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Spooky Reads for Tweens







Spark and the League of Ursus

by Robert Repino

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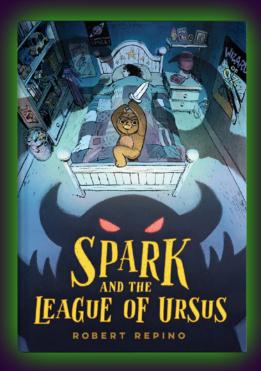
Tales from Lovecraft Middle School #1: Professor Gargoyle

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"Two thumbs up . . . a must read if you are a stuffed animal lover."

-Neatorama

"Grab a flashlight and burrow under the covers! *Spark and the League of Ursus* is the perfect bedtime adventure . . . "

-Kirsten Miller, New York Times bestselling coauthor of Nightmares!

"I loved the imaginative world building and likable characters (toy and human alike) of this fastpaced tale. A blast from start to finish!"

> -J. A. White, award-winning author of Nightbooks and the Thickety series

Toy Story meets *Stranger Things* in this epic tale of warrior teddy bears and the children they protect.

Spark is not your average teddy bear. She's soft and cuddly, sure, but she's also a fierce warrior. At night she fulfills her sacred duty: to protect the household from monsters. But Spark's owner Loretta is growing up and thinks she doesn't need her old teddy anymore.

When a monster unlike any other descends on the quiet home, everything changes. Children are going missing, and the monster wants Loretta next. Only Spark can stop it. She must call upon the ancient League of Ursus—a secret alliance of teddy bears who are pledged to protect their human friends. Together with an Amazon-princess doll and a timid sock monkey, the bears are all that stands between our world and the one that lies beneath. It will be a heroic chapter in the history of the League . . . if the bears live to tell the tale.

ROBERT REPINO is the author of *Mort(e)*, *Culdesac*, and *D'Arc*, which make up the critically acclaimed War with No Name series (Soho Press). He holds an MFA in creative writing from Emerson College and teaches at the Gotham Writers' Workshop. He lives in New York City where he works as an editor at an academic publisher. This is his middle-grade debut. Robert had two special teddy bears when he was growing up: Bear and Blue Bear.

SPARK AND THE LEAGUE OF URSUS

ROBERT REPINO





Spark rested her head on Loretta's chest, with her paw on the girl's rib cage as it rose and fell with each breath. Loretta's eyelashes fluttered, tickling Spark's fuzzy ear. Spark liked it. Teddy bears like her were meant for this. They were meant to stay with their human, their best friend, and watch over them in the darkest hours of the night. Outside, the buzzing streetlamp glowed like a phony sun. The toys on the windowsill cast shadows on the rug. And as the house settled in, as the quietest stretch of the night began, Spark saw the monster for the first time.

It began with a scratching sound, loud enough to make Spark lift her head. In the corner of the room, a blackness spread outward. The hardwood floor and painted walls rippled and sank into darkness. Then the void glowed red like the embers of a fire. The light glinted off Loretta's movie posters. Flickering shadows extended from the bookshelf and the enormous wooden desk. On top of the shelf, the sock monkey named Zed squatted with his paws over his eyes. Spark waddled to the edge of the bed, where Loretta's feet rested under the blanket. She tried to stand tall enough to see into the portal that had formed in the wall. A shape appeared; it was a man's head, only larger, and with sharp horns curving upward above the brow. Spark crouched behind the footboard. She could make out the monster's face now. He had enormous eyes, like an owl. There were two holes above his mouth, as if the nose had been sheared off at the root. A thick chain wrapped around his collar, holding a hideous pendant: it was a human face, with leathery skin stretched tight, the eyes squinched shut. The links of the chain curled under its jaw, which hung open as if letting out an eternal scream.

The monster continued to rise, carrying with him the smell of grease and soot. A chain mail vest covered his torso. A plate of rusted armor, flecked with bits of gold, encased his shoulders, with two sharp points on either side. At his waist, the pale human skin gave way to greenish-black scales.

And then the first claw rose over the edge of the portal, followed by another, then another. Then another. Thin legs, with knobby hinges, like an insect's. The creature slithered out half man, half scorpion. Spikes pointed from the armor along his spine. The tail ended in a two-pronged pincer the size of a pair of hedge clippers.

The monster stopped. The scant light reflected in his eyes. When they fixed on Spark's furry ears poking over the footboard, the monster squinted. There was no point hiding now. With Loretta still fast asleep behind her, Spark stood straight. Maybe this would be enough to scare the monster back into his hole.

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It wasn't.

The monster leaned forward and bared his glistening teeth. He let out a long hiss. And then, impossibly fast, he climbed the wall. On the way up, one of his claws ripped the corner of a poster for *The Wizard of Oz*. And before Spark could speak, the monster hung upside down from the ceiling. Somehow, the necklace with the human face remained attached to his chest. His tail reached for the foot of the bed. The pincer snapped shut and then opened again like some meat-eating flower.

Spark trembled. She knew monsters were real. Teddy bears were meant to ward them off. The only problem was that she had never seen one until now.

The monster hissed again, and a blob of spit fell from his teeth onto the floor.

Spark tried to remember the oath: the sacred words, first spoken by the Founders of the League. Every bear needed to recite the oath in a moment like this. Doing so would chase away even the most powerful monster. As she hastily assembled the words in her mind, they grounded her. They felt magical. They *had* to work.

"I am Spark," she said. "I am the sworn protector of this house."

The monster's tail continued to slither. The pincer scraped along the bed frame.

Shaking, Spark continued. "We serve goodness and truth." Wait, was it goodness and truth, or truth and goodness?

On the bookshelf, Zed pulled his hands away from his eyes.

"We give refuge to the innocent," Spark said. "We defend the light . . . to the *final* light . . . in times of darkness. By the power bestowed upon me by the League of Ursus, I command you to be gone!"

She didn't even know what some of the words meant. "The final light"—what was that supposed to be? But Sir Reginald, the bear who taught her the oath, would have been proud that she got it all out at once. Though he would have nitpicked her mistakes. He would have told her to say it louder next time.

The monster should have run away by now. Instead, he let out a new hiss, higher pitched, which quickly dissolved into hysterical, cackling laughter.

A piercing shout rang out. Spark felt movement behind her. Loretta sat up, screaming. The monster grimaced. Spark covered her ears.

Loretta shot from the bed, whipping the covers so hard that she flung Spark into the air. The teddy bear collided with the desk and fell to the floor. Before Loretta could reach the door, it swung open. Light from the hall poured into the room. In the doorway, Dad stood bleary-eyed and unshaven, wearing a frayed T-shirt and boxer shorts. His face looked so different without his glasses.

"Dad!" Loretta said. "Dad, look! Look!"

"What?"

Spark turned to where the monster had been. But the creature was gone, the portal sealed.

"It's a dream, sweetie," Dad mumbled.

"No, it was—" Loretta stared at claw mark on the poster, her lip quivering.

"Come on," Dad said. "Nothing here. Get back in bed."

"Dad, I swear there was something in here!"

"I know, I know. But it's gone. And Mom and I are right next door." His tone suggested that eleven-year-old girls weren't supposed to have nightmares like this anymore.

Still shaking, Loretta climbed onto the bed.

"And look," Dad said, "you left poor Spark on the floor."

Spark lay still, a clump of brown fur, the way she always did when humans were watching. Loretta scooped her up and took her to the bed. She rolled away from Dad, her arm wrapped around Spark's neck.

"Are you okay, sweetie?" Dad asked.

"I'm fine."

She wasn't fine. Dad waited a moment before closing the door.

Loretta's heart thumped against Spark. The girl wept silently, stopping only when she gasped for air.

"I saw it," she said. "I saw it."

Long after a pool of tears gathered on the pillow, Loretta finally drifted off to sleep. Spark lay in the same position, waiting for the sun to rise, listening for the scratching noise.



Spark needed to find Sir Reginald. He would know what to do.

Outside, the overcast sky glowed white through the window. Loretta stirred, the first sign that she would wake soon. Despite what had happened a few hours earlier, Spark tried to enjoy this quiet moment before the day began. Before this week, Loretta had not slept with her bear in years, preferring to leave Spark on the bookshelf. That was normal for an eleven-year-old. But something had changed in the last few days. Something scared her. Spark should have investigated sooner, but she was simply happy to be close to her friend again.

When the alarm clock buzzed, Loretta rubbed her face, set her feet on the floor, and placed Spark between the two pillows at the head of the bed. Wearing her pastel-blue pajamas, Loretta crept over to the corner of the room. She knelt and touched the hardwood slats and the painted drywall, the place where the portal had opened. Monsters almost never appeared in daytime, and even then, they stayed in dark places—though the one from last night was big enough to break whatever rules he wanted. Spark wanted to scream as Loretta ran her finger over the rip in the *Wizard of Oz* poster, an inch above the Cowardly Lion's tail. Definitely a claw mark, but it could easily be dismissed as something else—a shifting of the house, an accidental bump with her backpack. There were countless explanations that did not involve a monster.

Shaking her head, Loretta walked into the hall toward the bathroom. While she was gone, her cell phone buzzed on the dresser. Spark forced herself to remain still when, minutes later, Loretta returned and hastily changed into jeans and a zip-up hoodie. The girl tied her curly raven hair in a bun that sprouted from the crown of her head. Then she grabbed the phone on her way out the door.

In the next room over, Loretta's older brother Matthew was also on the move. After he put on his shoes, his footsteps became loud clonking sounds. On his way to the stairs, Matthew peeked inside Loretta's room to see if she was there. Despite the early hour, he wore jeans, a raincoat, and a ballcap. To Spark's surprise, he also wore a pair of boots. It was unusual to see Matthew ready to go so early on a Saturday morning, especially one as dreary as this.

Every time Spark saw him, it came as a shock. A year older than Loretta, Matthew was growing faster than ever. In another couple of years, he would stand taller than Mom, maybe even Dad too. Sir Reginald was proud, for he watched over Matthew in the same way that Spark watched over Loretta. The bears had a word for it. Loretta was Spark's dusa—her best friend, the one she was sworn to protect. Once Matthew's footsteps faded, Spark rose from her seat and waved to Zed. The monkey still covered his eyes, so Spark needed to yell.

"Monkey, did you see that thing last night?"

"N-no," he stammered.

"Yes you did!"

Spark vaulted the footboard, landing on the rug. Her legs buckled, but her big butt and stubby tail broke the fall. That's what they were for.

"You're not supposed to do that!" Zed said. "What if she comes back?"

"The family's headed out somewhere," Spark said.

"Where?"

"I'm not sure. But Loretta's not coming back anytime soon."

Zed lowered his hands, but only a little.

"I need to know," Spark said. "Have you ever seen that monster before?"

"What monster?"

"Stop it, monkey."

"I kept my eyes closed! I didn't see anything!"

Zed would never change. He was a court jester, not a knight. Not a protector. When Loretta was a baby with wispy hair, she spent hours flicking Zed's tail and giggling, her first experience with humor and silliness. Sometimes she would doze off with his ear squeezed between her gums. He made her feel safe. But he did not actually keep her safe. That was Spark's job.

And anyway, arguing with Zed was a waste of time. Spark needed Sir Reginald. So she went to the closet, which shared a wall with Matthew's room. That was where Matthew stored Sir Reginald, having grown too old for a bear. Every night at three, Spark would take a quarter from Loretta's jar of coins and tap on the wall. On the other side, Sir Reginald would repeat the signal. Three simple taps meant that all was well, no monsters. Three at three, they called it. Five taps signaled danger, but they never got that high.

The night before, the monster had appeared *after* their check-in. Perhaps he wanted the bears to feel safe before he attacked.

This morning, when Spark tapped the wall, no one responded. She tapped again. Still nothing.

Sir Reginald was gone. At the worst possible time.

Spark stepped out of the closet in a daze. She saw no point in pretending to be calm. The monkey would see right through her.

"Is he there?" Zed asked.

"No," she said, unable to look him in the eye.

"Better take our places, then. Right?"

The League had a rule against what she was about to do: no roaming about the house when humans were around, except in an emergency. Sir Reginald trained her to do it quietly, quickly—while at the same time reminding her to *never* do it. If the parents ever saw a walking teddy bear, they would lose their minds.

None of that mattered, though. Not after last night.

"I'm going to find out what's going on here," Spark said. She headed for the door.

"Hey! You're not supposed to—"

"I'm not listening."

Zed clapped his hands. "Stop!" The monkey was not merely reciting the rules. He was terrified to be left alone.

"Listen, Zed. Sir Reginald's missing. Loretta is acting strange. She hasn't cuddled with me in years."

It felt weird to say that out loud.

"And then a monster appears out of nowhere!" she continued. "I want to know what's happening."

"Mom and Dad take care of that stuff! Sir Reginald said *they* handle it."

"Did you hear what I said? Sir Reginald isn't here."

The monkey covered his mouth, muffling his voice. "What if the monster comes back?"

"I'll be quick."

The door was cracked open a few inches, wide enough for Spark to squeeze through without moving it. The noises from the kitchen made their way upstairs. Spark heard the cupboard closing and the faucet running. Someone dropped a plate in the sink.

Spark crept down the hallway. The door to Matthew's room was shut. Spark shimmied up the frame and peeked inside the keyhole. Papers cluttered the desk, the bedsheets were tossed about, and random articles of clothing lay scattered on the floor. Spark whispered Sir Reginald's name, but did not hear a response. A clump of black fabric on the floor near the closet caught her eye. But it wasn't the bear, just a winter coat that Matthew needed to stow away for the spring.

Matthew acquired his messy habits from his parents. At the end of the hallway, Mom and Dad's room was in total chaos. Spark noticed Mom's makeup kit splayed out on the dresser, its contents spilled beside a poorly folded stack of laundry. Dad's half-built exercise machine leaned against the wall. The wardrobe doors hung open, and several jackets lay draped over the unmade bed. Mom and Dad never recovered from their early days as parents, and the children were now old enough to notice. "How come I have to clean my room and you don't?" Loretta often asked. Mom always swore she would clean it soon. Dad's typical answer was even more annoying: "When you pay for your own room, then it can be as messy as you want."

Spark also checked the bathroom and the linen closet, but neither yielded clues. She would have to venture downstairs, alone. Something she had never done before. Something Sir Reginald had warned her to never do, to never even *think* about.

Spark lay on the top step, on her tummy. She poked her head through the bars on the railing. A Persian rug covered the living room floor from the fireplace to the front door. Framed photos lined the mantelpiece, arranged from oldest to newest.

Near the edge of the mantel, a trophy towered over the family photos. It was mounted on a marble base, with a golden movie projector at the top. It was the Spirit Award from the Young Filmmakers contest, given to the most popular entry in the competition. Matthew and Loretta won it the year before for their short film, a space-opera parody that earned a standing ovation. Spark allowed herself a smile when she saw it. Even during a crisis, a reminder that her dusa was special always made her a little happier.

The feeling lasted only a few seconds. Through the large archway, Spark could see the breakfast table. And right away,

she knew that something was off. Dad was already dressed and ready to go, in a rain slicker and rubber boots and a baseball cap fitted over his graying hair. His sunglasses perched on the brim of the hat, which meant that at some point he would ask where they were. He ate a bowl of cold cereal while leaning against the counter. Matthew zipped his coat, a toasted waffle sticking out of his mouth. Mom ate the last of her banana, dropped the peel in the trash, and buttoned her jacket. In the corner, Loretta struggled to fit her ponytail under her cap.

They were going somewhere, and no one looked happy about it.

The radio on the counter played the news station. The anchor gave the five-day forecast. Unexpectedly mild, with a chance of rain later in the week.

The family ate in near silence. Mom looked like she wanted to say something. Finally, she asked, "Is Darcy going?"

Darcy was Loretta's best friend. "Of course she's going, Mom," Loretta said. "Everyone is."

While the family finished breakfast, Spark scanned the room. Nothing seemed out of place. Across from the kitchen was the den, where the children often watched movies on the flat-screen television. Spark heard a noise coming from that direction. It sounded like a machine whirring. If she could get there without being seen, maybe she would find something useful. Zed's voice whined in her head: *You're not supposed to do that!*

Spark tried to remember her training. In the early days, Sir Reginald used to time her as she zipped from the den to the kitchen to the staircase, all without making a sound. It never seemed fair—the faster she went, the louder her footsteps were. "You will learn," the old bear told her. "You will blend in. And you will be prepared if the day comes."

She readied herself. Dad's snow boots sat on the bottom step, tall enough for Spark to hide behind. She curled into a ball and tumbled, her brown fur whispering against the stairs. She came to rest right behind the boots.

With Dad facing her from the kitchen, Spark waited for him to pour more coffee before she could move again. As the news anchor began the traffic report, Dad turned away from the living room. Spark dashed across the rug and somersaulted into the den, landing on the carpet. It gave off a new smell, like plastic and smoke.

After making sure no one was watching, she climbed to her feet and hopped onto the recliner. Beside it, the family computer sat on the desk, with rows of books on the shelves behind it. A pile of manila folders leaned precariously on the edge.

Spark jumped from the recliner and latched onto the edge of the desk. The printer spat out page after page, building a stack over two inches thick. They were flyers, printed in black and white, each with a photo of a girl in the middle. The printer stopped, either because it had finished the job or because it had run out of paper.

"Lemme have your granola bar," Matthew said in the kitchen.

"I'm not done with it yet," Loretta said.

"You're not gonna eat it."

"Mom."

"Let her eat it," Mom said, annoyed.

The radio switched off. Footsteps approached.

In a panic, Spark swiped the top flyer and folded it under her arm. She immediately regretted it. Being found out of place was bad enough, but getting caught with something important in her paw would probably terrify the entire family, maybe convince them that the house was haunted. But it was too late to put it back. Dad's shadow darkened the doorway. Spark dove between the recliner and the desk, her wide hips wedged between the fabric and the wood. She tried to twist herself free, but this made a rubbing noise. The paper crinkled. Spark froze when Dad's boot pressed down just a few inches away.

"Is it finished printing?" Mom called from the other room.

"Yeah," Dad said. As he lifted the flyers from the printer, he bumped one of the manila folders. It was enough to tip the entire stack over the edge. Spark braced herself. Dad tried to catch them, but the folders plummeted into the space between the chair and the desk. The weight of them squished Spark into an odd shape, with her ears flattened against her head and her legs twisted around her neck.

"What happened?" Mom asked.

"Nothing. I'm fine."

Spark wanted to squirm her way free, but it was best to remain still and hope Dad didn't notice. So stupid to come here—to risk everything like this. Sir Reginald would never have allowed it.

Sir Reginald isn't here, she told herself. No one was coming to the rescue.

"Did something fall?" Mom asked.

"It's nothing. I'll fix it later."

As soon as Dad rejoined the others in the kitchen, Spark worked her way free. She smoothed the creases in her fur. No damage done. No stuffing lost.

"Here, take a few," Dad said. Spark could hear the papers rustling as Dad handed each of them a stack.

She unfolded the flyer and stared at it for a long time. Sir Reginald had taught her how to read, late at night when no one would hear. She traced the words with her paw, whispering them to herself, still unable to believe them.

Outside, the family piled into the SUV. The engine started. "Come on!" Matthew said.

"I'm right behind you," Loretta said. "OMFG!"

"Watch it with the language," Mom said.

"They're letters, Mom."

"I know what the letters mean."

By the time the vehicle drove away, Spark finally accepted what was right in front of her. She didn't want to. And she had no idea what to do next.



Clutching the flyer to her chest, Spark dashed up the stairs and into Loretta's room. On the shelf, Zed sat with his legs dangling over the ledge.

"Monkey, get down here," Spark said.

Zed stared at the flyer. "Where did you get that?"

"Never mind where I got it. I need you to see it."

"Sir Reginald said we're not supposed to take things."

Spark shook the folded paper at him. "If I have to climb up there to get you, I swear I'm tossing you out the window. Now come here."

Zed pushed himself off the edge and landed on the floor with a thud.

"You need to see this," Spark said. "I know I'm the protector here, but this is about all of us now. Do you understand?"

"No."

Sighing, Spark unfolded the flyer and smoothed it out on the floor. In the center, a crease ran through the black-and-white

image of the girl. It was a school picture. The girl sat in front of a screen and smiled, wearing a basketball jersey over a T-shirt. The team name was the Cardinals, the mascot of Loretta and Matthew's school. She had straight, shiny hair parted in the middle of her head and dangling in two pigtails. The word MISSING splashed across the top of the page. Her personal information appeared beneath the image. Name: Sofia Lopez. Height: 5 feet, 4 inches. Age: 13. Hair color: black. Eyes: brown. Distinguishing characteristics: a surgical scar on her stomach. Zed traced his finger along the contact information, the hotline people could call if they knew anything. CALLS ARE ANONYMOUS, it promised.

And then, the worst part. The part that punched Spark in her gut. In capital letters, a simple, desperate plea: HELP US PLEASE. She heard the phrase in Loretta's voice every time she read it.

"Who's that?" Zed asked.

"She goes to school with Loretta and Matthew."

Loretta and Sofia had played on the same basketball team the year before. While Loretta spent most of the season on the bench, Sofia played center, because she was taller than most of the boys in her class. When Loretta told her about her and Matthew's filmmaking hobby, Sofia offered to help. Her uncle worked for the local news station, and his computer used the same kind of editing software that Mom and Dad had bought Matthew for his birthday. Sofia showed Matthew how to use it, which gave their movies a professional quality. It probably won them the Spirit Award. And as a result, Matthew developed a huge crush on her.

Sir Reginald told Spark all about it, but she got to witness it firsthand the day Sofia came to the house to teach Matthew the program. The boys at school did not understand Matthew and his unusual interests. Some bullies picked on him so much that Spark once asked if she and Sir Reginald should accompany Matthew to class, to protect him. The old bear told her no. Matthew needed to learn on his own. And despite all that, here Matthew was, inviting the most popular girl in school to his house.

He purposely met with her on a day when Loretta wouldn't be home—he didn't want any interference. He wore his best shirt and khakis and splashed on some cheap cologne that Spark could smell through the walls. Though it took only a few minutes for Sofia to walk him through the software, Matthew tried to make the visit last as long as possible. Sofia was patient enough to let him go on and on about his favorite films. When they both agreed that some of the Marvel superhero movies were overrated, Matthew acted like they jointly discovered some hidden secret of the universe.

As Sofia made her way out of the house, Matthew followed behind like a puppy, trying to slow her exit with more questions. Sofia cut it short with a simple demand: "You better put my name in the credits of all your movies."

"Oh, yeah, of course!" Matthew said.

"Like, at the *top*," Sofia added.

Matthew stammered some more until she punched him in the arm—Spark could hear it. "I'm joking with you!" she said. "Sort of."

Spark tried to explain all of this to Zed, but the monkey claimed that he didn't remember Sofia. That was probably because he shut his eyes and clamped his ears whenever strangers entered the house.

"So they can't find her?" he asked.

"No. She's missing."

"Well, where did she go?"

"She's missing, Zed. That means nobody knows."

There was more. While searching for clues in the den, Spark had tapped the keyboard to make the computer come to life. Dad's email appeared on the monitor, and it opened to a message from someone named Nick. The message started with a time and place where people would meet. According to the details that followed, the parents in the neighborhood had organized an event at which everyone would hand out the flyers and stick them to every telephone pole and brick wall in town. After that, they would help the police search the woods. That explained the hiking clothes the family wore.

Upon hearing this, Zed grabbed a corner of the paper and spun it toward him so that he could look the missing girl in the face.

"They've been searching for Sofia for a week now," Spark said. "I've been so stupid."

That was it. It was her job to watch over this house. And yet she had been so happy that Loretta needed her again that she didn't ask any questions. So when Matthew sulked around the house these last few days, hiding in his room, Spark told herself that he was turning into a typical teenager. When Mom and Dad stayed up late, speaking in hushed voices, she assumed they were talking about parent stuff: a new job maybe, or a visit from relatives, or paying the bills, or whatever. Looking back, Spark was amazed at how easily she had fooled herself. How badly she wanted to believe that things were okay.

"Maybe Sofia ran away," Zed said.

Most monsters liked to scare children, nothing more. They fed on a child's fear. It had been years since a monster had actually *taken* a child. But the creature from last night, with his pincer tail and grasping claws, seemed ready to do just that.

"Sofia did *not* run away!" Spark said, before realizing that she'd raised her voice too loud. "That thing took her," she whispered.

"No!" Zed said. "No, no, no!" He covered his ears.

"The monster took her—"

"Stop! Stop it!"

"—and it's coming for Loretta next. I saw the way it looked at her."

Zed cried so hard that his entire body shook. Such a cowardly thing, not fit for fighting. But Spark needed him. She needed all the help she could get.

"Do you think the monster took Sir Reginald, too?" Zed asked.

"Maybe." It was possible that Sir Reginald had gone snooping around the house in the night, as he was always sensing danger. Now that Matthew no longer played with him, Sir Reginald had more freedom of movement. Spark pictured the old bear latching onto the monster's tail, shouting the oath of the League of Ursus until the Founders themselves could hear him. The creature could have easily dragged the bear into the portal.

"We need Sir Reginald," she said. "We can't do this without him."

"Do what? And what do you mean we?"

"We have to scare this monster off somehow. You can help me, or I can use you as bait. Take your pick."

Like a real monkey, Zed pounded his hands on the floor and squeaked a few times. It was supposed to be scary.

"Are you always like this?" he asked. "Are you always about doing your duty, rah-rah, all that?"

"Yes," Spark said.

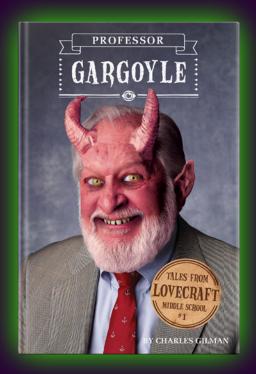
It was Sir Reginald's fault. He made her like this. She could not help but think of the time he made her recite the oath while balancing on the basement rafters like a gymnast. Or the time he made her chase squirrels off the roof to quicken her reflexes. "A test!" he shouted. "If you cannot chase a squirrel, you cannot chase a monster!"

Zed gazed at Sofia's smiling face. "So now what?"

"I'm going to find Sir Reginald," Spark said. "If the monster wants this house, he'll have to go through both of us." You've just finished reading an extended excerpt of *SPARK AND THE LEAGUE OF URSUS* by Robert Repino. To continue reading, you can find the book at the following retailers or your local library:

<u>Amazon</u>

Apple Books Barnes and Noble Books-A-Million Bookshop Google Play Kobo



"Two-headed monsters, giant tentacles, angry demons— Lovecraft Middle School is great creepy fun!"

> -Ransom Riggs, author of *Miss Peregrine's* Home for Peculiar Children

"Great fun for fans of light horror."

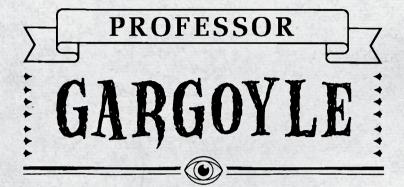
—Kirkus Reviews

"Fans of Goosebumps and other lightly creepy fare will look forward to spending more time with a series that even manages to find the dark side of recycling."

-Publishers Weekly

Strange things are happening at Lovecraft Middle School. Rats are leaping from lockers. Students are disappearing. The school library is a labyrinth of secret corridors. And the science teacher is acting very peculiar—in fact, he just might be a monster-in-disguise. Twelve-year-old Robert Arthur knew that seventh grade was going to be weird, but this is ridiculous!

Professor Gargoyle (volume I in the Tales from Lovecraft Middle School series) is full of bizarre beasts, strange mysteries, and nonstop adventure. It's perfect for readers ages 10 and up. Best of all, the cover features a state-of-the-art "morphing" photo portrait—so you can personally witness the professor transforming into a monster. You won't believe your eyes!

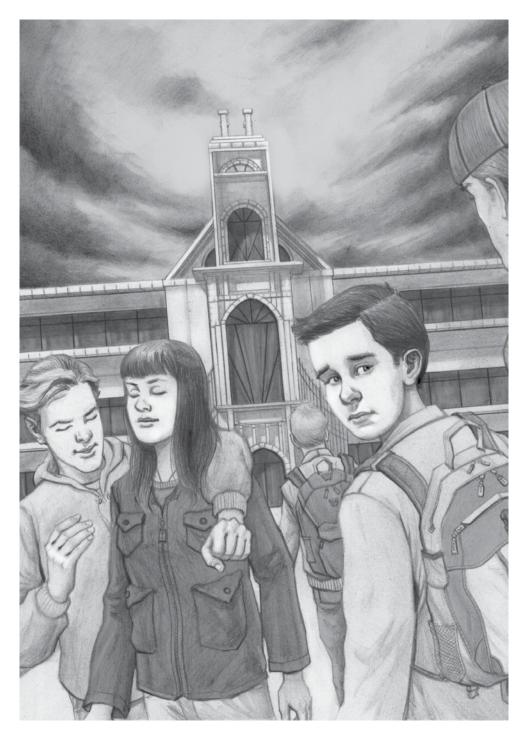


TALES FROM LOVECRAFT MIDDLE SCHOOL #1

By CHARLES GILMAN

Illustrations by EUGENE SMITH







Robert Arthur was surrounded by strangers.

He stood outside the entrance to Lovecraft Middle School, watching the students pass by, searching for a familiar face. Everybody was talking to someone. Kids were joking and laughing and goofing around. But Robert didn't recognize a single person.

Earlier that summer, his neighborhood had been redistricted. This was a fancy way of saying that all of his old friends were attending Franklin Middle School, in the north part of town, but somehow Robert got stuck attending Lovecraft Middle School, in the south part of town.

His mother told him there was no say in the matter;

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it was just the luck of the draw.

"But you're going to love it," she promised. "They spent millions of dollars building this school. It's brandnew. State of the art. With a swimming pool and digital chalkboards and everything. It's such an incredible opportunity!"

Robert wasn't so sure. He would have happily traded the swimming pool and digital chalkboards for the chance to be with his old friends. He had a hundred different worries: *Who would sit with him at lunch? What if he needed help opening his locker? Wasn't* anybody *from his old school here?*

Beside the main entrance of the school was a large digital billboard with an animated message:

WELCOME, STUDENTS! PLEASE REPORT TO THE ATHLETIC ARENA FOR THE RIBBON-CUTTING CEREMONY!

It might have been faster to walk through the building, but Robert wasn't in a hurry. He took his time, circling the outside of the school, marveling at how quickly it seemed to have sprung from the earth.

Six months earlier, this was all abandoned farmland, full of weeds and mud puddles and sticker bushes. Now there was a four-story classroom building, tennis courts, a baseball diamond, and lush green grass as far as the eye could see.

When Robert reached the athletic stadium, the bleachers were packed with spectators: students, teachers, parents, news reporters—everyone in town had come to witness the ribbon-cutting ceremony. Everyone except Robert's mother, a nurse, who worked the early shift at Dunwich Memorial Hospital. Most mornings she was out the door before Robert woke up, so she rarely attended school presentations or class trips. Sometimes this bothered Robert, but today he was grateful. He knew the only thing more embarrassing than sitting alone at his new middle school would be sitting with his mommy. All the other kids were sitting with their friends.

Robert climbed halfway up the bleachers and

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squeezed between two clusters of giggling girls. He tried smiling at them.

None of the girls smiled back.

The ribbon-cutting ceremony was already under way. First the mayor thanked the governor. Then the governor stood up and thanked the teachers' union. Then a bunch of teachers got up and thanked the parents' association. Then a bunch of parents cheered and thanked Principal Slater.

Finally Principal Slater stood up with oversized scissors and sliced the long green ribbon in half. At precisely that moment, the clouds turned gray and a low drum of thunder rolled across the sky.

It was weird, Robert thought. Just one minute ago, it had been a perfectly pleasant and sunny day. Now, suddenly, it looked like rain.

Fortunately, the ceremony was almost over. The grand finale was a special performance by the Dunwich High School marching band, complete with drums, brass, and color guard. They paraded across the field playing "The Stars and Stripes Forever."

PROFESSOR GARGOYLE

Robert glanced over his shoulder, peering up at the bleachers, scanning the faces. There must have been four hundred kids in the arena. He knew that, sooner or later, he'd have to recognize someone.

And then he did.

The worst possible someone.

Oh, *no*.

Robert immediately faced forward.

But it was too late. He'd been spotted.

"Hey, Robert! Is that you? Robert Arthur?"

He couldn't believe his rotten luck. *Glenn Torkells?* The one person he knew at Lovecraft Middle School—and it was *Glenn Torkells*? The bully who had tormented him for years?

"Robert! I'm talking to you!"

Definitely Glenn Torkells.

Robert tried ignoring him. His mother used to tell him to ignore the bullies and eventually they would leave him alone. *Yeah, right*.

"I know that's you, Robert. I got a real good memory and I never forget a face." Something slimy hit

the back of Robert's neck. He reached up and peeled it off: a half-chewed gummy worm.

"Turn around and look at me."

Robert knew that Glenn would get what he wanted, sooner or later. Glenn always did. Robert turned around and another gummy worm struck him right in the forehead.

Glenn laughed uproariously. "Haw-haw! Bull'seye!"

He was seated two rows behind Robert, looking much like he did back in elementary school—only bigger. He wore the same green army jacket and the same grubby blue jeans. His dark blond hair was still plastered to his forehead, still looking like he'd cut it himself with dull scissors. Glenn had always been the biggest kid in the class, but over the summer he'd ballooned into the Incredible Hulk.

"What do you want?" Robert asked.

Glenn popped a gummy worm into his mouth and began working his jaw. "Dweeb tax," he said. "Pay up."

Robert sighed. Glenn had been collecting the

dweeb tax for part of fifth grade and all of sixth. It was a one-dollar penalty he imposed on Robert for various "infractions"—tripping or stammering or wearing ugly pants or other "crimes" that Glenn dreamed up.

Robert glanced around, hoping to spot a teacher who might intervene. That never happened at his last school, but he thought maybe Lovecraft Middle School would be different.

No such luck. Everyone was watching the marching band on the field. The girls on either side of Robert were chattering among themselves.

"Hurry up, Nerdbert," Glenn said. "You think you're the only kid in this school who owes me?"

Earlier that morning, Robert's mother had given him an extra five dollars of spending money, to celebrate his first day as a middle school student.

Robert retrieved one of those dollars and passed it to Glenn. His tormentor shook his head and smiled, revealing flecks of chewed-up gummy worm in his teeth.

"It's gonna be *two* dollars here in middle school," Glenn explained. "We're not little kids anymore."

TWO

After the marching band had finished playing, Principal Slater directed the students to find their lockers and then proceed to their homerooms.

As the bleachers emptied, Robert moved nimbly through the crowd, careful to stay several steps ahead of Glenn Torkells.

He noticed a girl hurrying alongside him.

Looking at him.

She was short and skinny, dressed in a white T-shirt and blue jeans and carrying a beat-up skateboard. She had dark brown hair that fell past her shoulders and wore a dozen jangling bracelets on her wrists. She smiled, revealing a mouthful of metal braces. "You've got worms in your hair," she said.

"Excuse me?"

"Gummy worms. In your scalp."

Robert reached up and shook them loose. "Thanks."

"You're gonna have to stand up to him."

"Stand up to who?"

"You know who."

Robert flushed. Was there anything more embarrassing than getting advice on bullies from a cute girl?

"Glenn and I are friends," Robert quickly explained. "That's just a stupid game we play. I owed him two dollars from the other night."

"He called it a dweeb tax."

"See, that's part of the game."

The girl wasn't buying it, Robert could tell.

"I'm Karina," she said. "Karina Ortiz."

"Robert Arthur."

"I know," she said. "I heard him taunting you."

"He wasn't taunting me."

"Friends don't throw chewed-up gummy worms in

your hair," she said. "I was there. I watched the whole thing."

"Well, maybe next time you should mind your own business."

The words came out louder than Robert intended. Karina raised both hands in a defensive gesture, like he'd just come at her with his fists. "Hey, suit yourself," she said. "You just looked like you needed a friend, that's all."

Karina dropped her skateboard to the asphalt, pushed off with one foot, and quickly zoomed away from him, swerving around the other students with remarkable balance and precision.

Almost immediately, Robert wished he could apologize and somehow take the words back. But it was too late. Karina was the first friendly person to approach him at Lovecraft Middle School, and he'd managed to scare her away.

He followed the crowd of students up the stairs and into the central corridor of the school, a frenzy of color and sound and energy.

Instead of bulletin boards, the hallways of Lovecraft

Middle School featured large high-definition LCD screens with animated announcements of soccer tryouts and chorus practice. Sleek metal lockers lined the walls; instead of old-fashioned combination dials, they had ten-button digital touch pads. Up and down the hallway, kids were lining up to stow their backpacks and lunches.

Robert walked to his locker—A119—and entered the passcode he'd received in the mail. Each button made a satisfying chirp when he pressed it, and then the locker door opened with a gentle pneumatic *whooooosh*.

In the distance, Robert heard a girl shriek, but he thought nothing of it. Girls in sixth and seventh grade were always shrieking about something or another.

His new locker was divided by a metal shelf into two sections. There was a tall bottom section with a hook where he could hang his coat and a short top section, near the air vents, where he could store his brown-bag lunch.

Robert studied the top section and blinked.

Perched on the shelf, twitching its nose, was a large white rat.

Elsewhere in the hallway, another girl screamed. Then another, and another. A teacher yelled, "Get back!" and Robert felt something brush past his legs. He stumbled away from the locker as the white rat sprang toward him, landing on his chest and leapfrogging over his shoulder.

"Get it off me!" someone shouted.

"There's another one!"

"It's in my hair!"

More rats brushed past his feet—there were dozens now, darting under sneakers, gnashing their teeth, squealing and snarling and stampeding down the hall.

Up until this moment, Robert's life had been fairly quiet and ordinary. He had the same interests and hobbies as a million other twelve-year-old boys. He spent his days in school; he spent his nights doing homework and messing around on the computer. He'd never experienced anything that might have prepared him for a swarm of wild rats.

Yet while the rest of his classmates were freaking out, Robert remained calm.

He understood he had just two choices: He could scream and panic like the rest of his classmates. Or he could sit tight for a few moments and hope the rats would charge toward the nearest exit.

Which is exactly what happened. The stampede reached the open doors at the end of the hallway and fanned out across the lush green lawns surrounding the school. The students watched after them, awestruck.



"I don't believe it," said the boy standing next to Robert. "They spend a trillion dollars building this place and it's already full of rats? How's that possible?"

Good question, Robert thought.

He knelt to study the inside of his locker. The metal walls and floors were intact; there were no gaps or cracks or holes. There were no places where a rat might have squeezed its way into his locker.

Robert knew middle school would be strange, but this was ridiculous.



THREE

Incredibly, the strangest part of Robert's first day at Lovecraft Middle School was yet to come.

Most of his teachers were very nice. His American History teacher promised a class trip to Philadelphia, where students would tour the National Constitution Center. His Mathematics teacher demonstrated a neat trick for adding large numbers without a calculator or even a pencil. And all of his teachers boasted about the school's extraordinary new facilities. They claimed Lovecraft Middle School was the most environmentally responsible school on the East Coast; much of the building was constructed from recycled materials. They seemed like good teachers who were proud to be

working in a good school.

Then Robert went to Science.

As soon as he arrived, he noticed Glenn Torkells seated on the far side of the classroom. Robert ducked his head and grabbed a desk near the door.

There was no sign of a teacher, but the students had plenty to admire while they waited: chemistry flasks and beakers and enough test tubes to stock a mad scientist's laboratory. At the front of the classroom was a life-size model of a human skeleton. In the back were a dozen aquariums housing tropical fish, lizards, a hamster, and other small animals.

The seventh-period bell rang and still no teacher arrived. Robert's classmates continued to chat away, but the mood had changed. Something was wrong.

He checked his class schedule.

PERIOD 7 – SCIENCE MRS. KINSKI – ROOM 213

He was in the correct room at the correct time.

But where was Mrs. Kinski?

The girl on Robert's left turned to him. "I think you should go to the principal's office," she said. "Tell them we're waiting for a teacher."

"Me?" Robert asked.

"Don't listen to her," said the girl sitting on his right. "She likes to boss people around."

"I do not."

"Do too."

Robert looked from left to right and back again. Both girls had fair skin and long red hair. They looked so similar, they could have been sisters.

In fact, they looked virtually identical.

"Wait a second," he said. "Are you two-"

"Twins," they said simultaneously, almost sighing, as if they were tired of answering the question.

"Cool," he said, because he couldn't think of anything else to say. "I'm Robert."

The girls didn't bother to introduce themselves.

Suddenly the door to the classroom swung open and Robert looked up, expecting to see Mrs. Kinski.

Instead there was an old man, tall and gnarled and dressed in a jacket and tie. He seemed surprised to find the classroom full of students. His cold blue eyes surveyed the desks, taking everything in. He did not blink.

"Good afternoon," he finally said. His voice was rich and deep and smooth as polished wood. "I hope you'll forgive my tardiness."

He lumbered toward the front of the classroom and laid a worn leather satchel on his desk. Without a word, he turned to the blackboard, picked up a piece of chalk, and began scratching some notes:

> *Rattus norvegicus* Kingdom: Animalia Phylum: Chordata Class: Mammalia Order: Rodentia

Robert watched in astonishment with the rest of his class. "Excuse me?"

The teacher whirled around. "Yes, young man?"

Robert immediately regretted opening his mouth, but someone had to ask the obvious question. "What about Mrs. Kinski?"

"Kinski?" The teacher scrutinized Robert through his bushy eyebrows. "Kinski, Kinski. Why does that name sound familiar?"

Robert held up his class schedule. "It says she's teaching seventh-period science. Here. In Room 213."

"You mean the substitute! Of course! Mrs. Kinski is one of our many wonderful substitute instructors. She'd been assigned to cover my duties while I was, ah, recovering. From illness. But as you can see I'm feeling perfectly fine, so her services are no longer required. I am Professor Garfield Goyle and *I* will be your seventhgrade science teacher."

Robert had seen some kooky teachers over the years, but this guy was far and away the strangest. Professor Goyle didn't even bother to take attendance. He just turned back to the chalkboard and began sketching an anatomical drawing of a rat skeleton. It was extremely detailed and took him the better part of ten

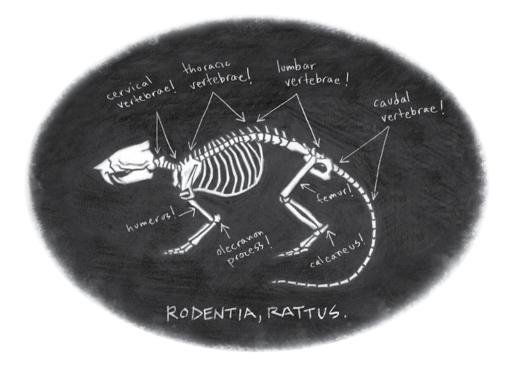
minutes. He drew forcefully and furiously, and several times the chalk snapped in his grip.

When the drawing was finally complete, he labeled the bones one at a time—the sternum, the scapula, the tibia, the thoracic vertebrae ...

One of the twins raised her hand.

"Excuse me, Mr. Goyle?"

He didn't turn around. "Professor Goyle."



"Professor Goyle, is this going to be on the test?"

"I don't understand the question." He went right on labeling the head of the rodent: the incisors and the mandible and the maxilla.

"I mean, should we be taking notes or something?"

Again, the chalk snapped in Goyle's fingers; the broken pieces clattered to the floor.

He turned around to face the class, looking weary from all the frenzied scribbling.

"I understand," he said, "that many of you were disturbed by this morning's incident. This is completely understandable. Humankind has long associated rats with disease and filth. In fourteenth-century Europe, rats carried the dreaded black death, a plague that killed some one hundred million people." Professor Goyle laughed. "Can you imagine that, children? A hundred million humans? Wiped off the earth by a bunch of tiny rodents? They're truly deadly creatures! Much more dangerous than they appear!"

The class stared back at him. If he was trying to put them at ease, he wasn't doing a very good job.

Goyle walked over to the window and glanced outside. "You need to remember that, six months ago, all of this property was farmland. Trees. Streams. Hundreds of natural ecosystems invisible to the naked eye. The rats were probably quite happy living here. They had food, water, shelter, everything they needed." His expression darkened. "Until man came along and bulldozed all their underground burrows. Destroying their homes in the blink of an eye. Now what would you have these creatures do? They needed a new place to hide, and the result was this morning's unfortunate surprise."

The other students were nodding as if this made perfect sense, but Robert wasn't satisfied at all. It didn't explain how a rat ended up *inside* his locker. But Robert was too shy to ask another question, so he didn't raise his hand. He figured it was no big deal. If everyone else in class accepted Goyle's explanation, then it was probably—

"Uh, Professor Goyle?" Glenn asked. His voice was full of uncertainty; Robert couldn't remember the last

time he'd heard Glenn ask a question in class. "I hear what you're saying, but I found one of those rats *inside* my locker. It was there, like, *before* I opened it."

Professor Goyle nodded. "An adult rat can gnaw through bone, brick, concrete, even lead piping. Your school lockers are made from sixteen-gauge sheet metal, a much thinner material. No match for the teeth of a rodent."

"Yeah, but I checked my locker," Glenn continued. "There weren't any holes in it."

Now Goyle seemed irritated.

"What's your name, young man?"

"Uh, Glenn?"

"Glenn what? Do you have a family name?"

"Glenn Torkells."

"Mr. Torkells, are you sure there were no holes in your locker? You're absolutely sure?"

"Yeah, I checked all over. No holes. Just the air vents in the door."

"Just the air vents in the door!" Goyle exclaimed. "Now we're getting somewhere! Tell me, Mr. Torkells,

how would you describe the width of those vents? Did you happen to notice?"

"Maybe half an inch?"

"Maybe half an inch," Goyle said, smiling now. "And did you know, Mr. Torkells, that the rat is the only known mammal that can literally collapse its own skeleton at will, allowing it to squeeze through spaces as narrow as half an inch?"

"I did not know that," Glenn mumbled, and the whole classroom laughed.

"Of course you didn't! Because you're too busy wasting my time with stupid questions!"

Robert gasped. It was the first time he'd ever heard a teacher describe any question as "stupid."

"May I suggest," Goyle continued, "that you listen obediently to my lecture, like the rest of your peers? Then maybe you'll learn something. Do you think you can manage that?"

Glenn nodded, face flushed, and slouched down sheepishly into his chair. Professor Goyle returned to the chalkboard and continued labeling the rat.

Robert couldn't believe it. For just one moment for the tiniest split second—*he actually felt sorry for Glenn Torkells*.

It was by far the strangest thing that happened to Robert all day.

You've just finished reading an extended excerpt of *TALES FROM LOVECRAFT MIDDLE SCHOOL #1: PROFESSOR GARGOYLE* by Charles Gilman. To continue reading, you can find the book at the following retailers or your local library:

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"An engaging mystery to unravel, with a few nice twists and surprises along the way.... It's a fair bet that for many the main attraction of *Warren the 13th and the All-Seeing Eye* will be Staehle's lavish illustrations."

-New York Times Book Review

"A whimsical mystery with a lot of heart and spine-tingling illustrations, this novel will circulate as soon as children open it." —School Library Journal, starred review

"The riveting story had interesting characters, riddles, and lots of drama. Readers will get caught up in the mystery and will want to keep turning pages to find out what happens next."

-Nicolas Curry, Kid Reporter for Time for Kids

"Beautifully and amusingly designed and illustrated, featuring a plot filled with twists and riddles, this clever tale of mysterious goings-on at a rundown hotel proves to be an unlikely winner." —Common Sense Media, 4 out 5 stars

A beautifully illustrated, action-packed middle grade adventure in the spirit of Edward Gorey and Lemony Snicket.

With fantastic Victorian-esque design, fast-paced action, and plenty of puzzles to solve, this middle grade mystery is a fun and engaging read for even the most reluctant readers. Warren the 13th is the lone bellhop, valet, groundskeeper, and errand boy of his family's ancient hotel. The strange, shadowy mansion is full of crooked corridors and mysterious riddles—and it just might be home to a magical treasure known as the All-Seeing Eye. But if Warren is going to find the hidden treasure, he'll need to solve several other mysteries first: What is the strange creature lurking in the hotel boiler room? Who is the ghostly girl creeping around the garden's hedge maze? And why is the hotel's only guest covered in bandages? Full of puzzles, secret codes, outrageous inventions, and hundreds of intricate illustrations, *Warren the 13th and the All-Seeing Eye* will delight and confound readers of all ages.

WILL STAEHLE is the creator of Warren the 13th and is an award-winning designer and illustrator. He grew up reading comics and working summers at his parents' design firm in Wisconsin. He now spends his days designing book covers, posters, and mini-comics to ensure that he gets as little sleep as possible. He lives in Seattle.

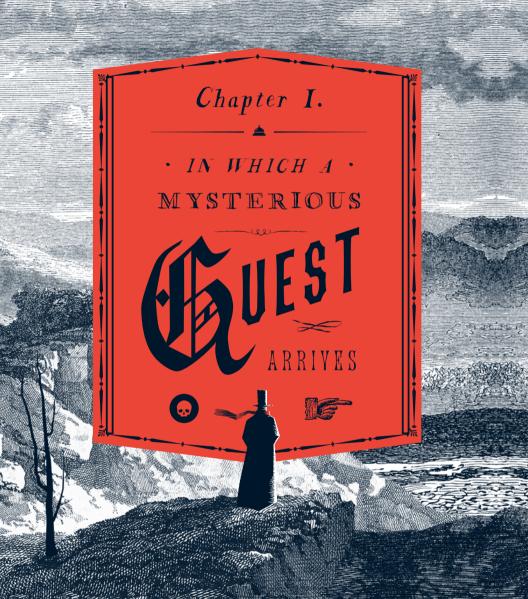
TANIA DEL RIO is a professional comic book writer and artist who has spent the past ten years writing and illustrating, primarily for a young audience. Her clients include Archie Comics, Dark Horse, and Marvel; she is best known for her work writing and drawing a 42-issue run of *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*. She lives in Los Angeles.



Written by TANIA DEL RIO Illustrated & Designed by WILL STAEHLE



PHILADELPHIA





WARREN THE 13TH AND THE ALL-SEEING EYE



WARREN the 13th

tiptoed across the roof of the Warren Hotel, and the old slate tiles clattered like bones. A crisp autumn wind snapped at his back, threatening to knock him off balance, but he kept going. A fall from the top of an eight-story building was the least of his worries. He had a chimney to repair. The ravens screeched a warning from inside the smoke shaft but Warren peered down anyway. As usual, the chimney was clogged with newspapers, fabric scraps, twigs, branches, and other debris. Six black birds stared back, huddled together in a makeshift nest.

"Go on now!" Warren shouted.

The ravens didn't budge.

"There are plenty of nice trees around here. Shoo!"

But the ravens did not "shoo." They seemed to be pretending that Warren was invisible.

"I guess we'll have to do this the hard way," he said with a sigh.

Warren had performed this chore dozens of times. At least once or twice a month, he climbed up to the roof and cleared the nest from the chimney before it caused the entire hotel to fill with smoke. But this morning the ravens seemed particularly stubborn. Winter was coming, and they needed a cozy place to ride out the cold weather.

"What if I poured water on you?" Warren asked. "How would you like that?"

The birds knew he was bluffing. One snapped its beak, but the rest went right on dozing. So Warren creeped over to the ridge of the roof where a crooked weathervane stood. He unscrewed the sharp metal post and poked it inside the chimney. "I'll use force if I have to," he said with determination. "Get out of there or else!"

The ravens didn't even ruffle a feather. They knew Warren was too nice to hit a bird with a weathervane. It was clear Warren had only one option left. "If you don't leave now," he said with as much menace as he could muster, "I'll go get Aunt Annaconda and then you'll have to deal with *her*."

The ravens exploded from the chimney, squawking and scattering feathers as they rose into the sky. They had been around the hotel long enough to know all about Annaconda, and no one—not even a raven dared to test her patience.

Warren watched until the birds were nothing but dark specks against the dawn's pale sky. He hated to frighten them, but they'd left him no choice. His gaze lowered and he looked out from his spot high above the ground. The view was nothing special.



The Warren Hotel was the only building for miles; perched miserably on a hill in a bleak gray countryside, it was ringed by a forest of equally bleak and withered trees. You could walk for hours in every direction without finding anything interesting.

But Warren wasn't looking at the depressing view. He was looking beyond it, past the horizon, to where the rest of the world existed. He imagined cities and jungles, seaports and deserts, landscapes he knew only from books. All places he would love to visit . . . were it not for the fact that he was twelve years old and heir to his family's hotel, where he worked as the sole bellhop, handyman, exterminator, room-service valet, and all-around errand boy. Warren the 13th had spent his whole life at the hotel, just as his father and eleven other Warrens had before him.

With a sigh, he returned to the grim

task of chimney cleaning. Soon his hands were black with soot. He yanked out dozens of sticks and branches and a handful of stranger, more unexpected objects: a lady's lace bonnet, a rusty nail file, a pie pan, even a bag of marbles he recognized as his own.



Warren was trying to figure out how the ravens could have retrieved a bag of marbles from the desk drawer in his attic room when a low growling noise caught his attention.

Warren squinted into the early-morning fog. To his astonishment, he saw movement in the forest. Concealed by a canopy of spindly branches, a large dark shape was weaving through the trees. The woods around the hotel teemed with bears and



wild boars, but this shape was larger than any animal. It growled again, and Warren's heart gave a leap. This was no ordinary creature.

It was an automobile!

He hadn't seen an automobile since the last guest exited the Warren Hotel, vowing never to return. Five long years had passed without a single customer. Warren's eyes grew large as the automobile crested the hill. At last, someone was coming to stay with them!

The car passed through the once-grand iron gates and slowed to a stop at the front doors of the Warren Hotel. And that's precisely when Warren remembered it was *his* job to greet new arrivals and help with their bags.

He winced as the hotel intercom sputtered to life—its tinny sound echoing inside the chimney shaft—with his uncle Rupert's panicked voice ringing through the static:

"WAAAAARREN!"

He had to get to the lobby right away! Warren considered using the chimney as a shortcut, but eight stories was a long way down. Instead, he leapt off the side of the roof, grabbed a rain gutter with one hand, and swung through a window in the attic. He landed with a thump, sprinkling soot all over the small bed and desk that crowded his tiny room.

Warren used to sleep in one of the large bedrooms on the hotel's second floor, but Aunt Annaconda didn't like having children around and wanted him out of her way. She banished him to the hotel's topmost floor, eight floors away from the lobby where Warren did most of his work.

Dashing to a spot on the floor of his room, Warren raised a trap door, climbed down a wooden ladder, and landed with a thump inside the eighth-floor hallway. He picked himself up and ran to the main stairwell, his mind abuzz with possibilities. Who was this mystery guest? And why had this person come to his hotel?



Things had been much different when Warren was little. Back then, the hotel was booked months in advance. Grand automobiles paraded along the driveway all night long; guests arrived in style-men wearing tuxedos and top hats, ladies bedecked in gowns and jewels and pearls. A dozen bellhops in crisp matching uniforms greeted each new arrival, transferring luggage to polished brass carts while butlers swept by with trays of lemonade and cookies. In those days, the hotel had an enormous staff devoted to keeping everything in tip-top shape. Hedges were clipped, carpets were vacuumed, furniture was dusted, and wallpaper was scrubbed. A troop of maids stretched fresh linens across soft mattresses, and tall vases of fresh flowers brightened every corner.

But that was long ago, when Warren the 12th was still in charge. He died when Warren the 13th was just seven, too young to take over such a big hotel. Instead, his uncle Rupert had stepped in to fill the job. Unfortunately, Rupert was lazy and disliked work, which meant that things went downhill fast. The staff quit. The lawns became overrun with weeds. Guests cut their vacations short, then stopped coming altogether. Within a year most of the rooms were vacant, and they had remained so ever since. Now the hotel looked more like a haunted house than a vacation destination. Once-shiny windowpanes were cracked or broken; shutters hung crookedly, and the whole building was in desperate need of paint. The interior wasn't much better. Faded wallpaper was peeling at the seams. Faucets dripped, hinges creaked, floorboards squeaked. No one had used the game room or the tearoom or any of the other common rooms in ages. The pool table was covered in dust. The furniture was shrouded beneath musty old sheets, turning tables and chairs into squat little ghosts.

"WAAAAARREEENN!"

Again Uncle Rupert's voice wailed through the intercom, jolting Warren from his daydreams. He set aside his memories and ran even faster down the winding staircase, leaping over the one-hundred-andthird step [since it was, in fact, missing] and narrowly avoiding the hotel snail lurching across the fourth-floor landing. He descended the last two flights by sliding along the bannister and then skidded,



breathless, onto the chipped checkerboard marble floor of the lobby.

Uncle Rupert stood near a window, peering through the curtains and slicking back his hair. "Th-there's a car in the driveway!" he sputtered.

Warren joined him at the window and peeked outside. A uniformed driver was unloading a small red satchel from the trunk of the car, but the passenger remained seated inside, a dark shape silhouetted against the backseat window.

"It's probably a guest," Warren said.

"But what's a *guest* doing *here*?" Rupert exclaimed. "No one comes to this hotel! Not in years! Just look at this place!"

Indeed, as with the rest of the hotel, time had taken its toll on the lobby. Sunshine seemed unable to penetrate the room; the only source of light was a tarnished chandelier that clung to the ceiling like an insect. It flickered and buzzed as if it might sputter out at any moment. Underneath sat a faded red velvet couch, its surface encrusted with a thick layer of dust—except for a large round area in the shape of Rupert's torso [he often napped there].

"It's not so bad," Warren said cheerfully. "I can dust the lobby this afternoon. Everything will look as good as new!" Rupert stared helplessly at the wall of keys hanging behind the reception desk.



"Which bedroom is best? I've never been inside them!"

"Any of the rooms will be fine," Warren said. "I clean and vacuum them every week, just to be safe. I always knew this day would come!"

With a *whoosh*, the lobby doors swung open and a tall thin figure strode inside. The visitor was dressed all in black, except for white bandages wrapped around a strangely narrow head. Even more surprising, the guest had no luggage of any kind—only the small red satchel. Warren could hear delicate glass objects clinking inside.

Rupert gaped at the strange figure.

Warren gave a slight bow. "W-w-welcome to the Warren Hotel, sir!"

The greeting was met with silence.



"We're delighted to have you. My name is Warren. What's yours?"

The guest did not reply.

"Where are you visiting from?"

Still more silence.

"Have you come far?"

Somewhere in the distance, a cricket chirped.

The visitor reached into the folds of a long black topcoat and produced a card with a sharp *fwip*/ Warren tried to accept the offering, but the guest held it just out of reach. Warren could see it was engraved with the image of a four-poster bed.

"You'd like a room with a bed!" Warren exclaimed. "Of course! We'll get you set up right away!" He looked meaningfully to Uncle Rupert, who continued to stare at the newcomer. "All I need is a room key... Uncle Rupert?"

Rupert finally snapped out of his trance. "Yes, yes, of course! Right away!" He turned to the rack of keys, still overwhelmed by the selection, while Warren attempted to take the stranger's luggage. "I'll be happy to carry your bag to your room. The elevator doesn't work, I'm afraid."

The guest yanked the satchel back as though Warren were diseased.

"Sorry," Warren said, shrinking away.

"Here we go!" Rupert chimed in, holding up a mottled brass key on a tattered cord. "The key to your suite. It has a lovely view! And the room number is printed directly on the surface, in case you get lost in our beautiful corridors!"

Warren eyed his uncle skeptically. It was a stretch to call any of the corridors in the hotel "beautiful," or any of the rooms a "suite," and certainly none of them had what could be considered a "lovely view." But he held his tongue as the new guest reached out a bandaged hand and snatched away the key.

Warren followed the stranger up the creaking stairway. If he couldn't carry the bag, he would at least show his new guest to the room. But the visitor whirled around and—*fwip!*—produced another card, this one bearing a large red "X."



Warren took that to mean "Leave me alone," so he gave an awkward bow and retreated to the lobby.

"I wonder if he'll expect breakfast," Warren said.

"Odd sort of fellow," Rupert muttered. "Didn't even give us a name."

Paleface, Warren decided as he imagined what might be hidden beneath all those bandages. Wounds? Scars? A third eye? An upside-down nose? Whatever it was, it had to be something pretty horrible. Why else would a person have a face wrapped in gauze?



The sound of boot heels clicking upon tile broke Warren's reverie. He turned to see his aunt Annaconda striding into the lobby. Where Uncle Rupert was short and chubby, his new wife was exactly the opposite: tall, elegant, and slender. Her long black hair was pulled tightly into a bun that resembled a viper coiled atop her head.

"Am I hearing things?" she inquired. "Or was there an automobile in the driveway?"

"My beautiful queen! My love!" Rupert exclaimed, his cheeks glowing with adoration. "You are not mistaken. We do indeed have a new guest! A wonderful fellow! He arrived just moments ago."

"Is that so?" Annaconda crooned. She scratched Rupertunder his chin as though he were a cat. Rupert's face flamed fire-engine red and a purring sound escaped his fleshy lips. Warren tried not to gag. "I'm sorry to have missed him."

Warren's uncle Rupert had married his aunt Annaconda a mere four months earlier, and they still acted very much like newlyweds. They had exchanged letters for half a year before finally meeting in person. Rupert was so enchanted, he proposed almost immediately.

"Oh, darling," Rupert said, heaving a long sigh. "You are too good to me."

"No, *you're* too good to *me*," Annaconda insisted.



said Rupert. "Ever since you entered my life, I've felt like a new man!"

"No, I'm the lucky one," Annaconda said, throwing her arms wide and twirling. "You're my sweet handsome prince, and you brought me to this wonderful fairy-tale castle!"

Warren couldn't bear to listen to any more of their lovey-dovey talk. He tried to slink off without being noticed, but his aunt called after him. "Warren, dear, I hope you showed our esteemed guest to his room?" Annaconda smiled, causing the wrinkles around her eyes to flare like spider legs.

"He didn't want my help."

"He rejected you? Oh, my poor dear Warren, I hope you're not disappointed!" Annaconda said. "You're a peculiar-looking child, it's true, but that's no reason for adults to treat you poorly!"

She spoke so sweetly that Uncle Rupert didn't even notice the insult buried in her words. Warren ignored them. He knew he had a few strange features: a toadlike face, gray skin, crooked teeth. But he was proud of his beautiful hair—every one of his ancestors had a luxurious full-bodied head of hair—and he thought it offset the worst of his flaws.



"There's some soot in my bedroom that needs sweeping," he said. "If you'll excuse me."

"But of course, darling!" Annaconda said. "I know how much you enjoy your chores. I'd be loath to prevent you from doing them."



As Warren climbed the stairs, he could hear his uncle chuckling. "Such an odd lad. What kind of boy enjoys cleaning? He certainly didn't get that from me!"

His aunt laughed. "Of course not, my love! You're far too princely for chores."

Warren sighed. Uncle Rupert wasn't princely—he was just plain lazy. He never bothered to fix anything or clean anything or do anything that resembled labor of any kind. Warren knew that his father, Warren the 12th, would be so disappointed in Uncle Rupert. Warren the 12th always used to say that hard work built character.

Warren climbed the stairwell to the third-floor broom closet and opened the door. He sprang back in surprise. Waiting inside was Aunt Annaconda!

"Took you long enough!" she hissed, thrusting a broom into his hands.

"How did you—" Warren started to ask how his aunt had reached the third floor without passing him on the staircase but then thought better of it. She was always disappearing and reappearing unexpectedly. It was just one of her many mysterious qualities.

Annaconda stepped forward, towering over her diminutive nephew. Her gnarled hands were fixed squarely on her bony hips, which jutted out against the fabric of her dress. Gone was the smiling mask she wore in front of her husband; now her dark eyes glittered dangerously and her long face stretched into a deep snarl.

"Tell me," she hissed. "Where is this mystery guest? What's his room number?"

"I don't know," Warren said, cowering beneath her wrathful gaze. "Uncle Rupert gave him the key. I didn't see where he went." "What did he look like? What did he say?"

"He was tall and thin . . . and he wore all black. Except for his face, which was covered with white bandages. He didn't talk, except with picture cards, and he carried a red bag."

"What about the All-Seeing Eye?" Annaconda asked. "Did he mention the All-Seeing Eye?"

"He didn't say a word," Warren said. "I think he's just a traveler passing through."

"He's here for the Eye," she whispered. "He must be! Why else would *anyone* come to this dreadful place? He's looking for the Eye, and he's planning to steal it for himself!"

Warren had heard plenty about the All-Seeing Eye, a mysterious treasure hidden inside the hotel—or so Annaconda believed. Within days of marrying Rupert, his aunt began asking about it. Warren knew the Eye was a legend, just like the giant insects that supposedly roamed the forest or the ghosts that reportedly haunted the hedge maze.

"I don't think he's here for the All-Seeing Eye," Warren said.

"You are a child and you don't know anything," Annaconda replied dismissively. "Next time you see this mystery guest, I want you to find me right away. Do you understand?"

"I do," Warren said.

"Then close the door and leave me be."

"Leave you here? In the closet?"

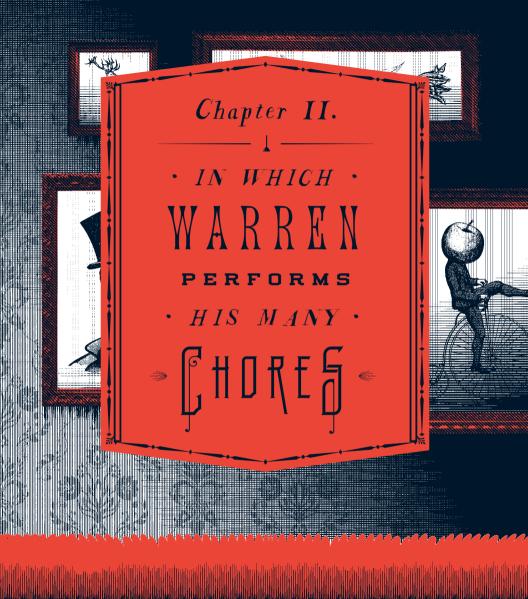


Warren shut the closet door. He suspected that if he opened it again, Annaconda would be gone. But he was too scared to look.

Instead, he took the broom and climbed the stairs to the attic.









ours later, his arms aching, Warren was still only halfway

through his many chores. He had intended to sweep just his attic bedroom, but after finishing he decided to sweep the eighth floor, too. And when that was done, he couldn't help but notice the seventh floor also looked dusty. Then he decided he couldn't leave the rest of the hotel unswept. It wouldn't be fair to all the other floors!

Along the way, Warren encountered dozens of messes left behind by his aunt. Annaconda spent most of every day searching the guestrooms for the All-Seeing Eye, and her work was extremely disruptive. On the sixth floor, for example, Warren discovered a series of floorboards that had been pried up; he needed to hop up and down to wedge them into place. On the fifth floor, a carpet had been partially unraveled, so he knit the threads back together. Once repaired, the carpet didn't lay as flat as it used to [a tripping hazard!], so Warren fetched an iron and smoothed away the bumps.

In the fourth-floor hallway, Warren found a chaise with most of its stuffing yanked out—it looked like a fluffy critter had exploded. Warren gritted his teeth in frustration and set to restuffing the chair, piece by lumpy piece. But as soon as he finished that job, he noticed a hole cut into one of the walls. He didn't have time to mix fresh plaster, so instead he dragged the chair to the wall and arranged it to hide the damage. He would return later to fix it properly.

Eventually, Warren arrived at his favorite part of the hotel: the third-floor Hall of Ancestors. Hanging on the wall were portraits of the twelve previous owners—all of Warren's forefathers arranged chronologically. Warren walked directly to the picture of his father, Warren the 12th. He looked exactly the way Warren remembered: a kind man with warm brown eyes and a long curled mustachio framing his mysterious smile.

"Father, I have exciting news!" Warren said to the painting. "The hotel has a new guest. Our first in a long time. I thought you'd want to know right away."

Warren often told his father about the latest events. He knew it was silly to talk to a painting, but he liked to pretend his father could hear him.

"He is a bit strange," Warren continued. "He doesn't say very much. And he refused to let me carry his bag to his room. But I don't care. I'm happy just to have a customer. Business is booming!"



Warren tried to keep his updates positive. He knew that his father would be saddened to learn the true state of the hotel, so he often exaggerated the good news and omitted the bad. He didn't want Warren the r2th to know how awful things really were.

"Of course, I still have a mountain of work," Warren continued. "There's so much maintenance to do before winter, so many windows to repair and heating ducts to clean. And those pesky ravens keep clogging the chimney. But I remember everything you taught me, and I won't let you down."

That was the main reason Warren worked so hard: because he knew his father had worked hard, and his father's father had worked hard, and his father's father's father had worked hard, and so on. Twelve generations of Warrens had shaped the hotel into one of the grandest destinations in the world... and it had taken just five years of Uncle Rupert's incompetence for everything to fall apart.

"I'll be happy when I turn eighteen and can officially take over. You're going to see big changes around here!" Warren said, smiling at the portrait of Warren the 12th.

The portrait of Warren the 12th winked back.

Or seemed to, anyway. With the afternoon sun streaming through the windows, lights and shadows bounced off the portraits in curious ways. Warren knew the wink was probably just a trick of his imagination, but he felt better nevertheless. He always felt better after visiting with his father.

Warren sat there daydreaming about happier days until the grandfather clock at the end of the hall began to chime. Soon all the clocks were clanging and gonging and bellowing, a cacophony that echoed noisily throughout the hotel.

It was four o'clock! Time to prepare dinner!

Warren hurried downstairs to the basement and ran into the kitchen. He ducked under an arc of flying carrot slices spraying from the knife of Chef Bunion and landing in a soup pot at the other end of the room. "Sorry I'm late," Warren said.

"No problem, my boy!" said Chef. "Have a seat while I finish this prep work."

Chef was the last of the family's old employees; he loved the Warren Hotel too much to leave. A burly man with thick arms, his strong hands were as big as bear paws but they moved with grace and dexterity. In fact, according to a longstanding rumor, Chef Bunion had once been a member of

CHEF BUNION'S KITCHEN



the circus. One of his favorite stunts was to chop an onion, scramble an egg, and carve a turkey all at the same time. It was as if he somehow possessed four hands instead of two.

"Whatever you're cooking smells great," Warren said.

"I want you to try it," said Chef. "We'll serve you a big helping before your auntie comes sniffing around."

Warren was forbidden from eating what the rest of the family ate. Soon after marrying his uncle, Annaconda had placed Warren on a strict diet of porridge for every meal: breakfast, lunch, and dinner. She claimed that boiled oats was the only nutrition a growing boy needed. Uncle Rupert was too love-struck to disagree, but Chef Bunion was outraged. He believed a growing boy needed vegetables and fruits, cookies and caramels. So he sneaked them to Warren whenever Annaconda wasn't hovering around.

"Tonight we have a zesty beef goulash," Chef exclaimed. "Peppers, tomatoes, eggplant, zucchini—all your favorites in a single delicious dish!" He thrust a ladle under Warren's nose.

"Mm-mmm," Warren said, savoring the smell before tasting the stew.

Chef Bunion slid a bowl across the counter and tossed Warren a hunk of bread. "Now eat up. As much as you want."

"I better leave some room for porridge, otherwise Auntie will be suspicious."

Chef Bunion just laughed. "When you've finished, chew on a mint leaf so she won't smell garlic on your breath."

Within minutes, Warren had wiped the bowl clean with his bread and was happily licking his fingers. He realized that Chef Bunion was watching him and seemed sad.

"What's wrong?" Warren asked.

"Nothing," Chef said, clearing his throat. "I was just thinking that your father used to adore this meal, too."

"He did? Really?" Warren loved learning anything about his parents, no matter how trivial the information might be.

"Oh, yes, absolutely. After your mother died, when you were just a baby, he ate it every night. It was his greatest comfort."

Warren looked down at his empty bowl and treasured the warm feeling in his belly. "No wonder I like it so much."

Chef dabbed at tears with his big pawlike hands. "Lousy onions are making my eyes water," he grumbled, turning back to the cutting board. "You better finish up and serve dinner. You don't want to be late." And with that he tucked a treat in Warren's pocket-a pudding cookie, Chef's signature dessert of creamy chocolate mousse tucked inside a hard shell-and then sent the boy on his way.

Moments later, Warren had loaded the dumbwaiter with covered meal travs for the hotel's other occupants. First he rode up to the fourth floor and delivered a tray to Mr. Friggs, his private tutor and the establishment's only permanent guest. Mr. Friggs had been a resident for as long as



Warren could remember but he never left the library, not even to venture to the dining hall. He found Mr. Friggs sitting at a desk, his face buried in a book. "Oh, is it suppertime already?" he asked, rubbing his eyes. "I do believe I've spent all day lost in this tome about the old wars of Fauntleroy. I'll have to tell you all about it in our next class. We're still meeting tomorrow morning, yes?"

"Of course!" Warren said. Meeting with Mr. Friggs was one of the highlights of his week. The old man was always quick to teach him about the extraordinary history of the hotel and all twelve of Warren's forefathers. He seemed to know everything about everyone.

"I heard your uncle calling for you this morning," Mr. Friggs said. "He seemed to be in a state of panic. Was everything all right?"

Warren nodded. "The hotel has a new guest!"

"A visitor! Is that so!" Mr. Friggs exclaimed. "And what is this person's name?"

Warren told him about Paleface and then explained the curious circumstances surrounding his arrival. "I'm afraid I don't have a lot of information. Not yet. But Aunt Annaconda is convinced that he's come to steal the All-Seeing Eye."

"Not that nonsense again!" said Mr. Friggs. "I have told her a thousand times: the Eye is nothing but a fairy tale. It simply does not exist!"

Mr. Friggs gestured around the library, with its thousands of journals and ledgers, its towering reams of paper. "I have the complete history of the Warren family at my disposal and I assure you, there's not a single mention of an All-Seeing Eye. There's no such thing!" "I believe you, Mr. Friggs," Warren said. "But that won't stop Aunt Annaconda. She's convinced that it's real."

Mr. Friggs shook his head sadly. "I hate to say it, but sometimes I think the only reason she married your uncle was to get her hands on this imaginary treasure."

Lately, Warren had found himself thinking those very same thoughts.

His aunt could be as sweet as a kitten when his uncle was watching. But as soon as Rupert turned his back [or fell asleep on the lobby couch], she started tearing through cabinets and ripping apart pianos. And she never even cleaned up after herself. She didn't seem to care about the hotel at all!

"Sooner or later she'll have to give up," Warren said. "She's already searched every room and hallway. There's nowhere left to look."

"I hope you are correct," Mr. Friggs said, glancing at the clock. "But right now I suspect the only thing she's searching for is her dinner. You mustn't keep her waiting!"

Warren realized he'd once again lost track of time. He hurried back to the dumbwaiter and descended to the first floor, where he placed the meals onto an old cart that, like everything else in the hotel, had seen better days. He turned and headed for the main dining hall. In the middle of the room was a large mahogany table that once sat up to twenty guests for banquet-style feasts. Warren could still remember when dinner was the highlight of every evening. All the well-dressed guests would come down from their rooms amid lively conversation and tinkling wineglasses while a live band played cheerful music in the corner. After dinner, dancing ensued and usually lasted well into the night.

But now the dining hall felt cavernous and cold. Warren pushed the squeaky cart, its wheels rattling noisily. Above his head hung the room's once-sparkling chandelier, now kept dark to save on the electric bill. Candelabras were lit instead, and their flames sent eerie shadows jittering across the walls.

Warren set a bowl of goulash and a basket of bread at each end of the table, one for his aunt and one for his uncle. Between the two he placed a tiny bowl of porridge for himself. Just as he was pouring a bottle of sarsaparilla [Rupert's favorite drink] into a glass, he heard footsteps and looked up to see his aunt and uncle entering the enormous hall. It was five o'clock on the dot, and their arrival was accompanied by the clamor of the hotel's many clocks.

With a gallant air, Rupert pulled out his wife's chair, its clawed feet scraping hard against the floor, and then scurried to take his seat all the way at the opposite end of the table. Almost immediately he began digging into his meal and making exuberant smacking noises. Flecks of tomato dotted his double chin.

Annaconda looked at her meal with displeasure. "What is this slop?" she whis-



pered menacingly to Warren so that Rupert could not overhear. "It looks unfit for a peasant!"

"It's goulash, Auntie," Warren said. "It tastes good."

Annaconda's eyes narrowed. "And how would *you* know, Warren?"

"I ... um ... "

"Did you try some? Without my permission?"

"My love!" Rupert cried from across the table. "Isn't this delicious? Chef Bunion has done it again! *C'est magnificentique*!"

Annaconda's frown vanished. "Yes, my dear!" she chirped back. "Chef Bunion is a treasure! But I'm afraid I have an upset stomach and I must send mine back."

"No, no! Have Warren bring your serving to me," Rupert said. "There's no need to waste a good meal."

And so Warren picked up Annaconda's plate and carried it over to his uncle, who dived in to his second helping without a

moment's hesitation. As Warren returned to his aunt's end of the table, he passed by his bowl of porridge and realized it was turning cold. And cold meant gummy. Yuck.

"I'm sorry you don't like goulash," he said to Annaconda. "May I bring you something else from the kitchen?"

Annaconda leaned closer and sniffed the air around Warren's face.

"Is that garlic I smell?"

Warren quickly cupped a hand over his mouth. He'd forgotten to chew the mint! "I—I don't think so—"



Annaconda extended a scrawny finger and flicked a speck of carrot off Warren's tie. "How did you manage to eat this slop? Has Chef Bunion disobeyed my orders?"

Warren blanched. He certainly didn't want to get Chef Bunion in trouble. Annaconda was always looking for an excuse to fire him. "N-no, Auntie. Chef didn't do anything wrong. I tried the goulash when he wasn't looking."

"Then you will have to be punished."

Warren bowed his head and waited while Annaconda tapped her chin. Thinking up new punishments was one of her favorite things to do. Like the time she sent him off to fill a sack with bear dung from the forest. Or the time she forced him to paint her fingernails and sharpen them into triangular tips. The toxic stench of her nail polish [not to mention the stinky dung!] had nearly made him puke.

"Ah-ha!" she exclaimed. "I have a good one! Your punishment is to walk the hedge maze and find its center. You'll be lost in those passageways for hours!"

The old hedge maze behind the hotel was choked with thorns and populated by wild creatures. Even during the hotel's most prosperous era the labyrinth was a scary place, and rumors soon spread that it was haunted. But that didn't keep Warren from exploring its every inch. He'd spent hours playing in the dark evergreen hedges, and he knew every turn and path like the back of his hand.

"Not the hedge maze, Auntie, please!" he begged, dropping to his knees and trying his hardest to look forlorn.

"You'll go at once!" she said, her smile widening ominously. "And there's no returning until you've found the center!"

"But how will I prove it?"

"In the middle of the maze is a statue of Warren the 1st," Annaconda said. "At the base of the statue is an inscription. I want you to copy it, word for word, and bring it back to me. Don't you dare come home until you've written it down!"

At the other end of the table, Rupert's chewing and gulping continued nonstop. Oblivious to their discussion, he had moved on to dessert, stuffing Chef's pudding cookies into his mouth at an alarming rate. Soon he would be fast asleep; he liked a good "digestive" nap after a meal.

"Now, go!" Annaconda snapped.

"Yes, Auntie," Warren said, managing to conceal his smile until he was out the door. For once, her dreadful punishment would be easy!



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f one could see inside Annaconda's bedroom [which one rarely did, because she kept the door triple locked], one would find it quite obvious that Warren's aunt was no ordinary woman. She was a witch! Scattered about were old scrolls and books, written in strange and ancient languages. Jars of smelly oils and herbs and fish teeth cluttered every inch of the shelves. She even had a large cast-iron cauldron set squarely in the center of the room; mysterious wisps of smoke could be seen rising from within the large vessel, though it always appeared to be empty.

Annaconda retreated to this room every night after dinner. Yet again her disgusting husband Rupert had fallen asleep at the dining table; she'd left him snoring in his plate and invented some pointless errand to keep her nephew out of her hair. She needed privacy to concentrate on her new apprentice.

The robed girl sat patiently in a chair. She was twelve years old, with fair hair and skin like parchment.

"I hope your trip was pleasant?" Annaconda asked.

"Yes, Your Darkness," the girl said. "The ride was a bit long, but I'm happy to finally be here. The hotel is . . . nice."





"The hotel is horrible!" Annaconda snapped. "Absolutely miserable! A wretched place! But you will find it worth the trouble, my young pupil. I plan to teach you many skills. You'll have powers you've only dreamed of!"

The girl bowed her head. "I certainly hope that is so."

Annaconda reached into her dress pocket and pulled out a long curved object. It was the color of bone and as sharp as a claw. A dark essence seemed to emanate from it, causing her apprentice to lean forward, intrigued.

"Do you know what this is?" Annaconda asked.

"No, Your Darkness."

"This is a rare Malwoodian manticore tooth that I stole from my homeland before I was banished."

"Why were you banished?" "The *why* is irrelevant," Annaconda snapped. "What matters is that my magical powers were stripped from me! *Robbed*! I can still transform into my spirit animal and slither across the floors—"



"Excuse me, did Your Darkness say 'spirit animal"?"

"Yes, yes, every evil witch has a spirit animal. We can change back and forth at will. But to do anything else, I need the tooth!"

By this point, the girl had produced a notepad and was eagerly recording Annaconda's remarks. "The tooth allows you to cast spells?"

"Only one spell remains. I'm afraid I've used up most of its magic. But when I find the All-Seeing Eye, I'm certain all my abilities will be restored. I'll be more powerful than ever!"

The girl looked up. "So why not use the tooth to find the Eye?"

Annaconda glared back. "Don't you think I've tried that?" She thrust the object toward the apprentice as if she meant to stab her. "Half these spells are failed attempts to find the Eye! You've no idea how many I've wasted in my search!"

"I'm sorry, Your Darkness," said the girl. "I will assist you in any way possible."

"Indeed, you will," Annaconda said. "You can start by shadowing my nephew Warren. Odd-looking boy. Crooked teeth and a face like a housefly. You can find him outside in the hedge maze. I imagine he'll be there all night, wandering around in circles." "And when I find him, Your Darkness, what should I do?"

"Just keep an eye on him. I've never trusted the boy. He claims to know nothing about the All-Seeing Eye. He claims it's a fairy tale, even though his ancestors have kept the Eye hidden for twelve generations! I'm certain he's trying to throw me off the trail."

"I shall find him, Your Darkness."

And with a flash of bright light, the apprentice vanished.



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