourteen tests, then you'll each graduate and become Guardians."

The boys couldn't imagine anything better.

"But if you fail just *once*," Sir Marvel said, "then you'll be expelled from this school, and sent right back to your dreary little lives."

The boys couldn't imagine anything worse.

"And whether you succeed or fail," Sir Marvel warned, "you're forbidden from speaking about the School of Magic to anyone else. Not a single, solitary soul—have I made myself clear?"

"Definitely."

"Crystal."

"Very well, then," Sir Marvel said. And then the subtlest of smiles brightened his mustachioed face.

"Let's give it a go. Lesson number one."



## The First Magic Lesson

Sir Marvel whipped a finger to the air. "Each magic spell begins with a magic phrase," he instructed. "But it's not enough to simply *speak* the phrase."

He pointed to his head. "You must focus, with a clear mind, in order for the spell to work properly."

The brothers had never paid this much attention to any lesson at Drudgemore.

"Now then, watch very closely," said the knight. He aimed his hand at a vertical rack of swords—longswords and curvy sabers and