

SECOND EDITION



# THE LOST SON

AIDAN LUCID

# **THE LOST SON**

Second Edition

**Aidan Lucid**

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“The flow of this novel is such that I just kept on reading. There are some great fight scenes in this book and some very well-fleshed-out interactions of totally believable characters. Give it a try; you will enjoy it, especially if you believe in magic.”

— J.D. Warner, author of *Hexa-tech*

“*The Lost Son* is a unique fantasy novel that begins with a bang. This fast-paced adventure keeps the reader turning pages, while it offers a story that will keep you guessing.”

— Brandy Alexander, author of *Genesis*

“The plot of the book is solid and engaging, exciting and well-developed. All told, I believe Aidan shows promise in his story and I will keep my eye out for the next one.”

— Scott Collins, author of *Days' End*

“*The Lost Son* was written by Ireland’s own Aidan Lucid; and, let me tell you, he is going to be one of the shining stars in the literary world. From the first chapter, this story has it all ...”

Randy Belaire, author of *The Reckoning: Chronicles of the Shadow Chaser*

## CHARACTER PRONUNCIATIONS

<b>Aranok</b>	Aaron-ach
<b>Damone</b>	Da-moan
<b>Detrok</b>	Dee-trok
<b>Eranam</b>	Err-on-am
<b>General Fradar</b>	Fray-dar
<b>General Haynach</b>	Hay-nach
<b>Hamorin</b>	Hammer-in
<b>Hannorah</b>	Han-nora or Han-no-rah
<b>Hernacious</b>	Her-nass-ee-us
<b>Karina</b>	Car-eena
<b>King Argoth</b>	Ar-goth or Our-goth
<b>King Gronach</b>	Groan-ach
<b>King Mordoch</b>	Mor-duck
<b>King Zakarius</b>	Za-care-ee-us
<b>Nemus</b>	Nee-mus or knee-mus
<b>Orkinad</b>	Or-kin-ad
<b>Porok</b>	Po-rock
<b>Queen Cyren</b>	Siren or Sigh-wren
<b>Queen Eusaba</b>	You-say-ba
<b>Slyvanon</b>	Sly-va-non
<b>Tyram</b>	Toy-ram
<b>Verach</b>	Ver-ach
<b>Wernach</b>	Were-nach
<b>Xongrelan</b>	Zon-gra-len
<b>Zymbion</b>	Zym-bee-on



## Prologue

Avram and Temrok, both Sadarkian, in their black armor, jumped as the throne room's double doors slammed shut. They knelt while their king's footsteps echoed as he approached. King Zakarius's broad shoulders made his shadow wider; the low sun made it longer. An imposing figure in the flesh, made more so by the light. Zakarius's long black hair fell just below his shoulders.

Avram and Temrok dared not look at him until they were given express permission.

Zakarius sat on his throne and fixed his gaze on the two guards kneeling before him. The vivid, banana-yellow Sadarkian skin tone contrasted with his black beard as his hand stroked down its length. It was neatly and cleanly shaved, groomed to pointed perfection. Over his head was a large portrait of his predecessor, King Mordoch.

Mordoch was revered for being a fair and just king. Zakarius had always hoped to be better than him. In Zakarius's opinion, he surpassed all of his predecessor's accomplishments by winning more wars.

"Stand up." His clear voice cut through the silence of the room.

Avram and Temrok stood, holding their helmets underneath their right arms. They stared at Zakarius, whose eyes were sharp with intelligence, calculating.

"Then you understand eradication is the only option?" Zakarius asked.

"We do, sire," Temrok said.

"Very well. But before you go, understand this." Zakarius walked down to look into their eyes.

They stared up at him.

"This mission is important. If you fail, I will burn each and every

one of your children and make you watch. Understood?"

Both soldiers nodded nervously.

"I said, *understood?*" Zakarius barked.

"Yes, sire!" they answered in unison.

"Dismissed."

Avram gave his salt-and-pepper-haired friend a nervous glance before each of them put on their helmets and left.

Zakarius passed the columns lining each side of the throne room as he walked to the window to his far left. Shadows cast by flames on the candles danced on the marble floors. Each candle was in a holder attached to every column. Overhead were balconies that had rows of seats where the Senate would sit whenever he had a meeting with them.

Zakarius stood by the window, gazing down at the dragons. Large black chamfrains covered their heads; their lower bodies were protected by black armor, which blended in seamlessly with their skin. The beasts sat with their wings tucked in by their sides.

Ladders rested against each dragon. Zakarius watched as Avram and Temrok climbed onto them. When they were seated, the ladders were taken away.

The dragons spread their great leathery wings. As they headed east, a sound like cannon fire exploded behind the clouds. A large, violet-colored, spinning hole opened. Both beasts banked to the right and flew into the portal. Momentarily, it expanded, and then collapsed, closing after the riders. Zakarius chuckled, imagining the smell of his enemies' blood wafting into his nostrils.



# Chapter One

November 5th, 1945

Many thousands of feet above the Bermuda Triangle, the TBF Avenger disturbed the blue sky's silence. Captain Edward Johnson, aged forty, and his friend, Sergeant Conor MacCall, thirty-seven, crewed the dark-blue Torpedo bomber. They flew without a bombardier because they did not expect any action. This was a routine patrol for the naval air station in Fort Lauderdale, near Miami.

"It's a good morning for flying. The one thing I haven't missed these last two years is the miserable weather back home," said Conor in his strong Glaswegian accent.

"I agree with you on that one," Edward replied in his Oxford drawl, his brown eyes surveying the area around him. He had dark-blond hair and a blond moustache.

Sitting in the rear of the plane, controlling the turret gun and radio, Conor pushed back his carrot hair and turned his green eyes towards Edward.

"Do you ever think about England?" Conor asked.

"All the time," Edward said with a slight trace of loneliness.

"What do you miss the most?" Conor pressed further.

Edward thought for a moment before answering. "I miss my parents. Every Sunday, Sandra and I would take the kids and visit my folks, staying for a few hours. Sandra loved my mother's baking. Mum always fussed over the children."

"I suppose you miss her baking too, sir, eh?" Conor chuckled as he asked this.

"Well, I suppose I do. But there're better opportunities over here, so we had no choice but to move."



“Aye, I’ll second that. I miss meeting the lads on a Saturday for a wee game of footie and then the few pints after. I’ll tell you this much, one thing I don’t miss is shooting down Germans over London.”

“True, true,” Edward agreed.

He scanned the area once more, satisfied that there was no present danger.

“I suppose we’ll head back,” Edward said. “Radio the station to all-clear the area.”

“Aye, sir. I’ll get right on it.”

Twenty minutes from base, a brilliant white light exploded out of nowhere, engulfing the sky as far as they could see. Sound burst around them, ricocheting with memories of bombing raids, flak and fire, the uncertainty of survival, deafness isolating each man in his real and recalled fear, never knowing if they would make it back. The light intensified, burning their retinas.

Shielding their eyes didn’t help much.

As suddenly as it arrived, the light disappeared.

“What in blazes just happened?” Conor said, blinking.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Edward replied.

Both Conor and Edward’s headphones suddenly burst with static as they received a transmission from base.

“Fort Lauderdale to FT-4, do you read me?”

“This is Fox Tare Four to Fort Lauderdale; we read you loud and clear. What’s the problem? Over,” Conor replied.

“You got two unidentified bogies closing in on your position. Three o’clock.”

Conor shook away the last of the retina burn and looked again. With a second glance, he saw them approaching.

“Roger that, Lauderdale. Bogies spotted. FT-4, out.” His headphones crackled as Lauderdale was cut off.

“Sir, I know this may sound strange,” he said, turning to Edward, “but they don’t seem to be planes coming towards us.”

“Of course they are. What else can they be?”

Conor shut his eyes and squinted, focusing harder. As he looked again, he became slack-jawed.

“I think they’re ...” He swallowed the unreality of the thought. “They’re ... black dragons. And there’s someone riding them.”

“This is no time for jokes,” Edward barked.

“I’m not joking. They’re gaining on us. Break left!”

“Don’t be daft. There’s no such—” Edward stopped as he, too, saw what Conor had seen.

“My God!” he exclaimed in awe. “Bloody hell, how’s this even possible?”

Edward snapped out of his momentary, shock-induced paralysis. “Hold on!”

The TBF Avenger swooped down. The dragon followed. Opening its large mouth, it belched fire and narrowly missed the TBF Avenger’s tail.

Conor unleashed a wave of bullets from the turret gun, but the dragon swerved, evading them.

Edward again performed an Immelmann turn: beginning as a loop, then, while upside down at the top of the loop, rolling the plane over, ending right side up but higher and going in the opposite direction.

When the captain had finished the maneuver, Conor continued firing.

The dragon turned upside down and again blew fire upon them. The flames licked the cockpit’s plexiglass, cracking it. The glass had also been blackened a little. Fumes from the fire leaked through the cracks.

Conor yelped with fright. “That was close, sir. If we don’t lose it, we’re toast.”

Their large pursuer flew over them. The dragon’s tail was inches from the cockpit. From Conor’s position, he could see the scales on its stomach trailing down to its tail. All of its upper body was covered in black, shiny armor. He caught a brief glimpse of its rider’s hideous face.

“I don’t know what’s uglier, that creature or the big dragon,” Conor said, hands trembling, sweat trickling down his forehead.

The giant beast leaped higher, twisted and turned, leveling at the frightened airmen’s six.

“By my estimation, it’s only four to five inches from our tail,” Conor said.

“Hold your fire and tell me when that thing’s about to open its mouth,” Edward ordered.

Conor glanced at the dragon. Its bright yellow eyes were alight with a volcanic-orange glow.

“I think it’s ready to blow,” he warned, hysteria tingeing his voice. He stared back at the jet-black creature and gulped.

“Hold on. Be ready to fire,” Edward commanded.

“Aye, sir.”

Edward pulled up, briefly soaring into the air and banking left. The dragon flew over them and dropped right down in front of the TBF Avenger. Edward opened fire using the guns at the front of the plane.

The black-armored rider abandoned his dragon and fell to the sea. The beast's right wing was shredded as bullets found their mark.

"Bull's-eye," Edward shouted.

"Good shooting, sir. Phew, that was close." The Scot wiped his brow, moist from perspiration.

"Yes, it was. I'm glad we made it. I can't believe what just happened. How on Earth did that dragon get here? Anyway, we're alive and that's all that matters."

Another dragon dropped down so close to the plane, its bellowed war cry reverberated through the metal skin.

The TBF Avenger banked left, flames brushing past the aircraft.

The second beast increased altitude until it was beyond their line of sight. It seemed that the threat had gone.

That was, until it reappeared behind them.

"I'll try to hold it off again." Conor's hands vibrated with each shudder of the weapon while firing.

Edward made the plane climb but couldn't shake off the monster. When that failed, the plane plunged into a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree spiral and then shot up again. That failed, too.

"It's too good for us. We mightn't be able to shake it off," Conor admitted.

"Don't worry; I've got one more trick up my sleeve. Hold on tight."

"Are you sure you know what you're doing, sir?" Conor asked, looking at the sea below rising up to meet them. He returned to firing at the creature, but it dodged the turret gun's bullets.

"Yes, MacCall," Edward answered.

The plane began to shudder, became harder to control. The water was perilously close.

Cold sweat gathered on Conor as his heart thumped. His breathing quickened. He was on the verge of hyperventilating. The Scot took a deep breath to control the fear.

"Altitude four hundred feet and closing," Conor announced with a quiver creeping into his voice.

"I know what I'm doing." The captain's voice was the epitome of calm.

"Three hundred feet, sir." Conor then thought, *What the hell is he*

*up to?* before saying, “Two hundred.”

There was still no response from the pilot.

“One hundred,” Conor squeaked, feeling death was now imminent. He began to question his captain’s mental state. “Fifty feet. Pull up, Captain. Pull up!”

Gravity seemed to shift as the TBF Avenger pulled up, narrowly missing the impact. Water rippled as they passed over it.

The dragon and its rider splashed into the ocean. Relief washed through Conor. Edward’s crazy maneuver had actually worked.

“They’re gone. I thought we were done for!” Conor shouted, relieved.

“I can’t believe you doubted me,” Edward said. “Have faith, old boy.”

“Aye, sir, but try tellin’ my underwear that.” Conor tried to catch his breath. “First there was that blinding light, and then we got attacked by two dragons. What a day! Where in God’s name did they come from?”

“I wish I knew, but I think it’s best if we keep quiet about this.”

“What will we tell Lauderdale, sir?” Conor asked.

“Radio back and inform them that—” Edward was cut short. The radial engine stopped working. “Dammit.”

An eerie silence surrounded them. For the first time, they could hear the wind blowing across the canopy. The engine’s comforting vibration was gone.

Conor knew Edward would lower the nose to establish a glide. Both men remained calm, as there was still time to regain control. Their plane, at eight thousand feet, was now descending.

“I’ll try to switch the fuel,” Edward said. This was done by manually switching fuel between the tanks by rotating a lever in a specific tank’s direction.

Nothing happened.

“I’ll try to restart the engine.”

From his time in training, Conor understood that in order for Edward to restart it, the pilot would first reach his hand over to the throttle, moving it back and forth while adjusting the prop with the lever next to the throttle. As Edward did this, his right hand trimmed the stick up.

“The engine won’t restart.” Edward’s calm was the opposite of Conor’s emotion.

“That’s just bloody great,” Conor mumbled.

The TBF Avenger was now at one thousand seven hundred feet

above the glittering ocean.

Continuing his efforts to get the engine started, Edward said, “Radio the base and tell them we need help.”

“Aye, sir,” Conor said. “Mayday, mayday, this is Fox Tare Four to Fort Lauderdale. We need help. We’re going down. I repeat, we’re going down!”

“Fox Tare Four, this is base. We did not receive your full message. Please repeat. Do you copy?”

Edward sighed his displeasure. “Blast it.”

Conor tried again. “Base, this is Sergeant Conor MacCall from FT-4. Our engine has stopped and we’re going down fast. We need your help. Over.”

“Base to FT-4, there’s interference in your signal. We can’t receive your full transmission.”

“Aw, to hell with it! There’s no use radioing Lauderdale, sir,” Conor said.

Edward shook his head. “I don’t understand why they’re not receiving us fully.”

The plane was still gliding over the water, now less than nine hundred feet above it.

“In what direction do you think the breeze is blowing?” Edward asked.

“I’m not too sure, sir, but I think it’s northwesterly.”

“Thank you.”

The TBF Avenger was now moving northwest to head towards land. Conor’s flight suit became even more drenched with sweat, his breathing more rapid. He gulped as he watched Edward’s hands tremble as they gripped the throttle.

Edward now had to admit defeat at four hundred feet.

“Four hundred feet and closing,” Conor announced.

“I know.” Even now, Edward’s voice was calm, his fear well-hidden. “Parachuting from this height would be pointless. It looks like we’ll have to ditch. I’ve tried everything and the engine won’t restart. Tighten your seatbelt and shoulder harness as much as you can.”

Conor had trained for a situation like this, but it was his first time performing an actual ditching.

They were thirty seconds away from hitting the ocean.

“We may flip, so remember your Dilbert Dunker training,” Edward advised.

Conor tightened the strap across his lap. “If we do die, then it was an honor serving with you.”

“The honor was all mine, MacCall.”

The ocean was rushing up to greet them. Conor could see the water beyond Edward’s helmet.

Then both men gasped as the waters separated and a black, menacing hole appeared, the TBF Avenger heading straight for it.

“What the bloody hell is that?” Conor shouted in panic.

Edward’s voice trembled as he replied, “I don’t know but it doesn’t look good. I’m too low to turn away and it seems to be going down at our rate of descent. Brace yourself!”

Both men screamed as their plane nose-dived into the hole, which fluctuated inwards, creating a winding violet pathway.

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In the darkness of his chambers, Zakarius’s face was visible only in reflected luminosity. The light from the revolving object highlighted his gritted teeth, his disappointment and disgust, as the magic ball showed him the failure of his two riders. He cursed as the metallic beast and all the dangers it held reached the portal. Zakarius left his chambers, slamming the door behind him.

An hour later, he walked into the courtyard. After he watched the riders fail their mission, he immediately ordered that Avram and Temrok’s children be dragged out of their homes, along with their mothers, and brought to the courtyard. As he entered, soldiers positioned all around the white walls stood to attention.

Both mothers wept as they wriggled in vain to break free from the guards’ tight grip.

Each set of children was tied to a pole that was hammered into the ground. Below them lay a mound of straw. Avram’s little boy and girl, aged six and seven, whimpered, tears streaking their pale faces. Temrok’s two girls, thirteen and fourteen, cried as well.

“Please spare them,” begged Avram’s wife, her long brown hair partially covering her face as she continued to struggle to break free.

Zakarius ignored the pleas, turning instead to his soldiers looking on, awaiting his orders. “Their fathers were the best dragon riders in my army, and they failed. So let this be a lesson to any of you who do the same.”

He nodded to a guard standing beside the children. The soldier poured a large clay jug of oil over them.

“No, please!” Avram’s little girl cried as she saw the soldier take a lighted torch from the wall.

Soon cries of agony filled the courtyard as flames ravaged the children. Soldiers covered their noses as the stench of burning flesh invaded their nostrils.

Zakarius watched, the flames’ reflection dancing in his eyes. But he still wondered how he would deal with the threat of the two men in the metallic beast.

He turned his attention to his middle-aged general, Haynach. Zakarius motioned with his head for Haynach to come to him. He had confided in the general earlier about the humans coming through the portal.

“Send a team out to the forest to scout it. If those men arrive, I want them killed immediately. Bring me their heads.”

“Yes sire.” Haynach nodded before departing.

Zakarius smiled as he returned to watch the flames lick the children’s flesh before devouring them completely.

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## **Present Day Harleyville, USA**

Seventeen-year-old Henry Simmons walked with his head lowered and hands stuffed in the pockets of his green combat trousers. A little puff of wind blew through his brown hair as the boy’s blue eyes stayed fixed on the ground.

Today had been an emotional rollercoaster. He experienced the euphoria of passing Mr. Smythe’s dreaded biology summer exam. This was soon followed by bitter disappointment. He had stared into Tracey Maxwell’s green eyes, behind her red-rimmed spectacles, as he asked, “Hey, Tracey, um ... I was wondering if you’d like to be my date for the prom Friday night?”

He’d never forget her warm, understanding smile as she placed a hand on his shoulder.

“You’re a nice guy, Henry, but I’m not going to be your date. Sorry.”

The constant replaying of those words darkened his day and mood.

It had taken him two weeks to pluck up the courage to ask the most gorgeous girl in school out, then she'd gone and torn his heart out, dumping it in the trash.

Tracey Maxwell, although a "nerd" like him, was pretty and interesting in her own way. The fact that she was the top *Fortnite* player in school only attracted more boys to her. Henry had liked the girl for two years, even before she changed her hair color. She now favored long, brunette tresses instead of her former short, spiky blonde hairstyle. Other boys began noticing her more, too, after the transformation — including Brad Thompson, captain of the football team. Henry felt that he didn't have a chance of being with her, given the strong competition. Still, every time she'd pass him in the hallway, he'd receive a whiff of her strawberry perfume and his stomach would flutter.

So, taking his chances, he decided to ask her out. Never did the teen realize that a rejection would be this hurtful.

"Hey, Henry," a voice called out. "Hold up."

He turned around to see his best friend, Joey Arnolds, running to him. Joey was taller and physically leaner than Henry.

Joey removed his blue New York Knicks baseball cap, smoothing down his red crew cut before putting the baseball cap on again.

"Are you heading home?" Joey asked.

"Yeah. I don't feel like having lunch now."

"But what about the rest of your classes?"

Henry raised his head, unconcerned. "I think I'll give them a miss. Don't you have gym after lunch?"

"Uh-huh, but I'm just gonna skip it. I've practically made the lacrosse team," Joey replied.

Henry chuckled at his friend's remark.

"Won't your parents be home now? Your mom will freak if she thinks you're skipping classes," Joey said.

"Nah. Mom and Dad are away on business for the day, and if she finds out I'll just say I didn't feel well or something."

"I guess Tracey wouldn't have anything to do with you missing lunch?"

Henry didn't answer.

"I knew it. You've had a crush on her for a while, dude. Time to move on," Joey said.

"Yeah, I know, but it's just ... so hard to. I never thought being turned down by her would suck so much."



“Yeah. Sorry, bro,” Joey said, placing a hand of sympathy on his friend’s back.

Henry sighed and decided to change the subject. “How’s your grandma after her hip surgery?”

“Cranky as hell, but she’s getting ’round pretty good. I may as well go there now, until Mom picks me up after her shift at the precinct.”

“Your grandma won’t rat you out?”

Joey shook his head. “As long as she can watch *Dr. Phil* in peace, she don’t care who’s there or why.”

Henry was unsure whether or not to ask his next question, but decided to anyway. “Do you ever, like, think about your dad?”

“Nah. He can’t be bothered to call me or Mom, so why should I?”

“Yeah. Guess the whole thing sucks, huh?”

Joey sighed, “I stopped caring a long time ago.”

“I can see why.”

A silver sedan rounded the corner up ahead. Two teenaged boys were in it. Henry recognized one of them as the car got closer.

Sitting in the front passenger seat was Brad Thompson, wearing a smug expression. He was a guy most boys wanted to be like and most girls wanted to be with. Henry had to admit — but never would openly — that Brad was good-looking, with his dirty-blond hair gelled back and 1950s-Elvis-type sideburns.

Brad’s friend, Richard Moran, a boy slightly taller than him, was driving. They wore wine-colored letterman jackets with white sleeves and a yellow HVH (Harleyville High) crest.

“Oh no,” Henry grumbled.

“What’s wrong?” Joey asked.

“It’s Brad Thompson.”

As the sedan got closer, it slowed down. Brad stood up, a clenched fist raised above his head. Once the car was level with Henry and Joey, it slowed to a crawl as he shouted, “Hey, dummies!”

Henry and Joey ducked as Brad launched two eggs at them. One hit Henry’s back, while the other missed Joey by an inch.

“Ugh, gross!” Henry said.

“What the hell, guys?” Joey retorted.

“Suckers!” Brad roared as the car sped up again, leaving both boys in a cloud of dust.

“Jerkoffs!” Henry yelled back in between coughing and clearing the dust from his face. He took off his bag to see if any egg was on it. There

was a smudge of yolk on the left arm strap.

“Are you all right?” Joey asked.

“I just got egged, Joey. What do you think?” Henry snapped.

“Hey, chill, I’m only asking,” Joey shot back, semi-irked.

Henry sighed, instantly filled with regret. “Sorry, man. Yeah, I’ll live.” He turned his back to Joey. “Is it really bad?”

“Yeah ...kinda looks like a bird dumped on you, man. I’m talking, like, bad bird diarrhea or something.”

Henry scrunched up his nose in abhorrence. “Uh ... thanks. *Way* too much info.”

“Well, you did ask. So what’s his problem? It’s not because of that whole breaking-his-bike-light incident?” Joey asked.

“Yup, sure is,” Henry replied.

“But it was an accident ... and like, two years ago.”

“Try telling *him* that.” Henry carried the bag in his hand. “Come on, let’s get out of here before they come back.”

Henry and Joey walked faster, looking over their shoulders every so often to see if that dreaded sedan was coming at them again.

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Jasper sniffed the chunks of cat food in his dish and turned away in disgust. He was a gray American Bobtail with unusual acquired tastes for a cat. He would only eat a piece of steak or some of Mrs Cleary’s lasagna.

Mr. Anderson, Jasper’s owner, had gone to a poker tournament for senior citizens, leaving his cat in the care of Mrs. Williams, a mean elderly lady. Mrs Williams detested cats, and because of this, Jasper was evicted from the house while she stayed there.

While Jasper sat on the grass, plotting a dreadful and scratchy vengeance for her, the breeze began to blow. He looked up, sniffing the air, his eyes narrowed. The wind grew. Palm trees began to rustle as it swept through their leaves. Jasper’s fur stood on end. His instincts told him that something peculiar was in the air.

The little feline’s green eyes widened with amazement as a black dot appeared in the sky, which then broadened into a whirling tornado, gray in color. A golden coin was thrown from it.

Overwhelmed with curiosity, Jasper took a few steps closer to investigate. The coin spun on the ground and had a pulse-like glow.

Jasper ventured closer to the glowing object.

Just as the cat was almost beside it, the tornado began spinning quicker than before. Jasper tried with all his might to run away, but couldn't.

The cat clawed the air and screamed as he was sucked into the vortex.



*The Gold Coin*

*Illustration by Leonardo Borazio*

Henry was near his house when he saw Mr. Anderson walking around searching for something. The old man wiped his eyes with a piece of tissue. To Henry, it looked like he had been crying.

“Are you all right, Mr. Anderson?” he asked but the neighbor never answered. “Can I help you?”

“Jasper’s gone. My little baby’s gone,” he cried, his hands raised in despair.

“Where’d he go?”

Mr. Anderson dabbed his eyes and said, “I don’t know. The lady minding him said that there was a terrible wind and it must have scared him off. He was only outside for a few minutes.”

“I’m sure he’s around here somewhere,” Henry said.

Putting his bag down, he helped Mr. Anderson search for the cat by climbing the small stepladder and combing the gardens on either side. Then he searched in the old man’s shed. The cat was nowhere to be found.

Mr. Anderson wept a little, wiping away tears.

“Thank you, Henry. I’m sure he’ll show up later. You better go home in case your mom’s looking for you.”

“Sorry I couldn’t find Jasper. If I see him, I’ll let you know, okay?”

The elderly neighbor nodded and went inside.

Picking up his bag, Henry unbolted the front gate. He was about to lock it again when a shiny object glittering under a bush caught his eye.

Bending down to investigate, he found withered leaves had covered the object. Clearing them revealed a shiny, golden coin with unusual, engraved inscriptions. At first glance, and from the many Discovery Channel documentaries on ancient civilizations Henry had watched, it appeared to be Aztec in origin. It bore similar shapes and drawings; but he quickly dismissed that idea.

*Anyway, even if that was an Aztec coin, what would it be doing around here?* Henry thought.

The gold appeared to have no blemishes, scratches or rust. In the center on one side of the coin was something that looked like two hooks positioned back-to-back under a half-circular code of letters. Henry didn’t understand what they meant.

*This could be worth something,* he thought. *I’d better keep it safe for a while.*

The coin weighed heavy in his pocket and curiosity in his mind as he entered the house and went up to his bedroom, the attic room. It had pinewood flooring and a slanted timber ceiling. In the middle was a king-size bed with a Captain America duvet. A 32-inch television set and a game console were in the corner near a window. There were posters of Jennifer Lawrence on the walls, along with a few of WWE wrestlers such as Roman Reigns and Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson. On the locker to the right of Henry’s bed was a tower of Marvel comic books. Cluttered on his dressing table were family photos, including pictures of him as a little kid. In one, he as a baby was being bounced on his grandpa’s knee as Grandma looked indulgently on.

Even though he loved his space and privacy, there were times Henry wished that he had a brother or sister for company.

As Henry was deep in thought solving a math problem, a *ding* from his laptop made him steer his blue eyes away from the math textbook. It was a Facebook message from Tracey.

“Whoa, she actually messaged me.” He clicked on the message and it read, “Hey Henry. Sorry about earlier. I feel bad for turning you down. Wanna join me in a cool new online RPG?” A link to the game was the next message.

“She wants to be friends. I’m cool with that,” he said.

The front door being closed — and Suzeanne, his mother, calling the boy’s name — let him know that his parents were home.

“I’m up here, Mom,” he called out before clicking on the link.

Suddenly, images of naked women popped up on the screen.

“Crap.” Henry pressed the ESC key vigorously, hoping to get rid of them.

Footsteps thumped up the stairs.

“Come on, come on!” Henry continued to press ESC. When that didn’t work, he moved on to hammering the CTRL, ALT, and Delete keys together.

The footsteps drew nearer to his bedroom door.

Still the explicit images continued flooding his screen, one jumping in front of the other.

Now Suzeanne had reached the top of the stairs and was only a few seconds away from entering.

“Shoot. Screw it.” Henry bent down and reached for the monitor’s plug.

His bedroom door handle turned.

Stretching his right arm, Henry grabbed the plug, pulling it out of the socket.

The monitor screen went blank as Suzeanne opened his bedroom door fully.

She looked at him with a befuddled expression as he was still under his desk. “Everything okay, honey?”

“Oh, hi, Mom. Sure, everything’s fine. My computer crashed and I had to unplug it to get it to restart.”

“All right. So, how was school today?”

Henry got to his feet. “Ah, you know, same as usual. How was the meeting with the publisher?”

“Boring. Your father fell asleep halfway through and I had to wake him up. Thank God no one else noticed.”

Henry laughed.

“Guess I better let you get back to your homework,” Suzeanne said. “Talk to you later.”

“Okay, thanks, Mom.”

His cell phone vibrated on the desk. Swiping up, he noticed a message; but this time, it was from Sid Connors. It read, “Ha, ha. Enjoy the ladies?”

“That was you?” Henry typed back.

“Sure was. A friend saw you asking Tracey to the prom. Stay away from her. She’s mine.”

“And if I don’t?” Henry replied. He didn’t have to wait too long for Sid’s threat to pop up on his phone. “Then next time it’s gonna be much worse.”

Sid Connors was the bane of Henry’s life. Three years ago, he beat him in a local *Call of Duty* tournament. Since then, the boy had made Henry’s existence a living hell with sending him Facebook messages containing derisive GIFs, leaving snide notes in his locker, and even managing to hack his online Playstation Plus account once. Henry didn’t take the matter further because he was too embarrassed and didn’t want his parents getting involved, making it worse.

“You know what, Connors, screw you,” he muttered, locking his cell phone.

An hour later, heavy raindrops pounded the windowpane as thunder crashed down. Flashes illuminated the jagged outlines of far-off mountains. Henry placed the coin on his desk and changed into checkered pajamas.

Having climbed into bed, he found the cold sheets sent a chill throughout his body, but it soon passed. Henry laid his head on the pillow, but the persistent rain kept him awake.

“I wish it would stop already,” he grumbled.

Just as Henry was about to close his eyes again, a golden aura surrounding the coin caught his attention. Its glow intensified. The rain outside stopped.

“Whoa. Did you ... do that?” Henry said as he approached the coin cautiously.

At first, he reached out to touch it, and then withdrew his hand. He gulped before attempting to take it again. The coin felt warm in his palm; the inscriptions still glowed like the dying embers of a fire.

“This is crazy. What am I thinking? There’s no such thing as magic coins,” he scoffed. Still, his curiosity was piqued. Could it be that this small gold object stopped the rain? He decided to put it to the test.

“I know I’ll look stupid doing this, but I’m gonna see if you really are magic.” He thought about all the things to wish for and decided on something that would be easy to grant.

“I wish for a packet of chocolate-chip cookies.” He waited for one to appear ... but nothing happened.

*Yeah, I knew I was gonna look dumb asking for that.* Henry put the gold object back on his desk.

“Magic coin, my ass,” he said, shaking his head, still feeling a little silly for believing the strange object had some powers.

Just as he was about to climb into bed, Henry stopped in his tracks as an eerie chill invaded his room. Curtains billowed. Light from the lamp on his bedside locker began to flicker.

“What the hell?” With eyes wide in terror, Henry got out of his bed, retreating to the window, staying as far away from the coin as possible.

His desk shook. A cloud of purple smoke materialized above the golden object. The coin’s markings glowed once more.

From the smoke, a packet popped out.

Once his wish had been granted, the smoke disappeared. His room returned to normal.

When he felt it was safe, Henry approached the desk.

“Wow,” Henry said as he picked up the packet. “I don’t believe this.”

He opened the wrapping and tried a cookie. “Mmm,” he moaned, eyes closed with pleasure as the chocolate chips melted on his tongue.



The cookie itself was crunchy — just the way he liked it.

“So this really is magic,” Henry whispered in awe as he held up the coin, inspecting it. *No, wait. Magic, what am I saying? I sound like an idiot.*

Putting the packet down, Henry began walking back to his bed.

*Hold on a sec. It did give me what I wanted ... so maybe it does work.* He picked up the coin, feeling it in his palm again. *That could've been a fluke. Let's try for something else.* Thinking it over, the boy finally decided on what he wanted.

“I'd like the new *Assassin's Creed* videogame.” Immediately he put the coin down and stood back.

At first, nothing happened. Only the night's silence surrounded him. Just when he was about to give up, his desk shook once more. Another dark plume of smoke appeared, ejecting the game he wished for.

*Wow, this really is magic.* Henry's face was now aglow with the golden luminescence from the coin. *Maybe if I wish, tomorrow, for Tracey to be my prom date, it might come true.* Then he remembered the trick Sid played on him earlier, and how his mom nearly walked in on him.

Again worrying thoughts crossed his mind. *Maybe going with her to the prom isn't such a good idea. He could do something more messed-up.* But being in Tracey's arms and kissing her outweighed the negatives of making this wish.

*Man, if I got just one kiss from her, it'd be worth it.*

Henry put the coin back on his desk and went to bed, dreaming of being with the girl.

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The school bell rang, ending English class. Henry ran to the bathroom. Seeing that a cubicle was free, he went in. He rubbed the coin, shut his eyes and pictured Tracey in his mind.

“I wish for Tracey Maxwell to be my date for the prom,” he said aloud.

A wave of light washed over Henry's magical object. It was time to test his wish.

The boy emerged from the toilets with the bag on his right shoulder and walked confidently down the hallway to his locker. Henry shut the locker door after taking out some books he needed.

Tracey came around the corner. As she passed Henry, a faint whiff of strawberry perfume caressed his nose for a few seconds before the scent faded.

*Time to make my move*, Henry thought. “Hi, Tracey.”

“Hey, Henry,” she replied, not stopping to meet his gaze. “Got something on your mind?”

“Well, I was wondering if you changed yours about being my date for the prom.”

She shook her head as if in a short daze and then looked at him. This time, her red lips broadened into a warming smile.

“Yeah, sure,” she said. “See you tomorrow night at eight.”

Henry’s heart leapt with joy.

“Cool, see you then,” he said, walking away, grinning like the Cheshire Cat.

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Suzeanne’s car stopped outside Harleyville High. She turned off the engine. Henry held a bouquet of flowers meant for Tracey. His mother got them from a nearby florist after school, earlier that day.

“Well, honey, this is it,” she said. “Enjoy your night, and remember—”

“Home before midnight,” Henry repeated what he had been told all week. “Yeah, Mom, I know.”

“Good. Now, have a great time.” She kissed him on the cheek and let him go to meet his date.

Pushing open the main hall’s double doors, the heavy thumping of techno music greeted him. In the far-right corner, a female teacher guarded a table full of cola drinks. On the wall behind her was a banner that read *Harleyville High Prom 2022*. The lighting was muted; only the lights on-stage shone down.

Joey rushed to Henry. Excitement bubbled in his voice. “Hey, everyone’s talking about you. How the hell did you manage to get a date with Tracey?”

“I guess she had a change of heart.”

Before Joey could respond, the doors opened wide, framing Tracey Maxwell. As she entered, it seemed the world stopped spinning and a thousand angels sang a heavenly chorus as she walked towards Henry in slow motion. He thought Tracey looked alluring in her red, tight-fitting

dress. The girl's hair flowed naturally behind her as she walked.

"Sweet," Henry said in astonishment.

Tracey stopped before her love-struck date, eyeing up both him and his tuxedo. "Love your suit. Did you pick it out yourself?"

"Yeah," Henry said and then introduced his friend. "This is Joey."

"Hey." She shook his hand. "You don't look half bad either."

Walk the Moon's "Shut Up and Dance" pumped out through the speakers. Tracey grabbed Henry's hand.

"You wanna dance?" she said.

"Um ... sure," Henry replied, more than a tad nervous.

"Come on, it'll be fun," Tracey said, dragging him onto the already-crowded dancefloor.

Joey was left holding Henry's flowers meant for Tracey as the two headed away.

She danced a little too fast; Henry found it difficult to keep up with the rhythm of her moves. Then, in a sudden, unexpected movement, Tracey wrapped her arm around his waist, pulled him in, and they kissed.

At first, Henry's eyes opened wide in shock, but he gradually got the knack of kissing. It was the sweetest moment of his entire life.

"You liked that, huh?" Tracey asked, holding his hands.

"Totally," Henry answered, still stunned by the amazing kiss.

The girl nodded her head towards the table full of drinks. "You wanna grab a soda?"

Henry felt his cell phone vibrating in his pocket. "Can you excuse me for a moment?"

"Yeah, sure," she said. "I'll be over by the soda stand."

Henry had gone outside before answering the call. Only the words *Unknown Number* showed on the display screen.

"Hello?" he said nervously.

"Hey, Simmons," returned a voice laden with scorn right behind him, and was instantly recognizable.

Sid Connors shut his flip-phone, sliding it inside his tuxedo jacket. The tall, lanky boy's slick quiff seemed out of place, betraying his whole geeky look as the glare of the streetlight reflected on his glasses. There were little patches of acne on his face.

Henry wondered what Tracey ever saw in this guy — who, in his opinion, looked like a 1950s butler trying too hard to be cool.

"What do you want now?" Henry asked.

Sid took two steps closer. "You really should've taken my warning.

Did you not get the part about your date being *my* girl?"

Henry, unperturbed, folded his arms, meeting the bully's gaze head on. "Last time I checked, Tracey wasn't your girl anymore," Henry answered.

"Well, I'm telling you she is."

Sid took another step closer. Henry could smell his cheap cologne.

"You had no right to ask her out." Sid smacked the phone out of the boy's hand.

"No!" Henry cried as the expensive device smashed to pieces. "Dude, that's a \$300 phone. I saved hard for that!"

The bully stepped on the cracked screen, glass crunching under his right foot. "Guess it's worth nothing now."

"This is getting really old. Screw you, I'm going in."

He was about to walk past, but Sid put a hand on his chest.

"You're not going anywhere till we settle this."

Henry backed off a little while saying, "I'm not gonna fight you, so get lost."

"You mightn't wanna fight ... but I do."

Before Henry could react, Sid threw a hard right, landing it square on Henry's jaw. He followed up with two other lightning-quick punches: one to the stomach and another to the face.

Henry cried out and sank to his knees, both arms wrapped around his stomach. The second quick blow knocked him to the ground, where he split his forehead on a sharp stone.

Sid kicked him twice in the stomach before spitting on him.

"That'll teach you never to mess with me," Sid said.

As he was about to return to the hall, the side door opened. Tracey came out into the yard.

"Oh my God, Henry!" She rushed to him and squatted at his side. "Are you okay?"

"I'm ... I'm fine."

"Why did you do this, Sid?" She glared up at him. "I told you we were over."

The bully frowned, his jaw momentarily clenching. "Come on, Tracey, what do you see in *him*?"

"God, you can be such a jerk, sometimes," Tracey replied.

"Whatever," Sid sneered, then stormed inside.

"I'm so sorry about this, Henry." Tracey helped him get to his feet.

"Thanks." He winced as he straightened and touched the bleeding

gash. A coppery taste filled his mouth; he spat out blood.

Suddenly, the boy worried that the golden coin might have fallen out of his pocket when he fell. Henry patted his tuxedo jacket, finding it still in the inside pocket. He took it out, relieved.

“What’s that?” Tracey asked.

Henry gave a small smile. “Oh, it’s just my good luck charm.”

Almost in slow motion, a droplet of blood crept out of the cut on his head and fell onto the intricate disc. Henry watched as it slithered into the engraving of the two hooks.

Henry winced and recoiled, dropping the coin as a yellow beam shot up from it, far into the sky.

Tracey jumped back. She looked up as thunderous clouds gathered to block out the moon. A mysterious wind howled. Both he and Tracey took another few steps back, frightened by what was happening all around them.

“I ... think I’m gonna head back inside,” Tracey said.

A tiny sparkle of light appeared above both teenagers and transformed into a large, swirling hole.

“That’s it, I’m outta here.” Tracey fled to the side door, but it wouldn’t open. She banged on it. “Somebody let me in!” she screamed.

Nobody answered. The girl began to cry, rooted to the spot in fear.

Henry’s hands trembled, and he almost abandoned his magical object when a thundering voice spoke telepathically from the hole.

*DO NOT FEAR, CHILD. I WISH YOU NO HARM. I’VE WAITED A LONG TIME FOR THE MAGIC IN THIS COIN TO BE ACTIVATED.*

“Activated?” Henry asked out loud, puzzled, approaching the portal with caution. “What do you mean?”

*YES, ACTIVATED BY THE BLOOD OF SOMEONE WORTHY OF ITS POSSESSION.*

The boy pointed to himself in astonishment as he uttered, “Me? I’m worthy?”

The yellow beam vanished. The coin flipped into his palm. It felt warm, like a beating heart. Though he was full of self-doubt, he was both intrigued and flattered.

The booming voice spoke once more. *YES. COME, YOUNG HENRY. YOUR DESTINY AWAITS.*

Both teenagers screamed as they were sucked into the portal.

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