

# 1

## The Medallion

**W**ITH HIS HANDS BEHIND HIS HEAD and eyes unfocused on the ceiling, Mr. Peters teetered on the hind legs of the heavy oak chair. He was oblivious to the mess that surrounded him. Yesterday's art lesson had been a success, even though it looked like a paint store had exploded in the room. Each cluster of desks displayed colorful artwork, which would soon replace the students' charcoal drawings that had decorated the walls for the last month.

A knock at the door startled Mr. Peters out of his daydream. He lost his balance and tumbled backward. The chair slammed onto the floor at the same time as his head hit a wooden bookshelf.

"Ow!" the teacher bellowed.

Wedge between the bookshelf and the seat of his chair, he felt like a helpless turtle.

"I am such a twit."

A lopsided, backward somersault freed him from the predicament. Slowly, he rose to his feet. Mrs. Miller, the school secretary, stood in the doorway, cringing at what she had just witnessed.

"Sorry about that," she said quietly. Her hand covered her smile, and she swayed uncomfortably at the door. "Are you okay?"

Mr. Peters smiled sheepishly and rubbed the back of his head. "What can I do for you, Mrs. Miller?" he inquired as he lifted the chair upright.

She tilted her head in the direction of the hallway and whispered, "Your new student is here, Mr. Peters." Then in a louder voice, "Come on in, Dylan."

Dylan stepped cautiously into the room. The first thing Mr. Peters noticed was his filthy appearance. His dusty blond hair was tangled, and he wore a soiled red jacket that hung down to his knees. Mr. Peters

did not know his age, but he guessed that he was older than his other students.

“Good morning, Dylan. How are you?”

Mr. Peters smiled as he walked over to the disheveled boy, whose sloping shoulders lifted slightly and darting, blue eyes connected with his eyes in the form of a greeting. He extended his hand, and Dylan shook it tentatively. An invisible cloud of stale cigarette smoke followed the boy into the room.

“I’ve heard a lot about you. I’m happy you’re joining our class.”

Dylan smiled nervously, but his focus quickly shifted from Mr. Peters to the floor, then to the wall, and finally rested upon his new teacher’s desk.

“What’s that?” Dylan pointed to a plastic figurine.

“I confiscated that from one of my students. I think it’s a samurai warrior.”

“Why do you have it?”

“Sam was playing with it during math class,” Mr. Peters answered.

“Will he get it back?”

“Eventually.”

“Why did he bring it to school?”

“Sam said he needs it for protection.”

“What protects him now?”

“Uh...nothing. He doesn’t need protection.” Mr. Peters nodded a thank-you to Mrs. Miller as she turned to leave. “Your desk is over here, Dylan. Would you like me to help you unpack your school supplies?”

“Yeah...I guess,” Dylan said softly.

He shoved his hands into his pockets, rounded his shoulders, and followed Mr. Peters. Dylan unzipped his backpack and started pulling out school supplies, toys, and small, unidentifiable objects.

He was cramming everything into the desk when Mr. Peters said, “Can you take some of these things home, Dylan? Your desk is too small to house everything you have in your bag.”

“Yeah...I guess.”

Mr. Peters continued, “You’ll like it here, Dylan. The students in our class are very nice. Would you like to make some new friends?”

“Yeah.”

Dylan bent over to pull a binder out of his backpack, and a medallion on a tattered, woven leather cord slipped out of his shirt as he straightened up. Mr. Peters was immediately drawn to it. The dull, brass medallion displayed two rounded blades framing a large, central sword—all three weapons shared the same handle.

“Where did you get that charm, Dylan? It’s beautiful...and ominous! I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Dylan straightened up, and his piercing blue eyes connected with Mr. Peters’s. “I won it, and it’s a medal—not a charm!” he asserted indignantly.

Mr. Peters was taken aback by the boy’s sudden display of confidence. Dylan was instantly taller and broader.

“Where would you win something like that?”

Dylan paused. “I defeated the horrible Tracker, and I took it from him when I crushed his skull and cut off his head.”

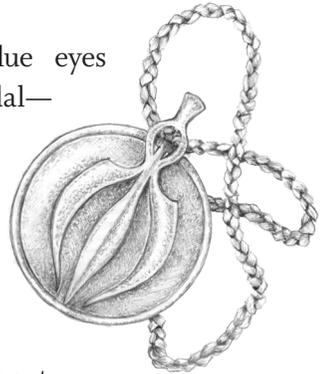
Mr. Peters stared at the boy, uncertain of how to respond. An uncomfortable smile appeared on the teacher’s face.

“Oh...well...uh...”

An announcement came over the intercom. “Mr. Peters, you have a call on line one. Mr. Peters, line one.”

“Uh...I...uh...I have to take that.” Mr. Peters pointed to the door and walked in the direction of his finger. “Make yourself comfortable, Dylan. I’ll be back...I’ll be back in a minute.”

Dylan watched Mr. Peters step nervously out of the room. The samurai warrior caught his attention again, and he walked over to it. Dylan picked it up and studied the grimace on the small man’s face. Then he noticed a large picture on the wall beside Mr. Peters’s desk and stepped back to get a better view. Enormous trees filled the photograph. They were perfectly straight, reaching for an unseen sky. Only the rough bark of the trees was visible, and behind the trees were the faint outlines of more trees and then complete darkness. Dylan stared into the blackness of the picture and wondered at the depths of the forest.



Suddenly, a small silhouette of a head appeared from behind a tree. Dylan's heart skipped a beat. He gasped and took a step back. As quickly as the silhouette had appeared, it was gone. Dylan leaned in to examine the picture for signs of the mysterious image. He was close enough to distinguish colorful dots making various patterns on the paper, but the figure had disappeared.

The sound of the bell startled Dylan. Seconds later, he heard the din of students pushing their way into the school. Dylan suddenly felt apprehensive as a number of students filed into the classroom. He quickly sat down, pulled out a copy of *The Hobbit*, and pretended to read. He noticed three boys enter the room in a rush.

"Give me back my hat, Jake!"

"Why, Teddy Bear? You gonna catch a cold?" the bigger boy mocked. A toque was pulled tightly over his massive head—dusty blonde curls sprouted out from beneath the brim.

"My grandma made it!"

"Oh, well that's different," teased Jake.

The bully pulled the hat off his head and presented it to Ted, the boy he had called Teddy Bear, as if it were a royal offering.

"Here you go."

Just as the boy reached out for it, Jake flipped it over his head to a third boy, who had been watching the incident and laughing. He quickly threw it back to Jake as Ted spun around helplessly. The smaller boy exhaled defeat and stood still while Jake danced a jig.

Another boy entered the room and warned, "Mr. Peters is coming."

Jake stopped dancing and blurted, "Give me a hug, Teddy Bear" as he dropped the hat into Ted's hands. Ted turned away quickly and bumped into Mr. Peters, who was carrying a cup of coffee.

"Whoa. Slow down, Ted," cried Mr. Peters as he lifted his cup out of the way. A few drops splashed over the rim and landed on the carpet.

"Sorry, Mr. Peters," Ted apologized. "I have to pee. I'll be right back."

Dylan watched Mr. Peters move clumsily across the room toward his desk. His giraffe-like strides made him look as if he were travelling in slow motion. Out of the corner of his eye, Dylan sensed movement in the picture. He turned to the photograph and again observed the

silhouette of a head peer around one of the trees. The shadowy figure did not disappear this time. He was mesmerized by it and could not avert his gaze. Time stood still.

“Dylan...Dylan.” With the third “Dylan!” a huge black fly bounced off the photograph.

Dylan jumped. The spell was broken. He turned his head in the direction of the call. The students were gathered on the carpet in one corner of the room, and Mr. Peters was sitting on a chair in front of them. All eyes were on the new student.

“Come and join us, please,” requested his new teacher.

Dylan stood up and took a step toward the group. He glanced at the picture one last time; the silhouette was gone. As he proceeded toward the corner of the room, he felt his face burn. *Look away!* he wanted to scream at the students. Sheepishly, he bent down and focused on the ground. He sat with one leg folded under his seat and wrapped his arms around the other leg. Dylan stared at the torn threads on the knee of his jeans.

“Class, I’d like to introduce you to Dylan. Dylan, what’s your last name?”

Dylan continued to stare at his knee as he mumbled, “Chevalier.”

Mr. Peters had not heard what Dylan had said, but he saw his discomfort, so he cut his introduction short. “Dylan just arrived from Edmonton, so let’s show him our hospitality and make him feel welcome. Ted, please give Dylan a tour of our school.”

Ted smiled. “Yeah, sure.”

He stood up and walked toward the door. Dylan remained seated and played with a small pebble that had caught his attention.

“Okay, who brought in a newspaper article for News Hawks today?” asked Mr. Peters as he searched the faces in the group.

Janna’s hand shot up immediately.

“All right, Janna! We can always rely on you.”

Janna made her way awkwardly to the front of the group, stepping over hands and legs. Mr. Peters noticed Ted swaying nervously at the doorway. He glanced at Dylan, who was batting something back and forth between his hands.

“Ted is waiting for you, Dylan.”

Dylan stood without averting his focus from the ground. All eyes were on him again. For the second time since he had arrived, his face reddened. With his hands in his pockets and his shoulders hunched, he dawdled toward the door. Ted greeted him with a nervous smile. His initial excitement of being free to wander the halls disappeared. Ted felt a little uncertain about this unfriendly stranger.

As the two boys left the room, they heard Mr. Peters say, “Okay Janna, what have you got for us today?”

The hallway was quiet and empty. Coats lined the corridor and muffled the sound of the boys’ footsteps. Ted stopped and looked to the end of the foyer; then he turned and peered the other way.

He smiled mischievously at Dylan and pointed to one side of the hall. “This...is where we hang our coats.” Then he pointed to the other side of corridor. “Don’t hang your coat on this side, or the wicked Miss Rodent will shred your jacket with her teeth, tie you up in the sleeves, and shove the rest of it down your throat.”

Dylan straightened up. Ted noticed a slight smile appear on his face. Without warning, Ted leapt at the coat rack. He put one of the hoods of the hanging jackets in a headlock. “This is what I...would like...to do...to you, Miss Rodent,” he said as if pained by the struggle. The jacket was draped over his back and was putting up a good fight, but Ted appeared to be gaining control. Finally, he threw his opponent over his back to the ground. He rolled around on the floor, grunting and groaning, throwing punches at the hood. Then the jacket rolled him over onto his back, where he struggled for a moment. Finally, he gained control and flipped the jacket over, but he was choking. “I...can’t...breathe.” Ted tried to loosen the sleeve’s tight grip around his neck when a teacher walked out of her room and looked down at Ted.

“What are you doing, Ted?” she asked calmly.

Ted jumped up. “Oh. Hi, Miss Roland.” Ted paused to catch his breath. “I was just giving our new jacket...er...um...our new student a tour of the school, and I noticed that someone had knocked this coat off its hook. I was putting it back.”

Dylan smiled as he watched Ted try to explain his behavior. Miss Roland had her hands on her hips, and she appeared stern, but Dylan sensed that she was amused.

“Have you met, Dylan, Miss Roland?” Ted inquired as he hung up the jacket.

“No, I haven’t.” She extended her hand. “I’m pleased to meet you.”

Dylan shook her hand and muttered a greeting. Ted forced himself between Dylan and Miss Roland, breaking their grip.

“We have to go,” blurted Ted, and the two boys raced down the hall.

They disappeared around the corner into the next hallway and then stopped and burst out laughing.

“Did you see her face?” Ted inquired through his giggles. “Doesn’t she look like a rat?”

Dylan smiled into his hand without speaking.

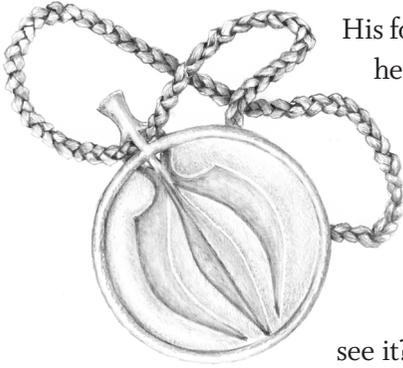
“We better hurry up. We haven’t gotten very far, and Mr. Peters won’t be happy if we miss math. Mr. Peters will probably hear about my battle with Jane’s coat, but he won’t care. He doesn’t mind if we have fun as long as we get our work done. This is the gym. Do you like gym?”

Ted continued the tour of the school, talking incessantly. He was starting to feel more comfortable with Dylan. Even though Dylan said very little, Ted had a good feeling about him. Dylan laughed at his jokes and put up with his crazy imagination. Finally, they stopped in the library.

Dylan was awestruck. It was the biggest library he had ever seen. He walked away from Ted and stepped through the aisles. He ran his fingers along the shelves and stopped several times to view some of the books. As the pages flipped through his fingers, he took in the smell of paper and ink. He preferred the older books with yellowing pages; they gave off the strongest odor.

Ted followed him and continued talking. He asked questions without receiving answers and commented on anything that popped into his head. Dylan was unaware of Ted’s presence. He was alone when he was with a book.

Something caught Dylan's eye. He stopped, crouched down, and pulled out *Where The Wild Things Are*. "Have you read this? I love this book."



"Yeah," Ted mocked, "I read that in grade two." His focus went from the book to Dylan's neck, where he spied a large leather knot. "What's on the rope tied around your neck?"

Dylan's glower forced him back a step, but he couldn't turn away from his penetrating eyes.

"It's a medal."

Ted swallowed hard and whispered, "Can I see it?"

Dylan rose. He pulled the medallion out from under his shirt and held it in the palm of his hand.

"Cool!" Ted reached out. "Where did you get it?"

"I defeated the horrible Tracker, and I took it from him when I crushed his skull and cut off his head."

Ted froze. He searched Dylan's eyes for a sign of make-believe. His blank expression was difficult to interpret. Ted swallowed noisily. He didn't really want to know, but he couldn't stop himself from asking.

"Who's Tracker?" he squeaked.

