

Timp

THE

BLUEBERRY VIKINGS

1



SHAWN-MICHAEL
MONROE

Timp and the Blueberry Vikings

Book 1

Written and Illustrated by

Shawn-Michael Monroe

Edited by Albert Pearce

Published by Flipbook Studios LLC

theShawno.com

Timp and the Blueberry Vikings: Book 1

Written and Illustrated: Shawn-Michael Monroe

Edited by Albert Pearce

Text and Illustrations copyright © 2013-2024 by Shawn Gillespie.

Timp and the Blueberry Vikings characters, names, and related indicia are trademarks of Flipbook Studios LLC. Timp and the Blueberry Vikings publication rights © Shawn Gillespie. All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, nor transmitted in any form nor by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without the express written permission of the author.

This book is an original work of fiction. Any similarities to people or characters is coincidental.

ISBN: NA

First public publication date 2024.

For the McClures.
And Mom

CONTENTS

Note from Author and Map

1	Mrs. Molly Mouse Catcher is One Crazy Cat	1
2	There Are Some Who Call Me . . . Timp?	5
3	Bollocks to Broccoli	12
4	Something Wicked this Way Prowls	20
5	Operation: Rescue Cold Chicken	25
6	You Scream, I Scream, We all Scream for Vikings	40
7	Mrs. Molly's Big Bad Incident	48
8	Circle Circle Dot Dot, Now You Have Your Viking Shot	55
9	House Hunting? In this Market?	66
10	The Man with a Really Long Name	73
11	Timp and the Vikings go to Hel.	84
12	It's a Small World, a Very Small World.	94
13	Meanwhile, Back at the Farm	108
14	Tha Tha Tha That's all, Vikings.	110
15	A Keen Kitty-Cat Detective	121
16	Let's Get the Hel Out of Here	123
17	Wild Huntress of the Kitchen	135
18	Yo, Daddio	137
19	A Very Berry Viking Snack	142
20	There and Back Again, A Viking Tale	145
21	The Mighty Mrs. Molly	152
22	Home again, Home again, Jiggity—What?	154
23	Dr. Who?	160
24	A Very Viking Dinner	164

25	Molly Remembersssssss	172
26	Short Trip Home, Looooonnng Trip Back	174
27	The Viking Village	182
28	A Meeting of Minds	191
29	Molly Down Under	213
30	Abandon Timp!	216
31	The Guest from Hel	223
32	Pest Patrol	227
33	One Pest for Another	230
34	All Work and No Play Makes Timp a Dull Boy	240
35	The Buzz on the Street	249
36	Molly vs. Clyde and Ethel	255
37	Good Morning, Sunshine	257
38	Molly on the Prowl	260
39	The Bees-Knees	264
40	Bee-loved	271
41	Nobody Puts Bonnie in the Corner	279
42	The Pugilist, the Day After	286
43	Attack of the U.S.S. Queen Molly	294
44	The Search for Bonnie. The Search for Berries	301
45	In the Heart of Deliciousness	314
46	Back into the Lion's Den	316
47	Trapped, AGAIN	324
48	The Wake of the Storm	335
49	A Brand New Day	347
50	Epilogue	351

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

WARNING! This book contains magic, mischief, wicked-horrible villains, and bees. While all of these things can be dangerous, one should be respected above the others: Bees.

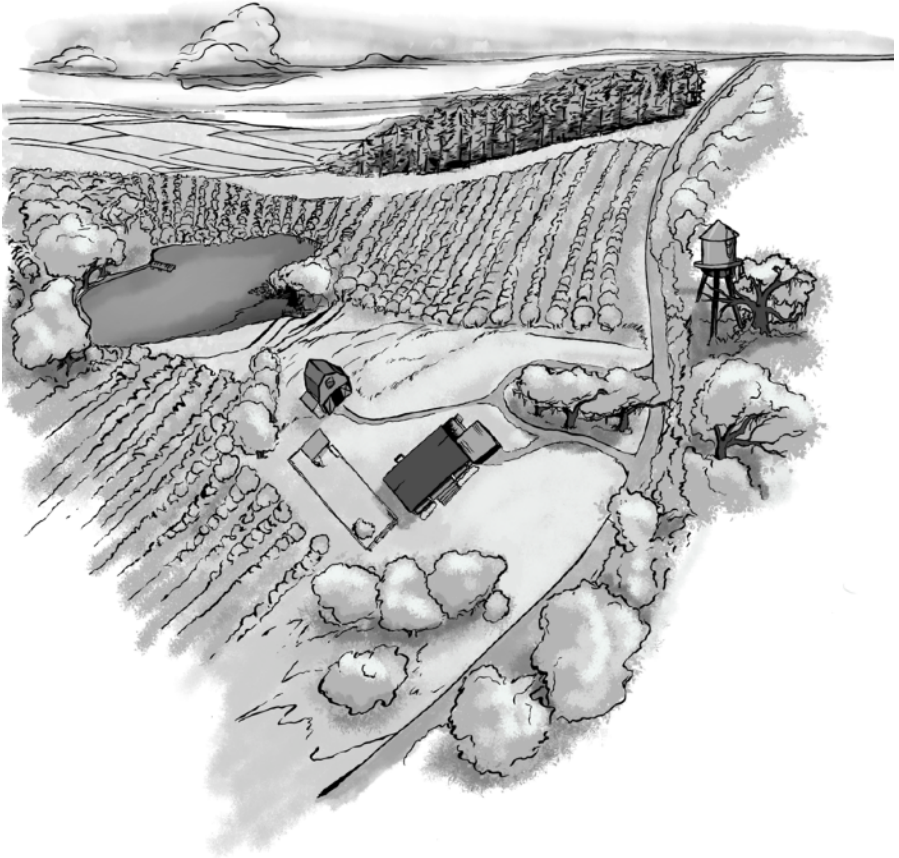
Bees are fascinating insects that are vital to our eco-system, but they can also be deadly. After reading this book, you might decide to find yourself a bee. Don't do it. Bees are not pets. Bees can be territorial. If a bee feels threatened, it will sting you. If you happen to be allergic, you could die. You don't want that. So, **DON'T MESS WITH BEES!**

If you're interested in bees, first have yourself tested for allergies. If you're not allergic, contact your local apiarist. Apiarists raise bees and harvest honey. They're generally quirky, awesome, and friendly people who love to talk about bees (especially if you buy some of their honey—Mmm honey).

Some apiarists offer classes about beekeeping. It's a safe, interesting way to learn, and the best part is you won't die . . . most likely. That's good, right? Right. So, show bees some respect, and leave them bee. (Get it: "bee"/ "be"?) That's a very witty pun that I came up with—You're so lucky you're reading this book.

Also, avoid wicked-horrible villains. They're both wicked and horrible. You know what, just don't do anything in this book. It's all dangerous . . . but I do hope you enjoy reading about it, though.

– Blueberry Springs Farm –

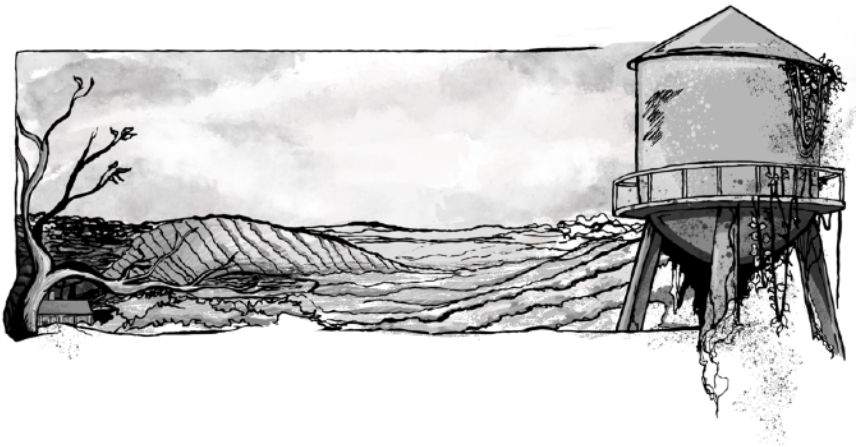


"If you don't know where you're going,
any road can take you there."

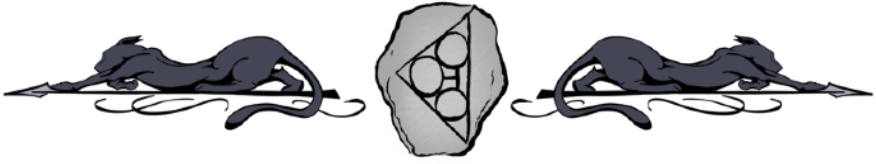
Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

PART I

The Land of Giants







CHAPTER 1

MRS. MOLLY MOUSE CATCHER IS ONE CRAZY CAT

Mrs. Molly Mouse Catcher sat on the porch plotting murder as she licked a stark white paw and rubbed it over her folded black ears. It was a hot summer day at Blueberry Springs Farm, and the humidity caused Molly's fur to poke out in ways that—Mrs. Molly felt—gave her the appearance of a common alley cat.

But Mrs. Molly was most certainly *not* a common alley cat.

"Stupid humans. Stupid. Nasty. Servants. How dare they," she said as she pulled a stubborn tuft of fur with her teeth. *"How dare they do this to me! Betrayal, that's what it is. I've been betrayed by my very own servants. Me, a queen! I shall simply have to kill them all."*

Over the years, Molly had become confused—or maybe it was the Littletons who were confused. The Littletons believed Molly was their family pet, while Molly believed the Littletons were her devoted servants.

There was much more evidence to support the cat's claim.

After all, the Littletons fed and bathed Molly and had done so throughout her life. They brushed her hair, clipped her nails, and bought her toys. They even played with those toys whenever Molly seemed bored. She'd lay on the couch with yawns and stretches, watching her servants shake around feathered sticks for hours. "*Humans are so easily entertained.*"

But if Molly ever wanted proof that the Littletons were her devoted servants, she need only check her litter box. Whenever Molly used the restroom, she found the remains so offensive that she quickly covered them with sand, sprang from her box, and ran away, pretending the refuse belonged to somebody else. "*Probably some smelly alley cat,*" she'd call from a safe distance away.

But on occasion, Mrs. Molly caught various members of the Littleton household combing through her box actually searching for her droppings! "*Gross! Disgusting! Ugh!*"

They sifted through the litter with a slotted plastic shovels like archeologists through the sands of the Sahara, and whenever they found a stinky lump of disgusting, they dropped it into a brown paper bag—the same type of bag they used to carry their lunches! *Yuck! Yuck! Bad servants, bad!* What they did with the droppings after that, Molly was sure she did not know, but one thing was certain: The Littletons were definitely *her* devoted servants and not the other way around. And that's what made their betrayal all the more infuriating . . .

Just over a week ago, Mrs. Molly had an incident, or as the Littletons called it, "Mrs. Molly's Big Bad Incident." Since then, the Littletons forbade Molly from entering the house.

"Banished from my own palace." Molly pawed at the backdoor, then gave up and lay on the porch. *"The nerve!"*

She'd just begun daydreaming about torturing her servants one by one, when the farmhouse door swung open and smacked her square on her kitty-cat butt. *"Yeow!"*

"Oh, I'm sorry, Molly," Mrs. Littleton said. "I didn't see you there."

Molly spat threats and curses, but as usual, all Mrs. Littleton heard was "Meow. Meow," and, of course, "Meow." Molly hated that her insipid servants were incapable of learning the exquisite language of Cat's Meow. She needed new servants, there was no doubt about it, but how to get rid of these idiots? Before Molly could give it much thought, she noticed Mrs. Littleton had left the doorway wide open. She shook the dust from her coat and dove for the opening like a charging rhino, but Mrs. Littleton was quick. She blocked the entryway with her foot and shut the door.

"Now, now, Molly, you know better. You know you're not allowed inside. Not after Mrs. Molly's Big Bad Incident." She said that last part in baby talk, and Molly choked back the urge to vomit.

"I see I'll have to kill you first," Molly growled.

Mrs. Littleton walked to the end of the porch and scanned the orchard. Molly stretched and did the same. The sun tucked behind the trees in the final hours of its descent, casting a blue light that made the farm seem dream-like and tranquil. Rows of evenly spaced blueberry bushes curved around a large hill and disappeared into the distant pines. At the base of the hill, green pellets of duckweed floated on the calm black water of a spring fed pond. Crickets, frogs, and cicadas sang their evening song in a steady rhythm that sounded as if the earth itself was breathing. This was the good time.

Mrs. Littleton took a deep breath, and then shouted, "Timp? Tiiiiiiimmp?" She waited, but there was no reply. "Where is he?" She wondered to herself. Her eyes scanned the farm until they stopped on the old, rusty water tower in the distance. Her jaw clinched and her lips drew tight. "He better not be . . ."

"Oh good," Molly meowed, *"the little one is in trouble. Always in trouble, that one. I can't wait to see what she does to him this time. Hey, wait for me!"*

Molly chased Mrs. Littleton as she trekked up the hill. Whenever Mrs. Littleton looked back, Molly stopped, licked her butt, and pretended to be uninterested in the goings-ons of her silly chambermaid. Mrs. Molly was a queen, after all.



CHAPTER 2

THERE ARE SOME WHO CALL ME . . . TIMP?

Timp tried to steady himself on the limb of a 300-year-old oak. His knees trembled and the limb bounced up and down, threatening to catapult him to the ground 15 feet below. No. He couldn't think about that right now. He needed to block that out, to concentrate. He'd come here with a purpose. Timp widened his stance one tremulous inch at a time. His left hand clutched a wet ball of leaves, stripped from some forgotten branch, grabbed in desperation. His right hand held a thick rope tied into a knotted loop.

Timp followed the rope from his hand to the water tower, where it began around a rusty crossbeam 40 feet above. A flash of embarrassment ran through him as he remembered searching the Internet for the proper knot to tie a tree swing. It seemed the sort of thing a kid should already know, but he wanted to do it right—or maybe he didn't want to do it at all. In the end, he settled on a double running bowline knot. He followed the steps, tied the swing, and now he was going to use it.

Timp yanked the rope to make sure it was tight. The tower creaked in response. He rolled the rope to the side, centering it on the support beam high above, and yanked again, harder this time. The tower swayed and groaned a familiar sound that Timp found comforting; his tower was saying hello . . . or was it goodbye? No, he couldn't think about that now.

This was Timp's special place. True, the tower technically stood outside of the Littletons' property, but it was *his* all the same. It was his because he was the only one who cared about it, and that, more than any piece of paper or imaginary line, gave him ownership. Besides, who else would want it? The tower stood on three rusted legs—the fourth had surrendered to time and weather long ago. The tank still held water, but outside, the paint had faded until a once prominent message was no longer legible. These imperfections only deepened Timp's fondness for the tower. For reasons he couldn't explain, Timp felt he and the tower were connected.

Satisfied his knot would hold, Timp mentally checked the rope's length. He imagined slipping his shoe through the loop, holding tight, and jumping from the limb with a mighty swing. He'd fly under the tower, barely miss the ground, and soar into the air on the other side. Timp imagined that magical feeling of weightlessness that occurs just before going up becomes falling back down. His body would float—if only for a moment—then the rope would catch, and he'd swing back in the opposite

direction . . . or maybe he wouldn't. What if he kept going? Flying up and away to someplace cold, someplace where he didn't have to work all summer, where he had friends. He'd just fly away. Timp wished the kids from school could see this unprecedented flight, but as usual during the summer months, Timp was alone.

Rope check complete, Timp was ready. At least, he thought he was ready. He guessed he was ready. Timp was reasonably sure, to the nth degree, that he might possibly be ready. His knees trembled and his palms sweat. He wiped his hands on his shirt. Wet leaves stuck for a moment, then fell to the ground, the ground so far below. Timp wondered if he'd be able hold the rope at all with those hands. He was not ready.

A hideous new story crawled from the dark recesses of his mind. What if, instead of flying, he crashed into the ground. His legs would snap like pretzel sticks, or maybe it'd be his back, or his neck. He'd die out there. Coyotes would drag his body into the woods. His parents wouldn't find him for days. They'd have to follow the stink. Timp edged closer to the end of the bouncing limb.

"I have to do it this time," he told himself. "I have to be brave, this time."

The ground swirled below. The tree seemed higher than it had ten minutes before. Had it grown? Was that possible? What if it kept growing? He needed to jump now, before it grew into the

stratosphere. Timp wiggled his toes and dried his palms. He visualized the jump one more time. *Happy thoughts. Think happy thoughts.* He pulled the rope taut. His stomach churned, and he tasted metal. He had to jump. *Now!*

His feet remained fixed to the limb as if his body were another branch, twisting from the ancient oak.

"Who am I kidding?" Timp let the rope drop without him and watched as it swayed in the tower's shadow.

Timp never jumped.

He shimmied down the oak's thick trunk with the bark scratching into his forearms. He thanked the lord when his wet-noodle legs finally reached solid ground. His feet felt like two cinderblocks stuck in Mississippi river mud. He towed them to the abandoned rope beneath the tower, slid his legs through the loop, and sat down, dragging his feet in small circles as the tower swayed back and forth in the breeze. The rusted steel creaked as if to say, "Maybe next time."

"Timp Francis Littleton Michaelson, what in the blue-blazes do you think you're doing?" Mrs. Littleton said as she struggled to free her pants from the briars lining the roadside. Timp's mother, like most mothers, believed she sounded more severe when shouting her son's full name. Unfortunately for her, Timp Littleton was Timp's full name. According to his father, Timp was named after Mount Timpanogos in Utah, which is where his father went on a spiritual journey to prepare his body,

mind, and soul for fatherhood. Timp's grandmother said that was a bunch of hogwash. She claimed Timp was short for Timpleton . . . Timpleton Littleton. Timp prayed it was his grandmother's story that was hogwash.

He once asked to see his birth certificate in hopes of rooting out the truth, but his father said it was somewhere in the attic. In his father's mind, that was as good as lost, and that had ended the discussion. Timp supposed it didn't matter how it happened, facts were facts, and the fact was, Timp Littleton was his name. He had no middle name, not even a middle initial, just Timp Littleton, pure and simple. So, when Timp was in trouble, his mother invented new names to yell. Timp could always tell how much trouble he was in by the length of the name she created—

"Timp Don Durango Constine Littleton, I said get over here this instant."

Timp was in a fair amount of trouble, that day.

"How many times? How many times have your father and I told you to stay away from this tower?"

"I wasn't doing anything."

"It's not *what* you were doing, it's *where* you were doing it."

"*You tell him! Off with his head,*" Queen Molly decreed as she hopped over some brush to get a better view.

Mrs. Littleton took a deep breath, and her fury melted into reason. "This tower is old and dangerous. Do you understand? I don't want you getting hurt."

Timp didn't see the problem. The tower had stood for his whole life, and that was 12 long years. If it could stand for a lifetime, then surely it wasn't going to fall any day soon. Timp searched for holes in this logic and found none. *Totally inarguable.* But he knew better than to throw that winning point at his mother. All in all, Timp Don Durango Constine Littleton knew he was getting off easy. At least she hadn't caught him about to jump. He couldn't imagine how long his name would have been then. So he cut his losses, apologized, and showed her an easier way through the briars.

As Timp and his mother crossed the dirt road back to Blueberry Springs Farm, thunder rumbled in the distance. Or was it thunder? A black limousine idled on the roadside, billowing a dark cloud of smoke from the tailpipe. The rotten stench of cigar clung to the humid air so heavily that Timp could smell it from 100 yards away.

"But how can they do that? How is that possible?" Timp's father asked, waving his hands at the shadowy figure sitting in the backseat.

"Come along, Timp," Mrs. Littleton said when Timp lingered. "Let's get cleaned up for dinner."

"Who's that?" Timp asked as he caught up to his mother.

"Uh, a friend of your father's," Mrs. Littleton trailed off. Timp noticed it was she who now lagged behind as they started down the hill.

She watched the limousine with worried eyes. Timp's mother was tough. She wasn't afraid of bugs, spiders, snakes, or coyotes. She even watched scary movies without covering her eyes. If whoever was in that limo worried her, Timp knew he must be uglier than a 500 year-old cannibal mummy and meaner than a giant spider-snake with acid fangs—both of which were in movies Timp had recently asked his mother to stop before the end. He preferred Star Wars. He even had a digital copy where Han shot first.

The limo's engine pinged into gear and left his father standing in a cloud of smoke. No, it wasn't thunder Timp had heard, but a storm was coming. He could feel it.

The back door slammed shut, and Molly's face smacked it with a *Thunk!*

"Heads are going to roll! Do you hear me? Roll! I'm your queen! Your queen!" But as usual, all the Littletons heard was, "Meow. Meow," and of course, "Meow."



CHAPTER 3

BOLLOCKS TO BROCCOLI

Dinner that night began in silence. Unfortunately for Timp, it would not end that way. Before they joined him at the table, Timp overheard his parents arguing in whispers down the hall. He couldn't make out the entire conversation, but he heard his mother say something about needing money, then she seemed to get really excited about going shopping. It made no sense. Timp's mother mended her shoes eight times before she considered buying a new pair. "Making that dolla' holla'," she called it. Why was she so excited about going shopping now?

Timp studied his parents across a plate of burned chicken, runny mashed potatoes, and smelly broccoli. His mother stabbed at her potatoes with her fork, while his father stared into a glass of water.

"Eat your broccoli, Timp," his mother said without looking from her plate.

"I don't like broccoli," Timp said. This was an understatement. In truth, Timp *hated* broccoli. His parents knew

he hated broccoli, yet every night when Timp came to dinner, there it was: disgusting-rotten-no-good-make-you-want-to-vomit broccoli. It bordered on child abuse.

Before she even opened her mouth, Timp knew what his mother was going to say next: "You know, there are children starving in Africa. I bet they'd like some broccoli."

Right on cue.

"Good, we can send them mine." Timp smiled. He'd finally come up with a solution to make everyone happy: his mom, the children of Africa, but especially himself.

"Don't be smart," his father said, waking from his thoughts.

I'll remember you said that next time I give you my report card, Timp thought, but he didn't dare say that gem out loud. He was on a roll tonight, but the sad fact was, Timp wasn't being smart. He really did want to send the starving children of the world his broccoli. Why not? He imagined himself dropping the horrid little trees into Ziploc bags, packing in some ice, and then mailing it all off with a note: "Dear starving kids, Please enjoy this broccoli. My mother tells me it's your favorite." Then again, why bother mailing it at all? Cut out the middleman and have farmers ship the world's broccoli supply to the starving kids directly. That was the way to do it. *Brilliant!*

"Well?"

Uh oh. Timp's mother expected something. What was it? Timp had been so busy figuring out new and ingenious methods of distributing the world's broccoli supply to the starving masses that he'd forgotten what his mother was talking about. Mrs. Littleton gritted her teeth. "Eat your broccoli!"

Well, she didn't have to yell about it. Timp jabbed his fork into the pile of broccoli and speared the smallest piece he could find. In a moment of insanity, he thought about flicking a broccoli torpedo at his mother's forehead, standing on a chair, and shouting, "Freedom!" But doing so meant certain death, and Timp was fond of living. Nope, there was no way around it. He closed his eyes and braced himself for nasty-broccoli-barf surprise.

He popped the piece of broccoli into his mouth, and swallowed it whole so that he didn't have to taste the horrid flavor. But it was too late. Broccoli fumes filled his mouth and went up his nostrils. How did it get into his nostrils? He imagined little leafy pods exploding into a sickly yellow gas that crawled up his nose from the back of his throat. His face flushed, and his eyes burned. He gagged. He hacked and coughed, and banged his fist against his outer thigh, trying to choke the broccoli down before he spewed all over the table. Timp looked to his parents for sympathy, but found none.

"Stop acting like a baby," his mother said.

Stop acting—a baby? Couldn't they see he was dying? It wasn't fair, their taste buds were old and dead, his were young and hypersensitive. Timp had learned all about it in biology. His tongue had something like a trillion million more taste buds than theirs. They probably thought broccoli tasted like cotton candy ice cream, instead of what it really tasted like: freeze-dried barf trees. Timp choked down the broccoli and guzzled water to wash the taste away. He'd die before he ate the rest. *Die!*

Timp's father sighed. "Timp, we need to talk." Timp looked up while hiding his uneaten broccoli under his mashed potatoes. "I'm going to need you to get up an hour earlier every day to help me pick before the help gets here."

Timp stared at his father.

Mr. Littleton continued, "We need to harvest as much as we can for Summer Fun Fest. With the drought this summer, we're not getting enough berries, and I can't afford to hire more workers. I was also hoping you could help an extra week this summer."

It sounded like a request, but Timp knew it wasn't. Summer Fun Fest was the largest farmer's market of the season. The Littleton's sold their produce to anyone and everywhere that had need of blueberry deliciousness: walkup customers, restaurants, bakeries, coffee houses, yogurt shops, smoothie counters, juice bars, grocery stores, and ice cream parlors. The event was the main source of the Littleton's income.

Timp said nothing. His face burned as blood filled his cheeks. So this was how it was going to be. First, they tried to choke him to death with poisoned broccoli, and now, they planned to work him to death too. It was child abuse! He'd call Children's Services! But all he managed to get out was, "What about Colorado?"

Every year, after spending half the summer picking berries, Timp and his parents hauled up to Colorado to escape the Louisiana heat. They rented a cabin in the woods, fished for trout in the cold mountain streams, and roasted hotdogs on open fires. The air was 30 degrees cooler there, but best of all, Timp had friends—lots of them. He looked forward to seeing them all year long but especially after two mind-numbingly boring months as the only kid on the farm. By that point, Timp had to get away or he'd go nuts. His parents knew this.

Mr. Littleton studied Timp with sad crinkled eyes, "We just can't do it this year, Son."

He sounded sorry, he truly did, but Timp didn't want sorry. He wanted Colorado. He wanted his friends. Timp had only one response. "This is crap."

"Timp, language!" Mrs. Littleton said.

Language? Language! Who cared about language when his only chance at happiness had just been stripped away? He'd worked hard for that trip. He'd earned it.

"Timp, we're going to need you to act like a grown-up on this one," Timp's father said.

There it was again: "Act like a grown-up." "Don't be a baby." They kept saying that; yet, they were the ones calling him names and whispering about shopping sprees in the halls like gossiping schoolgirls. Yeah, that was solid. He'd go with that: "You're the ones acting like children: gossiping, calling people names. Didn't you just call me a baby a few minutes ago?" He had them now. Golden!

"No, we told you to stop *acting* like a baby."

Crap. That's true, they did. They were better at this than he was. Timp's frustration grew.

Act like a grown-up. It was absurd. He wasn't a grown-up, he was a kid, and he should get to act like a kid. He didn't want to work; he wanted to play. He didn't want to be alone during the summer; he wanted friends. And he didn't want broccoli, dadgummit! He wanted . . . anything other than broccoli! He should get to make his own decisions, like an adult. No. Wait. Not like an adult, like a kid. *Crap.* Now, he'd confused himself. Being 12 was tough.

If they wanted him to act like an adult, then they should treat him like one. Otherwise, he should get to be a kid. Yeah, that was it, that was what he wanted to say. But when Timp spoke, these points muddled together in a gibberish deluge. He tried to catch his breath and compose his thoughts, but new

thoughts fell upon old ones until it all collided and slipped away, leaving only, "What about her?" Timp pointed at his mother in one last desperate grasp. "She's the childish one, getting excited about going shopping. Is that why I have to work harder, so she can go shopping?"

Yeah, secret knowledge bombs. Boom! Face explosion. He couldn't wait to see them argue that. But his words didn't have the "gotcha" effect he'd hoped for. In fact, his parents seemed completely lost.

"What on God's green earth are you jabbering about?"

Timp's confidence wavered, but he'd committed himself now. "If we need money, then why does she get to go shopping? I overheard y'all say she was going shopping."

Realization fell on his parents, and they glanced at one another. His mother covered her mouth, concealing a smirk. Mr. Littleton tilted his head to study Timp over his glasses. Timp knew that look well. It was the look his father gave him whenever he said something stupid. Timp's face flushed and his mother fought back a grin. "Timp, you don't know what you're talking about."

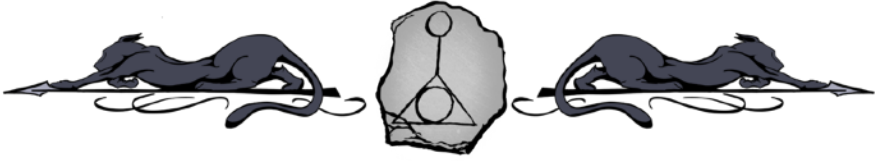
"You don't know what I'm talking about!"

Not his best comeback, he knew. Why did his brain always fail him when he needed it most? His eyes burned with the frustration and unfairness of it all. He didn't want to cry. He knew if he cried, they won. But Timp always cried when he got

angry. He wasn't a crybaby, but when he grew frustrated, his eyes watered. His body simply couldn't hold all of that anger, and the only place it could go was to pour out of his deep brown eyes.

Timp hated himself for crying, and he hated his parents for making him cry. But he wasn't supposed to hate anyone, which made him even more frustrated and brought more tears. Timp's parents stared across the table with their mouths hanging open. Timp avoided their gaze. What were they looking at, anyway? Like they'd never cried before. Why were they staring at him? Didn't they have better things to do? He wanted them to look away. He felt small, powerless, and sick to his stomach. He wanted to explode with rage and force them to see things *his* way. It wasn't right; it wasn't fair. How could they not see that? Timp glanced at his plate of broccoli—nasty-stinky-make-you-want-to-throw-your-plate-and-scream broccoli.

It wasn't worth it. Timp threw down his napkin, ran to his room, and slammed the door. *Bollocks to broccoli!*



CHAPTER 4

SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY PROWLs

It was a clear night. The moon climbed through the sky, casting a white glow on an otherwise blue world beneath. It was a perfect night for hunting, and Molly was on the prowl.

A week ago—just after "Mrs. Molly's Big Bad Incident"—Molly decided to show the Littletons who was *really* boss. And since her ridiculous servants refused to learn the exquisite language of Cat's Meow, Molly left the traditional message of the Kitty-Cat Mafia: a dead rat on the doorstep. Now, anyone who isn't a stupid alley cat knows that a dead rat on the doorstep is a clear message to the servants of the house: "Get out, or you're next . . . just as soon as I call my cousin the lion. He's a king you know, and oh my, have you seen his teeth?" But it turned out that the Littletons were humans of below average intelligence. They didn't understand her message at all. Though at first, the result was far better than Molly could have ever anticipated.

Mrs. Littleton stumbled onto the patio to collect the newspaper as she did every morning: wearing a satin nightgown,

pink cotton robe, and socks. Molly watched from the azaleas as her chambermaid registered something out of place. Her maid sniffed and Molly did the same. The air was cool and moist, and smelled of morning dew on burned grass. "*Not that,*" Molly said. Her maid squinted and Molly ducked back, giggling. She needn't worry; her chambermaid was blind without her contacts. The maid tilted her head.

"*Does the patio seem uneven, deary?*" Molly sniggered, and then covered her mouth.

The maid shifted her weight and something cracked. She tried to lift her foot, but lost her balance, and stepped down harder than before. A dozen more cracks and snaps, then squishy, red wetness soaked up her starched white sock. She leaned down and squinted. She didn't seem to see it at first, but Molly saw. Oh, yes. She saw. Molly held her breath in suppressed delight. Then the chambermaid saw it too. A lifeless grey rattail stuck out from beneath her foot.

Mrs. Littleton freaked.

She screamed and kicked her foot high into the air. The rat, wet and sticky from a night on the porch, stuck to her sock like a half-licked blow-pop in kitty litter. She threw her foot out and clawed desperately through the doorframe, but the rat-glue carcass remained fixed. Her voice shrilled bloody murder. She hopped on one foot with her head inside the door and kicked wildly outside, but the rat's front teeth had hooked through the

fabric of the sock, and no matter how hard she kicked, the body flapped with her. The other servants awoke to Mrs. Littleton's screams. Molly purred in contentment from the azaleas—revenge was truly a dish best served cold . . . and wet . . . and sticky . . . like a rat carcass.

But while Molly relished Mrs. Littleton's dance, she feared the overall meaning of her message may have been lost. Mrs. Littleton eventually ripped off her sock and ran inside the house screaming—which was great—but she slammed the door, leaving Molly still locked outside. *The nerve!*

Clearly, the chambermaid had not gotten the point. And to make matters worse, Mr. Littleton tried to explain the entire message away. "This is a good thing," he told Mrs. Littleton, as he dropped the dead rat into the garbage. "It means Molly is trying to provide for us. She thinks we're the leaders of her clowder. That's what they call a pack of cats. I read all about it online."

"*Leader of my—As if!*" Mrs. Molly huffed. "*My great, great grandfather was a bobcat. If anyone is the leader of this clowder it's me.*" And that's when Molly decided it was time for a new message, a better message. "*This time, I'll get a snake.*"

And so, on the night of the Littleton's broccoli argument, Molly prowled down the driveway in search of prey. It should have been a perfect night for it, but something felt off. A light breeze from the blueberry fields carried an unfamiliar scent. It smelled like berries, but also like humans.

"*Enemies.*" Molly's eyes narrowed. She ducked her head closer to the ground and stuck her butt high into the air: her kitty-cat ninja pose. All would cower before her might.

A metallic crash rang in the carport. Molly charged to meet her enemy head on, but then stopped just outside the carport door to listen. Someone was talking. The sound was barely audible, even with her keen kitty-cat ears, but she was sure she heard voices. She edged closer. Yes, definitely voices. *Perhaps a midnight snack.* She crouched deeper into her kitty-cat ninja pose, flared her hackles to appear extra fierce, and wiggled her butt high in the air.

"*On the count of three: one, two, THREE!*" Molly sprang into the carport with her claws out and paws flailing. She stabbed and hissed, swatted and swiped—she even threw in a karate chop for extra measure—but when she landed on the concrete floor, Molly was alone.

Embarrassed and confused, Molly licked her paws and casually scanned the room. *Maybe they're hiding in front of the truck? Yesss, that's it.* Molly snuck to the side of the Littletons' rusted-out Chevy. She didn't count down this time: *Jump! Kick! Hiss! Scratch! Karate Chop!* But again, she was alone. Molly stuck a paw in her ear and jiggled it around. *My ears must be playing tricks on me. Probably coming down with something. It's all my servant's fault, locking poor Molly outside. I probably caught some common alley cat disease. Poor Molly, me.*

As Molly turned to leave, a knapsack dropped over her head.

"Hey! Why, you dirty, rotten no-good-for-nothings, I'll get you! I'll smother you in your sleep! I'll eat your" — THWACK!

Everything went dark.



CHAPTER 5

OPERATION: RESCUE COLD CHICKEN

Timp lay in bed staring at the ceiling and replaying the argument from dinner in his mind. *The jerks*. He understood what was happening; anyone could figure that out: His parents were evil slave drivers. They probably hoped he'd drop dead from exhaustion so they could collect on some insurance policy or a government program that pays parents suffering from loss. That's what they were up to. Timp knew it.

Slowly, Timp's anger dwindled into boredom, which then dissolved into loneliness, and finally stabbed at his stomach in hunger. He thought about the leftover chicken sitting cold and alone in the fridge. *Poor chicken. Someone should rescue it*. He got up, pressed his ear to the door, and listened for movement. Nothing. Operation: Rescue Cold Chicken was underway.

Timp tiptoed down the hall, avoiding the floorboards that creaked. He prided himself on his mastery of the Jedi skills necessary to slink down the hall in absolute silence. He'd learned long ago which boards required a slide, which required a jump,

and which could be stepped on like normal (provided you were wearing 100% cotton socks and it was at least 90% humidity outside—which in Louisiana was always).

Timp peeked around the corner to make sure his parents weren't lingering in the kitchen. The lights were off, but the oven clock blinked a bright glow that allowed Timp to see. The kitchen was cleaned and dinner had been put away. On the counters, several bowls were piled high with blueberries ready for packaging the following morning. The coast was clear.

Timp skated across the slick tile floor toward the fridge filled with his mission's objective: cold chicken, when something in his peripheral moved. Timp froze. A blueberry tumbled from a bowl and plopped onto the counter with a roll. Timp's shoulders relaxed. *Only a berry.*

Gravity had a way of catching up with precarious berries. They tumbled to the counters and floors at all hours of the night. Timp joked that it was his grandfather's ghost throwing out the bad berries. But then something occurred that—ghost or no ghost—had never happened before. The berry hit the counter, bounced, and rolled to a stop. Nothing strange about that, happened all the time. But then the berry started rolling again in the opposite direction. *That ain't normal.* Maybe there really was a ghost.

Timp sidled to the counter, grasping for a rational explanation. Maybe it wasn't a berry at all, but some kind of

insect—a beetle, perhaps. That made sense, a beetle. Then, Timp heard the voices. At least he thought he heard voices: tiny, quiet, just-under-a-whisper voices. Timp ducked to the counter until his nose pressed against the cold linoleum edge.

The oven clock blinked off and on, as did Timp's comprehension. His brain refused to accept what his eyes saw before him. It had to be some trick of the light, or maybe he was dreaming. Yes, that was it, dreaming. He probably fell asleep while lying in bed, and now he was dreaming. He could almost laugh at his own silliness. Any moment now he'd wake up and the world would make sense again. Timp pinched himself to hurry the process. Nothing happened. He pinched himself again, harder this time. *Any. Moment. Now.*

Timp did not wake up. He wasn't dreaming. This was real. He pressed his nose against the counter until it hurt. Inches away, a man no bigger than an ant rolled a blueberry across the kitchen counter.

Each blink of light allowed Timp to study the man in greater detail. His size wasn't the only strange thing about him. He had long grayish hair that shot wildly from a leather helmet and then braided into a knotted beard below. He wore a blue tunic, leather pants, and heavy boots, all of it strapped tight with leather belts that crisscrossed over his body. A double-edged battle-axe covered his back. The axe was almost as large as the man, but the weight seemed to cause no discomfort.

Timp had learned about Vikings in school, and—other than the fact that he was no larger than an ant—the man looked just like one. But then Timp noticed something else strange. At first, he thought it was just the blue light from the oven, but no. As the man rolled his berry across a moonbeam that sliced through the kitchen window, Timp saw that the man's skin was blue, but not only blue, blue with dark lines of purple that weaved in tattooed designs down the Viking's arms and face. Timp thought about grabbing a mason jar to catch the tiny blue Viking, but before he could move, another Viking appeared over the edge of the berry bowl. This one was fatter than the one below. He stuffed his cheeks with berry innards.

"Is we done, yet?" the fat Viking said, shoving another handful of berry into his mouth.

The Viking rolling the berry below did not look up, but answered, "Ye'd be wise to eat in silence, O'dul, lest ye wake yon giants."

"Yipe! Did someone say 'giant'?" a third Viking said.

This one was smaller than the other two, and Timp could swear he wore glasses.

"Quiet, Fen. Ye'll wake yon giants," the Viking who'd been talking said. He pointed his thumb at Fen and added, "Can ye believe this Viking?"

The grey-bearded Viking groaned.

They scanned the room but failed to notice Timp despite looking right at him. Timp figured he must be so large by comparison that the Vikings didn't realize he was a person at all. He stifled a laugh as the Vikings tiptoed around the counter, inches from his nose.

"Hey-o, I's found me one!" a fourth Viking shouted from several bowls away.

This was turning into a Viking invasion.

This Viking had a long red beard, which he tossed over his shoulder before spitting on his hands and working to dislodge a berry from the bottom of the pile. Timp began to suggest that it might be easier to take a berry from the top of the pile, when a fifth Viking marched around to help—At least Timp *thought* she came to help.

The newest Viking was a woman—a whole lot of woman. She stood taller than the others. If they'd been regular size, she'd have stood at least seven feet tall and all of it corded muscle. She wore a skirt over leather breeches, but if you expected a curtsy, forget it. More likely the skirt was for wiping away her enemy's blood. A golden braid of hair weaved its way down her muscular back. If it moved out of place, she tossed it back with her spear.

The red-bearded Viking worked to dislodge the blueberry with such concentration that he didn't notice the Viking woman slip behind him. He didn't even notice as she leaned back and

took aim with her spear. But he *definitely* noticed when she stabbed him square in the backside.

"Yehow!" The Viking leapt into the air and scrambled to the top of the berry pile with his hands cupped securely over his buttocks. "What'd ye do that for?" he whined, rubbing his bum.

"Bjorn said be silent, fool." The Viking woman smirked.

"Why, you lousy —"

Before he could finish, she plucked the berry from the bottom of the pile, releasing an avalanche of purple and grey. Red tried to run on top of the berries as long as he could, but soon he was rolling next to them, and then under them as he and the berries tumbled to the kitchen counter. The other Vikings roared with laughter. Red did not. He jumped to his feet and started hopping up and down. He slapped himself, huffed, and grunted. His blue skin reddened until it matched his beard. He rammed his head against the side of the berry bowl, slapped his bottom, and stomped his feet.

"What's he doing?" Timp asked.

"Never you mind him," Fen answered. "He's just going berserk." The other Vikings stood wide-eyed with mouths agape. Slowly, Fen realized he'd just spoken to a "Gi-gi-gi-gi-gi-Giant!"

The Vikings screamed and ran in circles. The ones in bowls tumbled to the counter and joined the others. They pulled at their belts, trying to draw their weapons. Axes, maces, swords, and spears fell to the ground, and then were picked up and

dusted off. Eventually the Vikings organized themselves into something resembling a battle formation, but Timp also wouldn't have been surprised if they broke into the Electro Shuffle.

They waved their weapons in the air. "Back, foul beast!" one shouted then retreated to the back of the line. "We fear you not, horrible monster!" Another added and ran away. "Be gone, great stinky one!"

The Vikings paused. "Great stinky one?"

Timp sniffed himself.

"Twas all I could think," Fen stammered as he pushed up his glasses and ducked into the crowd.

The woman recovered first. She charged with her spear held high and stopped short of the counter's edge and Timp's nose. "Be gone, evil giant! Torment us no more! Return to the ice cave from whence ye came!"

She threw her spear with a grunt, and it wobbled back and forth in the end of Timp's nose. It surprised Timp more than it hurt. His head jerked back, and his hands flailed. The Vikings cheered in triumph. Their foe was defeated . . . or was he?

After Timp over came the shock of the being stabbed in the nose by a tiny blue Viking—which was a pretty surprising turn of events that evening—he pulled the spear out and handed it back to the woman. The Vikings fell silent.

"I'm not a giant," he said, rubbing his nose. "I'm a kid. And I don't live in an ice cave. I live in a house." The words felt feeble

even as he said them, but Timp had argued enough for one evening.

The Vikings muttered amongst themselves, then one said, "What mean you by 'kid', Giant?"

"I mean that I'm a kid, a boy."

The Vikings stared blankly.

Timp rolled his eyes. "I'm a child, young, not an adult. Not. Fully. Grown."

The Vikings huddled. After a moment, the thin Viking with glasses popped his head out. "You claim there be giants even more giant than you, Giant?"

"I just told you, I'm not a giant. I'm a kid," Timp said. "But yes, many people are bigger than me. I'm not even big for my age. Thanks for bringing it up."

The Vikings whispered some more in a hiss. Fen pushed up his glasses, took out a book, and made some notes. Finally, they'd reached a decision. "We have decided that, despite what ye say, ye're quite giant, Giant. And while there may be those among your'n kind who think ye small, to *us* ye are giant."

Timp had never thought of himself as giant before. He smiled a toothy grin, and the tiny blue men took a big step back. The woman warrior stood her ground with her spear ready. "And you, Giant, do thee swear upon the heads of your'n fathers not to eat us?" The grey haired Viking asked.

"Eat you? Gross!"

The Vikings ran Timp through the gamut of vows, pleas, negotiations, and litigations—complete with indemnification clauses and pinky promises. Timp swore he'd never *intentionally* eat one of the Vikings; though, he conceded that they were so small it was possible he might do it by accident, but he hoped not. The Vikings seemed satisfied; though, Timp noticed the woman warrior kept her spear ready.

Timp introduced himself, and the Vikings doubled over at his last name.

"A giant named 'little,'" they laughed.

Timp didn't see the humor.

"Little-ton," another corrected, wiping away tears.

"Aye, he's mighty little, but he weighs a ton." The Vikings rolled around and banged their fists against the counter.

Timp waited.

When they calmed down, the Vikings introduced themselves. The man with the peppered beard was the first to step forward. "I be Bjorn, named after my father before me," he said, and then added, "the bear."

Having recovered from his slapping fit earlier, the redheaded Viking stepped forward. "I be Gunnar the Red, head berserker and mighty warlord. You'd be wise to stay on me good side, Giant, lest I berserk thee!"

Timp started to ask what a berserker was when Gunnar began hopping up and down and slapping himself. Timp got the general idea.

The warrior groaned with impatience and elbowed Gunnar aside. "Ye couldn't berserk yer ma'ma," she said and Gunnar fell silent. "I be Erika the Nordis, named for the Northern warrior and eternal ruler. You, Giant, have suffered my spear, but ye've not yet felt my wrath. I trust ye not. I fear ye not. Do not cross me, Jötunn. You will lose."

Timp swallowed. He didn't know who Jötunn was, but he hoped never to cross Erika.

The plump Viking stepped up next. "I'm O'dul, named after. . ." He scratched his head in thought, and then finished, "O'dul." The other Vikings slapped their foreheads. Timp sensed this was a common reaction when O'dul spoke. "I collect rocks."

"Yer's head be's a rock," Gunnar muttered.

The skinny one with glasses jumped forward, holding up a notebook as though it were a weapon. "I'm Fenrisúlfur, learned skald, giantologist, pacifist, and swamp wolf of Hel! Fear me, Giant!" He dropped his book, held up his hands like claws, and growled himself into a coughing fit. The other Vikings stifled laughter. Fenrisúlfur blew his nose. "Um, but ye may call me Fen." He blushed, picked up his book, and fell back among the others.

Five Vikings in all: Bjorn, Gunnar, Erika, O'dul, and Fen. Timp noticed they all gave grand speeches in their introductions, speeches that included some form of threat. Maybe this was a Viking custom. He decided to reintroduce himself properly. "I'm Timp Littleton, giant to some, kid to others. Do not cross me or I'll squish you all with my mighty fist and swallow you whole." Timp laughed. The Vikings also laughed (as they backed to the opposite end of the counter).

The Vikings were easier to talk to after that. . . somewhat. Timp explained that he lived in a house, not an ice cave in the side of a mountain, and that the air was cooler because of a modern marvel called "air-conditioning," not because they were under ground. The Vikings wouldn't hear it. Timp eventually gave up and told them just to call it a house, which they did: "Giant, we have traveled to House Mountain in search of our'n homes."

"Your homes are missing?"

"Nay, not missing," Erika corrected. "Stolen by flea infested ice-giants like your'n self."

The Vikings sneered.

Timp cocked his head. "Why would giants steal your homes?"

The Vikings stared at Timp. That question had clearly not occurred to them.

"Twere nice homes," O'dul said, "roomy 'n comfy: cool in the summer, warm in the winter. . . hardwood floors, and faux finishing throughout. Them homes be outright. . . homey."

"Okay, fine." Timp rolled his eyes. "How do you know giants took them?"

"Because we saw 'em!" the Vikings shouted, shaking their weapons in the air.

"You saw giants take your houses?" Moments before, they'd asked if there were giants bigger than Timp. Clearly, they hadn't seen many.

"Well, we saw they's hands," O'dul said. "Their'n nasty *giant* hands!" Gunnar added. "Shoved 'em right into our'n village and took our'n houses, they did."

What on earth were these little blue ant-people going on about? It didn't make sense. If any giant—or rather a person—had come across a tiny Viking village, Timp would have heard about it on the news. "Tiny Blue Viking Warriors Discovered in Louisiana" was the kind of headline you remembered. There must be more to this story.

"Okay," Timp said, taking a breath. "What do your houses look like?"

"Got us one right here," O'dul said as he butted the blueberry next to him with the handle of his mace. It was the same berry that Bjorn had rolled across the counter earlier.

"And there be another yonder," Gunnar said, pointing to the berry Erika had pulled from the bottom of the stack.

Now Timp understood everything. The Vikings were insane.

Timp spoke slowly so they could understand, "That's not a house. That's a blueberry."

The Vikings eyed Timp with raised eyebrows. "Nay," Bjorn said, returning Timp's slow speech. "Yonder be a blueberry." He pointed to a berry across the counter, then back to another nearby. "This be a house."

Timp was beginning to get annoyed with these little know-it-alls. Clearly, their brains were too small for rational thought. "Nooo. That's a berry."

To prove it, Timp picked up the berry and tossed it into his mouth.

"What madness is this?" Bjorn shouted.

For three long seconds, Timp held the berry between his right molars, eyeing the Vikings in defiance. They were crazy. They thought he lived in an ice cave. They didn't even believe in air conditioning. Someone had to teach these Neanderthals a lesson. He'd been picking berries his whole life. He knew a berry when he saw one, and this was a berry, just a regular, every day blueberry. "Giant—"

Timp bit down.

It wasn't a berry. Dear God, it wasn't a berry at all.

Timp's mouth ran dry as wood splinters exploded onto his tongue. It was like eating a box of toothpicks (with just a hint of faux finishing). Timp wanted to spit it out, but he'd committed himself now. He chewed on. Wood snapped and broke in his mouth. Finally, he managed to choke it down.

The Vikings stared with their mouths agape.

"Ye ate me house," Bjorn said.

"Why'd ye do that? Ye promised." Fen sounded hurt.

"I promised I wouldn't eat any of *you*." Timp said, trying to hide his embarrassment. "I didn't say anything about your houses."

He forced a smile and held his chin up with false pride.

This was a bad move.

Gunnar jumped up and down and slapped himself. He shuffled his feet, babbled incoherently, and shook his head back and forth with his tongue out and slobber filling the air. Timp recognized this behavior as going berserk. He still didn't get it.

The other Vikings were no better. They screamed and cursed. Erika stabbed at Timp with her spear, and arrows bounced off of his cheek and disappeared to the kitchen floor. Timp needed to make this right, but before he could explain, yellow light poured from his parent's bedroom, filling the kitchen.

Timp's father stepped into the hall, but his mother must have asked a question, because he turned around and stuck his

head back into the bedroom. Timp couldn't hear what they said, but it didn't matter. It bought him the time he needed.

He grabbed the matchbox next to the oven and dumped the matches into the trash. The Vikings shrugged at each other, wondering why their enemy refused to meet them in battle. Timp placed the box under the counter's edge, swiped the Vikings inside, and shut the lid over Viking curses.

He dashed out of the kitchen, through the dining room, and around the corner. He'd just turned into the hall when he heard his father flip on the kitchen light and open the refrigerator door.

Distracted, Timp forgot to dodge the loose floorboards scattered throughout the hall—a Padawan mistake. He was no Jedi master. He missed the first three hazards by sheer luck, but as Timp reached his bedroom door, his luck ran out.

Timp felt the board buckle under his weight, and he froze. He knew this board well. It didn't make a sound when you stepped down, but it was the loudest in the entire house when you stepped off. Timp closed his eyes in shame. How could he be so stupid? He was no Jedi knight. He was a soldier standing on a landmine.