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Opening extract from

Kenny & the Dragon

Written and illustrated by

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Your love and inspiration will
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For my little girl,

SOPHIA.

It's what's on the inside

that counts.



Before I Forget . . .

Many years ago . . . hold on, I know what you are thinking. You're thinking a book about a dragon should start with "Once upon a time." But this one doesn't, because frankly, I don't really know what "Once upon a time" means. Now, I was once upon *a horse, and that was fun. Also, I was* once upon *a knight galloping on his horse, but that's another story altogether.*

So instead, let me start our tale with this:

Once upon a farm, in a town just west from yours, and on a Wednesday many years ago, a rabbit farmer,

his wife, and their son Kenneth were preparing to sit down to supper.

Now, Kenneth seems a little formal for a boy's name, doesn't it? No other kid would say "Kenneth, can I borrow a pencil?" No, they'd say "Ken" or "Kenny, can I borrow a pencil?" And no doubt our Kenny would not even notice when they swiped it from his school desk, for you see, Kenny always had his head buried in a book.

And he loved to read all sorts of subjects: science, mysteries, histories, and even fairy tales. In fact, fairy tales and natural history were his two favorite topics, and as far as Kenny was concerned, both held the same merit in the real world.

So it is not surprising that he enjoyed going to school. He always asked compelling questions, always did his homework (complete with footnotes and a bibliography), and always had fantastic notions about what he wanted to do when he grew up.

One day he'd want to be an astronaut and meet extraterrestrials from a distant planet. The next he'd decide on a jungle explorer looking for living dinosaurs. Another day he was going to build a submersible, which could go deep in the ocean to find lost underwater cities. Each day brought something new for him to explore.

"That kid has such an imagination," his English teacher would say.

"His identification of local flora and fauna is quite impressive," his science teacher would say.

"Kenny Rabbit? He's kinda out there," his classmates would say.

And to a certain degree, they were right. You see, like them, Kenny grew up on a farm, and both his mother and father were farmers. They came from generations of farmers who grew vegetables and raised livestock. So his parents, like most of his neighbors, really didn't have time to read books—they were just too busy tending the farm.

"You can't harvest corn with a book," his mom would say.

"No booky book's gonna bring the sheep in at sundown," his dad would say.

Regardless of what they thought, though, his parents did their very best to support Kenny in all that he did, right down to listening to his lengthy theories on this and that over dinner.

"You see," Kenny would tell them, "it's going to rain because cold air and warm air collide in the upper atmosphere. This creates thunder, and it causes the moisture within the cumulus clouds to fall."

"I thought it was going to rain because the cows are layin' down," his dad would reply.

And most folks in town would have agreed with Kenny's dad.

Hold on a second . . . what was the name of that town? I can't believe I've forgotten. It was near water, if I recall correctly.

Dunhill? No, that's in the northern province. . . .

Meadow Falls? That's not it either; but it was a stream or a river. . . .

Roundbrook? Yes, that's it! The town was sort of roundish in layout, with a brook running through the middle of it. (Goodness, I can't believe I'd almost forgotten—not something a fellow in my position should allow.)

All right, then, so in the little farming town of Roundbrook, *Kenny lived with his parents, went to school, did his chores on the farm, and filled the rest of his time reading, which is precisely where we find him at the beginning of our tale.*



I. That Devil Scourge

KENNY'S FATHER BURST INTO THE kitchen, panting heavily. His ears twitched. It was suppertime, and Kenny's mom was making her family's favorite, corn chowder. The soup's heavy aroma swirled about as the farmer moved through the room.

"Pack all yer things! We're out of here! We're moving!" Kenny's dad screeched. He was a scraggly, hairy fellow wearing a wide-brimmed hat, and he was trying to catch his breath, as if he'd been running.



"Moving? Not now, mister," Kenny's mom replied. "The corn's not boiling yet, the broth isn't quite right, and I still have to sew the patches on Kenneth's trousers for school tomorrow."

Kenny's dad paused, walked to the stove, dipped a finger in the pot, and agreed it still wasn't quite right.

"Get your dirty paws out of my chowder! Wash your hands, have some milk, and tell me what's got you so riled up." She ground a little pepper into her broth. Unlike Kenny's father, she was

soft, round, and huggable and seemed to always be adorned in an apron with a spoon in hand.

Kenny's dad did as he was told. He stroked his ears and started:

"This afternoon my eyes saw something I wish they'd never seen. I went to shepherd home the flock up on top of Shepard's Hill where they had been a-grazin' all day. As soon as I get up there, I sees the sheep all huddled and quiet on the far side of the hilltop, and I think to meself, what in the world has got 'em so spooked? So I wander over to the other side of the hill, you know where them rocks and boulders are?"

"Mm-hmm. Here, taste this. Better?"

"Yes, much better. So I—"

"Hold on, dear. Kenneth! Get out here and set the table."

The wooden floorboards creaked as Kenny shuffled into the kitchen, his head buried in his book. He was reading a story about a giant, written by a man named Oscar. Without looking up, the small, skinny lad opened the cupboard and grabbed plates to place on the table.

"Not plates—bowls, Kenneth. I told you earlier

we're having corn chowder tonight. Get your head out of the clouds, put the book down for a minute, and set the table properly." His mom snatched the book out of his paws and set it on the counter.

The wooden counter was dinged, scratched, and stained from years of use. Pots and pans hung from the ceiling, right above where Kenny's mom was cooking. She reached over and opened one of the numerous round windows to allow the cool evening air into the kitchen.

"Don't you want to hear the rest of my story?" Kenny's dad whimpered through his milk mustache.

"Of course, dear. Of course. What did you find in the rocks?" his mom said as she tasted the soup.

"So there I am, climbin' up on them big rocks and boulders. All the while I'm thinkin' there must be a wolf, a lion, or a bear hiding in there. Remember I said I heard those weird whooshin' sounds coming from the hill last week?"

Kenny folded the napkins and placed them around the banged-up wooden table. "I remember that," he said. "I thought—"

"Hold on, son, hold on," his dad interrupted,

waving his hands about. "So I make some noises of my own to see if I can spook it off. And that's when I saw it."

Kenny stopped setting the table and looked up. "Saw what?" The gears in the boy's brain began to turn. He realized his father's tale involved some sort of encounter with a carnivorous animal. Kenny figured he could determine just what his dad had seen based on the description. A lion was out of the question—they were too far east for lions. Wolves usually traveled in packs and were rarely seen in these parts, but bears did prefer rocky outcroppings and caves. . . .

"Well, first I smell something burning. Not wood, but something smokylike. Then I see a pair of glowing eyes, and then a head, as big as this here table, peers out from an opening in the side of the hill, and it's covered in horns and scales and fur like a crocagator."

"You mean *alligator*," Kenny corrected him, though he wondered what sort of alligator had horns and fur.

"Exactly, but have you ever seen a *blue* alligator? With a neck like a turkey, and a body like one of

them giant lizardy things in your books?"

"You mean dinosaurs, Dad? Those really did exist, you know. Scientists have even found their bones in old—"

"No, son. This wasn't one of them brontosaurus rexes." His father looked the boy in the eyes. "It was like one of them flying things that eats pretty maidens and burns castles to the ground."

Kenny paused for a moment. *It can't be*, he said to himself. *It couldn't be*. He put the last of the silverware in its place on the table.

His father just sat there staring at him with his big eyes. Glancing over at his mother, Kenny noticed she had stopped cooking and was looking at them quietly while holding the ladle. He turned back to his father. "Dad, are you talking about a dragon?"

"Yes, son. I am talking about one of them dragons." He started pacing around the kitchen, waving his arms wildly. "It's taken up residence on the side of Shepard's Hill, and we gotta sell the farm and move before that devil, that scourge, comes down and burns everything we got right down to the ground."

II. Dishes and Homework

"NOT IN A MILLION YEARS," KENNY'S mom said. She then blew on her spoonful of soup and sipped it up.

"But *Mom*! It's a dragon! I wanna go see it before anybody else does!"

"Who knows what that thing could do to you? You could get bit, or scratched up, and it's probably carrying all kinds of diseases. Right, Pa?"

As Kenny had figured, his father was much calmer now that he had eaten, and Kenny studied him as he started on his third bowl of chowder. The dainty wooden soup spoon looked odd held in his

rugged, worn paws. In fact, the boy half waited for his father to lift the bowl up and slurp the remainder of the chowder. Instead he calmly said, "If Kit thinks he can handle the likes of a dragon, then I think we should let him. After all," he continued, winking at his son, "he ain't no little bunny anymore."

His mom folded her napkin and set it on the table. She sighed. "All right, but not until you finish the dishes and your homework."

"Awww! I can do those later. Lemme go now, pleeeease!"

"Dishes and homework first," she repeated as she pointed at him with her spoon.

Kenny cleared the table and cleaned the dishes in record time. As he finished drying the last of the soup bowls, he watched the sun sink lower and lower in the darkening sky.

When he was finished, he ran into his room and dumped his book bag upside down onto his bed. Textbooks spilled out, pencils rolled off onto the floor, and loose papers scattered like white leaves. Kenny shuffled through it all and picked up *Stars and Their Constellations*, the book he was to do a book report on. It was his last assignment for the school



year, and it would be an easy one for him, as he'd read the astronomy text front to back several times already—now he simply needed to write the report.

Or, he thought, *with a little persuasion on my teacher, Mrs. Skunkmeyer, I could do an oral report instead, and I won't have to write anything . . . so technically, I'd be finished with my homework.*

However, an oral book report meant going in front of the class and talking. The last time Kenny had done that, it was on the topic of "The Migration of the Ruby-throated Hummingbird" for his science class and it hadn't gone so well. One of his classmates had started snoring loudly, and another hooted, "Snoring! Boring!" bringing snickers to the entire room as Kenny tried to give his presentation. The other kids just didn't get excited about the stuff that he did. But honestly, who wouldn't be fascinated by the idea of a tiny bird flying all over the world by itself? If a little hummingbird could do that, well then . . . He paused in his thoughts, for there on the bookshelf, next to his copy of *Amazing Hummingbird Stories* was an old bestiary he had borrowed from his friend George.

He grabbed the leather-bound tome and opened

it up. It smelled musty and old, and in one whiff, Kenny was back in George's dim bookshop in a beat-up armchair, surrounded by stacks of books all around him. Even though the shop appeared messy, it was quite organized. But only George knew where everything was, as he hardly ever left his little literary sanctuary.

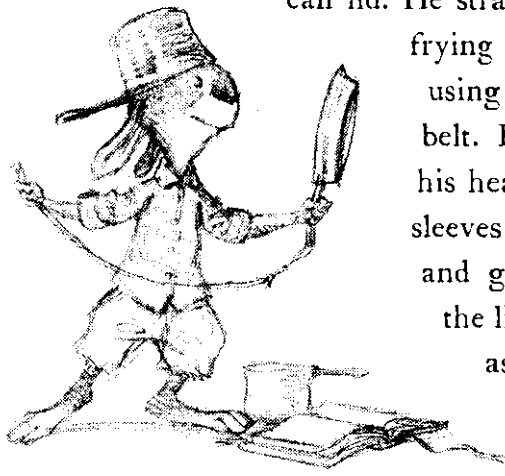
When Kenny would visit, the retiree would always recount a story about his past adventures, usually over a game of chess, and he had plenty of new and interesting books to show the boy. Many times he would let Kenny borrow these books from the store as long as he took good care of them and returned them in their brand-new condition once he was finished. Sometimes he'd just let Kenny keep them as a gift.

Kenny flipped through the yellowed pages of the bestiary. Albatross . . . bear . . . chimera . . . "Dragon!" he said aloud. Kenny hadn't finished this book yet and had read only some of the entries. The illustration for the dragon showed a vicious, sinewy, coiled monster belching white-hot flames.

An actual dragon, the boy said to himself. *It's like seeing a living dinosaur. Imagine bringing him to class for science fair.*

He turned the page, and there were more pictures. One was of an armored knight fighting a dragon. In one hand the knight held a shield, in the other a long lance, with which he was pinning the reptilian beast down to the blackened, scorched earth. Fallen knights littered the background. A little gear in Kenny's mind clicked into place. "Perhaps I can do my report on this bestiary instead—and add my own field observations," he said, slamming the book shut and shoving it into his worn leather book bag. "I better get prepared."

Dashing through the house, Kenny grabbed a pot, a pan, some rope, an old broom, and a garbage can lid. He strapped the blackened frying pan to his chest using the rope and his belt. Placing the pot on his head, he rolled up the sleeves to his flannel shirt and grabbed the broom, the lid, and his book bag as he headed for the door.



His mother

and father were sitting in their rockers on the front porch. His dad was smoking his after-dinner pipe, while his mom was stitching a patch onto the knee of Kenny's trousers. Without looking up, she said, "I'm glad those are play clothes you're in. Homework finished?"

"Yes, Mom," the boy replied, taking a lantern and hooking it to the end of the broom.

"Be careful, Kenneth. I hope you know what yer doin'," his father said. He sucked on his pipe and rocked slowly in his chair, watching the sun set. "And tell that varmint not to eat any of my sheep."

Kenny turned to his dad as he climbed onto his bicycle. "I'll be fine, Pop. This is most likely an Olde World Wyrm. They're cold-blooded, so they are very slow once the sun goes down. I can outrun him any old day, should it come to that. Either way, I aim to find out just who he is, where he came from, and what his intentions are."

"Don't be out too late," his dad replied, but Kenny had already sped out of sight.