

ARCADE

AND
THE **DAZZLING TRUTH DETECTOR**

Books by Rashad Jennings

The IF in Life

THE COIN SLOT CHRONICLES SERIES

Book 1: *Arcade and the Triple T Token*

Book 2: *Arcade and the Golden Travel Guide*

Book 3: *Arcade and the Fiery Metal Tester*

Book 4: *Arcade and the Dazzling Truth Detector*

ARCADE

AND THE DAZZLING TRUTH DETECTOR



RASHAD JENNINGS

WITH JILL OSBORNE

 **ZONDERkidz™**

ZONDERKIDZ

Arcade and the Dazzling Truth Detector

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Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zonderkidz, 3900 Sparks Dr. SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49546

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Illustrated by: Alan Brown

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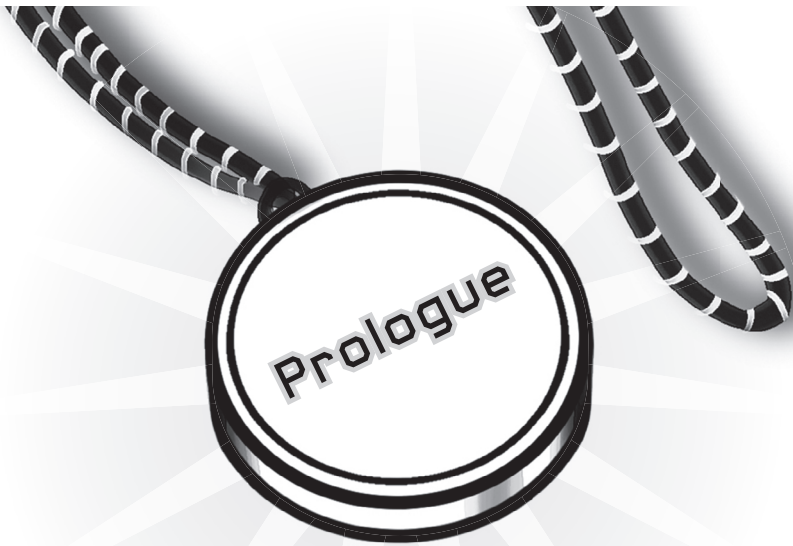
*This book is dedicated to my dad—the late
ALBERT O. JENNINGS.*



My dad, the patriarch of my family, Albert Jennings, has gone home to be with the Lord. Though I know I'll see him again, I'll miss his laughter. We became so close that whenever he was very tired, and Mom needed to get his attention, she'd just mention my name and he'd light right up! Yet despite the wonderfully close relationship he and I had, there will always be one thing I'll remember most. You see, Dad was a man's man with a gruff exterior. He was never a hand-holder. But a few days before his passing, when I was last at his bedside, we hugged and shook hands as always. But that last time, he literally took my hand and held it tightly for five minutes! In that moment, I made special promises to him that I will forever keep. It was like he knew it would be our last time together in this life. Dad went to heaven at 1:24 am ET, March 1st, which in LA was 10:24 pm PT, February 29th (Leap Day). I'll always remember Leap Day, because throughout his life, my dad made so many courageous leaps for us!

*And now, my dad has made one final leap, out of this life
and into the waiting arms of the Lord in heaven. I won't wish
him happy travels—he has arrived! Dad . . . Wish me happy
travels! By God's grace, I'll be there with you, someday!*

I love you, Dad, with all my heart.



Theo! Son! Where are you? It is time to get back to work.” Theo Timon Theros sat where he always did during his short afternoon break—on the outside stone window ledge, staring at the mighty Greek arches in the distance, sketching.

“Theo! There you are!” Theo’s father huffed and puffed after climbing the steep stairs from the workshop. He raised a hand toward the sky. “How many times can you sketch the same scene?”

Infinity.

Theo had to tear his eyes away from the parchment to answer his father. “Please, may I have a longer break today, since it is my birthday?”

Theo’s father, Ergon Theros, the most skilled and, therefore, busiest metalworker in town, grumbled. “Too much rest invites poverty.”

“But I’m not resting. I’m . . . imagining possibilities.” Theo dropped his head and traced the reed pen over the lines in his drawing.

“Well, then, bring your imagination down to the metal

shop and see if it is possible for you to finish today's project. We will celebrate your birthday this evening. Your mother is helping the servants prepare your favorite dish." Theo's father moved in closer and took Theo's sketch from his hands. He held it up to compare it to the architecture in the distance. "This drawing looks nothing like an arcade. See, you've squared off the arches." Ergon sighed loudly. "This looks more like three Ts joined together."

Theo grinned, gathered his sketching materials, and followed his father downstairs to the workshop. A new, unforged piece of metal sat at his workstation. Theo picked



up the lump, flipping it upside-down and back over, inspecting it.

This is the best we have.

He carefully placed it back on the workbench and faced his father with wide eyes.

“Where is the other piece I was working on?”

Theo’s father turned his head slightly toward his son. “Next year you will turn thirteen. What kind of father would I be if I did not bestow a generous gift on the last birthday of your childhood?”

Theo rested both hands on the workbench and stared at the metal. “I do not understand. This is a gift?”

Ergon Theros walked over and placed a hand on Theo’s shoulder. “You said you were imagining possibilities. Well, what would you imagine for this little lump of metal? It is yours to shape however you choose. Happy birthday, Theo Timon Theros.”

Theo breathed in deeply, his father’s hand heavy on his shoulder. This piece of metal represented profit for the family. For his father to give that up was a strong gesture of love from the often serious and frugal man.

“Thank you, Father.”

“You are welcome, my son.” Theo’s father lifted his hand and returned to his projects on the other workbench.

Theo spoke without looking up, his voice cracking slightly. “And when would be a proper time for me to work on it?”

Ergon tipped his head in Theo’s direction, and the sides of his mouth pulled up in a grin.

“You may work on it this afternoon only. Quickly now, before the birthday magic fades.” He shook his head and took a mallet to his own project.

Theo struggled to swallow the lump that had formed in his throat. His eyes filled up, clouding his vision, but he willed himself not to blink.

He’s allowing me to create. But just this one day.

He grabbed his parchment and carefully examined the drawing. The one his father thought was a mis-sketched row of arches.

He took a deep breath . . . gathered the metal and his tools . . . and headed to the heating vat.

Happy birthday, Theo Timon Theros.

He always thought it odd that all his names began with T.

Now I see.



On January twenty-first, everyone in my life turned weird. Except Doug Baker—my best friend and now foster brother—who normally *is* weird, turned *normal*.

“Dude, I have a list of things I need to pick up at the market. I’ll catch you later.” Doug and I were walking home from school on our favorite path through Central Park.

“The market? Since when do *you* go to the market?” I adjusted the straps on my flamingo backpack, tightening it on my back. “You know what, seventh grade books are heavy!”

“Hey, Tolleys!” Doug yelled to a couple of big shadows following behind us on the path. “Can Arcade walk home with you guys? I gotta go to the market.”

Kevin and Casey Tolley, our “friendly” neighborhood bully brothers, picked up the pace, and when they reached me and Doug, they gave us fist bumps.

Weird!

“Oh, yeah. He can walk with us. We’ve been wanting to talk with you anyway, Arcade.”

“Yeah.” The Tolley twin on the left grinned a little,

revealing his chipped tooth. That would be Casey. “We were wondering, Arcade, if you could come to the . . . uh . . . Ivy Park Library with us tomorrow. We wanna start research for our persuasive essays, and you could help us find some good books.”

“*You guys* want to go to the library to start a school project *on a Saturday*? You’re messin’ with me, right?”

I stared at them through my narrowed eyes. These boys *could not be* the real Tolleys. They must have had their bodies snatched by aliens or something.

“We were thinking of goin’ at two o’clock,” the other one—Kevin—said. “Do you know if the library is open on Saturdays?”

I swung my head around, looking for Doug. But he was outta there.

“Well? What do you say, Arcade?” Casey crossed his arms and stepped back. “I know the project isn’t due for a month, but we wanna get a jump on it.”

I scanned the Central Park lawn. “You dudes seen a spaceship anywhere?”

“Huh?” Casey and Keven both grunted out.

I shook my head and held back a laugh. “Never mind. Yeeeeeah . . . okay, sure, I’ll go. I gotta be back early though. I have plans with the fam.”

I didn’t know *for sure* if I had plans with my family, but tomorrow was my twelfth birthday. No one had actually mentioned my birthday yet. Mom and Dad had been extra busy with their jobs, and my sister, Zoe, had been swamped with homework. But none of them ever forgot a birthday.

“We appreciate the help, Arcade.” Casey walked beside me and pulled a bag of chocolate chip cookies out of a brown bag. “Want one? These are your favorite, right?”

The *only* thing that could make this day *weirder* would be . . .

“Arcade! There you are! How was school?”

It was my sister. She had climbed up the stairs out of the subway station. Her long, black hair was pulled back in a ponytail, as usual.

“ZOE!” I grabbed both sides of my head. “What happened? Did you get attacked by an old mop? It seems to have taken over your head.”

I waited for some sassy reply about my body odor or my pea-sized brain. But Zoe just smoothed her hand through her ponytail and smiled.

“Yeah, it was quite a fight, but I found some good conditioner. So, I’m good. How was your day, dear brother? I hope it was great.”

Oh, no!

If I couldn’t get a rise out of my sister when I made fun of her hair, then the whole world had gone whack.



Loopy! Come here, boy!” I dropped my backpack and held out both hands, ready for my chocolate-colored Shih-poo, Loopy, to run down the stairs, jump into my arms, and drool me up. Like usual.

“Loopy?”

Nothing. No panting, jumping, or drooling. No Loopy!

Goosebumps covered my arms as I thought back to last fall when Loopy disappeared for a couple of months. In the *Internet*.

“LOOPY!” I ran to the kitchen, expecting to find him with his head in his dog dish.

Nope.

“Zoe! Loopy’s gone!”

Zoe placed her backpack on the dining room table, strolled into the kitchen, and opened the refrigerator. She pulled out a flavored water. “He’s not in there.” She closed the door, unscrewed the cap, and took a few gulps. She came over and put a hand on my shoulder. “Don’t worry about it, bro. Loopy’s probably hiding upstairs waiting for

you to take a shower.” She sniffed. “I don’t know what you’ve been doing at school lately, but it’s got you smelling kinda . . . ripe.”

Okay, now that’s more like my sister.

I sniffed my underarm and cringed. “We’ve been playing volleyball in last period P.E. I’ve been sweating every day inside our hot gym in the middle of winter! Plus, I’m *almost* twelve, ya know. Sweat glands are working overtime.”

Zoe didn’t even crack a smile when I dropped the subtle birthday hint.

“Volleyball, huh? That’s cool. What’s your specialty? Setting, digging, or spiking?”

I shook my head. “I’m pretty much the person who wipes up the floor, since I’m always down there.”

“Diving for the ball?”

“I’d call it more like tripping and falling after the ball. Casey Tolley keeps sticking his foot out in front of me. We’re supposed to be on the same team.”

“Do you want me to talk to Michael about it?”

“NO! That would make it worse.”

Michael Tolley is Zoe’s new boyfriend. He’s the older brother of Kevin and Casey, and he obviously sapped all the nice genes out of the family when he was born.

Zoe shrugged. “Okay, then. Don’t say I never tried to help.”

I grabbed a sports drink out of the refrigerator. “And on Monday, they’re mixing us up with the girls’ P.E. class. We’re playing in a tournament.”

Zoe grinned. “Sounds like more humiliation is on the way for you.”

“Well, at least I’ll have a fun birthday weekend to look back on when I’m wiping up the floor.”

Zoe ignored my comment and finished chugging her flavored water. “Mom and Dad will be home soon. I should get going on my homework.”

“But it’s Friday. You’ve got all weekend.”

Zoe picked up her backpack and swung it over her shoulders. “You middle-schoolers clearly have *no idea* just how much work high school is.” She waved and headed for the stairs. “*Au revoir, mon frère!*”

I reached my hands out. “But . . . Loopy! And remember tomorrow’s my birthd—”

Just then, Doug blasted through the front door. “Arcade! I’m the MAN! I got everything I needed ON SALE! Not only am I the Food Dude, I got real shopping skills! CHA-CHING! Boy, aren’t you glad I’m gonna be your brother.”

Doug hoisted his shopping bag onto the counter.

My stomach growled. “Are you making dinner tonight?”

Doug tilted his head. “Am I making dinner tonight?”

“That’s what I said.”

He reached in the bag and pulled out some flour. “Nah. I got a food project.”

“Are you making me a cake?” I asked with a little wiggle of my eyebrows.

“A cake?”

“Yeah, a cake.”

He pulled out a bag of sugar. “Why would I make you a cake?” He leaned forward and sniffed. “Are *you* cooking dinner? Cause you smell like onions.”

I raised my arms. “No onions. You can thank volleyball for the smell.”

Doug scrunched his nose. “Dude, you better go take a sh—”

I held my hands up. “I’M GOING!”

I thumped up the stairs and flung open the door of the room that Doug and I had been sharing since November. Loopy was snoozing on the lower bunk. We added bunk beds after Christmas, rock-paper-scissored for the top, and Doug won.

“Hey, Loop! No wonder you didn’t come down to greet me. Why are you in here with the door closed?” I sat down next to him.

“Oh, man. I’m sorry, boy. Have you been in here all day? Come here, let me give you a snuggle . . .”

Loopy sat up, sneezed, jumped off the bed, and ran under it.

“You too? Come on, I can’t smell *that* bad.”

I stood up and stripped off my shirt. Around my neck hung my Triple T Token. An old woman gave it to me at the library soon after my family moved to New York City, and ever since, it had been taking Zoe, me, and my friends on adventures through mysterious elevator doors. The last adventure had taken place the day after Thanksgiving, when the elevator took us to China to return a flamingo named Flames to the Beijing Zoo. I missed the little shrimp hog.

I looked at Loopy. “Hey, at least I don’t smell like shrimp anymore.” He poked his head out from under the bed.

“You think I stink?” I put my nose under one arm and took a big whiff. “Ugh. I guess it’s true, then.”

As soon as I said that, the Triple T Token, which had stayed cool and silent for almost two months, began to flash brilliant lights around the room.



ZOE! COME IN HERE! IT'S AN EMERGENCY!" Loopy ran out from under the bed and chased after the light patterns that swirled around on my floor. He even jumped to try and bite the ones on the wall.

Zoe burst through the doorway. "WHAT? Arcade, are you all right?" She stood, frozen, staring at my token. "What the . . . OH, NOOOOO!"

I looked toward the ceiling, expecting what normally came next when the token came to life.

"Where's the glitter?" Zoe stood with one fist jammed into her hip.

"Maybe it only appears if the token heats up."

Zoe came over and touched the token. "It's cool." Then she examined the patterns on the wall. "But it's sure creating a dazzling display. What did you do to it?"

I shrugged. "Nothing."

Zoe adjusted her reading glasses on her face. She moved closer to the token, picking it up off my chest, and turning

it around to examine the back, where “Arcade Adventures” was stamped across the bottom.

“Think, Arcade. Did you say anything before this all started?”

“I was just talking with Loopy.”

“What did he say, Loopy?” She ran around until she caught him. She brought him up close to me. Loopy barked.

“Loopy told me I stink.”

Zoe petted his head. “You are a smart doggy.”

“And then I said, ‘Ugh, I guess it’s true then.’”

“HA! You admitted the truth!”

“Yeah! So what?”

Zoe shrugged. “I don’t know. I just like you to admit I’m right once in a while.” Her eyes widened. “Hey, maybe that’s what triggered the token! You’re finally seeing the wisdom in EVERYTHING I SAY.”

I shook my head and waved my hands. “Now wait a minute, Zoe. That is NOT why this thing came to life. You have some of the weirdest ideas that I’ve ever heard.”

I barely got that out of my mouth when the token stepped up the light show a hundred percent. Light prisms took over the room.

I squinted. “I’m gonna need my shades for this.”

Zoe, who usually scowls and screams and complains when the token comes to life, danced around instead this time. “This is amaaaaazing! You’re seeing the light, Arcade! Zoe’s truth about the world! I can’t wait to see where we’re going!” She ran over to my dresser and grabbed my spray

deodorant. “Apply this, please. I don’t want to regret one minute of this adventure.”

I took the can, lifted my arm, and sprayed. Nothing came out. Zoe flew to my closet and pulled out a clean, red T-shirt.

“Here, at least put this on.”

When she closed the closet door, it turned into a sparkling-gold elevator door. A golden coin slot rose up out of my floor, this time with a sign attached that said GET TRUTH.



I reached for the token, pulled, and it came off my chain into my hand. I turned to Zoe. “So, you good with this?”

Her eyes reflected the brilliant rays coming off the token. “Oh, yeah. I have a feeling I’m gonna love this.”

I approached the coin slot. “Okay then, no complaining when you find out I’m right about *everything* in life.”

“Ha.” She pointed to the sign. “It says GET TRUTH. I’m sure I won’t be complaining.”

I held Triple T right above the slot but hesitated.

“What?” Zoe threw her hands up.

“We haven’t been on a Triple T adventure for a while.”

Zoe reached over and smacked the top of my hand, causing the token to drop directly into the coin slot. “Let’s see what all this light is about.”



Light streams shot through the cracks of the elevator doors. I had to shield my eyes.

“Make the open-door motion!” Zoe yelled.

“Oh yeah. Almost forgot about that!” I put my palms together and then pulled them apart. The doors opened. The light was unleashed. It was brilliant, but for some reason, it didn’t make me want to jump back. It made me want to climb in.

Woof! Loopy appeared by my side as I took a step toward the elevator entrance.

“Loopy, last time you went through, you got lost! I’m not risking that again.” I picked him up and placed him on my bed. “I’ll be back for you, I promise.” I jumped in the elevator, where Zoe was holding a golden handrail and staring at the dazzling lights all over the walls.

“Let’s hope we aren’t the ones who got lost this time,” I said.

The elevator door closed.



Triple T elevators are tricky. Sometimes there's a button with only one choice. Sometimes there's one button with many choices. A few times, I had one button with no choices, so I shouted a command out loud. I'd learned the hard way to be careful what you ask for.

This time, there were no buttons at all! Just this golden sign at the top that said GET TRUTH.

"So, what're you gonna do, Einstein?" Zoe had one hand on her hip, and the other rubbing her neck.

I pointed to the sign. "I guess I'm going to ask it to show me the truth."

"The truth? About what?"

I grabbed hold of my golden chain that, just a few minutes ago, held the biggest mystery of my life over the last year.

The Triple T Token.

"I wanna know where the token goes every time I drop it in the slot."

And then *we* dropped.



"AAAAAHHHHHHHH! ARCAAAAAAADE!" Zoe screamed as the elevator plummeted. "Why did you SAAAAAY THAAAAAT?"

I reached for the golden doors to steady myself. "BECAUSE I REALLY WANT TO KNOW!!!!!"

“BUT WE’RE DROPPING!”

“I KNOW THAT! MAYBE THE TOKEN GOES TO ANTARCTICA!”

“ANTARCTICA?”

“YEAH, THAT WOULD BE DOPE!”

“NO, IT WOULD NOT BE DOPE!”

“WOULD TOO!”

“WOULD NOT!”

Right in the middle of the argument that was going nowhere, the elevator began to slow, as if a parachute had opened up on top. It eased to a stop.

Zoe and I stood there, staring at each other. The doors didn’t open.

“Great. They’re stuck.” Zoe felt along the cracks of the doors that were still gold but had now turned an antique gold.

“Patience, Zoe. Remember your goal.”

My sister Zoe and I set goals back in August for the school year. Zoe’s was to grow in patience. Mine was to grow in compassion. I’m still working on it, especially with Zoe.

Zoe stepped back from the door. “Okay. Open when ready, ancient doors.”

The doors creaked and slid open.



Radiant sunlight streams through the doors. It's warm. I step out.

Zoe rubs her upper arms. "Well, good. It's not Antarctica."

We're at the top of a large, outdoor amphitheater. The seats are made of white stone. There's a stage at the bottom of the many rows. Behind the stage is a stunning crystal blue sea. A few small boats float in the distance.

Zoe and I take a few steep steps down to the middle of the amphitheater. Zoe shields her eyes as she looks out at the ocean. "This is where the token goes? I don't get it."

"Check it out, Zoe." I point toward several rows of white stone arches on our right.

Zoe smiles. "Arcades."

"What?"

"Arcades."

"I heard you. What?"

"What?" She crunches her eyebrows together. "Oh, did you think I was calling *you*?"

"Well, you said my name."

She throws her head back in frustration. “I’m saying that *those* . . .” she holds her hand out to the arches, “are ARCADES. A series of arches is called an arcade. You should know that. Check it out.” She turns in a complete circle. “They’re all around us.”

She’s right. Arcades everywhere.

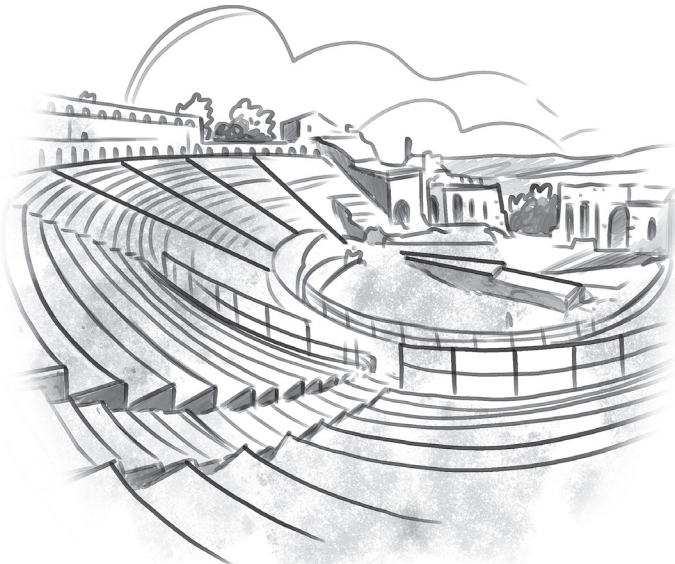
I turn back to the ocean view and notice two people sitting way down in the front row of the amphitheater. One appears to be a boy about my size, and another is a woman of small build, wearing what looks like a ball cap and a white sweat suit.

I jet down the steps of the amphitheater.

“ARCADE!” Zoe yells.

“I know! They’re everywhere.”

“NO! This time I *am* calling you. Wait up!”



I don't stop. I have to get a closer look at the two people in the front row. Within eight rows of them, I trip over the uneven stone. I watch from the ground as the boy stands, hugs the lady, glances at me, and disappears into the sun's blinding rays. I scramble the rest of the way, finally reaching her. She turns to look at me. I freeze.

"Uh . . . oh . . . I'm sorry. I thought you were . . ." I crane my neck forward and examine her face closely.

She smiles. "It's me, Arcade."

I put my hand over my mouth to stifle a gasp. She's wearing the Triple T ball cap, but she's . . . young.

Like, Zoe-young! In fact, she even kinda looks like Zoe.

I sit down next to her. "Uh . . . you're . . ."

"Younger. Yes, I know. This is the real me."

"The real you?"

"Yes. The other way is just how you perceive me."

I stare down at her white running shoes. "Well, I always wondered how you could move so fast."

She laughs.

"ARCADE!" It's Zoe. She's still many rows up, waving a shoe in the air. I know I should go check on my sister, but the Triple T lady makes only brief visits, so I stay put.

"Do you have a name?"

The woman grins. "Ruah."

I glance down at a hunk of metal Ruah is holding in her lap.

"In the elevator that brought me here, I asked to know where the token goes when I put it in the coin slot. Is it in there?"

She pulls off the top of the metal piece, and there it sits. In a mold! It's the same mold I saw at a gold refinery where the Triple T Token was cast in one hundred percent pure gold. Ruah was there too.

Ruah glances out in the distance. The boy who left a few moments ago is scrambling over some rocks, heading to what looks like a cluster of homes.

"ARCADE! MY SHOE BROKE! DON'T YOU CARE?"

I care about Zoe, but not her shoes. That pair, in particular.

"Where is he going?" I ask, pointing to the boy just as he disappears over the other side of the rocks.

"Back to work." Ruah frowns. "Every day. Back to work."

"Work?" I scratch my head. "But he's my age."

"He's *exactly* your age." Ruah holds up the mold. "And a craftsman. He made this."

"*That boy* made the Triple T mold?" My heart beats faster.

Ruah stands up, takes the token out of the mold, and drops it in my hand. It lights up. Gleaming, but not hot, yet somehow warming me on the inside. Ruah puts her hand over the dazzling token. "Use it well, Arcade. You have traveled, and you have been tested."

"Yeah. About that testing. Do you know how hard it is to take care of a baby flamingo?"

Ruah chuckled. "Now you are free to experience the widest, the longest, the highest, and the deepest."

"The widest what? The deepest what?"

Ruah nods. "Yes. You're getting it now."

“GETTING WHAT?”

The glittery Triple Ts on Ruah’s ball cap shoot out rays of light. I shield my eyes.

“Arcade!” Zoe jumps down from the row above me and holds up her shoe. “I fixed it. With no help from you, of course.” She sits down and pokes me in the side with her elbow.

I stare in front of me, trying to see past the flashes in my eyes, but Ruah isn’t there anymore.

“Arcade?” Zoe looks around. “Why did you take off? Why didn’t you wait for me?”

“She was down here.”

“*Who* was down here?”

“Ruah.”

Zoe rubs her neck with both hands. “Okay, I’ll play your game. Who’s Ruah?”

“The Triple T woman. That’s her name.”

“Of course. Ruah! That’s a pretty name. Did you catch her *last* name? You know, so we can look her up on the Internet and find out where she lives? Maybe she’s on social media.”

I turn to Zoe with a questioning gaze. “Are you serious?”

She gives me a little shove. “No.”

“Good.” I hold up the token. “Because I think she lives in this thing.”

As soon as I say that, the token dazzles light, sparkling like the sun reflecting off the ocean. It summons the antique elevator doors to the amphitheater stage. The coin slot, with the GET TRUTH sign attached, rises up from the ground.

I sigh. “Guess it’s time to go home.”

Zoe glares at me. “DO NOT SAY THE WORD *DROP*.”

“What would you like me to say?”

“Say the word . . .” Zoe puts one hand to her chin and sniffs, “shower.”



The trip back is slow. I study the inside of the elevator.

“What in the world . . .?”

Zoe tilts her head and her jaw drops open. “Whoa. That’s a beautiful ceiling. It’s never been like this before.”

The ceiling is a huge, gold dome with signs that are way, way up. I squint through my super-strong, long-distance glasses.

“Zoe, can you read the signs?”

Zoe takes off her glasses—which she mostly needs for reading—rises up on her tip-toes, and squints. “No. And it’s really bugging me. I bet they say something profound.”

“Profound?”

“Well, yeah. The words look like they’re carved into the gold. Who would take the time to carve something *unimportant* into gold?”

I pull my phone out of my pocket. “Maybe I can take a picture and enlarge it.”

“Nope. Phones don’t work in your token world, Arcade. Remember? You should mention that inconvenience to Ruah next time you see her.”

I lower my phone, which is showing me nothing but

flashing lights on the screen. “So how am I supposed to see what’s up there?”

“Beats me. Grow taller, I guess.”

“Oh, well you know, that could happen soon, since tomorrow is my bir—”

DING!



The doors opened on their own, and Loopy was right there waiting, panting and slobbering.

Woof!

I turned to Zoe. “That was an interesting trip. I’m glad we didn’t get lost, but something about me feels lost all of a sudden.”

“What do you mean, *lost*?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. Maybe ‘confused’ is a better word. And that boy sure is a mystery.”

“What boy?”

“The boy scrambling over the rocks. He was talking to Ruah, and then he left. Ruah said he was going back to work.”

“Work?”

“Yeah. She told me that *he’s* the one who made the mold for the Triple T Token!”

Zoe grabbed me by the T-shirt sleeve. “Get over here.” She pulled me over to my desk chair. “Arcade, what did you ask right before you put the token in the slot this time?”

“Uh . . .” I scratched my head and tried to clear the blur

from my brain. I looked down at my token, which was once again hanging from the gold chain around my neck. “I asked to know where this thing goes when I put it in the slot.”

“And did you find out?”

“Well, I saw the token. Ruah put it back in my hand after she took it out of the mold.”

“So, if we just ‘Got Truth,’ that would mean . . .”

“That the token goes back to the mold every time?”

“It goes back to its origin. The beginning. That makes sense.”

I stood and paced the room. “No, that doesn’t make sense at all! A mold is just a thing. Why would a token that seems to be alive go back to a dead mold? Why would the mold care?”

Zoe joined me in the pacing. “It wouldn’t. But the maker of the mold might.”

I gasped and grabbed the token. “THAT makes sense!”

Zoe pushed me in the arm. “Now you’re seeing things my way.”

“Zoe, I need to go to the library.”

She rolled her eyes. “So, tell me something new.”

I grabbed my flamingo backpack. “I need to find out about ancient Greece. About metalworkers. And I need to find that boy.”

Zoe grabbed my backpack strap. “Hold up, Skippy.”

“What?”

“It’s dinner time. You’ll have to go tomorrow.”

“Oh, man.” I put my backpack back on the desk. “I guess that’ll work. I’m going with the Tolleys tomorrow anyway.”

★
“The Tolleys?” Zoe chuckled. “Really, Arcade? Has your life gotten so boring that now you’re choosing to hang out with Kevin and Casey?”

“Hey, they invited me. And no one else has invited me to do anything tomorrow. Which is whack, since it’s my bir—”

“Arcade! Zoe! Dinner!”

Mom’s voice from the bottom level of our brownstone echoed up the stairs.

“Arcade! Zoe! Dinner!”

And that voice . . . was Doug’s.



“I don't want to work . . . I want to learn . . .”

“Learning is work, Arcade.”

“I get that, but . . . hey, what do these gold signs say?”

“The signs contain quotes about knowledge, wisdom, and truth.”

“Aren't those all the same thing?”

“Sometimes.”

“Sometimes? That's not an answer.”

“But it's the kind of answer you appreciate.”

“You're right. But why? Why am I like that?”

“Because the truth about you is . . .”

All of a sudden, I couldn't breathe! I opened my eyes and gasped. Loopy had stretched out to sleep with me in my bed. One leg was resting over my mouth. The other one was plugging my nose! I pushed him off. “Loopy!” I sneezed. “You interrupted my dream! I was about to find out the truth about myself!”

Doug stirred on the top bunk. “Arcade, dude, can you find out the truth about yourself later? It's Saturday, man, and I really wanted to sleep in. I was dreaming of chicken parmesan!”

I jumped out of bed. “Doug! I just had a crazy dream! I was floating inside a golden dome, and there were paintings and sculptures all around me.”

Doug rubbed his eyes, stretched, and yawned. “Sounds cool. But not as cool as chicken parm.”

I shook him. “And there were golden plaques all around, but I couldn’t read ‘em, cause it was blurry.” I grabbed my glasses off my dresser and shoved them on my face. “Hey, Doug, do you think my dreams are blurry ‘cause I don’t wear my glasses when I sleep?”

“I have NO idea. Ask the eye doc next time you’re there.” Doug turned over to face the wall.

“DOUG! Zoe and I went on an elevator trip last night, and there was a golden dome at the top—the ceiling. It was the same dome as in my dream!”

Doug sat up, swung his legs over the bed, and jumped down. “You went on another Arcade adventure? Where did you go? Were there flames and intense heat like last time?”

“No. No heat. Just blinding light. We went to Greece!”

“Greece! You went to *Greece* without me?”

“Well, I think it was Greece. I’m going to research it at the library today. I’m sure Ms. Weckles—”

Doug put his hand on my shoulder. “No! You can’t go to the library today.”

I stepped back. “Really? Why not? The Tolleys invited me.”

Doug crossed his arms over his pajama top with the pizza-slice pattern. He shifted his eyes left, then right. “Oh, wait. Yep. My bad. You can go.”

“Just like that? You sure changed your mind fast. What’s goin’ on, Doug?”

“Nothin’. I’m just tired and confused. Yeah. You need to go with the Tolleys. It’s the library. You’re a bookworm. It will make you happy. What time are you going again?”

I just stared at him. “Two o’clock.”

Doug checked an invisible watch on his wrist. “Two o’clock. Right. That’s right. And with the Tolleys. Yep. That’s a plan. I’ll see you later.”

And then he ran out the door. In his pajamas.

I looked at Loopy, who was standing and panting, watching Doug tear out of there.

Woof!

“Yeah, I know, boy. Happy birthday to me.” I sniffed. “Hey, Loop, do you smell chocolate chip pancakes?”



I ran down the stairs. “Happy January twenty-second, everybody!” I threw my arms up in a victory pose, but there was nobody around. I must have been imagining the aroma of the birthday pancakes Mom usually makes for me, because there wasn’t any action happening in the kitchen. Doug wasn’t even in there.

Where did he go so fast?

I plunked down on the couch. Mom stepped in the front door wearing her winter workout clothes and carrying some mail. She shivered as she closed the door. “Brrrr. It’s chilly out there. But I had a fabulous jog this morning! Saw lots of

friends in Central Park.” She sorted through the envelopes in her hands. “Arcade, you have a couple of letters.”

I jumped up off the couch to retrieve them. “Thanks! They look like cards for my bir—”

“MOM! COME QUICK! I NEED YOU!”

Zoe.

Mom’s eyes widened. “Whoa. Sounds urgent.” She ran up the stairs.

“But MOM! I need you too!” I stroked my chin. “I think I’m sprouting a beard hair!”

I carried my mail over to the dining room table. A small envelope sat there with my name on it. It was in Dad’s handwriting. Dad was upstairs sleeping. He gets home early every morning from his job as a set designer and stage manager on Broadway.

“Good old Dad. I’m sure *he* remembered my birthday.” I put down the other two envelopes and opened Dad’s. It was one of his famous notes. He leaves them for me and Zoe since he can’t always greet us in the morning.

*“What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?” Micah 6:8 KJV.
Great thing to ponder, right, Arcade?
Mom and I have a long errand to run this afternoon. Hopefully we will be home by dinner. Have a great day . . . and walk humbly!
—Dad*

I read the note three times. Doth? Thee?

“Well, Loop, this *is* a great verse to ponder, but it looks like Dad forgot my birthday too.” I turned around and around. “Loop?”

I ran upstairs and watched from the hallway as Loopy scooted back into my bedroom.

Mom came out of Zoe’s room, brushing her hands together. “Crisis averted! Oh, good, you’re here, Arcade. I have to go out this morning, and then I’m meeting your dad for an errand this afternoon. I’ll grab lunch in the city. Are you all set with everything you need for today? Doug mentioned that you were going to the library with the Tolleys at two o’clock. I think it’s very nice that you’ve befriended those boys. You can be a good influence on them.”

“Yeah, I love to be a good influence, but today is my birthday,” is what I *wanted* to say. But Mom was down the stairs and out the front door before I had the chance.

What’s goin’ on here?

I knocked on Zoe’s door. A perturbed sister voice came from behind it.

“If that’s you, Arcade, it’s going to have to wait. I’ve got some issues that need attention.”

“What, more broken shoes?” I whispered, turning in a huff.

Well, when your people and your dog desert you, there’s always good old snail mail.

I started down the stairs to retrieve my two letters.

“Arcade’s a mess! Arcade’s a mess!”

I glared at my sister's cockatoo, Milo, who was swinging in his cage that hangs from the ceiling of our living room.

"Yeah, well, you're looking pretty ragged yourself, Milo."

"Zoe's the best! Zoe's the best!"

My sister loves to teach her bird phrases that get me all riled up.

"Come on, Milo, say 'Happy birthday, Arcade!'"

"Zoe's the best! Zoe's the best!"

I resisted the urge to let Milo outside to fly with the wild New York City birds. Instead, I focused on my mail.

The first piece was a birthday card from my grandparents with a twenty-dollar bill inside. "Aww, you guys you didn't have to do that!" I ran my fingers over the raised purple number twelve on the card. They had written a message inside.

Dear Favorite Grandson Arcade,

(They say that to whichever grandson they're with at the time.)

Twelve is a special year. Make the most of it! It's your last year to be a child. Discover your true self now, and when you do, you'll never forget it! Even when the teen years confuse you.

"Ha! This explains why Zoe is so confused."

"Zoe's the best! Zoe's the best!"

“Quiet, Milo.”

The next envelope made my stomach jump. It was from Miss Gertrude in Virginia! Miss Gertrude has known me since I was a kid. She’s also the grandma of Lenwood and Kenwood Badger, brothers who once owned the Triple T Token. One time they tried to take the token from me, and they ended up stuck in San Francisco. In 1935. They’re back in the present day now . . . I’m just not exactly sure where. Miss Gertrude was at the hospital on the day I was born. An elevator took us there once, and Zoe and I watched her steal the Triple T Token from my mom. I paused at the memory.

Why did you do that, Miss Gertrude?

This card was the same one my grandparents sent— with the raised purple number twelve. Miss Gertrude also included a message.

Happy Birthday, Arcade. Keep shining your dazzling light in the world. “As one lamp lights another, nor grows less, so nobleness enkindleth nobleness.”

Sincerely, Gertrude

She had taped twelve dollars in the card. One dollar for each year. Sweet!

Note to self. At the library today, look up “enkindleth.”

Miss Gertrude had drawn a squiggly arrow on the bottom of the card’s insert paper. I turned the paper over.

P.S. They are back.

I dropped the twelve bucks *and* the card. I put my head in my hands. “OH, NO! THEY’RE BACK! THE BADGERS ARE BACK!”

“The Badgers are back! The Badgers are back! Happy birthday, Arcade!”

“Not NOW, Milo! I’m in real trouble here!”

The Badgers are back. And no one in this house remembers it’s my birthday except Milo.