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Opening extract from

Tich Dragonslayer

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Also by Pete Barrett

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Chapter One

Clocks Away

'I'm going to tell you a story,' said Mrs Wilson staring at the rows of eager faces of her class.

'In ancient Carpathia there is a legend of a fearsome dragon that descended from the mountains and plagued the villages on the plain. The dragon would swoop down on the people, setting their corn fields on fire, torching their houses and burning to a crisp every man, woman and child unlucky enough to be caught outdoors.

'The villagers were in despair and they began to believe the only way to save themselves was to migrate to a new home hundreds of miles away, where they could at last be safe from the dragon. But just when it seemed that all hope was gone, a young boy arrived in the village.

'Despite his size, he was fantastically brave

and armed with only a sword and shield he rode into the mountains and found the dragon's lair. A terrible battle ensued and for days the small boy fought the dragon until, eventually, the boy's bravery, skill and cleverness got the better of the dreadful creature. He stabbed it to death and left its corpse rotting in the mountains.

'With the dragon slain, the boy returned to the village a hero, and the celebrations marking the end of the dragon's reign of fire went on for days. The boy married a pretty young girl from the village and remained there for the rest of his life. With the boy there, no dragon ever dared come back to the village again.'

'That's a complete load of old rubbish,' said the Boff.

'You didn't like the story then, Pravin?' asked Mrs Wilson.

'No,' continued the Boff. 'For one thing, there's no such thing as dragons.'

'Yeah, and why does it always have to be a boy killing all the time? Why can't a girl kill the dragon?' said Maggs indignantly. 'Most of the boys I know would run a mile if they saw a dragon. I wouldn't be scared. I'd rip its head off.'

'Also,' said Tich. 'If a young kid went to fight a real dragon, the dragon would burn him up in ten seconds and then eat him probably. Kids can't fight dragons. That's just stuff you get in stupid stories.'

'You shouldn't be teaching us about dragons,' argued the Boff. 'We should be having stories about famous scientists and stuff.'

'We don't want stories about scientists,' said Ginger. 'They're totally boring. I like dragons.'

'Yes but they don't exist,' insisted the Boff. 'What's the point of hearing stories about stuff that doesn't exist?'

'Some stories and legends are interesting, aren't they, Pravin?' said Mrs Wilson patiently. 'We're allowed to use our imagination a little bit surely? They'd be no stories, no books, no films if we weren't allowed to use our imaginations.'

'But that's why people believe in dragons, and vampires, and Robin Hood and Flying Saucers. Because of all these stupid stories,' persisted the Boff.

'Well, anyway that's all very interesting, but it's time we did some work,' said Mrs Wilson. The class groaned.

'Not work, Miss,' said Tich. 'You're wearing our brains out. Our brains'll be worn out completely by the time we leave school.'

'Yes, well, never mind that,' said Mrs Wilson. 'I want you all to write an exciting story about one of your heroes, and how they did something really brave, and – yes Pravin – you can write a story about Albert Einstein, or Louis Pasteur or Stephen Hawkins.'

'I bet Stephen Hawkins'd be rubbish at fighting dragons,' said Ginger.

'There's no such thing as …' began the Boff.

'Oh shut up Pravin, you gink,' said Tich, and then he looked down in despair at the huge sheet of lined paper Mrs Wilson had just put in front of him, and muttered 'I hate writing feppin stories. We're being tortured to death having to write this stuff.' Then he said out loud, 'Miss, do jet-fighter pilots have to be able to write stories?'

'Everyone has to be able to write, Kevin,' said Mrs Wilson. 'You'll never get a worthwhile job unless you can read and write and do maths.'

'Do you need to be able to do maths and writing if you're going to be a dragon slayer?' asked Ginger.

‘Now you’re being silly, Charles, just get on and write your story,’ said Mrs Wilson. ‘Now I wonder who’ll be first to finish their page?’ The class went quiet as the children racked their brains for something, anything to write. And the clock above Mrs Wilson’s head ground to a halt.

*

Tich never understood clocks. When you were looking forward to something, or doing something you hated, they never seemed to move. And yet when you were having fun, they whizzed round gobbling up time like a mad crocodile.

Right now the hands of the clock had slowed, so Tich began his time-filling strategy. He sharpened his pencil, wrote a silly note to Ginger, scratched the side of his nose and even tried to write a bit of his story. He did all this and tried not to look up at the clock, but when he finally did, THE HANDS HADN’T MOVED AT ALL!

For the first few years at school Tich had been the same height as everyone else in his class, but when he was eight, about the time

when his parents split up, he just stopped growing. Every few months he'd measure his height, but it never changed – 120 centimetres every time – and within a couple of years he was the smallest person in his year group, and it was all starting to get on Tich's nerves.

Tich was good at sport, but it was always the same when they picked the teams. 'You're too short. You can be the mascot.'

As Tich tapped his pen against his teeth, there was muttering from the back of the class, as the Goons started looking for a little entertainment. The Goons' job in the world was to make everyone's life a misery. They'd steal your sweets money, or demand the chocolate bar out of your packed lunch (the only thing worth eating) or they'd scribble on your homework.

In charge of the Goons was Pigboy. Pigboy was a big bully with huge hands. He had two mates, Thicko and Barf. Thicko had big muscles and fists and no brain. Barf was skinny as a greyhound with funny little eyes and about twenty per cent of a brain. Tich had given them their nicknames but you never said them out loud if they were anywhere near you.

The teachers said you should just ignore

them, but Tich noticed the teachers didn't exactly follow their own advice, and were always shouting at them in class. When the teachers got angry Tich wanted to say, 'Why don't you just ignore them.' But it was probably just as well he didn't.

Tich used to dream of ways of murdering Pigboy and his mates: tying them to the train line for example, so that the train would come along and chop their heads off, or drowning them in a huge tub of boiling custard and turning them into Car Accident Pudding, or chaining their ankles to a van and driving it over a cliff (Tich having jumped out at the last minute, of course). Tich would smile to himself, thinking of them impaled on spikes which he had previously placed at the bottom of the cliff.

Tich had his own gang at the school. There were four of them. There was Tich, whose real name was Kevin, and the Boff whose real name was Pravin.

The Boff knew every single fact in the world. You could ask him something like, 'How many ostriches are there in France?' and right away he'd know the answer and he'd also tell you

where they were and what they'd had for dinner.

Then there was Ginger. Ginger was tall and so much like a bean pole that, if he stood still too long, little dogs would trot up and wee on his leg. He was the exact opposite of the Boff. He knew absolutely nothing. Not a thing. If you asked Ginger how many ostriches there are in France, he'd say, 'What's an ostrich?' or 'What's France?'

Then, last but not least, there was Maggs. Maggs was a girl. At least she looked a bit like a girl. But Maggs, unlike other girls, had no interest in boys and makeup and hairstyle. She never combed her hair or went on a diet like the other girls pretended to. She was more like a boy, but the boys didn't want anything to do with her either so, as a last resort, Maggs had palled up with Tich.

The advantage of having Maggs in your gang was that she was frightened of no one – not even the Goons. If they came near her she would kick them as hard as she could on the shins.

If you were picking a team, the last four people you'd pick would be Tich (too small), the

Boff (too clever), Ginger (too skinny, too thick) and Maggs (too mad, bad and dangerous) but these four people were Tich's gang, and, for the moment, they just had to put up with each other until someday, maybe, someone better might come along.

Tich looked at the clock one last time and then looked at what he'd actually written. It was the word 'The'. Tich wondered if it was possible to actually die of boredom.