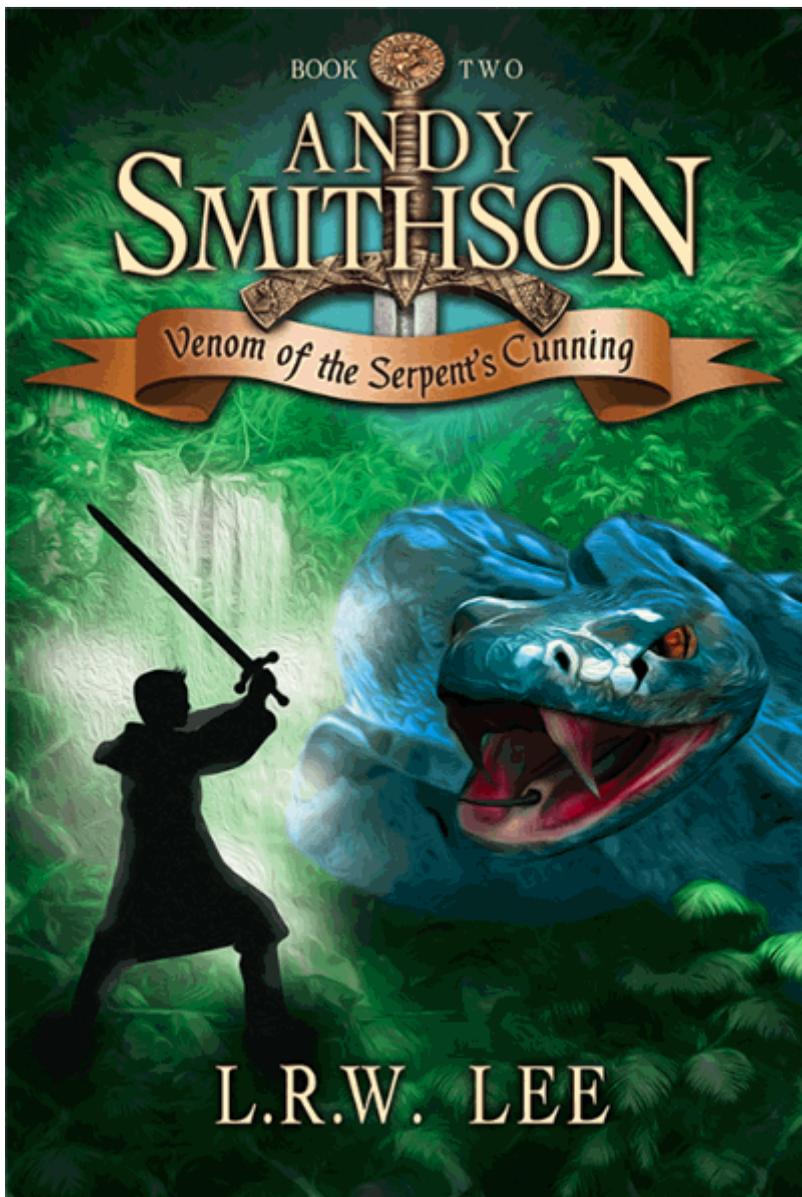


BOOK TWO

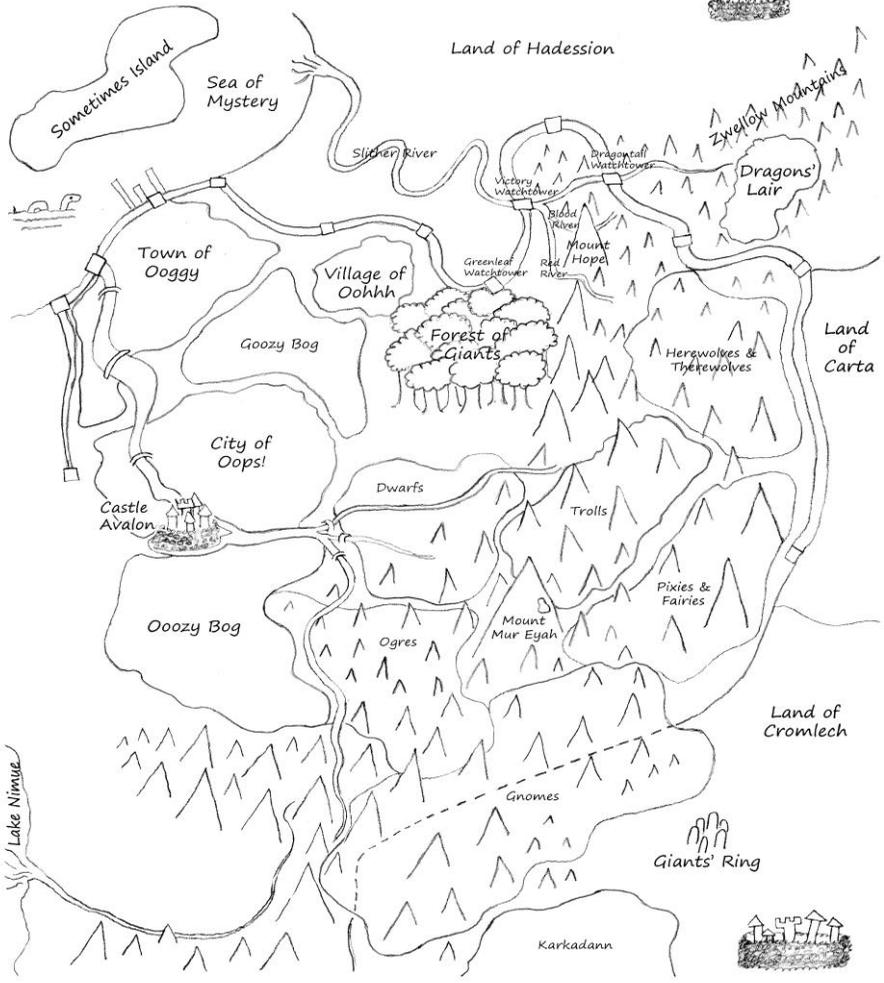
ANDY SMITHSON

Venom of the Serpent's Cunning



L.R.W. LEE

The Land of Oomaldee



CHAPTER ONE

Longing

Andy woke himself hollering, “No! No!” He breathed hard, as if he had just finished crawling fifty laps around the track in gym class. His room was dark except for the light of the moon filtering between the slats of the wood blinds. He looked over at the digital alarm clock on the nightstand next to his bed: 2:07 a.m.

Andy wiped the sweat from his forehead on his undershirt before getting up and heading to the bathroom.

He turned on the faucet and splashed cold water on his face, trying to forget. Peering over the towel he held in both hands, he saw the reflection of an unremarkable eleven-year-old boy—brown hair, brown eyes, average nose, average chin (nope, no whiskers yet) illuminated by the orange glow of the night light. His pediatrician had called him “small for his age.”

He tried to forget the dream, but the images kept flashing in his mind. Andy walked along a deserted dirt road. In the distance, through lighter-than-usual fog, he could just make out the silhouette of a house in the fading sunlight. As he approached, he saw its broken porch railing, smashed front window, and peeling paint. Several of the windows on the upper floor were also broken. Shards of glass lay on the ground below. He walked up onto the crumbling porch, nearly falling through a rotten board on his way to the front door with a NO TRESPASSING sign nailed across it.

The board and door mysteriously dissolved and Andy walked into a dust-covered room with broken furniture strewn about. It smelled of decay. He heard voices coming from upstairs and headed toward a staircase, its risers broken in places. He picked his way upwards, making the boards creak as he shifted his weight on each step. Reaching the landing, he turned right and

inched down a hallway with peeling paint, illuminated only by the light filtering through the doorway at the end. The smell of decay grew stronger.

He stopped at the doorway but did not go in. Before him were two creatures in conversation. One was a dove with drops of blood on its pure white feathers. It spoke to a creature that kept changing forms. Beginning as a large bird, the creature flapped its enormous wings, and in a rush of thunder and wind became a weird-looking rhino with a jet black corkscrew horn. The beast pawed the ground and snorted, readying a charge, then just as quickly transformed into a being that looked like water in the form of a person. As the figure stood and wildly waved its arms, it morphed into a growling wolf with a smashed-in nose and huge paws. This in turn became a monstrous serpent that changed into a seven-headed red dragon with ten horns, four wings, and a thick tail. Every time the transforming creature took on the form of the seven-headed dragon, it would stand and roar, "I will rule the world and live forever!" The dove did not react, only continued mumbling something about a stone.

When the two creatures finally noticed Andy standing in the doorway, the changling, now in the form of the huge bird, flew at Andy, beak open wide and talons poised to rip into his flesh. At this point Andy woke up yelling and sweating.

Andy shook his head. He had been having the same dream on and off for the last three weeks. Each time it had become more detailed and more frightening. Tonight had been the most disturbing yet. He recognized the seven-headed red dragon as Abaddon, whom he had fought and beaten. But the rest of the dream made no sense.

He exited the bathroom and walked slowly back down the hall to his bedroom. Passing his parents' door, he heard his dad thunder out a loud noise that sounded much like the hippo on the nature show Andy had watched that evening. He slid back between his covers and stared at the ceiling, afraid to fall asleep. Sleep must have finally overcome him, however,

because he awoke with the clock now reading 8:38 a.m. He dressed and went downstairs for breakfast. His mom greeted him with a hug and kiss.

“How’d you sleep?”

“Okay.” He wasn’t about to tell her about his dream.

“I’m working from home today.”

“Why?”

“I just thought it would be nice to spend the day with you and Maddy before your summer vacation is over. I thought we could go to the library and get ice cream later. We don’t get these opportunities often.”

Andy’s mom and dad were CEOs of separate companies they each had founded and grown. The companies took a lot of their time and put them on edge. His dad believed neither he nor his older sister, Madison, appreciated all the privileges owning and growing the companies afforded them, and he reminded them of this fact regularly.

After Andy finished his cereal and toast, Mom suggested, “Why don’t you go outside and play for a while. I’ll get my work done and then the three of us can head out.”

Not for the first time since his return home from Oomaldee, Andy stood before the ugly, three-foot-tall concrete garden gnome. Its full, white-painted beard and long, crooked nose were complemented by a bright red pointy hat, patched black pants, and a blue jacket that looked like it could fit two gnomes. It somehow reminded Andy of Mermin, the king of Oomaldee’s kindly old wizard. His mom insisted it looked “So cute!” every time Dad hinted at moving it to a less conspicuous spot in the backyard.

Quickly, Andy scanned the patio, looked between nearby shade trees, and glanced around the long-neglected wooden playhouse, making sure no one watched. He pulled a gold key from the pouch hanging around his neck and begged, "Please wake up. Please?"

He stared intently into the gnome's bulging eyes, hoping to see the slightest movement. Not a blink. Not a dart. Not a twitch. Nothing. Not that way down deep he had expected it to move, or that he had wanted to awaken a garden gnome and have it think he was its friend. That would be weird! All the same...

Andy let out a long, slow sigh and hung his head.

No stone statues that come to life when the gold key is near, no fire-breathing dragons, no flying pegasi, no vulture-men or Abaddon to battle. *Well, that part I don't miss*, he thought. *But what I'd give to see the King, Mermin, Alden, Marta, and Hans again. And to taste Marta's awesome chocolate chip cookies!* He could almost smell the fresh-baked aroma that wafted down the stone-lined hallway outside the castle kitchens every time Marta made them.

Andy laughed. *I must be sick. I even miss the smell of cow farts.* He smiled, then reached down and rubbed his stomach. It felt like a tiny King Abaddon fought within him, blasting fire and poison at his insides. In fact, his stomach hadn't been feeling well for quite some time.

I wonder if I'll ever get to go back.

He remembered the night he had been abruptly sent home after telling the king about the old trunk he found in the attic. The note inside the trunk expressly told him not to mention it to anyone.

I'll never make that mistake again! If only whoever sent me home would forgive me and let me go back. If only...

Madison, older than Andy by two years, stuck her head out the back door and yelled loudly enough for the neighbors to hear, "Mom, Andy's trying to make that gnome come to life again! I just saw him."

Andy quickly stuffed the gold key back in its hiding place and turned to glare at her. "You have no idea what I was doing!"

“You had that same look as when I saw you trying to make the angel on the top of the Christmas tree and the knight above the fireplace come to life. You’re pathetic, Andy.”

She pulled her head back inside.

Through the screen door he overheard his mom say, “Maddy, dear, you know Dr. Frandangle said we need to encourage and support Andy. He’s going through a difficult time.”

“Dr. Frandangle’s a quack!” Madison replied, slamming the door behind her.

Andy agreed. Dr. Frandangle, his “counselor,” was a quack. A quack who had been introduced into his life a couple months after he’d returned from Oomaldee. Apparently, waving his arms at the ceiling and yelling that he needed to go back to break the curse had upset his parents more than a little. And insisting that he told the truth when they questioned him about his change of clothes and the pouch that hung from his neck only made the situation worse. That, combined with him no longer wanting to play his video games (who wants to fight a pretend dragon when you’ve battled one in real life?) and no longer arguing with his mom when she asked him to mow the lawn, take out the trash, or go to bed, put his parents on edge. Go figure.

He remembered his dad calling a family conference the night before his first appointment and doing his uncomfortable best to explain that he and Mom understood Andy’s needs were greater than what they were equipped to handle. Dr. Frandangle was going to help them help Andy.

Gotta love Dad. Trying to “fix” me, Andy remembered thinking. And when his dad made it clear that no one outside their family was to know Andy was seeing a shrink, he remembered laughing to himself. *Can never be less than perfect in this family!*

Between Dr. Frandangle asking about any dreams he might be having or invisible friends, Andy began to wonder about this doctor’s qualifications. He hated having to talk about his feelings with a stranger. In the end, the doctor

had come back with a diagnosis of severe low self-esteem, suggesting that treating Andy “more gently” would help him build some self-confidence. The diagnosis had worked because his parents started paying more attention to him.

For the first time in he couldn't remember how many years, Dad had taken him and Madison trick-or-treating. Both—yes, both—his parents had actually come to hear him sing in the choir as part of the school Christmas pageant and had attended his spring play, *The Princess and the Pea*, even though he had the part of a servant and only spoke seven lines. But the best part by far was that all this attention made his sister, Miss Perfect, jealous. She resented the fact that Andy, in all his glorious imperfection, somehow got more of their parents' attention. It drove her crazy. He loved it!

Unfortunately, while his parents paid more attention to him, he could tell Dad still did not accept him for who he was and didn't approve of his grades, even though he'd (unsuccessfully) tried to bring them up.

Andy came inside. When she saw him, Mom said, “I'm not quite finished with what I need to do. Why don't you read a book or find something else to do for a little bit. I should be done shortly.”

He headed up to the attic. As quietly as he could, he opened the door at the end of the hall and climbed the stairs, hoping Madison wouldn't hear and announce to the world that Andy was once more trespassing in forbidden territory.

Reaching the top step, he saw the old, weathered trunk. He had first found the oak pirate chest after tripping backwards and falling over it. From what Mermin told him, Andy knew it could only have come from Oomaldee. But he still hadn't figured out how it ended up in his attic. What he did know, though, was being near the trunk made him feel connected with Oomaldee even if he couldn't be there. He thought again about what Mermin said—that he often observed Andy's world for the King to get ideas to break the five-

hundred-year curse that caused thick fog to blanket the land and prevented the King and himself from dying.

Mermin might be looking down on my house this minute. Andy half-smiled.

He lifted the heavy top of the trunk as he had so many times since his return and propped it at an angle that would prevent it from smashing his fingers. The unsigned note that he had disregarded, precipitating his sudden return, sat in the uppermost tray next to the black leather holster with the King of Oomaldee's purple family crest. He remembered the King telling him the purple crest was no longer used; his father had forbidden it after he had dishonored his family. Whatever he had done to shame his family so much, the King had not confided in him, but Andy could relate.

He lifted the tray out and set it on the floor next to the trunk. Reaching in, he counted the scrolls again. One, two, three, four...fifteen. All the scrolls were still here, just as he'd found them when he looked in the trunk the first time after returning. Some had characters on the back, others didn't. He pulled one out that did and unrolled the parchment, again studying the detailed drawing of a triangle with a key, a sword, and a ball at its three corners. The key looked like the one he had been given from the invisible gold book in Mermin's library. From the detail of the sword's hilt, Andy could tell it was Methuselah. He had no idea what the ball was, however.

Why would drawings of the key and Methuselah be on an old scroll in this trunk? The question had puzzled him since he first discovered it. *And what is the ball? I've never seen a ball. What does this mean?* Writing appeared below the triangle, but he did not recognize the language. Early on, he had searched online to see if he could figure out the letters, but his searches turned up nothing. He had even written down some of the words and shown them to his school librarian, as well as to the librarian at the public library where his parents took them frequently. Neither recognized the characters.

He rolled the scroll up again and pulled out another. This one had no characters on the back, and like the other, it had lots of writing that he could not understand. Nevertheless, Andy studied the characters, memorizing their shapes. *Never know when I might find someone who knows what these letters mean.*

Rolling this parchment up, he replaced it and pulled a third scroll out of the trunk. This one had characters on the back like the first. It was his favorite, not because it was the largest, which it was, but because it was the fanciest of all the scrolls. It was the drawing of a family tree. There was a sketch of a man or woman next to each branch with what was probably their name written underneath. The tree was tall and the drawing detailed. It clearly went back a long time. It was also clear that the tree was incomplete since it stopped suddenly, as if the person who had been recording all the births and deaths had died. *But why? Whose family was this?*

He remembered the message sphere telling him his ancestors had come from Oomaldee and relived the anxiety he felt when that same message sphere declared he would become a great leader in the land if he did what the sender of the message told him—it predicted that even the King would follow him. After studying the scroll for several minutes, Andy rolled it up again and put it back in the truck with the others.

He lifted out the tray containing the scrolls and placed it on the floor next to the upper tray. Only one object remained in the trunk. He reached in and gingerly grasped the handle of a dagger between his thumb and forefinger as if it would bite him. It had a beautifully carved handle like Methuselah's, but its ten-inch blade was speckled with patches of rust. He had examined it many times, but dark flecks of an unidentified substance on the handle and blade made him feel creepy every time he saw it. After studying it yet again for several minutes, he returned it to the trunk, put the other two trays back in, and slowly closed the lid.

A trunk full of mysteries. If I ever get to go back to Oomaldee... He walked back downstairs to the kitchen to see if Mom was ready yet.

The rest of the day was uneventful. The three of them visited the library, and before returning home he and Madison had a heated argument about which flavor of ice cream was the best. After eating dinner and watching a couple TV shows, Mom announced that it was time for bed. Without argument, Andy headed upstairs.

Entering his room, he approached his desk that stood just inside the doorway, picked up a red marker, looked at the calendar hanging on the wall above it, and crossed off today's date. *Nine months, 23 days since I returned.* He sighed. *At least there's only three more weeks until summer vacation is finally over.* It wasn't that he loved school, for it seemed he was always getting in trouble with one teacher or another for being disrespectful. No, he longed for the start of school so he would be distracted for a large part of the day.

I sound like Madison. I must be sick, Andy thought as he got ready for bed.

CHAPTER TWO

Pony Express

The following afternoon, Andy lay on his bed reading *Stance, Balance and Poise: The Art of Sword Fighting*, one of the books he had gotten at the library. Mom had raised her eyebrows when she saw the book he wanted to check out. In the end, he had convinced her he was curious about how people fought way back when.

“It goes against my better judgment,” she’d added. She knew Andy too well.

Looking at a picture of two knights facing off with swords drawn, Andy stood up and pulled Methuselah’s hilt from the pouch hanging around his neck. Unlike in Oomaldee, the blade did not extend. Nonetheless, Andy tried to mimic the stance of one of the knights, putting his right foot out in front of his left. He read aloud, “Keep your feet shoulder-width apart as much as possible. Never cross your feet or bring them together as you move.” He checked his stance. “Align your wrist with the hilt to grip the sword. When you strike a target, you want the strength of your wrist behind it instead of your thumb. Your thumb should be pointing left or right. If your thumb is pointing up, you are not holding the sword correctly.”

Andy checked his grip. “Yep, got it.”

Feeling nature’s call, he put Methuselah back in the pouch around his neck and laid the book face down on his bed. He wandered down the hall. He was alone in the house; Dad was at work and Mom had taken Madison out shopping for school clothes. “You’re growing too fast,” she had complained while smiling at Madison over breakfast.

When he reached the bathroom, he caught a glimpse of the front yard through the wood blind. *What? Where did that come from?* He let out a loud gasp as he recognized a life-size statue of Sir Gawain charging full speed ahead on his horse, Alexander. It looked exactly like the statue he'd seen in the cavalry training center in Oomaldee. Unmoving, it listed at a precarious angle, its stone base sunken a foot or more into Dad's perfectly manicured lawn.

Andy bolted downstairs and out the front door to get a closer look. As soon as he left the porch, both Sir Gawain and Alexander started struggling to free themselves from the ground. By the time Andy reached them, Alexander had cleared the hole and pranced across the grass by the street, making divots in the lawn.

Dad's grass!

Out of the corner of his eye, Andy saw one of their neighbors stick her head out her window, staring at the spectacle.

"Glad to see you're doing fine!" boomed Sir Gawain as Andy reached him. "Whoa, Alexander!"

While Andy wanted desperately to come right out and ask what in the world they were doing here, he thought better of it and instead asked, "Can I help you?"

"Au contraire, sir. I have come to help you!"

Andy glanced over. Nosy neighbor talked on her cell phone, wildly gesturing at the spectacle. *Announcing the festivities to the entire street, I bet. Dad's going to flip!*

"What do you mean you've come to help me?"

"An envelope arrived for you at the castle yesterday." Sir Gawain pulled a gold envelope from a pouch hanging around his neck. "Do I need to put it in the mailbox? Mermin wasn't sure."

"No," replied Andy. "I'll take it, thanks."

As Sir Gawain reached down to hand Andy the envelope, a passing car startled Alexander. The stone horse reared up, scaring the unfortunate driver. The driver yelled and waved his hand, laying on the horn. Alexander took off galloping toward the backyard.

“Whoa, Alexander! Slow up!” called Sir Gawain to no effect. “Whoa!”

Andy ran after them. Alexander whinnied, his eyes huge and wild. He bolted toward a tree, nearly unseating Sir Gawain as he lunged under one of the low-hanging branches. The knight ducked just in time. Andy tried running around the other side of the house to cut him off and keep him in the backyard, but when he tried to block the stone horse’s path, Alexander nearly trampled him. Out of breath, Andy stopped chasing and retreated to the safety of the deck. He watched the chaos as Alexander ran laps around the house.

Then he had an idea. As Alexander rounded the corner and charged into the backyard again, Andy pulled the gold key from his pouch and held it up. “Please make him stop.”

As quickly as Alexander had taken off, he came to an abrupt halt. He stopped so suddenly, Sir Gawain nearly catapulted over his head. Alexander shook his mane and snorted, eyeing the key and breathing heavily. The knight let out a snort of his own and exclaimed, “Wow! Alexander’s never done that before!”

“He’s never been honked at by a car before!”

Andy scanned the lawn. *Dad’s going to kill me!* There were deep divots scarring the whole backyard. It looked like someone had turned up ground to plant a garden. *The front can’t look any better. I’m so dead!*

Sir Gawain guided Alexander to where Andy stood on the steps of the back deck as Andy dropped the gold key back in the pouch.

“Sorry about the mess,” Sir Gawain apologized. “I hope I don’t get you into too much trouble.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“We best get back,” Sir Gawain said, finally handing the gold envelope to Andy.

“Before you go,” Andy stopped him, “can you tell me how you got here?”

Alexander tossed his head about as Sir Gawain explained. “Well, like I said, this gold envelope arrived at the castle yesterday. It being addressed to you, the King asked Mermin to find a way to deliver it to you since you’d told him it was illegal to open other people’s mail. Mermin knew the easiest way was to use the Appearo Beam, but he feared the letter was too small and might not travel well. Since I’m a statue, and he remembered what happened with your gold key, he decided to see if I could deliver it. And, well, here I am.”

Andy’s heart jumped. “Thank you, Sir Gawain! I’ve missed everyone so much.” He paused and then asked, “How did Mermin know you’d come to life once you got here?”

“He didn’t. He hoped the key would wake me up like it did in Oomaldee. He put this pouch with the letter in it around my neck just before he beamed me here. It’s funny, Andy. Ever since the key woke me up, I can hear conversations and other sounds, I just can’t move if the key’s not nearby. Fascinating what people will say around me. I feel like a knight on the wall, listening in on people’s conversations.”

“I don’t get it. I’ve tried waking up that gnome statue for months. Nothing’s ever happened,” Andy said, pointing at the ugly statue standing nearby.

“A gnome?” replied Sir Gawain, laughing.

“Yeah.”

“Andy, that’s no gnome. Gnomes would be insulted if they knew what you just said. My guess is, the key only works on objects from Oomaldee, where its magic comes from.”

Andy thought about that until Sir Gawain interrupted, "Great seeing you again! I think you'll need to take the key inside so I can change back into a statue before I go back. Mermin said only non-living objects can transport with the Appearo Beam."

"Oh, right," he replied. "Thank you, Sir Gawain. Please tell everybody I miss them."

"I'll be sure to let everyone know."

Andy smiled. It had been so good seeing someone from the land he loved.

"I need to head to the front yard so Mermin can see me and take me back with the Appearo Beam. Sorry again for messing up your grass," he said, waving. "Give me a couple minutes to get back into position before you go inside, okay?"

Andy stayed on the deck for several minutes before heading in. When he did, he raced to look out the front window. Sir Gawain and Alexander had gotten back into the foot-deep hole and were again listing greatly on their stand. Alexander had resumed his pose, running full speed ahead, with Sir Gawain bracing for battle. They disappeared a minute later.

As soon as they departed, Andy saw movement in several windows down the street as spectators left their lookout posts.

Great, the whole neighborhood'll be talking. Andy groaned. Dad's going to have a fit about his yard.

He looked down at the gold envelope in his hand. The address read:

Andy Smithson, he whose longing shall be satisfied

Despite his sense of impending doom at what Dad would say, a smile broke out across his face. He ripped it open. A single piece of parchment read:

You have learned your lesson well,

*On the past you should not dwell.
For with sorrow, you're replete,
Your misstep, ne'er to repeat.*

*Turn now your attention,
And give not in to apprehension.
For the urgent task at hand,
All your might it will demand.*

*Enemy without, a threat,
Bold incursion to regret.
Enemy within, a debt,
All things right you must set.*

Andy could not contain himself. He jumped up and down, celebrating, "I'm going back! I'm going back!"

He danced around the downstairs, running laps from the living room through the family room, into the kitchen, and around the breakfast nook. He finally collapsed, happily falling into the couch as he passed through the family room for the umpteenth time. The smile would not leave his face—at least not until he remembered the mess and glanced into the backyard a few minutes later. *Yikes! I better see if I can fix any of that before Dad gets home!*

He spent the next hour doing his best to restore his dad's prize lawn. He ignored the nosy neighbors when they reappeared while he worked on the front yard. When he finished, he stood admiring his handiwork. *Well, it looks a lot better than it did. But Dad's still gonna notice.* Andy had managed to flatten areas where the sod had been disturbed, but the bare areas that Alexander's hooves had trounced repeatedly—there was no hope of fixing those, at least not to a standard his dad would approve. He went back inside

and showered, and since no one had come home yet, he picked up his sword fighting book with greater purpose.

Not long after, Andy heard the first explosion. Mom and Madison were back and had seen the yard.

“Andrew Smithson,” came the call from downstairs.

Well, she didn't use my middle name. That's got to be a good sign...I hope.

Andy found Mom looking out the front window, shaking her head.

“What happened, Andy?” She tried hard not to lose her temper. She took measured breaths and moved her hands up and down to calm herself.

“Well, a horse—” Andy began.

Madison stuck her face around the corner and gave him a smile that said, *Let's see you get out of this one.*

“Thank you, Madison. You may go,” Mom said, having seen her with the eyes in the back of her head.

Madison scowled and headed upstairs.

“Mom, I'm telling the truth. This horse got loose in our yard. It ran around the house several times. I tried to stop it, but it almost ran me over.”

“And where is this horse now?”

“How should I know?” As he said it, his conscience protested. He hesitated, opened his mouth to say more, then thought better and closed it again.

She remained quiet for several minutes, thinking hard.

Andy broke the silence, “After the horse left, I went out and pushed down the worst parts, but there are some spots that are bare. I couldn't fix those.” Andy hoped his parents would not hear the neighbors' version of events anytime soon.

Mom let out a long, slow breath. After a few more minutes of silence, she finally looked at him and said, “Andy, I don’t know what happened. From the looks of the lawn, it’s clear a horse was somehow involved. Thank you for trying to fix what you could. Because there are no stables anywhere near here— I’ve no idea—” She shook her head, disbelieving, then added, “Your father’s going to be furious.”

Andy didn’t respond.

“Please go find something to do until dinner.”

Madison slammed the door of her bedroom as he reached the top of the stairs grinning.

A week later, the tornado of Dad’s fury had blown itself out. Madison stood against the wall of the pantry in her PJs, one side of a cereal box resting on the top of her head, the bottom of the box snug to the wall. Mom drew a line and wrote, “Maddy, age 13.”

“You’re next, Andy,” Mom said.

Andy stood as straight as he could and waited for her to mark his height on the wall. When she finished, she wrote, “Andy, age 11 + 2 mo.”

“You’re still the same height as you were two months ago,” his sister teased. “The same height as me when I was nine!”

“That’s enough, Maddy,” Mom warned.

Yes, Andy had to endure Madison’s birthday today. When Little Miss Perfect had asked to go to the museum with several of her friends to celebrate, his only thought had been, *You’ve got to be kidding.*

“That’s a great idea, Maddy!” Dad had exclaimed. “An educational birthday celebration!”

So today he and a squawking, screeching gaggle of girls would be stuffed into a SUV to go to the natural history museum, one of the most boring places on the face of the planet. This particular hoard of girls happened to also find boys of his size and maturity great sport. Only the thought of

returning to Oomaldee kept his spirits up. He had read the letter more times than he could count, and while its ominous tone concerned him, the promise of seeing everyone again more than made up for it.

“Better go get showered and dressed, Maddy. We need to leave in an hour,” Mom said after breakfast.

Madison went upstairs. Andy followed.

Several minutes later, Madison let out a blood-curdling scream. Sitting on his bed, Andy smiled and laughed.

“Mom! There’s...there’s...there’s a snake in my room!” his sister screeched.

Andy heard Mom and Dad’s hurried footsteps on the stairs.

“Andy! Come here!” bellowed Dad a minute later.

“I came back from the bathroom. I didn’t have my glasses on and, and, and—that was on my floor!” Madison stammered, pointing.

Andy entered the violent peach room, trying desperately to hide a smile that hadn’t gone away for the last several days. Yes, he felt like his old self again.

Dad held up a twenty-inch inflatable toy snake and shook it as he entered. “Might you have any ideas what happened, Andy?”

He couldn’t hold it in. Sneaky snickers escaped, giving him up to face punishment. He doubled over in laughter.

Mom and Dad attempted to stay straight-faced and serious, but Mom launched into a fit of giggles and then, shockingly, Dad couldn’t keep it together either and snorted. His laughter soon turned to roaring and he, too, doubled over.

Madison watched, fuming.

“Ma-Mad-Maddy, we’re not laughing at you,” Mom managed to get out. “It’s just that it’s...it’s been...” She doubled over again in a fit of laughter.

Dad finally composed himself, clearing his throat. "What your mother's trying to say is that it's been a long time since Andy's played a trick on anyone, let alone laugh like he is. It's just good to see." He smiled at Andy.

Andy stood there, not knowing what to say. Not only did he not get in trouble, but Dad laughed.

"Oh honey, come on. Lighten up. You have to admit, the joke was pretty funny," Mom said as Madison continued pouting.

"It wasn't funny," Madison insisted through gritted teeth.

An hour later, Andy found himself wedged between the door handle and bony Ashley in the backseat of his mom's new SUV. Sitting by the other door, Madison behaved like her usual annoying self. She kept whispering to Sarah, Ashley, Alexis, and Taylor, who would all snicker and glance over at him. Mom and Dad, comfortably seated in front, chose to ignore this.

The ride was long and boring. Andy tried to ignore the squawking and screeching inside the car as he endured the monotony of square houses and limestone buildings passing by on the outside. At long last, Dad pulled up in front of the stately natural history building. The girls, including Mom, got out.

"The men will go park the car," Dad announced, winking at Andy in the rearview mirror.

After finally finding a parking space, he and Dad got out and started the trek back to the building.

"Your mom says you've been in a better mood over the last week. Did you want to tell me anything about the lawn?"

Andy frowned and replied, "No." He looked down at the pavement as they walked.

"I expect you to behave yourself while we're here, son."

Andy chose not to respond.

Upon reaching the girls, Mom handed him a map of the exhibits.

“Ooh, I want to see the dinosaur fossils!” Madison shouted, examining her own copy.

“The woolly mammoth looks awesome!” added know-it-all Sarah. “Did you know that scientists say the last woolly mammoth went extinct four thousand years ago?”

“Why, no I didn’t, Sarah. Thanks for sharing that,” replied Mom, smiling.

Satisfied that her contribution had been appreciated, Sarah added, “Yeah, and I read that scientists think they may be able to clone one and bring it back.”

“Well, that would be fascinating, wouldn’t it?” replied Mom.

Andy rolled his eyes. *She’s more annoying than Madison.*

“Can we see the volcano exhibit?” asked Alexis.

“I don’t see why not,” replied Mom.

“And I’d like to see the Animals of the Plains,” chimed in Taylor.

Seeing a pyramid drawn on the map, Andy asked Dad, “It says here there’s an exhibit, Snakes of Ancient Egypt. Can we see that?”

Dad smiled and said, “If we have time, son.”

They spent the better part of three hours looking at stiff woolly mammoths, stuffed furry gophers, rigid rabbits, petrified penguins, and starched Tasmanian tigers (extinct in the twentieth century, the sign said). The girls oohed and aahed in an annoyingly high-pitched squeal at a baby dodo bird they all agreed was “so cute.” Andy grew bored. *Enough furry, stuffed animals*, he thought. While Mom and Dad read a sign next to the stiff, glaring cave lion, and the gaggle of girls pointed at the various occupants of a Stone Age scene, Andy slipped away to look for the Egyptian exhibit. Using his map, he easily found it up on the third floor.

As Andy walked below the massive archway into the enormous room housing Snakes of Ancient Egypt, he noticed a larger-than-life model of a golden snake slithering up the wall, crawling upside down along the curve of the arch, down the other side, circling the perimeter of the entire room. A

fancy sign read, "Apophis was an evil god in ancient Egyptian religion. So large was this golden snake that his body stretched for miles. Every day he attempted to swallow the sun, invoking the wrath of Ra, the sun god."

"Cool," Andy said in awe under his breath.

Nearby, Andy saw another sign labeled "Snake Facts." Curious, he read, "Snakes are cold-blooded and do not have the ability to keep their body temperature at a constant level. Unable to hear, snakes sense predators and prey by picking up vibrations through their jawbone. Snakes use a forked tongue to smell, which is why they keep it moving constantly. Snakes do not have eyelids. All snakes are carnivores, and most varieties have over 230 teeth, which are pointed backwards to grip prey."

"Good to know," he acknowledged aloud.

He walked past elaborately detailed stone sculptures of serpents the Egyptians worshiped, eventually coming to several spiral snake pedestal tables. While there were instructions about how to play Mehen, the Forbidden Game of the Snake, Andy didn't stop. An ancient golden statue of King Tut had caught his attention. He walked toward the far wall to check it out, but before getting there he saw a statue of a winged snake. He stopped briefly to read the sign: "Winged drakontes were believed to live under frankincense trees. They could have been a big problem for ancient Egyptians if not for the fact that the female killed the male during mating and the young, born live rather than via eggs, ate their way out of the womb, thus killing the mother."

"Uh, yuck, that's disgusting."

Arriving at the statue of King Tut, Andy felt dwarfed by its size. He leaned forward to examine the headdress more closely and noticed a giant cobra poised to strike carved in gold above the king's forehead. While he had seen pictures of King Tut in this same headdress before, he had never paid attention to the cobra on it. A sign nearby read, "The uraeus was seen as a royal symbol. Historians believe the goddess Isis created the first uraeus and

considered it the instrument by which she gained the throne of Egypt for Osiris.”

“Awesome!” whispered Andy.

A larger model of the uraeus stood nearby, inviting closer study. Positioning himself squarely in front of the poised cobra, Andy stared into its round, quarter-size eyes. Remembering that snakes do not have eyelids and therefore cannot blink, he jumped when the serpent in front of him suddenly did just that.

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