

SOLDIE

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Wendy L. Anderson

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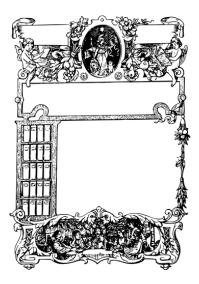
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DUST THE MAD SOLDIER'S EYES





The library was full of books and antiques, with walls covered in wood paneling and watercolor paintings. Tall over-stuffed chairs sat next to artfully carved tables covered in lace doilies topped with delicate teacups, and yellowing pictures in silver frames. Busts of eagles and owls carved out of marble and many vases of fine colored glass decorated the room. Thick rugs weaved in rampant flower patterns and fleur-de-lis covered the hardwood floors. A large bay window with a narrow red velvet bench covered one wall

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and was bordered by thick burgundy curtains tied neatly back with heavy tassels.

In front of a towering bookcase, was a huge intricately carved, cherry wood desk. Among the many curious objects upon that desk was an empty crystal ink well, blank yellowing paper, various pens and pencils, and a stack of used drawing pads.

A huge cherry wood bookcase took up the entire wall to the back of the library. Upon the bookcase's shelves, numerous books stood lined up neatly from tall to short. Bookends of various kinds, picture frames, and knick-knacks also decorated the shelves. The second to highest of the shelves held a set of encyclopedias on flower species, replica figurines of soldiers from the Great Wars and fantasy figures, and large glass paperweights in the shape of jewels. Though the room was cluttered, not a speck of dust could be found.

It was approaching evening and a brass clock made perceptible ticks as the hour hand moved. It chimed midnight and the magic hour approached when the library would *come to life*.

"He's at it again!" A Redcoat soldier

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grumbled through clenched teeth.

"Yea, we can all hear him." The Civil War soldier grumbled back. He shook his musket a little in response and the bayonet rattled in the end of the barrel. Then he moved his head back and forth slowly working out the stiffness in his neck.

"I'm not sure I can stand much more of this. It's the same every night!" The Redcoat sounded exasperated emphasizing each word. He rolled his shoulders as life slowly seeped into his painted pewter shoulders, now flushing with life.

"There ain't nothin we can do it about it so just shut your pie-hole." The Civil War soldier grumbled back.

Nearby, on a plastic stand, the figurine of a fantasy character stiffly turned her head and stared toward the place where the two arguing soldiers stood at attention. The sides of the dragon she rode expanded and contracted as it took a deep breath and let it out with a sigh. Tiny puffs of dust blew from his small nostrils like wisps of smoke.

"I am disturbed as well, but arguing will not help." The girl painted in jewel tones and made of resin admonished. She tried to soften her voice so the soldiers would not think she was annoyed at them. Though she rode a dragon, held a long dagger in a fighting pose, in her heart she really wanted to be a peacemaker. Her stiff other hand pointed outward towards an unknown destination.

It was growing later in the evening and every night, around this time when the library magically came to life, the sound of sorrowful crying echoed from down the hall. It started as low moaning and then turned into crying and then sobbing and sometimes, screams.

"Well, someone simply *must* do something!" The Redcoat suggested. "I cannot go on listening to this every night."

"What can we do?" The Civil War soldier, who was always in opposition with the Redcoat, asked sarcastically.

The female figurine was gaining mobility with each minute. She was dressed a strange costume and rode a dragon. No one knew what story she was from.

"I think we should find out who cries?" Her arm dropped a little more. The two soldiers began to move more as life seeped down their torsos and down into their legs.

As soon as the three were fully mobile, the girl jumped off the back of the small dragon she rode. She gave him a pat on the head and the dragon gave a yawn and spread his wings out before stepping down from their pedestal.

"Screaming and crying all night long!" The Civil War soldier spoke sympathetically as he arched his back and stepped down from his pedestal.

"I still think someone should do something." The Redcoat stepped down from his platform that matched the Civil War soldier's and he quickly took three steps away from him as if he could no longer stand to be at his side.

"I agree we should do something. My heart breaks to hear the crying of the poor soul whose anguish rings out each night." The girl took a few steps to the edge of the wooden shelf they stood on and she looked out over the vast library.

The Redcoat mumbled under his breath, "I said *someone* should do something, I was not implying *we* should do something!" Sounding shocked and indignant.

"What could we do anyway? We're just figurines? We ain't even meant to be played with, we're just useless decoration."

"Perhaps *you* are useless, but I've seen plenty of action!" The Redcoat's accent made his boast sound bold.

"I can show you some action if you want. I'm itchin for a fight!" The Civil War soldier brandished his musket at the Redcoat and the loose bayonet rattled sounding as if might fall off.

"Oh, posh!" The Recoat scoffed. "I could take you on with one arm tied behind my back!"

"Stop!" The girl stepped between the two. "You are always fighting. Let us work together now. We have got to find out who is crying so that we can help in some way."

"What do you suggest?" The Redcoat looked doubtfully at the girl. "Not that I think *you* could come up with anything constructive. What are you anyway? I've never heard of a girl riding a dragon! It's preposterous!"

The girl did not acknowledge the Redcoat's insults, instead, she looked back out at the vast library toward the direction the sobbing came from. Her brow knit together as she pondered the situation.

"Someone should do something!" The Civil War soldier pushed his blue cap askew and clasped his hands over his ears. "I can't take this crying every night."

The girl turned and surveyed both soldiers. Crafted by a talented artist, they were decorative figurines from a collection of the 'Soldiers of the Great Wars and Civilizations.' They had been sculpted perfectly with exact details specifically designed to represent the wars they fought in. The Civil War soldier's uniform looked a little large on his slim frame and he had been sculpted with a slightly rumpled appearance.

The Redcoat was pristine in his red coat and white vest, silver buttons, white britches, tri-corn hat, and polished black boots.

"May I remind you, you both are part of the same collection! You should work together, you are made of the same stuff, just painted with different costumes."

"That is something only a *female* would say!" The Redcoat sniffed.

"Hey, show some respect for the Lady!" The Civil War soldier stiffened. The Redcoat looked away as if he was bored with the conversation. The distant crying rose a bit louder and it turned into a wail of jumbled words.

"The crying is getting worse." The girl suggested.

"I'm open to suggestions." The Civil War soldier agreed, "anything to stop that howling!"

They moved to the edge of the bookshelf that was their perch and they looked across the large room in the direction the crying came from.

"We must go see who is crying and help them." She suggested again.

"Right! We have only got to get down four shelves to the floor where, who knows what dangers lurk, cross the room to the other side and go out into the hallway without knowing where to find the dreadful screamer."

"We could just follow our ears?" The Civil War soldier suggested.

"I for one am not keen on the idea. Though I would like to hear an end to the wailing of the individual who is making that horrifying sound." The Redcoat with his hands fisted at his side. "That settles it, we will go and find who is suffering and help them." The girl nodded once having made up her mind.

"Right! Let us know how that goes." The Civil War soldier stalked back to his pedestal where he sat down and covered his ears.

The girl turned and strode purposefully towards her dragon who lay snoozing. The Redcoat followed her slowly.

"Do you think you can fly on that dragon? Can you see in the dark? Can you make it back by morning? You have to be back on your pedestal before morning! You've only got a few hours to find this person who wails and you don't even know where to start looking!"

The girl stood with her chin held high. "I must try, but I do not think my dragon can fly me that far."

The Civil War soldier moaned covering his ears as the sobbing continued.

"I will ask the Angel who glows. She is high above us all and can see very far and can tell us all we need to know."

"I'll go with you if only for something to take my mind off that crying." The Civil War soldier stood, grabbing his musket. His flat hat, cocked to one side on his head, made him look very young. The artist had sculpted a slight dimple in the boy's chin and he gave his shelf companions a one-sided grin. His cerulean eyes held a sparkle that had not been painted there and he challenged the Redcoat with his bravery.

The Redcoat threw his hands in the air, "Oh, alright! I will go along, though I think it is a waste of time."

"And I will go!" A strong male voice greeted them from the shadows at the back of their shelf. Out stepped a Knight in Shining Armor who shone with silver plate and scrolling gold in-lay. At his side was a sword set with glass jewels in the hilt. His armor clanked a little as he approached and his voice issued from within a full-face silver helm. "I will go on this quest with you, My Lady." The knight made a gallant bow, gauntleted arm swept back.

"Aren't you from the shelf next to us?" The Redcoat questioned.

"I am. I heard you speaking of the quest to help the person who cries and I am determined to join in the adventure."

"You are welcome, Sir." The girl

approached the knight and announced her plan. "First, we are going up to the Angel to seek her wisdom in this matter."

"A sound plan, my Lady. The Angel sees all from her high perch. She will know what to do." He nodded. "Before we go, may I introduce myself. I am King Charlemagne a replica from medieval times." He removed his helmet and smiled. He had a handsome face and the artist had given him bright blue eyes and long flowing, golden locks, and a pointed beard and mustache.

"I am Willow." The girl gestured towards her dragon. "This is my dragon, Bramble."

The dragon heard his name, stretched out violet-colored wings, and bobbed his snout in greeting. His scales on his neck and body glistened with metallic browns, greens, and purples. The King looked amazed at Willow's strange costume with her tall boots. Her hair was held back by a band with a white feather decoration on the side. Two braids fell forward over her shoulders while the rest of her hair fell down her back in sculpted waves.

"Private Billy Banks, Civil War soldier. Just call me Billy!" Billy offered his hand to the King and shook it vigorously. The King turned toward the Redcoat for his introduction.

"I am Major Thomas Gage, 18th Century British Army Soldier, at your service, Sir." The Redcoat gave a smart salute. "You may call me Major Tom."

"Welcome King Charlemagne," Willow began, "we must hurry as you know, we need to get back to our pedestals before morning. The way is dark, unknown, and may be dangerous."

"Then let us be gone. I will follow you, my Lady." King Charlemagne bowed again and placed his helmet under his arm, sweeping his other hand out indicating that she should lead.

"How do you propose we get up to the top shelf?" Major Tom questioned Willow, sounding doubtful that she could.

"We will climb the books." Willow confidently walked away.

Tall volumes stood in a neat row toward the back of the shelf. Willow, Major Tom, and Billy Banks decorated this shelf with the row of encyclopedias on flower species. Willow began to tug on the volume marked "Roses through Zinnias" and it slid from its place. The others rushed to help her and soon the book was lying flat on its side. The next book they stacked on top the other and staggered it back, other volumes following until they had a stairway of books high enough to reach the shelf above. When they all climbed to the upper shelf, they stood staring in awe.

The Angel had huge silver wings and long flowing hair. A full, draping skirt fell from her waist that was a container of water with silver glitter inside. Made of pressed, molded acrylic, she was beautiful and regal. Her head was bowed and she held a book. It was spraypainted with more silver and glitter and her eyes were closed.

"Oh great!" Billy lamented, "She's asleep still. Maybe she doesn't come to life the way we do every night?"

"Maybe her batteries are dead?" Major Tom wondered sarcastically. "Either way, I have my doubts a plastic angel sitting in a skirt of glittery water could tell us anything."

"Hey! Show some respect you blasted Redcoat!" Billy pointed his musket towards the Major and they squared off as if they were going to fight.

King Charlemagne ignored them and approached the Angel. Walking around her he surveyed the tall silver base the Angel stood on.

"Our Lady Angel is on a timer. We must wait until she awakens." The King announced.

Bramble, had followed Willow up the book stairs, circled three times, and then curled up in a ball with his long tail tucked under his chin and swiftly fell asleep. Tiny clouds of dust puffed from his nostrils.

The clock below chimed one o'clock in the morning.

CHAPTER TWO

After a moment, a slow white glow began to shine around them and the glitter in the base of the Angel's skirt began to rise and swirl magically. The Angel's silver eyes opened, and her chin slowly rose and surveyed the figurines. Soft music began and a tinkling rendition of 'Amazing Grace' filled the silence on the high shelf. The Angel did not seem surprised at all to find four strange figurines and a dragon there.

"My Lady, forgive the intrusion this evening, but we are on an important quest."

The Angel lowered her book a little and stared at Charlemagne who had spoken. Moving slowly, her gaze rested on each of them as if she were trying to gain some understanding as to why they had come to her. The water-filled skirt glowed brighter and the silver glitter inside danced.

"Lady Angel, we come seeking your help. Night after night we are upset by the distant crying of a troubled soul. We wish to know why he cries and how we can help? Can you tell us?" Willow pointed into the distance.

"Yes, please tell us so someone can put an end that infernal crying!" Major Tom added testily.

"It is the Mad Soldier who cries out in anguish each night. Do you truly wish to help him?"

"Yes," Willow nodded, "We want to help ease his suffering."

"Then you must go out of the library, into the hallway, and across to the boy's room. There, you must dust the Mad Soldier's eyes."

All the figurines looked surprised at what the Angel said, and then they looked at each other with incredulous looks on their faces. The music box song continued.

"Too bad figurines don't cry real tears!" Major Tom angrily retorted. "Then he wouldn't need to be dusted. I'm surprised he doesn't sneeze instead of carrying on like this."

"How can this be, my Lady?" Charlemagne shifted closer and the glow from the angel's skirt illuminated his silver and gold armor. "We do not fully understand."

"The Mother grows old and forgets to dust

the Mad Soldier, he cries out because he cannot see when he wakes each night, if you want to help him, you must go to him and dust his eyes, help him to *see*."

"You mean the old woman forgets to dust his eyes and it is making him scream with madness?" Major Tom could not hide his doubt.

"Do not speak ill of the Mother." Willow pointed her long knife towards Major Tom. "She is very careful with us all. Perhaps she cannot reach the Mad Soldier's shelf?"

"You must dust the Mad Soldier's eyes to free him of his sadness. The robot lights the way."

"Where can we find a robot?" Billy asked.

"There is a robot who stands upon the shelve below me," Charlemagne spoke confidently, "with the children's books."

"Dust the Mad Soldier's eyes." The Angel repeated then her head bowed as the music slowed and finished. She fell asleep as the music box played the final notes.

"Well, that was not helpful at all!" Major Tom grumbled. "We might as well go back to our shelf and endure the Mad Soldier's wailing each night." He turned his back and angrily crossed his arms.

The others hesitated too, but Willow was determined. She walked purposefully toward the book stairway and after a few seconds, the others followed. Bramble swooped back down to their shelf.

"I will go down to the shelf and find the robot who can light the way, then I will go find this Mad Soldier and help him." Willow with finality.

"My Lady, if you will allow me, I will accompany you on this worthy quest. I can lead you to the robot and we can venture down from there."

"I will gladly accept your help, King Charlemagne." Willow smiled at the King as he gave her another bow.

"Right, I'm coming too!" Billy fell into step behind them.

The figurines climbed down the book stairway with Major Tom ascending first then Willow, Charlemagne, and Billy. They continued toward the other end of the shelf to make their way down.

"You're all fools! There are untold dangers out there!" Major Tom yelled at them while he returned to his platform. Billy walked by and muttered "Redcoat Coward!" under his breath. Major Tom, "harrumphed" and ignored him. But a few seconds later, Major Tom threw his hands in the air and followed.

On the shelf next to the soldier replicas and the figurine of Willow and her dragon, King Charlemagne's pedestal. He was showed them how to hold on to the wood carvings on the face of the bookcase and swing across to the next shelf and they saw his grand pedestal. It was rectangular, made from white marble. As they walked closer, they heard the clopping of horse hooves. A gray stallion approached from the other end of the shelf stepping high and tossing his head. They heard the jingle of the ornate saddle on his back as he came closer. Charlemagne met his horse and patted the tall beast's head.

"This is my noble steed Tencendor, upon whose back I sit each day." He introduced his horse in a strong noble voice full of pride and affection. The horse tossed his head and from behind them, Bramble gave a hiss and a crouched down in an attack stance.

"Tencendor, you'll not be coming on our quest I'm afraid." The King spoke affectionately to his horse. "The way is not safe for horse travel. Stay here and guard the pedestal well." With that farewell, King Charlemagne placed his crowned helm upon the pedestal leaving it. "I will return before morning!"

The King turned, "Onward!" He pointed.

The figurines walked the long shelf where King Charlemagne's pedestal always sat. The prancing pewter horse followed them and stood steady, watching as the figurines prepared to descend. They moved to the end and passed by small picture frames of children long since grown up, a volume of medieval poetry, a book titled "The Life and Times of King Charlemagne" and then a copy of "Sir Ivanhoe."

When they finally reached the opposite side of the bookshelf, they stopped and looked at an impenetrable wall. The dark cherry wood was sanded smooth when the carpenter had made it. They were faced with this barrier and had to figure away down. The time they had left to complete their journey and return to their pedestals, was growing shorter with each passing minute.

"How we gonna get down to the next

shelf?" Billy questioned while scratching his head under his blue cap. He looked fearfully at the shelf wall.

Willow approached the decorative wood border on the outside edge and clasped on. Reaching around she flung her leg across and climbed down the front carvings. Bramble chirruped and puffed through his nostrils, spread his wings, and followed her over the edge.

Charlemagne did as Willow had done and climbed down into the gloom.

Billy watched as they disappeared and hesitated. He was not fond of heights and swallowed nervously. After a few moments of hesitation and fierce shaking, he took hold of his fear and followed. Slinging his musket strap over his head to rest on his back he approached the edge. Taking hold as the others did, he closed his eyes, grasped the sides tightly, and climbed down.

With a bump, his foot caught on the next shelf ledge down and Willow helped pull him to safety. Billy stood on the solid shelf, wiping his forehead with his sleeve, and regaining his courage. Major Tom descended and they were ready to move on. They turned to face what the third shelf held.

This shelf was cluttered with many toys all neatly lined up. There was a silver spaceship on a conical stand, a few plastic dragons which Bramble greeted with interest. There were plastic horses and various toy attachments such as shields and discarded swords that had lost their owners. A Noah's ark music box rustled busily with tiny animals who walked around two by two. An unfinished, jumbled Rubik cube blocked their path and they moved around it, looked forward, and saw the robot.

He was taller than any other toy on the children's shelf and his helmeted head came just short of hitting the shelf above. Shiny black, metal gleamed at them as they approached.

Willow gasped. "It is Eon, a Galaxy Marauder!"

The robot turned his head at the mention of his name and he surveyed them. Eon Galaxy Marauder was entirely black but for golden glowing crystal shapes protruding from the top of his helmet, his shoulders, elbows, and knee caps. His chest had two golden glowing bands coming down over his

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broad shoulders that converged in the middle at a circular medallion that likewise glowed and cast him in an eerie light. His shielded face came to a point where his mouth should have been and the sharp angles of his helmet made him look far from friendly. The dark wide band that covered his eyes was a plastic shield glistening and shiny like new but that was all that was new about him. As the group drew closer, they began to see the battle damage. Eon Galaxy Marauder was missing his right hand and his left hand appeared to be a weapon of some kind. He had multiple scars on his body as if he had been scraped and scratched or was well played with.

With a jerking, robotic motion Eon Galaxy Marauder turned his head and surveyed each of the figurines that stood gazing up at him. Something inside his helmet whirred and clicked each time he stiffly moved his head. Then his left arm, the one with the weapon, raised and pointed at them.

Charlemagne stepped forward in front of the others with his empty hands up.

"Eon Galaxy Marauder, I am King Charlemagne. I greet you in peace." With a clacking whirr, Eon stepped off of his pedestal and took two steps toward Charlemagne. The crystals on his helm, chest, and the rest of his armor glowed brighter before the robot spoke in a mechanical metallic voice.

"Prepare to be boarded!" His mechanical voice warned then his gun hand raised a little higher.

"Stand down! Galaxy Marauder!" Willow stepped beside the King and gave the order in a strong voice. She held up the hand that always pointed and showed him her palm in a gesture that made the robot halt.

Eon's helm tilted downward so that he could look at Willow.

"You are a Dragon Rider from the Dragon Crystal Planet. Where is your dragon?" Eon Galaxy Marauder asked. Billy gave a low quiet whistle.

"Eon Galaxy Marauder, I am as you say, from the planet of Dragon Crystals. We have come seeking you. I ask you to help us as a friend." Willow continued in a strong voice. "The Angel from above has sent us to you. She told us you would lead us to the Mad Soldier. He needs our help." As he if he knew they spoke about him, the wailing of the Mad Soldier rose from behind them. He reminded them all, he cried out in pain from somewhere out of the library.

There was another whirring and the left arm of the robot rose and pointed his futuristic weapon up into the air. It slid and the metal parts flipped until the gun transformed into a hand. Eon looked at Willow and gave a single nod.

"What is it you require of Eon?" the Galaxy Marauder looked back and forth between Willow and Charlemagne. The brightness of the crystal on the top of his helm dimmed a little as he waited for instruction.

"I am King Charlemagne," the King began, "This is Billy Banks and Willow whom you know, Bramble, and Major Thomas Gage. We are on a quest to search out the Mad Soldier who wails so sorrowfully out yonder library door."

"The Angel on the high shelf sent us to you. She said that you would light the way out of the library, into the hallway, and to the boy's room. Can you take us to the Mad Soldier? We must dust his eyes, for that is the reason he cries out in such anguish. He

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has gone mad because he cannot see and we need to help him."

"Eon knows the way and will lead." Eon the Galaxy Marauder turned and led the way. The clock chimed signaling two o'clock.

CHAPTER THREE

As they followed Eon there came soft footfalls. Out of the shadows, making a slight rustling sound came a new figure. It was a polar bear who had once been white but now, it was a light gray. He was dirty and slightly matted from being held in the loving hands of a boy, a favorite childhood toy. His round black plastic eyes looked over the group and his black plastic nose rose in the air as if he was sniffing the air. Around his neck was tied a long red scarf speckled with faded silver stars. With a rustling slump, the polar bear sat down.

"Who are you?" Billy stepped forward asked the bear.

"I am Christmas Bear!" the polar bear answered proudly. "I used to be a Ty Beanie, but my tag fell off a long time ago. I am called Christmas Bear because the boy received me as a gift at Christmas and that's the name he gave me!"

"Welcome Christmas Bear." Willow and Charlemagne each offered their greeting. "We are on an important mission to save the Mad Soldier who cries out each night," Willow explained.

"I heard you telling Eon. I want to come and help." Christmas Bear nodded his head.

"How can he help? He's just a floppy old bear! He doesn't even have hands!" Major Tom stepped out from where he had been lurking. He spoke angrily, "how can he be of any help?"

"He can come if he wants to!" Billy shook his musket at Major Tom.

"I believe he should be able to come along." Charlemagne agreed.

"You shall come Christmas Bear and we are happy to have you with us!" Willow smiled. She gave the bear an affectionate pat on the head. From behind them perched on the edge of the shelf, Bramble agreed with a dusty puff.

"We must go. The hour grows late." Eon turned to lead the way. "We must be back to our shelves by six chimes of the clock."

Around them, the library was frighteningly dark. The group now consisted of seven who wanted to help.

Eon turned and pushed his face shield up.

A long bar of light glowed brightly where eyes should have been and lit up the shelf with a bright beam. The eerie glow showed the rescue party the path ahead. In a single line, the figurines followed Eon, as he led the way.

Christmas Bear took up the rear. The group came to the end of the shelf and Eon motioned for them to follow. Reaching around the center wall of the bookshelf he flung a leg across it, straddling the center barrier. Behind him was the vast emptiness of space and each figurine knew that to fall meant scratched paint, or worse, broken parts. Once Eon's foot was on the other side, he easily crossed over. He was an action figure and had more moving parts and dexterity than the others. Charlemagne went next and his armor shone brightly as Eon's light illuminated him from the other side.

Willow was next and she lightly slipped across. Charlemagne was there to lend Willow a hand and took the opportunity to hold her hand and stare fascinated into her sable eyes. With a few flaps of his wings, Bramble soared over to the next shelf.

Major Tom pushed his way forward and

barely scraped his buttons as he crossed over to the next shelf. Next came Billy who hesitated. He swallowed hard and pushed his hat back on his forehead. Looking down over the edge he whistled low as he judged just how far down it was to fall. He began to shake with nervousness.

Christmas Bear rubbed his head on him and said, "You can do it!"

Billy arranged his musket strap on his back and then followed. Shaking with fear, just as the others did, he straddled the center bookshelf wall and reached a foot over to the other side. He froze with fear. Suddenly, a large black metal hand flashed out and Eon grabbed Billy by the shoulder, pulled, and then he was safely on the other side. Billy wiped his forehead with relief.

"I don't much like heights," he apologized.

Eon reached around the wall again and grabbed Christmas Bear by the back of his scarf. As he spun through the air, Christmas Bear made a joyful "weeeeee!" noise as Eon swung him over with the rest of the group. He made a rustling sound as his body, full of beans, landed. Now that they were all on the other side, they turned to see what inhabited this shelf.

Two towering, marble unicorn bookends were stationed between loose leaves of ivory colored papers. Eon led the way with his light and as they passed, he turned his head lighting the papers. The others looked at what was there. They pushed a few pages aside and leafed through what turned out to be drawings. As they passed by, they admired the artist's workmanship.

The Mother had kept these drawings made by the boy. There were drawings of robots and dragons, many of cars, and monsters the boy dreamed up. There was also a close-up portrait of Willow with Bramble flying in the background. One drawing in colored pencil was of Billy and Major Tom sharing a campfire.

Major Tom scoffed. Billy shook his head sadly and moved on, but Major Tom stopped longer in front of this picture to stare at it.

There were pictures of Christmas Bear on a beach sitting on his rump surrounded by seashells and drawings of him on various adventures. The last picture was of Eon Galaxy Marauder with his missing hand. The boy had drawn sparks and shooting lines as if showing live electrical damage. He stood staring at this drawing and raised his missing hand, looking back and forth from it to the picture.

The whole party had slowed to look at these drawings. The Mother had kept the boy's handy work. An unexplained air of sadness overtook them and they stood, unable to move past these remnants of history.

Charlemagne spoke quietly, breaking the silence. "We'd better move on. We must be back to our shelves by morning."

The party moved on with strangely heavy hearts. Always in the background, the wailing cry of the Mad Soldier reminded them of their quest.

They moved past the last unicorn bookend and various knick-knacks until they reached the end of the shelf. Eon stopped.

"From here, we go down to the next shelf. Hold tight." Eon did as they had done before, grasping the wooden shelf and climbing down. Charlemagne and Major Tom easily maneuvered down. Bramble swooped down. Willow stopped and waited for Billy who stood staring out into the darkness below and shivering with nervousness.

"You'd think it would get easier, goin down after I'd done it a few times." He swallowed and wiped his forehead as if there were actual sweat there.

"I will help you and Christmas Bear get down. Do not worry. Eon and King Charlemagne will catch you at the next shelf." Willow said sympathetically. "We are almost to the bottom."

Billy moved carefully to the side and grasped hold. Shaking violently, he swung a leg over to the other side as he had done before. Closing his eyes, he clung tightly to the wood repeating over and over, "I ain't no coward," under his breath. His musket rattled at his side as Billy shook with fear.

Willow went to the shelf bottom and knelt, leaning over she cupped her hand by her mouth and yelled: "Billy is coming." She straightened and went to help.

"Gently, Billy, this is the last one."

Billy began to ease his way down. With closed eyes, and shaking hands he began his descent to the next shelf. He was doing well, but holding tightly to the wood, with false starts and much shaking, he moved. As he got halfway down his musket swung over to one side and unbalanced Billy. He lost his grip and fell backward with a terrifying scream.

"Heeeelllllppp!" he shouted as he fell. His companions gasped and shouted as Billy tumbled down into the dark gloom.

Willow cried, "Billy!" from the upper shelf as she watched him fall.

Christmas Bear exclaimed, "Oh no!"

Eon, Charlemagne, and Major Tom went to the edge and looked over trying to see where Billy had disappeared to.

Major Tom shouted, "Billy! Are you alright?" No answer came back.

Eon moved his head from side to side casting his beam of light down. Willow climbed down and joined them while Christmas Bear's head looked over the upper shelf edge.

As the beam of light moved over the ground below, it found something. It was a trash can. The darkness within was lit brightly and there they saw Billy lying in a bed of crumpled papers.

"Billy!" Charlemagne shouted. "Billy! Are you alright?"

Eon's light continued to shine on him as the others all watched. Then, Billy began to move slowly. He sat up and shook his head then looked up at the others and waived slowly.

"I'm alright, just a bit shaken up."

"You have fallen in a trash can. We will come to get you out!" Willow was relieved he was unharmed from the fall and shouted back.

They moved back from the lip and everyone started to talk at once about how to get Billy out of the trash can. Christmas Bear watched from the shelf above. Finally, he hollered down until he gained everyone's attention, "Help me down! I can help! I can help!"

"How can he help?" Major Tom scoffed angrily, "He's just beans and fluff!"

"Help me down! I can help!" Christmas Bear continued to shout while waggling his head at them.

Eon acted quickly. Making a mighty leap he jumped to the lip of the upper shelf, he pulled himself up with one hand. After a few seconds, Christmas Bear swung down by his paws and landed with a soft rattle of the beans inside his plump body. He quickly got up and lumbered to the edge. Leaning over, he shouted down to the waiting Billy.

"Billy! We'll get you out. Hold on!"

"How can you say that! We have no way of getting him out of that trash can!" Major Tom's fear was plain on his face. He was worried for Billy and lowered his voice before croaking sadly, "he'll be thrown away!"

The others looked fearful as well and Eon hung his head in sadness. They all feared Major Tom was right and Billy would go out with the trash.

Christmas Bear was dancing with excitement. "Use my scarf! Lower it down and we can pull him up!"

"Christmas Bear!" Willow exclaimed, "that is a marvelous idea!"

Charlemagne went to help undo the knot in the red scarf and unwound it from Christmas Bear's neck. Underneath the scarf Christmas Bear's fur was bright white where it had protected him from getting dirty.

They went to the edge and lowered the scarf down into the trash can.

Christmas Bear shouted, "Billy! Grab the scarf! We'll pull you out."

Major Tom was in front, and he and Charlemagne held the scarf end. Willow stood by to help grab Billy when he climbed up. Eon concentrated his light down into the trash can so that Billy could see. When the entire length of the scarf hung down Billy jumped up and tried to reach the end.

"I can't reach it!" The papers he was standing on bounced as he jumped up trying to reach the scarf end.

"Is there something you can stand on to help you reach?" Major Tom shouted.

Billy looked around they heard him exclaim, "ah-ha!" The papers rustled slightly, and Billy disappeared out of the light but came right back pulling a paper cup behind him. Pushing the cup, he managed to turn it upside down and then, using the crumbled papers, sprang on top of the cup.

"I've got it! Pull me up!"

Major Tom and Charlemagne pulled hard and slowly drew Billy out of the trash can. Willow leaned over the edge and as soon as Billy was close enough, grabbed his arm and helped pull him up.

Everyone cheered Billy and Major Tom clasped him in a hug and beat him on the back, joyful Billy was now safe. Eon stood to the side and watched the reunion. His golden crystals shone brightly as if to glow his happiness.

Christmas Bear rested his head on the edge of the shelf and was looking down into the darkness. Major Tom had let go of the scarf and it tumbled back down into the trash can.

When the celebration was over, they looked over at Christmas Bear who gazed sadly down and they realized his red scarf with the fading silver stars, was gone.

Willow went to Christmas Bear and hugged him around the neck. "You did it! Christmas Bear, you saved Billy. I am sorry about your scarf."

"It's ok." Christmas Bear said firmly, "We got Billy out and that's what counts. Billy, are you alright?"

Billy patted himself down as if checking and then bent down to pick up his musket. He looked at the barrel and answered. "I'm alright, lost me bayonet though." The rattling bayonet had fallen out in the and was now at the bottom of the trash can with Christmas Bear's scarf. He walked over to the bear and patted him on the head.

"Thanks for saving me, Pal! I'm sorry about the scarf."

"It's ok," Christmas Bear repeated, "You're safe and now we can continue our quest to help the Mad Soldier."

The clock chimed signaling three o'clock.

CHAPTER FOUR

With renewed purpose, the rescue party continued down the bookshelf, more cautiously this time, until they landed on to the thick dark carpet below. Eon took the lead and showed them the way. Willow next and Charlemagne beside her. Bramble swooped along. Major Tom walked by Billy's side and Christmas Bear lumbered behind. They began the long trek, across the library floor going around furniture and overstuffed chairs.

The night was darker around them and the library was spooky with figurines and sculptures coming to life all around them. Eon's bright light shone ahead, lighting the flowery upholstery of the overstuffed chairs and the dark wooden legs of the tables. As Billy suggested from the first, they followed their ears and Eon's light, to help the Mad Soldier.

They walked until they came to a rug that stretched-out out the library door and into the hallway. Coming even with the door, they now heard the muffled sound of human voices and saw a white flicker ahead. Eon dowsed his light and they crept forward to look and see who was talking and making the flickering light.

In a large chair sat the Mother. Her grayhaired head rested on her chest and her hands were limp in her lap. She had fallen asleep in front of the television which continued to play the nightly program. The rescue party started forward again, the way now lit by the flickering television. Eon silently pointed across the room to a dark doorway indicating that was their destination. It was obvious to them that they would have to cross in front of the Mother's feet to get to the boy's room. Silently they crept forward.

They reached the green chair where the Mother sat. She was wearing her long green velvet robe and her fuzzy slippers peeked out from under the hem. They could just barely hear her steady breathing as she slept. Her glasses had slipped from her hand and lay on the floor next to her foot. Eon continued to lead the way carefully going past her, but Charlemagne reverently moved the glasses away from the Mother's foot so that she would not step on them upon wakening. As Willow moved past, she carefully laid her tiny hand on the Mother's slipper and gazed up at her. Though from this angle she could not see the Mother's old face, she smiled up at her with obvious love in her eyes.

Continuing past the chair, the small table next to it, were lamp wires and a stack of books rested on the floor, they moved swiftly so that they wouldn't be caught in the open. The dark maw of the boy's room door beckoned to them. The Mad Soldier's crying grew louder the closer they got, and they picked up the pace. Their purpose was renewed as they listened to his sorrowful crying.

Across the room, something was watching them. A large black and white dog was laying in his spot next to the wall. His black eyes slowly opened as he sensed the movement of the figurines. Like a stalking wolf, he slowly got up, crouched low, and crept toward them. Eon was leading the way with his bands of light glowing low and did not see the dog coming toward them, his mouth open, with fangs bared.

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Willow, behind Eon, looked up as Bramble let out a tiny peep of warning, and then she looked over to where the dog was almost upon them. She shouted, "run!"

They all turned and took off at a run back to get underneath the Mother's chair, the dog bolted forward barking. Billy and Major Tom dived under the chair. Eon dowsed all of his lights and ran behind the leg of the side table. Charlemagne lifted the skirt of the chair and frantically waved at Willow who ducked underneath, and then he followed. Bramble clung to the underside of the side table like a bat. Christmas Bear slid under a magazine that had fallen by the chair and hid under the pages.

The Mother was woken by the dog's barking. "Ok Pup," she said to the old dog. "I'll let you out so that you can turn around and come in!" She chuckled. Slowly getting out of the chair, she shuffled to the door and let the dog out. Being a very old dog and having used up his energy on the sprint toward the figurines, he quickly forgot what he was chasing. She patted him on the head, and he stepped outside into the cool night.

The clock chimed signaling four o'clock.

CHAPTER FIVE

The figurines waited in their hiding places while the Mother let the big dog out then she shut the television off and went to her bedroom.

The figurines took off running again. Once they reached the door to the boy's room, they stepped across the threshold into the darkness and safety. Eon switched his light on and lit up the trail ahead. Moving past the boy's small bed they looked around and were not surprised to find the floor empty of all signs of a young boy. No shoes were carelessly tossed under the bed, no stray sock was to be found, and not a scrap of paper or fallen drawing pencil was left. The hardwood floor was clean and not a speck of dust could be seen even in the corners. They could see across the expanse of the room to the top of a short bookshelf where the Mad Soldier stood alone in his misery. Nothing else inhabited the top of the bookcase, but the Mad Soldier.

Eon motioned for them to follow and they crossed to the other side of the bed. The bookcase was half as tall as theirs in the library and would only have come up to the top of a boy's head. It was filled with books! Adventure books, books on insects and spiders, books about dragons, sharks, and snakes stood on one shelf. On the top of the bookcase, the Mad Soldier continued to cry heartbreaking sobs alone.

"How are we going to get up there?" Major Tom asked tilting his head back trying to see to the top.

No one answered, but they began to search for a way up. There was no decorative carving to climb.

"We could climb the bedspread and jump across to the second shelf and then climb the books like we did to get up to the Angel," Willow suggested.

Everyone seemed to think that was a good idea and so they moved to the bed, grasped the cloth, and climbed. Eon grasped Christmas Bear and with a mighty toss, the bear flew through the air and landed safely on top of the bed, then Eon nimbly followed. Billy swallowed hard but seemed to have found some bravery and he too was able to climb with the others. Bramble swooped up

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following Willow. Once they all made it, they walked along the neatly made bed and to the pillow.

It was clear that they were all going to have to jump for it. Taking a running start, Eon leaped across and landed on the shelf. The other's hesitated and Billy looked nervously down at the ground between the bed and the bookcase shaking his head in fear.

Eon's voice rang out from across the shelf. "Prepare to board!" A soft scraping sound followed, and they saw a wooden ruler pushing out from the edge of the shelf. It stretched across making a precarious bridge but was not going to be long enough. Using his great strength, Eon squatted down, hooked his booted feet around the edge of the bookcase, and stretched out completing the bridge with his body. He tilted his head back and lit the way with his light.

"Hurry!" Willow whispered and one by one they rushed across the bridge stepping upon Eon the last few steps. Christmas Bear bounded across last. Once they were on the other side, Charlemagne and Billy helped Eon back onto the shelf. They took a rest after that ordeal and Eon turned his head, lighting the shelf they were on. Just above was the top of the bookcase where they knew the Mad Soldier stood.

The Mad Soldier's sobs turned into whimpers as if he sensed help was coming.

"Come," Willow broke the silence, "we must go and dust the Mad Soldier's eyes, so his sadness will end."

"Right!" Charlemagne looked around with intent purpose.

They walked to the side of the bookshelf and moved a few of the books down making a stairway as they had done before. Just as they were about to go up, Major Tom blurted out.

"Wait!" Major Tom stopped them, "what are we going to *use* to dust the Mad Soldier's eyes?"

They all stopped in shock realizing they had no cloth to dust with. "If only Christmas Bear's scarf wasn't lost, we could have used it," Billy said guiltily.

Each figurine looked at what they had with them. Willow only had her knife. Charlemagne his sword and armor. Billy had his musket and Major Tom only stared sadly at his black boots. Eon stood still and silent. He was all plastic and metal and had nothing soft on him.

"Look around, maybe there is something here we can use," Willow ordered.

They searched the shelf and beside a small wind-up toy and a cracking rubber ball, there was nothing the figurines could use to dust the Mad Soldier's eyes.

"Maybe there is something up there we could use?" Billy suggested.

"We all saw, the Mad Soldier resides alone upon the top shelf," Charlemagne spoke in a sad voice.

"Me!" Christmas Bear spoke up from behind them.

All the figurines turned and looked at the bear where he sat on his rump looking at them. Eon turned his light brighter and the shelf lit up the dirty white bear.

"Use me," he said again. "Use me to dust the Mad Soldier's eyes."

"What are you talking about?" Major Tom said angrily, "We've no time for nonsense from a bear! We've got to find something, finish this, and get back to our shelves! We're running out of time!"

"Christmas Bear," Willow spoke gently,

"we do not understand. You are made of small beans and your scarf is lost. There is nothing to use to dust the Mad Soldier."

"My body is made of beans, but my head is made of fluff. Take it out and use my fluff to dust the Mad Soldier's eyes."

Everyone stood staring at Christmas Bear with varying looks of shock on their faces as they realized what he was saying.

"Christmas Bear, you'll die if we take the fluff from your head," Willow whispered.

"It is our only choice, cut the seam in the back of my head and take my fluff. Help him. Help the Mad Soldier." Christmas Bear insisted.

The figurines began to argue, but Christmas Bear raised his voice above the others, "Hurry or you will not have time to get back to your shelves."

Charlemagne squared his shoulders, approached the bear, and drew his sword. The glass jewels in the hilt glittered in Eon's light.

"I will do it swift and painless." His voice sounded brave, but his eyes were full of sorrow.

Christmas Bear moved forward, turned his

back to them, and bowed his head. There was a seam where his head had been sewn to the rest of his body and the fur was pure white where the scarf had kept him clean.

Willow cried out and ran between Charlemagne and Christmas Bear. She went to her knees and hugged him around the neck.

"Do it!" Christmas Bear said "Hurry!" and he smiled at them. As if the Mad Soldier knew help was on the way he let out a loud wail from above.

Willow looked up at Charlemagne and nodded once, giving him the signal to make the cut. Then she placed her hands on either side of Christmas Bear's nose and looked into his eyes.

Charlemagne's hand shook as the sword descended and split the seam that held Christmas Bear's head to his body.

As the light left Christmas Bear's eyes, Willow cradled his head until Christmas Bear was gone.

They all stood in silence and stared as Christmas Bear's lifeless body slumped down. A few beans trickled out and spilled around Willow's knees. Billy held his hat against his chest and wiped at his face as if real tears were falling down his face. Major Tom snapped his heels together and gave Christmas Bear a solemn salute.

"Come, we must hurry," Eon spoke into their sadness.

Willow turned Christmas Bear's head around. She gently pulled out a tuft of pure white fluff. She cradled the precious stuffing against her chest and rose to her feet.

Eon stooped and carefully lifted his friend's body and grabbing the head walked to the edge of the shelf. He gently let the body fall into the darkness. It tumbled to the floor, coming to rest beside the boy's bed, the beans spilling out across the floor.

Eon turned and explained, "The Mother will find him, and she will mend him."

They had no choice, but to finish what they came to do and turned toward the stairway of books to make their way up to help the Mad Soldier.

When they finally climbed up to the top shelf, they saw him. The Mad Soldier stood alone, in a place of honor, the only toy on the shelf. His sobbing rang out and the figurines walked over to him.

On a plastic stand, they saw a worn action figure that had been well played with. Two clear plastic holders propped him up under his arms and he slumped down with his head bowed. His army green uniform was tattered, he had no accessories and his brown boots were scuffed and looked as if he had been through a war.

The figurines approached and he slowly raised his head, moaning loudly. His face was crumpled in sadness, but it was his eyes that caught the attention of the rescue party. Bright, blue, and completely clear, *without* a speck of dust.

Willow rushed forward clutching the fluff from Christmas Bear.

"Mad Soldier!" She spoke loudly to be heard above his moans. "Mad Soldier, we have heard your cries and we have come to help you!"

The Mad Soldier stopped crying and looked at them as if he did not understand. He looked confused, but at least he was silent now.

Eon's bright light turned an angry red and lit the Mad Soldier's face giving him a haunted visage.

"Mad Soldier, we have come from the great library, down the hallway, and through the boy's room to save you. An Angel told us of your sorrow. She said you've gone mad because your eyes need dusting. We've come to help." Charlemagne stood in front of the soldier.

"Why do you cry out so each night?" Willow sounded just as confused as the soldier looked.

"Speak!" Eon demanded in an angry metallic voice.

"The boy!" the Mad Soldier looked around scared and confused, and then his face screwed up as if he would start his crying again.

"Straighten up man!" Major Tom stepped closer with Billy until they all stood in a halfcircle in front of where the Mad Soldier hung. "Tell us what all this is about!"

The Mad Soldier seemed to try and straighten, he shook his head and made a great effort to speak.

"Why do you cry, Mad Soldier?" Willow asked again more forcefully, still clutching Christmas Bear's fluff.

"The boy," he whispered, swallowed then cleared his throat and went on, "the boy is gone and I am alone, no longer played with, no longer loved." He gave a sniffle, "I cry out every night because the boy is gone. The Mother whispers of him and I cannot stop my grief from flooding out every night when I awaken and realize the boy is gone, never to return." He began to whimper with renewed sorrow.

The figurines stared at him with their mouths hanging open in shock. Bramble peeped once. They hung their heads in sadness, it took many moments for the truth to sink in. The Angel was wrong. The Mad Soldier cried because the boy would never come again. Frozen by their collective grief, the figurines stood with the Mad Soldier.

"Then," Billy cried, "there is no dust in the Soldier's eyes making him mad, and no need for fluff to dust with. Christmas Bear's sacrifice was for nothing!"

One by one the figurines walked away from the Mad Soldier. All but Eon stayed and continued to stare at the Mad Soldier who began to cry again. Though they each understood his pain there was nothing they could do to help him. The boy was gone. Christmas Bear was gone and morning was almost upon them. They had to get back to their pedestals.

They lowered themselves over the ledge and disappeared down the book stairway, the Mad Soldier's cries started up again.

Eon stood before the Mad Soldier and looked at him with his lights dimmed. Then he raised his broken hand and sparks crackled from the end. He stepped toward the Mad Soldier.

Willow led the way down, with Charlemagne, Billy, and Major Tom following. They climbed down the bookshelf, leaped onto the bed, and began to climb down the bedspread. Bramble circled above them never far behind. As they reached the floor and walked over to Christmas Bear's body, they heard the Mad Soldier's cries suddenly cut off and nothing but silence came from above.

The dim glow of Eon's light was coming down the bookcase toward them. Willow stuffed the unused fluff back into Christmas Bear's head.

"The Mother will find him and mend him."

Willow echoed Eon's words. She spoke with authority and the complete faith that the Mother would help the broken bear.

"Come, my friend." Major Tom put his arm around Billy's shoulders and turned him away.

The figurines made their way across the boy's room and no one said anything about the silence or the Mad Soldier ever again.

The clock chimed signaling five o'clock. The sun began to rise.

CHAPTER SIX

The Mother woke early in the morning as usual. She slipped on her green robe and headed toward the kitchen to start her day. As she walked down the hallway, she looked down and saw several figurines on the floor. She shook her head and mumbled about the cat playing with them. Slipping them all into her pocket she went about her chores.

She dusted every shelf in the library with old shaking hands. Carefully, she returned the figurines to their spots and told their still pewter and plastic figures, she would shut the library door so that the cat could not get them again. When everything was dusted and clean, she left, closing the door behind her.

The Mother went into the boy's room and found Christmas Bear torn on the floor. Slowly, she knelt and carefully collected each bean and put them in her pocket. Taking her dusting cloth, she cleaned the room restacked some books the cat knocked down and reached for the Army soldier in his

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stand. She lovingly dusted him making sure to wipe the dust from his shoulders, polish his worn boots and dust his large blue eyes. She rubbed her thumb over a small dark mark over the soldier's heart that had not been there before and placed him back in his stand. Her hand hesitated for a moment before letting go of the soldier. She whispered as she always did on dusting day, "you were always his favorite."

Then the Mother turned and walked out of the quiet room. She grabbed her sewing kit and sat down in her chair to mend Christmas Bear.

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