



The INCREDIBLE TALES  
of  
**WEIRDWOOD  
MANOR**

**BOOK ONE**





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# Chapter I

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*Bump!*

Oliver's eyes snapped open. He let out a yelp as he fell from the air and bounced back onto the plush, blue leather seat beneath him. He blinked groggily, and looked around as the car jostled and bucked its way down an old forest road. He breathed out slowly, and tried to let his shoulders relax. He must have dozed off again. He shivered involuntarily as he remembered the dark creatures that had plagued his brief and restless sleep.

Another nightmare. Why couldn't he ever have a *normal* dream like a normal kid? He snorted, then shook his head. '*Normal*' — as if. He peered out the window to see ferns and moss and ancient-looking trees roll by. He smiled. They must be getting close. This was definitely the kind of place that a person like Arthur Weirdwood would want to live. It looked like

something straight out of a novel — with elves and orcs and... *dragons*! Oliver pushed that thought away, instead busying his mind with the excitement of what was to come!

He still had trouble believing he had actually won. There had been thousands of contestants — each a talented artist, or writer, or young inventor. A few of them had even been somewhat famous; child prodigies who were constantly being interviewed on talk-shows or news programs. But Oliver was a nobody, and all he'd had to enter in the contest were a few pencil sketches of imaginary creatures. And yet — somehow — that had been enough.

Now here he was — one of three grand-prize winners — being escorted to Weirdwood Manor where he'd get to spend an entire week with the great





Arthur Weirdwood! He smiled and settled back into the big, blue leather seat. This was the first time Oliver had ever been in a limousine. He'd never forget how this long, shiny, monstrosity of a car rolled up to the curb in the small subdivision he'd called home. Oliver had been so excited that he'd almost forgotten his backpack as he rushed out the door to meet the limo.

He'd looked back with a big smile to say goodbye and 'thank you' to his latest foster-parents, Mary and David Brown, but had just turned in time to see the door slam shut, and hear the dead-bolt slide into place. He had tried hard to ignore the sting in his eyes and the heat that painted his cheeks their familiar red.



He'd thought he would be used to it by now; the rejection, the suspicion, the fear. But every time something like this happened, it just seemed to make that part of him hurt all the more.

The driver had glanced at Oliver with an awkward smile, but then cleared his throat and with an air of professional detachment, ushered him into the most incredible back seat he had ever seen! Oliver's amazement had quickly pushed away any thoughts of this last foster-fiasco. He had laughed as he settled into the plush leather seat, taking in the dark curtains, the blue couches, and the ornate rug. This was an almost perfect replica of the magical limo in Arthur Weirdwood's story **The Seven Suns of Midnight**.

When he had sat down, the seat-back behind his ears had given a soft exhalation like the car was breathing! He had pressed his ear to the warm leather and heard a slow *thud-lump* like a heartbeat. Again, exactly like the book! It gave Oliver the willies!

*Bump!*

The limo bounced Oliver into the air once more. He barely caught his backpack and sketchbook before they had a chance to crash to the floor. The corner of a loose

paper peeked out from behind the front cover. Oliver frowned as he pulled it free.

He had read it at least twenty times already. Yet, some small part of him clung to the hope that maybe he'd gotten it wrong, that maybe there was some error, or loophole or... *something* that could assure him that this was all just some big misunderstanding. Before he realized it, his eyes were scanning the fateful letter once more.

Dear Oliver;

We regret to inform you that David and Mary Brown have requested your immediate removal from their protective custody. This being your sixth foster home transfer in the past year, we have exhausted all current options for home-based foster care and must unfortunately remand you to the temporary custody of the Juvenile Corrections Authority. Your case-worker will fill you in on details upon your return from Weirdwood Manor.

Hope you have a WONDERFUL week!

Sincerely,

Merryll Buxley

Ministry of Children's Services

Oliver's cheeks flushed yet again. It was the same story, time after time. Of course, there was always some well-thought-out "official" reason for moving him, but the *true* reason was always the same.

"Cursed" — That was the word whispered or muttered when nobody thought he could hear. Oliver hated it. But he supposed he understood it.

Strange things happened around him. Scary things. Things no one could seem to explain. "Not my fault," whispered Oliver, even though everything inside him screamed that the opposite was true. He had tried so hard with the Browns. He'd kept his room spotless, helped out with meals, and done more than his fair-share of chores. And yet, he'd gotten lazy — went a bit too far with just one drawing and...

He winced, pushing the unpleasant memories aside. Mary and David had been his last chance. No one else seemed willing to take him in. And so, he was to be shipped off to some horrible prison for kids.

He gritted his teeth. It just wasn't fair!

Without realizing it, Oliver had whipped out his pen and began to draw on the back of the page. His anger and frustration poured out of the furiously scribbling pen,

etching seemingly random shapes and forms into the empty space. Oliver blinked, then looked down at what his hands had almost unconsciously drawn. He shivered.

From an artistic standpoint, the drawing was incredible. Lithe muscles, dark scales, leathery wings, and wicked curved talons were rendered in expert detail. In fact, it was probably one of the best dragons Oliver had ever drawn. What worried him, was that he'd once again drawn this dragon. He needed to put the drawing away before...

Oliver felt a rush of dark energy hurtle toward him from somewhere deep within the drawing. He slammed the cover of the sketchbook closed on the letter, and held it down to keep its trembling pages shut.

He began to feel light-headed and heard the familiar ghostly whispers closing in around him. Darkness tugged at him from inside the sketchbook, making his stomach churn and his muscles grow weak.

It's getting worse, he thought.

But the feeling slowly subsided, and the sketchbook grew still. Oliver let out a deep sigh of relief.

*Bump!*

The limousine launched into the air over another pothole, and then...

And then it didn't come down again.

Oliver hovered a few inches above his seat. The smell of old books and hot lightning filled his senses as an eerie blue glow drenched the world around him. He heard the deep *thud-lump* of the limousine's heartbeat, slow as a glacier.

*Thud...*

"Not again. Not now!" whispered Oliver as gravity slowly began to tug him back toward his seat.

*...lump*

*Flash!*

A dark blur streaked past the window with a sound like scraping metal and flapping sails. Oliver tensed.

*Thud...*

A deep, rumbling growl rattled the windows. Oliver felt the hair on his neck stand on end. He rubbed his eyes, and tried to slow his breathing.

"No, no, no! This is not real. It's just a dream, and I'm going to wake up any second now." He wondered vaguely if he

was trying to convince himself, or the big, hulking thing outside.

*...lump*

The growling stopped. Oliver held his breath.

*Thud...lump*

Just the throbbing heartbeat of the limo. Oliver took a deep breath. He couldn't be sure, but it seemed like the world was slowly turning back to normal.

"Well," he said with a sigh, "that could've been worse." An ear-shattering roar broke the silence. Teeth and claws squealed against the metal and glass of the limo's exterior. Oliver threw himself against the opposite side of the car, spinning to face his attacker. Their eyes met and Oliver cried out in surprise and terror.

"No Not you!"

The dragon — more real than any drawing, more solid than any dream — bore its teeth in a hungry grin. It breathed on the limo with a deep, throaty growl.

The window, the door, the curtains, *everything* began to dissolve as if it were nothing more than a fog or mist.



Oliver pushed himself hard against the opposite door. His heart pounded and his palms were slick with sweat.

First the nightmares, then the drawings and that strange energy... and now this! He'd seen many strange things over the past few years, but nothing had ever been *this* real!

The dragon pushed closer. A hungry, predatory smile framed rows of razor sharp teeth.

"Y-you're not real!" Oliver stammered.

But the dragon only grew more and more solid. He could feel the dark energy surround him, pressing in on him with such force he could barely breathe. Oliver







fought it, pushed against it with all his might, but it was too strong!

His insides twisted as the power snaked and pulsed through his body, pulling his mind down into a deep darkness. He screamed, but all he could hear was the roar of the black dragon.

*Bump!*

Oliver smacked his head against the door of the limousine as it hit another pothole. He winced and pushed himself up, his muscles weak and shaky. He blinked a few times and shook the lingering confusion from his mind. The haze was gone; the limo was solid. No dragons. He let out a deep, steadying sigh. Everything was back to normal!

The limousine slowed and came to a rattling stop in the middle of a thick patch of ancient trees. The haunting call of some unseen bird wafted in on the fresh, forest air. Oliver looked around, confused. “Was this it? Where was the manor?”

His backpack had been knocked over, and his clothes and books were strewn all over the floor. He scrambled to shove everything back into his bag when the door clicked and swung open with a sigh.

A long stiff arm in a long stiff sleeve held the door for him. Oliver took a last quick look around the limo, then zipped up his backpack. The long stiff sleeve was attached to a long stiff suit, the owner of which said, “Welcome to Weirdwood Manor, Master Oliver”.

As he stepped outside, he noticed that something had fallen to the ground. Oliver bit his lip as he bent down to pick it up. It was the drawing — but it had changed. The dragon was different now, covering the entire page and glaring at him with that terrifying, hungry look.

A cold shiver ran up Oliver’s back as he snatched it up and crammed it back into his sketchbook. He looked up at the face smiling at him from above the collar of the stiff black suit — and gasped.







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## Chapter II

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“I trust you had a pleasant journey,” said a deep, metallic voice.

Oliver squinted up at the imposing figure looming over him. He was tall, well-dressed and built completely of metal! One mechanical eyebrow whirred up. Oliver realized he was staring and stammered a reply.

“Uh, yes. It was... fine?” He forced a watery smile.

“Very good, sir.” said the metal man in a clipped, disinterested manner. “If you require anything, my name is Tinsworth. I am Master Weirdwood’s butler, and your servant for the duration of your stay. May I take your bags?”

Oliver could hear the purr of well-oiled motors as Tinsworth reached out an enormous steel hand. He had heard of the

Metal Man of Weirdwood Manor, but had assumed it was just another one of those crazy legends about this mysterious mansion. He looked closely at the gears and pistons that made up Tinsworth’s hand. Apparently some legends were true!

“Master Oliver?” said the butler patiently.

“Sorry!” He had to stop staring. “I’ve only got the one bag. I’ll hold onto it — if that’s alright with you.”

“As you wish. If you will follow me, sir.”

Tinsworth turned in one smooth, mechanical motion and walked toward a steep, winding stairway that looked very old and not at all safe. An ornate archway bowed over the top of the first stair, guarded by four weather-beaten gargoyles — one of which had toppled from its perch and lay forlornly in the grass.





They climbed the steep, narrow stairs, winding around trunks of giant trees and bizarre rock formations. Tinsworth didn't speak — which was fine by Oliver, who was entranced by the strange beauty that surrounded him. He hoped he'd have time to come back and do some sketching.

After a few minutes, the air grew brisk and had a fresh, somewhat salty smell to it. Oliver caught a faint but insistent sound, like the roar and crash of distant waves.

"I must warn you, sir," Tinsworth called back to him, "This next section can be a bit... tricky."



Oliver gasped as they rounded the corner. The stairs ahead had been carved out of the side of a cliff that plunged steeply down to crashing waves far below. Sunlight sparkled on an expanse of water that stretched as far as the eye could see. Oliver hesitated.

Tinsworth looked back, "I assure you, the steps are completely safe young master."

"Is... is that the ocean?" Oliver stammered.

Tinsworth tilted his head with what appeared to be a thoughtful expression on





his metal face. "In a manner of speaking... yes." He turned, and without another word continued his ascent up the steep, stony stairs. Oliver swallowed hard and carefully made his way after the butler.

But we should be nowhere near the ocean! he thought, Weirdwood Forest is smack dab in the middle of —

The wall next to him erupted as a huge slab of rock shot out across the staircase. Oliver jumped back, stumbling down a few steps before finally regaining his balance. He flattened himself against the wall, and stared down at the raging waves hundreds of feet below.

"Strange." said Tinsworth from the other side of the slab. "Master Oliver, are you alright?"

"Uh... I think so." Oliver called back in a shaky voice.

"I do apologize. That mechanism is meant to protect the manor and her guests from... well, let's just say that I cannot imagine why it would be

triggered now." He paused. "One moment, sir."

Oliver heard the whir of Tinsworth's motors, and the scrape of metal on stone. "There we are!" he said after a moment. There was a grinding sound, and the muffled clank of gears working from somewhere deep inside the wall. The steps vibrated as the huge slab disappeared back into the cliff wall.

Tinsworth looked down at Oliver with his emotionless glass eyes. "I do apologize, Master Oliver. Hardly a welcoming moment." Oliver's legs still trembled slightly, but he let go of his handhold on the wall and gave Tinsworth what he hoped looked like a confident smile.

Tinsworth looked unamused, "Indeed. Shall we continue, sir?" He turned, continuing up the stairs once again without waiting for a response. Oliver's chuckle turned into an embarrassed throat-clear. He grabbed the side of the wall again, and fell in behind Tinsworth. He supposed he shouldn't have been surprised that a man made of metal would have such a lousy sense of humor.



After a few more minutes of slow, careful climbing, the manor itself came into view. The tall, regal mansion sat perched on the edge of a pillar of rock that seemed to think the law of gravity was merely a suggestion. Oliver's stomach fluttered with excitement. This was it! He was finally here!

Tinsworth looked back, "Again — welcome to Weirdwood Manor, sir!"





# The INCREDIBLE TALES of WEIRDWOOD MANOR

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