



*By Maureen Crane Wartski  
Illustrations by Greg Newbold*

Rick didn't even have time to cry out. One moment he was walking along the narrow path; the next, he was stumbling and rolling down the mountainside.

He tried to grab for a bush, for grass, for anything that could break his fall. There was nothing. Then suddenly he came to a hard, jolting stop, and the world went dark.

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Rick could guess what had happened. He'd slid into some kind of cave, a hole in the rocky side of Dragon Mountain. He looked around him but couldn't see much.

There was a small square of daylight not too far above his head, so maybe he wouldn't have too hard a time climbing out. Rick started to get to his feet then gasped in pain.

"My ankle ..."

Had he sprained it during that mad tumble? The ankle throbbed, and what he could feel of it told him it was already swelling. He hoped it wasn't broken, but there was no way to tell here in the dark.

He tried yelling for Seth, but he knew it was no use. Seth was too far down the mountain slope to hear him. ...

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Rick and his older cousin, Seth, had driven out to this part of the Wasatch Mountains early that morning. Rick hadn't been impressed by the craggy peak of light-gray limestone ahead of them, but Seth had been excited and started bounding up the narrow mountain path.

"I know it doesn't look like much," he called over his shoulder, "but this is a fantastic place. These mountains were once covered by shallow oceans, and there are coral reefs here that have been preserved for millions of years."

There's an old legend that says dragons used to live here and lay their eggs in the limestone caves.

Rick grinned. A major in geology at the University of Utah, Seth thought rocks were the coolest things on the planet and was writing a paper on Paleozoic era fossils. His enthusiasm had rubbed off on Rick, who'd asked to join his cousin on a field trip into the mountains.

"Dragon Mountain's supposed to be one of the best places to study fossilized stromatolites," Seth was saying. "They're prehistoric algae —"

"Dragon Mountain?" Rick interrupted. He looked up at the peak in front of them. It didn't look like any dragon he'd read about or seen pictured.

Seth chuckled. "That's not its real name. There's an old legend that says dragons used to live here and lay their eggs in the limestone caves. It's just a folk tale, Rick. Come on — let me show you how to find those stromatolites."

For the next two hours, Rick followed his cousin up the steep slope looking for even layers of the light-gray stone.

"Bumps on flat rock surfaces are usually fossilized algae," Seth explained. He worked his high-def camcorder, talking about his findings, while Rick took still shots.

Legends usually were based on some fact.

The noonday sun was blazing hot when they stopped for lunch. Afterward, Seth checked his handheld GPS to map out where they would work next, but Rick felt restless. Saying that he wanted to take a few more photos, he began to walk up the steep trail.

Dragon Mountain — how had the place gotten that name? Legends usually were based on some fact. Had great beasts once roamed Dragon Mountain? Not dragons,

of course. There were no such things as dragons. Rick liked reading about those fantastic creatures with fiery red eyes — great, scaled beasts that could fly and puff out smoke and fire — but he didn't believe they'd ever existed.

Rick was jerked out of his thoughts when a loose rock crumbled under his foot. He didn't even have time to cry out. ...

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Now he was trapped in this cave.

"I've got to get out of here," Rick muttered.

His voice was making eerie echoes in the dark, strange noises in the enclosed space. Rick tried to get up on his knees, but then stopped as blistering pain shot through his entire leg.

"OK," he told himself, "I'll crawl."



As he began to move, there came that noise again. It was just an echo. Or ... was it something else? No — yes! Something was moving behind him!

Rick glanced over his shoulder and froze.

Two flaming red eyes were staring at him out of the darkness.

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## Ending by Emily Cameron, 2013

Rick lurched away from the dragon and flattened himself against the rough cave wall, his injured ankle throbbing sharply in protest. His panic-stricken gray eyes flickered up to meet the dragon's glowering red ones, the vertical pupils glinting in the dim light, the thick eyelids narrowed in contempt. There was nothing he could do to save himself now. Pressing his back into the jagged wall, he whispered in a pleading tone, "If you're going to kill me, make it quick, okay?"

He clenched his eyes shut and cowered in the darkness, the sharp rocks jabbing against his hunched shoulders. He waited for death to come, vaguely aware of his pulsing ankle, ready for the sharp teeth to rip mercilessly through his flesh, but nothing happened. Suddenly, he became aware of the familiar sound of suppressed laughter and giggling. "What—?" His eyelids snapped open and he glanced around in bewilderment. The glaring eyes had disappeared. Where was the dragon?

The faint yellowish beam of a flashlight flickered to life, illuminating the cave walls. In the dim glow, Rick saw the dark silhouette of a person, his body hunched as he struggled to contain his laughter. On the gravel floor of the cave, Rick could make out a deflated mask with a scaly, unearthly face and two red eyes. Rick could hardly believe what he was seeing. As the features of the other man's face came into focus, Rick recognized the familiar face of his older cousin, Seth, who was smothering his chuckles behind his hand. His brain struggled to make sense of this situation. "S-Seth?" Rick sputtered. "What—what . . . ?"

"*That*, my friend," Seth grinned, "was the best prank *ever*."

"But the dragon—"

"—was a *mask*," Seth finished, plucking the discarded mask from the ground and flinging it proudly under Rick's nose. Its rubbery surface looked so unrealistic in the light, Rick felt ashamed he'd actually believed it was a real dragon.

"Man," Seth chuckled, "I'd been waiting for *days* to pull this prank on you. You are *so* gullible.

Rick's original shock switched to guarded defensiveness. He felt embarrassed and humiliated that he'd fallen for Seth's corny prank. "I am *not*—"

"You should've listened to yourself, Rick," Seth teased gleefully. "You were whimpering and cowering—'Oh, please don't kill me, just make it quick, okay?'" he imitated in a high-pitched, mocking voice.

Rick nudged Seth's shoulder. "Oh, shut up," he said, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips.

He realized Seth was staring in disbelieving horror at something behind Rick's shoulder. He whipped around and found himself face-to-face with another set of glaring scarlet eyes. "Alright, Seth," Rick said uncertainly. "Cut it out. You can't fool me again."

"It's not a prank!" Seth gasped. The note of desperation in his voice told Rick that he was telling the truth.

The monster's lips peeled back to reveal a set of razor-sharp teeth. "*Run!*" Seth screamed, scrambling up the cave wall into the square of daylight.

"I can't climb!" Rick shrieked. "My ankle!" The monster was padding closer and closer.

Seth thrust one hand down and Rick grabbed his wrist. With a grunt of effort, Seth hoisted his cousin up to safety just as the dragon's jaws snapped at the spot where Rick's legs had dangled just a heartbeat before.

The two cousins sprawled on the ground, gasping furiously for air. Beneath them, Rick could hear the frustrated roar of the dragon as it retreated back into its cave.

Rick's chest rose and fell rapidly as he took deep gulps of air. "Well," he said to his cousin with a relieved smile, "on the bright side, at least you have something interesting to write about now, besides *rocks*."