

A boy saves the world with his wits and dreams.

## **Aidan and the Dragon Girl Save the World**

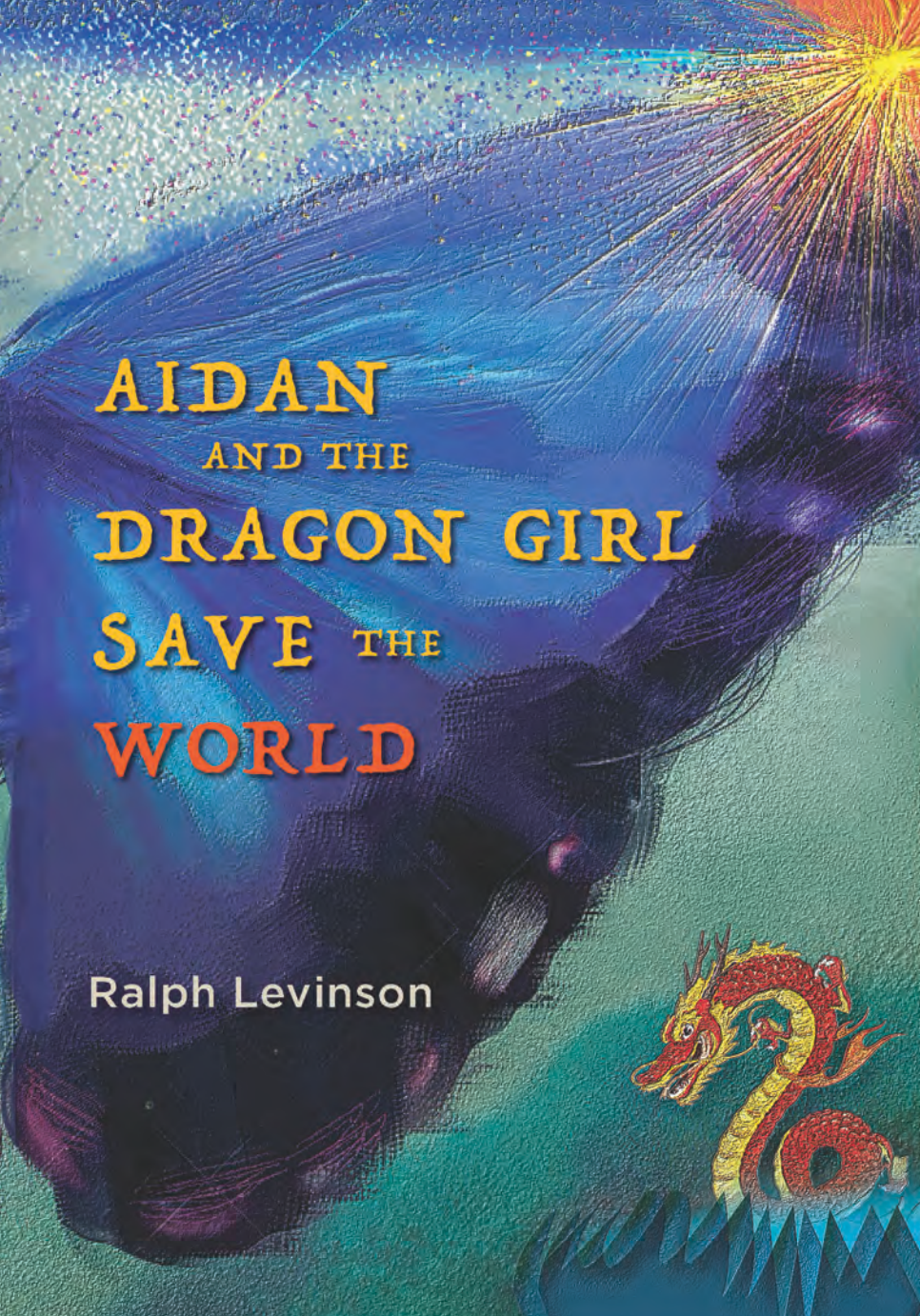
by Ralph Levinson

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**AIDAN**  
AND THE  
**DRAGON GIRL**  
SAVE THE  
**WORLD**

Ralph Levinson



## **Advance praise for “Aidan and the Dragon Girl Save the World”**

*This wonderful story is a fun way to get people of all ages to think about what is real and what is important.*

–Robert Lanza M.D., author of “Biocentrism” and “Beyond Biocentrism”

*“Aidan and The Dragon Girl Save the World” was a pleasure to read with my 8-year-old son. The imagery, action and relatable characters kept us captivated. Universal themes ... are presented in a fresh new way. This book would be a wonderful addition to an upper-elementary classroom.*

–Felicia Linares,  
National Board Certified Teacher

*I LOVED it! A delightful adventure! Aidan and his friends must trust their wisdom to save the world.*

–Julie Snider, Showrunner Assistant, Network TV  
Drama

*Exciting and fun and funny and sometimes scary but not too scary. I kept wanting to read more of this story. It makes you want to stay up and not go to bed.*

–Ruby, age 9

*What a great story! I definitely enjoyed the incorporation of history and adventure in Aidan's dreams. It was hard to put this book down. I wish the adventure could go on forever!*

–Jeremiah, age 12

For more about the book see:  
[ralphlevinson.com](http://ralphlevinson.com)

# **Aidan and the Dragon Girl Save the World**

Ralph Levinson

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Cover design by Scarlett Freund

Dedicated to all, young and old, who try to do the  
right thing, even when it is hard.





# **Chapter 1**

## **The Birthday Gift**

Aidan Alvarado thought of himself as a “kind of” kid: kind of small, kind of skinny, kind of smart, kind of funny sometimes, kind of normal—nothing all that special. He also thought he would have a kind of normal birthday party when he turned eleven.

And that Saturday he did have a normal birthday party. It was a beautiful fall afternoon, with bright blue skies and short-sleeve weather, as expected in Los Angeles. Everyone Aidan invited, fourteen of his best friends from school and soccer, showed up. Aidan’s mother, Anna Prosperowitz Alvarado, reserved an area with picnic tables at a city park close to where they lived. She hired a party bus loaded with video arcade games and arranged for it

to park nearby, a sure-fire hit with Aidan and his friends.

The handful of parents who stayed for the party talked and laughed with Aidan's mother, his grandmother, Jane Prosperowitz, and his grandfather, Dr. Emanuel Prosperowitz, while they indulged in pizza, ice cream and cake. His mother was careful to have healthy snacks and sandwiches available, but they were barely touched by most of the kids, or even most of the adults, for that matter.

Aidan took a break from the video arcade party bus and started kicking a soccer ball around with a couple of his friends when he noticed that his grandfather was no longer talking with the other adults. Dr. Prosperowitz was sitting on a nearby bench reading a book titled "The Science of Mind, Space and Time," nodding in enthusiastic agreement with whatever he was reading at the moment. He was absentmindedly eating a slice of pizza while he read, dripping a few small blobs of the sweet red

sauce on the front of his shirt. He kept reading, now shaking his head in obvious disagreement, as he wiped the sauce from his shirt with his hand without looking, then immediately ran the same hand through his thick gray hair, leaving behind short streaks of sauce. He didn't notice the mess he was making until he turned the page and smeared sauce on the corner of the paper. He used his sleeve to wipe the sauce off the page, staining both the page and his shirtsleeve, and continued reading.

Yep, all normal, Aidan thought, as he sat next to his grandfather.

"Good book?"

"Terrific. The author is a brilliant woman, though she sometimes misses the deepest point about the nature of mind—oh, wait a minute—I'm missing the point, aren't I? Sorry, I guess reading during your party is pretty rude."

"It's okay, Grandpa."

"You're very kind. I see you and your friends are having fun."

"Yeah, it's a great party. Are you gonna play some of the video games on the party bus? They're really cool."

"Maybe when I'm done reading this section I'll give it a try," Dr. Prosperowitz mumbled as he went back to reading.

"Really?" Aidan challenged.

"Nah." Then after a moment's thought he added, "Unless you want me to."

"No worries. You don't have to," Aidan called to his grandfather as he ran back to the bus and his friends.

After the party, when it was time to go to sleep, Aidan found a small gift-wrapped box on his pillow. There was a card on it that read "From Grandpa Emanuel and Grandma Jane. Happy birthday."

When Aidan opened the card there was a recording of his grandfather singing:

“Row, row, row your boat gently down  
the stream.  
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,  
Life is but a dream.”

Aidan had to laugh. His grandfather really couldn't sing very well, and the tiny speaker in the card didn't help his voice sound any better.

Inside the box Aidan found a large metal key and a business card that read:

AIDAN ALVARADO  
STUDENT MEMBER  
LEAGUE OF DREAM DETECTIVES

Along with a handwritten note:

Come by tomorrow for your surprise.  
P.S. Bring the key.

Below that was a crude drawing of his grandfather in a rowboat.

This is *not* a normal gift at all, Aidan thought, but then, it *was* from his grandfather, so that made it normally abnormal.

Aidan thought about the gift. What would the key open? Why the rowboat song? Most of all, Aidan had no idea what a dream detective was. Maybe it was someone who figured out what dreams were about. Why would there be a league of them? Did they have teams that played each other and had championships, like his soccer league?

Aidan gave up trying to figure it out. He'd just have to wait until the next day to find out what the surprise was.

The next day after breakfast Aidan ran the three-quarters of a mile to his grandparents' house to see what his surprise was.

Aidan's grandmother let him in. KoKo, his grandparents' dog, a large, mostly black German

shepherd, wanted to play tug-of-war, but Aidan was too excited.

“What’s the surprise, Grandma? Is Grandpa home?”

“Did you bring the key?”

“Sure.”

“Go on back to the study. Your grandfather is waiting for you. Use the key to let yourself in.”

Aidan raced down the hall to the study door and inserted the large metal key into the lock. He took a deep breath and turned the key. The lock clicked open with little resistance. Aidan hesitated a moment before entering as the door slowly swung open on its own. The study took up the whole back part of the house, and with its 30-foot high ceiling it was more than twice as tall as the front of the house. Aidan had only been in the study a few times before. He always found the chaotic jumble of shapes and colors and the dusty, musty smell to be overwhelming. There were books on shelves, stacked on the floor, and piled on the small wooden desk. In addition to books, there were scary looking masks from Africa,

antique scientific instruments made of glass and gleaming brass, hanging scrolls from China, jars filled with dark liquid and parts of formerly living creatures floating in them that Aidan didn't want identified, a samurai sword, a medieval French knight's helmet, small statues from India, a feather from an extinct bird, sea shells, fossils, sheaths of dried plants, an ancient Egyptian mummy case propped up against an old wooden filing cabinet in one corner, exotic musical instruments, and much more.

At first Aidan didn't see his grandfather high up on the ladder that he used to reach the top shelves. Dr. Prosperowitz was leaning and reaching for something. It looked like he was about to fall off the ladder when he took a small vase off a shelf.

Dr. Prosperowitz climbed down the ladder and sat in one of the two old large chairs with deep, soft, worn, faded gray, purple and green striped cushions, and pointed to the other chair.



“Good morning, Aidan. Have a seat.”

Aidan sat down and fidgeted in the chair. He wanted to jump right in and ask about the league of dream detectives, but Aidan knew better than to interrupt his grandfather’s train of thought as he silently studied the vase.

“When you walked in did you notice that this vase was glowing?” Dr. Prosperowitz asked.

Aidan shook his head no.

“That’s what happens in this study. If you are quiet and pay close attention, the study will find a way to tell you what’s important. Right now this vase is important,” Dr. Prosperowitz explained, as he examined it with a magnifying glass.

“Why’s the vase important?” Aidan asked.

Dr. Prosperowitz looked up and smiled. “Ah, that’s the right question, and that’s what I hope to find out. Why was it glowing? What was it trying to tell me? It’s a mystery. Let’s see, what do we know about this vase? It’s from China, and I think it’s about 1,300 years old, probably from the time of the Emperor Wu.”

"Who's he?"

"He was a she."

Aidan was confused. "So, then she was the *Empress Wu*, right? I thought the emperor was a man and his wife was the empress. Like a king and queen."

"That's how it usually was. In fact, Wu was China's only woman emperor."

"How'd that happen?"

"Wu was indeed married to the emperor and was called Empress Wu for many years. Even as the empress she was much more involved in running the country than many people thought she should be. The empress was just supposed to be in charge of the imperial household and leave the business of ruling China to her husband. But the emperor was sick a lot, and he trusted Empress Wu and counted on her. After her husband died she took over and ruled the country as the new emperor, the Emperor Wu. The new title meant she was the number one,

absolute top boss. It was a very bold move. She must have been very smart, very special, to pull that off."

"Was she a good emperor? Did she, like, fight wars and stuff?"

"I think she really cared about her people, a lot more than most emperors, anyway. She wanted to rule wisely. But many people back then, well, especially men, didn't think a woman should be in charge, and others were greedy and ambitious, so they said bad things about her. Some even tried to get rid of her and take over."

His grandfather handed the vase to Aidan. "Enough about the Emperor Wu. What do you think about the vase?"

"It's not glowing now," Aidan noted.

"Yes, you're right. Good observation. Maybe I was wrong, maybe it was just the sunlight coming through the skylight in the roof."

Aidan turned the vase over in his hands. It was a dull, gray-white ceramic vase, no more than nine inches tall, bulbous and round at the bottom, with a

long slender neck that was tapered at the top. The vase was not very carefully made; there were some lumpy bumpy bits where the clay hadn't been smoothed out carefully before it dried. A rough sketch of a dragon had been scratched into the widest part of the base.

"What does the dragon mean?" Aidan asked.

"Another good question," his grandfather replied. Aidan was proud. He knew that his grandfather liked good questions more than almost anything else.

Aidan gave the vase back to his grandfather. After pausing for a couple of minutes to look closely at it, his grandfather continued. "What do we know about Chinese dragons? Well, first of all, Chinese dragons were not the fire-breathing reptiles you might think of when you think of dragons. They were made up of parts of different animals, but they were also shape-shifters that could take different forms and sizes. In China the dragon was a symbol of the

emperor, but this vase is too rough to have been made for anyone at the imperial court. Some dragons were supposed to be very old and very wise, guardians of spiritual teachings. I'm not sure what that would have to do with this vase, since there isn't any writing or symbols of a spiritual or religious nature on it. Dragons were also powerful water spirits. The Chinese believed that each of the oceans had a dragon king, but that doesn't seem all that relevant for a vase like this."

Dr. Prosperowitz put the vase down on the desk and shrugged. "So, it's not clear to me why this simple little vase has such a crudely drawn dragon on it, with no other decoration or writing. Maybe someone just thought it would look good, or it would bring good luck, or was just practicing drawing dragons in clay. It's hard to know what someone over a thousand years ago might have been thinking."

When his grandfather paused again, Aidan thought it was his chance to ask more about his

birthday gift and the league of dream detectives.

“Tell me about the league of—”

Dr. Prosperowitz interrupted him. “I’m going on a trip. Think about the vase. We’ll talk after I get back.”

Aidan knew he wouldn’t get more out of his grandfather. His grandfather liked him to figure things out for himself. Aidan hugged his grandfather and told him to have a good trip.

“Aidan, remember, dreams can come true, and true things can become dreams. You know, like in the song, ‘Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream.’ Enjoy the study. Come by any time while I’m gone. Just remember: If things get weird, don’t panic. Go with it. Just remember to breathe! Take a slow, deep breath. I love you.”

“Love you, Grandpa.”

As he walked home, Aidan was lost in thought. Had the vase really been glowing? What could that be about? Aidan thought about how awesome it

would be to figure out all the answers to those questions before his grandfather returned.

If things get weird, don't panic? What did *that* mean? Aidan had no idea what that was about, but he decided to ignore it. That was just the kind of thing his grandfather liked to say.

Aidan was so busy trying to work out how he might solve the mystery of the vase that he only realized later that he didn't even ask his grandfather where he was going on his trip or when exactly he'd be back.

That night Aidan had a dream.

He was in a cave. He thought he was alone when he suddenly heard a soft, raspy voice behind him.

"I dreamed I was a butterfly."

Aidan turned and saw an old man with leathery skin, long, wispy white hair, and a white beard and mustache. The old man was sitting cross-legged on a rock. At first Aidan thought it was his grandfather sitting there, maybe playing some sort of trick on him, but he quickly saw that the man in the cave

was much older than his grandfather, and more importantly, he was Chinese. The old man was painting a picture of a butterfly on a scroll that rested on his lap. When he finished the painting, the butterfly flew off the paper and flitted around Aidan. Aidan watched the butterfly continue its journey out of the cave into a lush meadow carpeted with colorful flowers, where it joined hundreds of other butterflies fluttering here and there, feasting on the sweet nectar the flowers provided.

When Aidan turned back to look at the old man, he was gone, but the scroll was still there on the rock where the old man had been sitting. Aidan picked it up, expecting to see more pictures of butterflies. He was surprised to see a picture of the old man instead. He was even more surprised when the painted old man on the scroll started to move his arms in slow, sweeping gestures, the frayed sleeves of his dirty white robe gracefully opening like wings, as he spoke in a soft, whispered mumble.



“People said I was a wise old man, a sage. Then one night I dreamed I was a butterfly. I flew here and there among the flowers of the mountains and valleys.” The old man flapped his arms, his wide sleeves spreading out, and flew off the page, still looking like an old man, but no larger than a butterfly. “I was free and without cares. It was so glorious, so wonderful to be a butterfly!” The old man landed back on the scroll, once again becoming a flat moving painting. He crossed his arms over his chest, as if hugging himself in delight.

“Ah, but then I woke up, and I was once again an old sage, creaky bones and all.” The old man on the scroll yawned and stretched as if he had just woken up. Then he raised his eyebrows and gasped, exclaiming, “So tell me: how do I know I am not a butterfly dreaming I am an old sage?”

Aidan started to answer. Of course you know when you are awake. Everybody does.

But the old sage on the scroll held up his hand to stop Aidan. “Don’t be so quick tell me what you *think* you know.” Then the old sage added what

sounded to Aidan like "Den East is sick. You must help her."

"Who is Den East? How can I help anyone who's sick? I'm not a doctor." Aidan thought that must be pretty obvious, so maybe the old man was starting to lose it. He did look very old and he wasn't making much sense.

"You must help Den East. She is key. See you later, Butterfly."

Aidan woke up.

Butterfly? Den East? The key to what? Were these some kinds of clues? Did they have anything to do with the mystery of why the vase was glowing?

## **Chapter 2**

### **Aidan's Personal Enemy**

The next day was a regular school day, though Aidan thought more about the vase and the clues in his dream than his schoolwork.

But on the way home the day stopped being in any way normal. Standing by a tree was his own personal bully, his archenemy, Jerry, better known as Jerry Berry-Brain.

Jerry brushed his straight black hair away from his dark eyes and stared right at Aidan, stopping him dead in his tracks.

Jerry wasn't as bad as some bullies, and that was part of the problem. If Jerry did things that were really mean, Aidan would have told someone about it. Jerry didn't beat Aidan up or steal his stuff. But if the teacher wasn't looking, Jerry would snap his finger on the back of Aidan's head as he was going by and point and laugh, or blow his nose into a

napkin and then toss it onto Aidan's lunch plate. Jerry would make gross loud farting noises in the boys' bathroom when they were both in there, loudly blaming them on Aidan. Even if the kids didn't really believe Jerry, they'd still laugh at Aidan.

Aidan just took it. It wasn't worth fighting over or becoming a snitch. Jerry wasn't the biggest kid in the class, but he was three inches taller and almost 30 pounds heavier than Aidan. Although Jerry was soft and round, some of those 30 pounds were solid muscle. That was very clear by how he could lift Aidan up like a doll.

Aidan didn't know why they were enemies and Jerry bullied him in particular. Jerry didn't pick on anybody else. Jerry was new in school and he didn't seem to be interested in making any friends, not even with other bullies, as far as Aidan could tell. Most of the time Jerry kept to himself, just not when it came to Aidan.

Jerry had never waited for him after school before. This is not good, Aidan thought. He figured the best thing to do was to keep his mouth shut and wait for Jerry to make his move.

"My name is Jeremiah. Jeremiah Hu," Jerry announced after staring Aidan down for what seemed like forever.

Aidan shrugged. Jerry pushed him gently on the shoulder.

"No shrugging. So, you know my name is Jeremiah?"

"Sure. It's not a secret or anything."

"You know that teachers call me Jeremiah?"

"Yeah."

"Not Jerry."

"Oh." Aidan was starting to see where this was going.

"Not Jerry Berry. And never Jerry Berry-Brain!" He pushed Aidan on the shoulder again with his big, beefy hand, hard enough to almost spin Aidan around on his feet.

"Jeremiah, not Jerry." Aidan nodded.

"And especially not what?" Jeremiah stood there staring Aidan down.

"Jerry Berry-Brain." Aidan couldn't look Jeremiah in the eyes.

"And Hu's a Chinese name, not some sound for you to make fun of, so don't even *think* of going 'hoo, hoo' like an owl."

"And no owl sounds," Aidan mumbled. Aidan thought that was a little unfair because he never did make fun of Jeremiah's last name. On the other hand, he had to admit that could be because he didn't know Jeremiah's last name. It wasn't anything personal—it was just that Hu was a name he might have had some fun with. Owl sounds, knock-knock jokes, the time traveling Time Lord Doctor Who on television...

"Why would you be so mean to a new kid and call him Berry-Brain? I know you started it. Did you think you were being smart or funny?" Jeremiah demanded.

Yes, Aidan thought he was being very clever. It was fun. It made him a bit less of a “kind of” kid, a bit more popular. That didn’t sound very good, though, now that Aidan thought about it with Jeremiah standing there, waiting for his answer.

“Yeah, I thought ‘Jerry Berry-Brain’ was pretty funny,” Aidan blurted out. He immediately regretted it and waited for Jeremiah to explode.

Jeremiah took a step toward Aidan, towering over him with his fists raised, his jaw clenched tight. “No, it wasn’t! You see me laughing?”

Aidan stood his ground, surprising even himself. “So you decided we were enemies? You need to get a sense of humor!”

“No, *you* decided we were enemies when you called me that.” Jeremiah dropped his fists, but still glared at Aidan. “Anyway, that’s not why I’m waiting for you. You have to come with me. And you can’t say anything to anybody. Fart noises and snot napkins will be nothing compared to what I’ll do to you if you tell.”

"Why, what's going on? Where're we going?" Aidan's imagination went into overdrive. All sorts of pictures of murder, mayhem, and evil deeds flashed through his mind. What was Jeremiah dragging him into?

"Don't poop in your pants. Whatever you're thinking in your scared little brain, you're wrong. I just need to know I can trust you."

"You can trust me." Aidan meant it. This was getting interesting. Whatever Jeremiah was up to, it had to be pretty important to get Aidan involved. Unless it was a trick to get him somewhere where there were no witnesses! "Where are we going?"

"To my house."

Jeremiah lived in a different neighborhood about half a mile from their school. Some of the houses had bars on the windows. He heard some older kids were in gangs around there. It was okay during the day, but Aidan knew he wasn't supposed to be there after dark.



They arrived at a small house that needed painting. Two tough looking teenagers were hanging out in front of the house across the street. Jeremiah nodded to the two teenagers, and they nodded back.

Jeremiah fished his keys out of his pocket but didn't open the door right away. "Here's the deal. My sister's been pretty sick. We're real close. She's a year younger than me and I always look after her. Sometimes she acts kind of funny since she got sick. She might say some weird things. So you can't tell anybody."

"Why me? Why bring *me* here?"

"She asked for you."

"But I don't know her. She doesn't go to our school, does she?"

"No, she hasn't been to school since we moved to LA. She will when she's better, but she got sick right after we moved here over the summer."

"So how can she know me?"

"Don't ask me. Yesterday she went wild over a butterfly she saw and told me she *had* to meet my

friend Aidan. I told her I don't have a friend named Aidan. She just looked at me like I was stupid or lying or something. I don't know, maybe I told her your name sometime and don't remember. I sure wasn't going to tell her about any kid calling me Jerry Berry-Brain, so maybe she thought you were my friend." Jeremiah didn't wait for Aidan to respond. He opened the door and entered the house.

The house was quiet. Aidan followed Jeremiah through the living room and down a dark hall. Jeremiah stopped by a closed door, listened for a few seconds, and then knocked on the door with three gentle taps.

A girl's voice, melodic and light, answered. "Jeremiah? Come in."

Jeremiah tilted his head, signaling that Aidan was to follow him into the room.

The heavy shades were drawn so the room was dark. Aidan didn't see Jeremiah's sister until she sat up in the bed, startling him just a little. Her black

hair was disheveled, falling over her face and almost completely hiding her eyes. She struggled to free herself from the blankets and then slowly swung her legs around so they dangled over the side of the bed. Aidan had never been in a girl's bedroom before, so he didn't know what to expect or how to behave. Was it polite to look at her if she wasn't really dressed? He felt his cheeks warm a bit and was glad it was dark because he figured that meant he might be blushing. Jeremiah's sister was wearing bright yellow pajamas that seemed a size or two too big, so maybe it was okay. There was nothing embarrassing about a girl wearing yellow pajamas. She just looked like a kid.

After taking a moment to catch her breath, Jeremiah's sister swept the hair away from her eyes and pointed to her robe draped over a chair while looking at Aidan. Aidan handed her the robe. It seemed like the effort to stand and put on the robe took all of her strength. As soon as she had the robe on she laid back down on top of the covers. She looked up at the ceiling through half-closed eyes and

started softly singing, "Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream."

Then she opened her eyes, turned her head to Aidan and said, "Merrily, merrily, merrily. Merrily is nice. Things aren't always merry, are they? Sometimes they're scary." Then she looked away and sang, "Life is but dream."

Aidan was stunned. Why would she sing that song? And what's so scary about it?

"Butterfly, you are very pretty. Just like I thought you'd be. I'm sure you'll be a great friend," she said, looking again at Aidan and smiling.

Aidan didn't know what to say. He was flustered and confused. Was he 'Butterfly?' Was he really pretty? Girls are pretty. Butterflies are pretty, too. But he wasn't a girl or a butterfly. Most of all, how could she know about his dream and the card from his grandparents with the rowboat song?

"I'm tired. See you later, Butterfly," she muttered.

“Sure, go back to sleep, Denise,” Jeremiah whispered.

Denise fell right to sleep, even snoring a bit.

When they got back outside Aidan almost exploded. “*Denise! Den East!*”

Jeremiah looked at Aidan like he was crazy. “What are you shouting about?”

“The song she sang, the rowboat one, that was part of my birthday present from my grandfather. And in my dream last night an old man told me about butterflies and said something about Den East, only it must have been Denise!”

Jeremiah loomed over Aidan. “You’re totally not making any sense.”

“Come to my grandfather’s study after school tomorrow. I’ll show you.”

“If it might help my sister I’ll call a truce and go with you. We don’t have to be enemies for now. But don’t mess with me. This better be good...”

## **Chapter 3**

### **Diamante Petrus**

After he left Jeremiah, Aidan went over to his grandparents' house, said hello to his grandmother, played with KoKo, and then used his key to let himself into the study.

Aidan sunk down into one of the two old, soft, oversized chairs and looked around. It was the first time Aidan was alone in the study. He wasn't sure what to do.

The ancient Egyptian mummy case caught his eye. It seemed to want to be opened.

Aidan knew the mummy case was empty.

There was no dead mummy in there. He was sure of it.

He was almost sure of it, anyway.

Then again, maybe he just *thought* his grandfather had shown him that the mummy case was empty.

But, really, come on, it had to be empty. You couldn't really keep a dead body around, right? A mummy is a dried up dead body. That wouldn't even be legal, would it?

Nah, it wouldn't be legal. No way.

What if, as a doctor and a scientist, his grandfather could get special permission to keep a mummy?

Maybe he should get up, walk over there, and open the mummy case, just to make sure.

Aidan stood up, determined to find out whether or not there was a mummy.

Aidan took one step toward the mummy case and then stopped.

What if there is a mummy and it fell out when he opened the box and it was so old and dried out that it crumbled into a pile of dust? He'd be breathing in mummy dust and have to sweep it up

and explain to his grandfather why he messed up a perfectly good mummy.

Even worse, if there was a mummy, maybe it was cursed.

Aidan sat back down. He was definitely not going to open that mummy case and choke on cursed mummy dust.

Aidan was so engrossed in picturing the mummy in his mind that he shot up in surprise when he heard a knock on the door.

"Aidan, we have a visitor. Can we come in?" his grandmother asked through the shut door.

"Sure."

When Aidan opened the door there was a large, angular man towering over Mrs. Prosperowitz. He was arched forward, with long, sandy colored hair graying at the temples. He was dressed in a charcoal gray suit, and wore a rose-colored tie with a matching handkerchief in the breast pocket.



Aidan's grandmother introduced the man. "This is Diamante Petrus. He's an old friend of your grandfather. I'm going back to my garden. I'll leave you two to get acquainted."

Diamante Petrus held out his hand and Aidan shook it. Mr. Petrus's handshake was warm and soft, almost gentle, though he held on for much longer than Aidan thought he needed to.

"Very pleased to finally meet you. Your grandfather told me a lot about you."

Aidan sat back down and watched Mr. Petrus as he fingered books on the shelves and examined a very old globe with sea serpents drawn on it. Aidan had the impression that Mr. Petrus was trying to look casual but was really searching for something. Mr. Petrus looked at Aidan and then at the mummy case.

"Now this is special, don't you think?" Mr. Petrus asked as he walked over to the mummy case. "I'd say 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty." Mr. Petrus looked at Aidan again. "Do you know much about ancient Egypt?"

Aidan shook his head.

"This mummy case is easily 3,500 years old." Mr. Petrus raised his eyebrows and pointed to the ancient hieroglyphic writing on the lid. "Fascinating. Not the usual inscription for this kind of mummy case. Tell me Aidan, does it interest you? Do you look at it and wonder who might be inside?"

How could Mr. Petrus know? Was it just a lucky guess? Sure, that had to be it. Who wouldn't wonder about a mummy case?

Mr. Petrus opened the lid of the mummy case very, very slowly and carefully. When he had it open just a few inches, he peered inside, then shut it quickly and opened his eyes wide. Aidan sat up straight and gasped.

"Just kidding." Mr. Petrus laughed and opened the case so Aidan could see. "Empty. That's too bad. I was hoping for a mummy. That would have been fun, no?"

Aidan shrugged, trying to act cool. "Sure."

“So, Aidan, I understand Dr. Prosperowitz is off on one of his little trips.”

Aidan nodded.

Mr. Petrus studied Aidan’s face as he spoke. “Do you know where he went? He’s retired, so he didn’t go to a scientific or medical meeting, did he? Your grandmother is still here pattering around her garden, so it can’t be a vacation. It must be some kind of retreat, then? He often goes missing that way, going on retreats for weeks at a time, doesn’t he?”

Aidan shrugged, “I don’t know.” Aidan wondered why Mr. Petrus was asking him and not his grandmother. That seemed pretty weird.

Mr. Petrus suddenly made a beeline to the desk and picked up the dragon vase.

“This is a very interesting vase,” Mr. Petrus observed.

Aidan was thinking that was also pretty weird when KoKo came racing in and knocked right into Mr. Petrus. The vase went flying, bounced off a stack

of books, and then hit the floor, breaking into a dozen pieces.

"KoKo!" Aidan shouted.

"Oh, that is too, too bad." Mr. Petrus moaned, picking up the pieces. "But please, have no worries. I can fix it."

KoKo was growling softly at Mr. Petrus. Aidan made her sit and shushed her.

As Mr. Petrus scooped up the pieces of the vase, Mrs. Prosperowitz came running in.

"What happened?" she asked.

"KoKo broke the vase," Aidan explained.

KoKo looked like she wanted to tell her side of the story, but she was just a dog.

Mrs. Prosperowitz shook her head. "Oh dear. That vase lasted 1,300 years in one piece and now this! We are lucky that Mr. Petrus is an expert in restoring old art."

"Yes, I will have it looking like new in no time," Mr. Petrus said as he walked out the door, taking the

pieces of the broken vase with him. Aidan's grandmother followed Mr. Petrus out of the study, sighing and shaking her head.

Aidan and KoKo sat quietly. Aidan wanted a do-over. Couldn't we try that again? That didn't really happen, did it? The mysterious vase that he was supposed to be thinking about was broken! What would his grandfather say? He was crushed that he let his grandfather down.

Aidan decided he was right all along. It was better to be a normal kid. A normal kid didn't have mummy cases and glowing vases to think about. A normal kid didn't get a key to a crazy study for his birthday. It was so much easier to be normal.

KoKo whimpered, and Aidan released her from her sit and stay command by saying, "Okay." KoKo sprang up and pawed at a book on the floor. She nudged the book with her nose, revealing a piece of the vase that had slid behind the book.

Aidan picked it up. It was the part of the vase with the dragon drawing.

"We should run and give this to Mr. Petrus, KoKo."

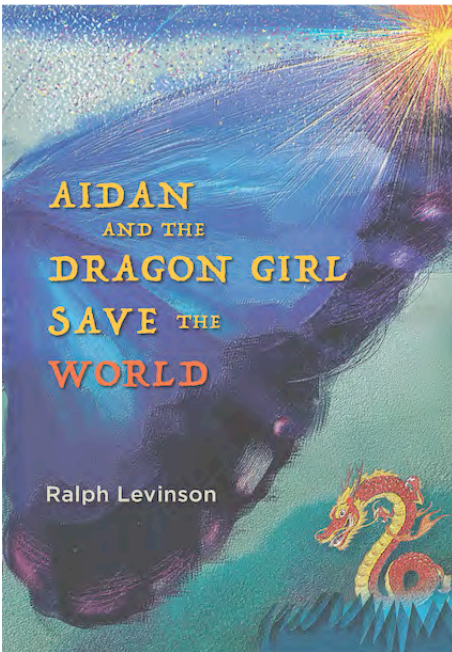
Aidan thought KoKo looked at him as if to say, "No, we shouldn't."

"Okaaaaay. Maybe you're right. Maybe for now we need to keep this. We can always give it to him later," Aidan said. KoKo wagged her tail.

Maybe this piece was a second chance to solve the mystery.

Aidan was getting suspicious. "Koko, did you run into that guy on purpose?"

KoKo looked away. She wasn't admitting anything.



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