



Lunchtime had arrived, but Luca was still in class. He had never been asked to stay back before. He didn't know why he had been asked to stay back today. Luca wasn't perfect, but he didn't usually get into trouble.

On the blackboard, someone had scrawled a weird drawing. There was a shape that looked a bit like a crown. Another looked like a tooth. To the side was something that looked

like a fork. Around them all was a squiggly line. Luca was pretty sure Ms. Long had drawn it. But why? And what did it mean?

Ms. Long always did things her own way. Other kids learned English in English class. In history, they did history. Ms. Long's classes weren't like that. In English, they might learn about riddles or codes. In history, they might learn how to make arrows by chipping away at flint.

If Ms. Long could crack your code in less than five minutes, she would rip it up. If the tip of your arrow was not sharp enough to pierce thick cloth, she would toss the whole thing in the trash.

Lots of kids didn't like Ms. Long. They called

her "The Dragon." Some kids swore they'd seen smoke curl from her nostrils when she was upset.

But Luca thought she was interesting. He especially liked her stories. When she was in a good mood, Ms. Long told tales about an imaginary land called Imperia. Maybe she was writing a book or something? Luca didn't know and he didn't care. The stories were cool. Imperia had once been a beautiful place, filled with majestic mountains, endless forests, and ancient cities that shone like gold. That was back when dragons were in charge.

But dark times had fallen on the realm. There were no dragons left. The land was overrun with wild beasts and ruled by a

power-hungry leader named Dartsmith. Ms. Long's Imperia stories always ended the same way.

“Only when the three dragons return will Imperia have peace again.”

Luca looked back at the chalk drawing on the board. None of the other classrooms had blackboards. But Ms. Long's room was old-fashioned. One wall was completely covered with old display cases. These were made of carved wood and stained glass. Inside them were the sort of things you might find in a museum. Old bones. Strange objects. Rocks.

Weirdly, it was the three rocks that always drew Luca's attention. One rock in particular, the one in the cabinet at the back of the

classroom. It was the size and shape of a football.

Once, when she'd been in a surprisingly chatty mood, Ms. Long had taken it out of the cabinet.

“This is a geode,” she had said, walking between the tables so everyone could see it up close. “Also known as a Thunder Egg. They are very rare. Thunder Eggs look boring on the outside, but on the inside most of them are crystal. This one, however, is filled with something even more precious.”

Luca wanted to touch the Thunder Egg. He felt like the rock was calling to him. But there was no chance. Ms. Long returned it to the cabinet, locking it with her key.

Her good mood disappeared, and she frowned at the class. “If any of you mess with this specimen,” she said, “you will enter *a whole world* of trouble.”

Now, sitting in the classroom waiting for Ms. Long to appear, Luca stared at the drawing. He stared so hard his eyes started to blur. The lines changed colour. Suddenly, they looked gold and not white at all.

“This is a total waste of time,” snarled a voice.

Luca started. He’d forgotten he wasn’t the only kid asked to stay back during lunch. He turned to look at Zane, the class football champ. Zane’s face was scrunched up and he was drumming his pencil on the table.

Ms. Long would have bitten his head off if she’d been around.

“Wow! Zane, you look *soooo* amazing right now.”

This comment came from the third kid asked to stay back that afternoon. Yazmine. She had joined their class at the start of the year. Luca didn’t know much about her. She kept to herself, her head always bent over her work.

Yazmine leaned back in her chair, smiling. Her green eyes were fixed on Zane.

Luca groaned. He could not work out why Zane was so popular. Every boy wanted to be his friend. Every girl had his name written on their pencil case. It made no sense. Zane

was a total pain in the butt. He did what he wanted, with no worries about anyone else. Luca was pretty sure Zane didn't even know his name.

Zane was also one of those kids whose phone camera was permanently on selfie mode.

He whipped out his phone now. "Really? I look amazing?" he asked, talking while trying to freeze his snarl.

Yazmine stood up and walked over to the blackboard. "Yeah. Amazingly stupid. Look, I don't know where Ms. Long has gone. But this"—she pointed at the drawing—"must have something to do with us being here. Let's figure it out so we can go eat."

Luca chuckled. This Yazmine was pretty cool.

Zane's frown deepened. "You'd better watch it, new girl."

"Firstly, I've been at this school for six months. I am hardly new," Yazmine retorted, hand on hip. "Secondly, what are you going to do? Pull out your comb and mess up my hair?"

Before Zane could respond, Yazmine turned to Luca. "Zane the Vain will be useless. But I bet you and I can work out what this drawing is. It's a kind of puzzle. You like puzzles, right?"

Luca stared at Yazmine in surprise. How did she know that?

"I guess," he mumbled. "But I don't have any idea what this is. Do you?"

"I think it's a map," she said, tracing the

squiggly line with her finger. “Here’s the coastline. And these shapes are landmarks. But the part I can’t solve is what country it is.”

Yazmine faced the board. Luca and Zane did the same, each tilting their heads to one side as they studied the drawing.

It suddenly dawned on Luca what he was looking at. As he said it aloud, so did Yazmine and Zane.

“Imperia!”

There was a clicking noise. The cabinet at the back of the classroom had somehow unlocked itself! The door swung slowly forward, like a ghost was opening it with an invisible hand. As Luca watched, he knew what was going to

happen before it happened, almost like he’d dreamt it.

The Thunder Egg that was always displayed in the cabinet tipped forward. As they watched, it rolled to the edge of the shelf and started to fall. Zane sped across the room and dove toward it. He reached out and caught the egg just before it smashed to the floor.

Luca blinked. He hated to admit it, but that was impressive.

But then Zane pulled a typically Zane move. “Hey, you! Leo or whatever your name is,” he called to Luca. “Catch!”

Fear pounded in Luca’s chest. “Don’t!” he yelled.