

## **Epilogue: “Johnny Fights for the Tiger”**

Johnny Rawten climbs up over the rubble and jumps down, entering the other side of this gray world, with Buddha’s words still echoing in his head. He stands motionless, crouching in a ready position. He looks straight ahead and sees a lime-green light shooting up from a giant stone slab. The lime-green light surrounds the Tiger, as it paces back and forth, locking its eyes upon Johnny. Johnny can’t believe he has finally reached this point. After all the time spent in the ancient world, he has finally reached the end. Seeing the Tiger for the first time since his razor sharp sword ripped through the Tiger’s chest gives Johnny renewed confidence and hope. Seeing the Tiger makes this real to Johnny. This whole time, Johnny had been fighting to save the idea of the Tiger but now, the beast is here, in the flesh, alive. It confirms the idea that this adventure is real.

This side of the wall is the exact same: nothing but grayness. There is no sound whatsoever. The air is still. Johnny’s senses are on high alert, for at any moment the demons of his past could emerge. Johnny scans the area for anything and everything. Staying in his crouched position, he creeps forward, inching his way towards the Tiger. On his second step, a massive force begins to shake the earth. Father Heaven seems to rear back and billow a gust of wind that is more powerful than a jet engine. Johnny tries to remain low to prevent himself from getting blown backward, into the rubble. Johnny can hear stone falling, but it’s not coming from the sky, he cannot see it, only hear it. The shaking gets so violent that Johnny can no longer remain upright. Stone crashes all around, the wind not letting up. More and more stone crashes down. Johnny has no idea what is happening.

The rumbling gradually comes to a stop. Johnny lifts his head from being buried in his arms, and then rises up. The landscape looks completely different than before the rumbling began. All around Johnny, the earth has fallen away, leaving steep cliffs surrounding him in all directions, like an island rising up a hundred feet. Johnny carefully makes his way to the edge and peers over. He sees nothing but blackness. No light, no bottom, just black, empty forever. He kicks a rock over the edge, listening for it to hit. Maybe he will hear it hit water, or solid ground. He listens carefully, but no sound comes. He kicks another rock, this one further out. Again, he waits and waits, but he hears nothing. Feeling very nervous, he turns and once again begins making his way towards the green light surrounding the Tiger.

Johnny is thirty feet from the green light. He can see the Tiger’s thick coat, his yellow eyes, and his white teeth. Johnny knows he must hurry for at any moment, the demons of his past will arrive, as Buddha said. Just as the thought crosses his mind, the demons emerge from the blackness. They are three of the most horrible looking creatures Johnny had ever seen. He knows they each represent the three worst characteristics of his past: disrespect, bullying, and laziness. He knows that he must now defeat them and end this once and for all.

Johnny studies each creature. They are identical looking, with each having long yellow fangs the size of a pencil. Slime and blood drip from their mouths, spilling out over the earth. Their black, shiny coat of spikes makes a porcupine look like a soft pillow. Their four legs glide forward; their shoulder blades twisting back and forth like a stalking lion. Their tail whips

like a lizard, their eyes a deep red. Their long, sharp claws scratch the earth. Their tongue hangs down, dragging along the ground, its tip coming to a razor sharp point. They prowl around, never taking their eyes off of Johnny, nor does he take his off of them. He has never seen such deadly looking creatures. He continues to study them. He cannot see a weakness. Their claws, fangs, tongue, tail, fur, it's all designed for killing. That, and the fact that it's three against one, causes Johnny to vomit.

Up ahead, Johnny notices the Tiger trying to break loose from the green force field. The Tiger senses Johnny is in trouble and with each attempt at jumping through the force field and coming to Johnny's aid, electricity sizzles through the Tiger's body and slams him back to the earth. But he gets up again and again, trying to help his savior. Johnny knows that the Tiger will not break loose and that he will only be free if Johnny and the Tiger alone can defeat these demons.

The demons see Johnny occupied with the Tiger's attempts at freedom and use it as their moment to strike. The first demon is just inches away as Johnny regains his focus and ducks down, the demon flying over his head, missing Johnny's neck by mere centimeters. The demon tumbles to the ground, rolling a bit but stopping before it reaches the edge. Johnny twirls around just in time to see another demon flying right at him. This time, Johnny steps to the side but the demon manages to extend his slimy paw out far enough to catch Johnny on the leg, opening up a huge red gash that sends pain shooting through his body. Johnny stumbles a bit but does not go down. If Johnny goes down, the three demons will pounce and it will be over.

Johnny scans the area for something he can use as a weapon. Suddenly, his pocket starts to smoke, a hot sensation pulses against his wounded leg. He reaches down and finds a golden dagger in his pocket. It can't be! The eight golden coins have forged into a dagger, a weapon for Johnny to use. He grabs it tightly in his hand and whips around as a demon is once again flying right at him. Johnny crouches down in the ready position. He has no intention of dodging the demon this time. As the demon gets within reach, Johnny shoves the dagger right through the throat of the demon. It lets out a tremendous squeal and flops to the earth. Black blood seeping out of its mouth, slowly pooling at Johnny's feet. One down, two to go.

Johnny, with dagger in hand, sprints towards the green light and the Tiger. Not more than ten feet away, a demon dashes in front, blocking Johnny's path. Johnny stops and turns away, heading for the edge of the cliff. Just as he is about to reach the edge, he digs his heels in and hits the ground. The demon goes flying right over top of him, descending into the black unknown. One demon left.

Johnny gets up, scanning the area for the third and final demon. He is so close to victory, he can taste it. It doesn't take long for Johnny to find the third and final demon. It's prowling directly in front of the Tiger, back and forth, luring Johnny to come forward. Johnny is anxious for victory so he wastes little time in making the first move. He approaches the demon, not more than ten feet away. The only thing that stands between Johnny and the demon is the stone slab that, just as Buddha said, contains eight slots for the eight coins. However, the coins have forged into a weapon for Johnny, so he takes the dagger and slams it to the ground. The dagger breaks into eight coins again. Johnny gathers up all eight coins and one by one quickly places them in

the correct slots as the demon continues to pace back and forth. As the eighth coin is inserted, Johnny goes down the line and pushes them all in, hearing eight clicks. The green force field disappears. The Tiger is free. Johnny did it. He has saved the Tiger. But time for rejoicing must wait, for things are far from being over. The demon, sensing the control starting to shift, turns to see the Tiger leap from his slab. The demon uses his spiked tongue to lash out, catching the Tiger on the shoulder, ripping open a deep cut.

As the Tiger lies on the ground wounded, the demon and Johnny are locked in a tight battle, each delivering blows to one another. They are seemingly locked together, rolling around on the ground, each trying to gain the advantage. Johnny does all he can do to avoid the spikes, the fangs, the claws. As they roll around, Johnny tries to get a hand free to deliver a punch to the side of the demon, or to the head, or to wherever he can find a weakness. The demon is too powerful, it's too tough, it's too deadly. None of Johnny's punches seem to have any effect on the demon. Johnny, pinned to the ground at this point, is swinging his fists wildly, desperately trying to defeat the demon. They continue to roll around on the ground locked in a life and death struggle as they approach the edge of the cliff. Johnny manages to get to his knees and swings a wild punch at the demon, missing it completely, which causes Johnny to lose his balance. He stumbles to his right, unable to protect himself. The demon senses his opportunity and jolts Johnny backward with his massive paw. Johnny's foot slips on the edge and he goes over the side of the cliff, but manages to catch himself by grabbing on to the side of the cliff with both hands. Johnny is now dangling above the bottomless black canyon, barely holding on to the edge. He looks up and sees the demon rise up on his hind legs, getting ready to slam down on the hands that are keeping Johnny from falling to his death. Suddenly and without warning, the Tiger flies in and snatches the demon with his mighty jaw. Johnny, hanging over the side, cannot see the battle; he can only hear the screaming and slashing. His left hand tires and gives way, now only hanging on with one rapidly tiring hand. With one wild scream, the air goes still and the silence returns. Johnny, hanging on for life with his right hand, sees the Tiger stride forward, black blood staining his mouth and beautiful orange coat. It's the black blood of the demon, which means the Tiger has killed it. It is over, the Tiger is free. The demons of Johnny's past are dead.

The Tiger watches Johnny desperately try to pull himself up. Johnny reaches up with his left hand but is unable to grab hold of anything. His right arm is burning with pain. He doesn't know how much longer he can hang on. Johnny looks up at the Tiger with a desperate look. It appears the only true way to Johnny can save the Tiger is by giving his own life. Tears well in his eyes over the completeness he feels for succeeding and freeing the Tiger. Johnny, with his strength gone, whispers "Thank you" to the Tiger for killing the last demon, then lets go. The Tiger stands at the edge and watches as Johnny Rawten silently disappears into the deep black unknown.

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Two Months Later

After over three years in the ancient world completing harrowing tasks, Johnny returned home, alive. The welcome-home celebrations went on for days as the never ending stream of visitors continued to stop by to see Johnny, to hear of his adventures. The time that had elapsed, the scars, the memories, it all had convinced his family and friends that his stories were true, that he really did time travel to the ancient world and that he wasn't just making it up. In the two months that Johnny had been home, he was just beginning to settle into his normal life again. However, with all that Johnny had seen and done, it was impossible for his life to be quite like it was. He constantly found himself thinking about the ancient worlds, of the tasks he completed, of the people he met.

More so than any other thought is that of his very last task, killing the demons of his past and saving the Tiger. His mind constantly rests upon the memory of himself desperately holding on to the ledge, staring at the Tiger, knowing it was the end. As his strength gave out and he let go of the edge, he was content, he was happy for though he was about to give up his life, he knew the Tiger would live on and that he had succeeded at something in life. Fortunately for Johnny, Buddha put in one last twist of fate, for the deep, dark abyss that Johnny fell into was not what it appeared. Death was not waiting at the bottom, but instead, a time portal, the very last Johnny will ever enter into. Just as the Tiger and ledge disappeared from view, a tingling sensation engulfed Johnny's body and sent him speeding through a purplish, grey tunnel with a blindingly bright light at the end. In seconds, Johnny's body slammed through that bright light and tumbled over onto a concrete sidewalk. He stood up, shielded his sensitive eyes from the sunlight and realized that he was not dead at the bottom of some deep, black hole, but he was alive and well, back in his world.

His eyes readjusted to reveal to him that he was not at his house, or school, or friends house, but he was at a zoo. Odd, he thought, but as Johnny began walking through the exhibits, his body froze. He looked out to his right and saw a massive tiger with a shining orange and black coat pacing back and forth, never taking his eyes off him. Johnny approached the cage. He studied the animal. He saw the scar on the shoulder. He saw the look in the animal's eyes. It wasn't just any tiger, it was *him*. It was the Tiger Johnny had saved. The thought of the Tiger being at the zoo gave Johnny a sense of relief, for the Tiger was safe. As the human and the animal stood motionless, staring at each other, they both knew their adventures were done. They both knew they were safe. They both knew they would always have each other.

In the weeks and months ahead, Johnny would continue to visit the zoo, even striking a deal with the zoo keeper to allow him to feed his Tiger once and a while. During these feeding sessions, Johnny would tell the Tiger about the tasks he completed, about the people he met along the way, and about how his adventure to conquer the ancient world had changed him as a person. Each time Johnny would go to the zoo, tossing steaks to the Tiger, his mind would drift harmlessly back to the ancient worlds he visited and all the things he had learned, not only about the ancient worlds, but about himself as well. Johnny got his one last adventure and it would change him forever. Now, Johnny can rest and enjoy the many years ahead. Maybe he will go to college, maybe he will become a zoo keeper or veterinarian, maybe a teacher. But for time traveling to the ancient worlds, Johnny is done.

