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FOUNDRYSIDE

BY THE AUTHOR OF CITY OF STAIRS



A NOVEL



ROBERT JACKSON BENNETT

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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First Edition

I
COMMONS



All things have a value. Sometimes the value is paid in coin. Other times, it is paid in time and sweat. And finally, sometimes it is paid in blood.

Humanity seems most eager to use this latter currency. And we never note how much of it we're spending, unless it happens to be our own.

—KING ERMIEDES EUPATOR,
“REFLECTIONS UPON CONQUEST”

I



As Sancia Grado lay facedown in the mud, stuffed underneath the wooden deck next to the old stone wall, she reflected that this evening was not going at all as she had wanted.

It had started out decently. She'd used her forged identifications to make it onto the Michiel property, and that had gone swimmingly—the guards at the first gates had barely glanced at her.

Then she'd come to the drainage tunnel, and that had gone . . . less swimmingly. It *had* worked, she supposed—the drainage tunnel had allowed her to slink below all the interior gates and walls and get close to the Michiel foundry—but her informants had neglected to mention the tunnel's abundance of centipedes, mud adders, and shit, of both the human and equine variety.

Sancia hadn't liked it, but she could handle it. That had not been her first time crawling through human waste.

But the problem with crawling through a river of sewage is that, naturally, you tend to gain a powerful odor. Sancia had tried to stay

downwind from the security posts as she crept through the foundry yards. But just when she reached the north gate, some distant guard had cried out, “Oh my God, what is that *smell?*” and then, to her alarm, dutifully gone looking for the source.

She’d avoided being spotted, but she’d been forced to flee into a dead-end foundry passageway and hide under the crumbling wooden deck, which had likely once been a guard post. But the problem with this hiding place, she’d quickly realized, was it gave her no means of escape: there was nothing in the walled foundry passageway besides the deck, Sancia, and the guard.

Sancia stared at the guard’s muddy boots as he paced by the deck, sniffing. She waited until he walked past her, then poked her head out.

He was a big man, wearing a shiny steel cap and a leather cuirass embossed with the loggotipo of the Michiel Body Corporate—the candle flame set in the window—along with leather pauldrons and bracers. Most troublingly, he had a rapier sheathed at his side.

Sancia narrowed her eyes at the rapier. She thought she could hear a whispering in her mind as he walked away, a distant chanting. She’d assumed the blade was scived, but that faint whispering confirmed it—and she knew a scived blade could cut her in half with almost no effort at all.

This was such a damned stupid way to get cornered, she thought as she withdrew. *And I’ve barely even started the job.*

She had to get to the carriage fairways, which were probably only about two hundred feet away, behind the far wall. And she needed to get to them sooner rather than later.

She considered her options. She could dart the man, she supposed, for Sancia did have a little bamboo pipe and a set of small but expensive darts that were soaked in the poison of dolorspina fish—a lethal pest found in the deeper parts of the ocean. Diluted enough, the venom should only knock its victim into a deep sleep, with an absolute horror of a hangover a few hours later.

But the guard was sporting pretty decent armor. Sancia would have to make the shot perfect, perhaps aiming for his armpit. The risk of missing was far too high.

She could try to kill him, she supposed. She did have her stiletto,

and she was an able sneak, and though she was small, she was strong for her size.

But Sancia was a lot better at thieving than she was killing, and this was a trained merchant house guard. She did not like her chances there.

Moreover, Sancia had not come to the Michiel foundry to slit throats, break faces, or crack skulls. She was here to do a job.

A voice echoed down the passageway: “Ahoy, Nicolo! What are you doing away from your post?”

“I think something died in the drains again. It smells like death down here!”

“Ohh, hang on,” said the voice. There came the sound of footsteps.

Ah, hell, thought Sancia. *Now there are two of them . . .*

She needed a way out of this, and fast.

She looked back at the stone wall behind her, thinking. Then she sighed, crawled over to it, and hesitated.

She did not want to spend her strength so soon. But she had no choice.

Sancia pulled off her left glove, pressed her bare palm to the dark stones, shut her eyes, and used her talent.

The wall spoke to her.

The wall told her of foundry smoke, of hot rains, of creeping moss, of the tiny footfalls of the thousands of ants that had traversed its mottled face over the decades. The surface of the wall bloomed in her mind, and she felt every crack and every crevice, every dollop of mortar and every stained stone.

All of this information coursed into Sancia’s thoughts the second she touched the wall. And among this sudden eruption of knowledge was what she had really been hoping for.

Loose stones. Four of them, big ones, just a few feet away from her. And on the other side, some kind of closed, dark space, about four feet wide and tall. She instantly knew where to find it like she’d built the wall herself.

There’s a building on the other side, she thought. *An old one. Good.*

Sancia took her hand away. To her dismay, the huge scar on the right side of her scalp was starting to hurt.

A bad sign. She'd have to use her talent a lot more than this tonight.

She replaced her glove and crawled over to the loose stones. It looked like there had been a small hatch here once, but it'd been bricked up years ago. She paused and listened—the two guards now seemed to be loudly sniffing the breeze.

"I swear to *God*, Pietro," said one, "it was like the devil's shit!" They began pacing the passageway together.

Sancia gripped the topmost loose stone and carefully, carefully tugged at it.

It gave way, inching out slightly. She looked back at the guards, who were still bickering.

Quickly and quietly, Sancia hauled the heavy stones out and placed them in the mud, one after the other. Then she peered into the musty space.

It was dark within, but she now let in a little light—and she saw many tiny eyes staring at her from the shadows, and piles of tiny turds on the stone floor.

Rats, she thought. *Lots of them*.

Still, nothing to do about it. Without another thought, she crawled into the tiny, dark space.

The rats panicked and began crawling up the walls, fleeing into cracks and crevices in the stones. Several of them scampered over Sancia, and a few tried to bite her—but Sancia was wearing what she called her "thieving rig," a homemade, hooded, improvised outfit made of thick, gray woolen cloth and old black leather that covered all of her skin and was quite difficult to tear through.

As she got her shoulders through, she shook the rats off or swatted them away—but then a large rat, easily weighing two pounds, rose up on its hind legs and hissed at her threateningly.

Sancia's fist flashed out and smashed the big rat, crushing its skull against the stone floor. She paused, listening to see if the guards had heard her—and, satisfied that they had not, she hit the big rat again for good measure. Then she finished crawling inside, and carefully reached out and bricked up the hatch behind her.

There, she thought, shaking off another rat and brushing away the turds. *That wasn't so bad*.

She looked around. Though it was terribly dark, her eyes were ad-

justing. It looked like this space had once been a fireplace where the foundry workers cooked their food, long ago. The fireplace had been boarded up, but the chimney was open above her—though she could see now that someone had tried to board up the very top as well.

She examined it. The space within the chimney was quite small. But then, so was Sancia. And she was good at getting into tight places.

With a grunt, Sancia leapt up, wedged herself in the gap, and began climbing up the chimney, inch by inch. She was about half-way up it when she heard a clanking sound below.

She froze and looked down. There was a bump, and then a crack, and light spilled into the fireplace below her.

The steel cap of a guard poked into the fireplace. The guard looked down at the abandoned rat's nest and cried, "*Ugh!* Seems the rats have built themselves a merry tenement here. That must have been the smell."

Sancia stared down at the guard. If he but glanced up, he'd spy her instantly.

The guard looked at the big rat she'd killed. She tried to will herself not to sweat so no drops would fall on his helmet.

"Filthy things," muttered the guard. Then his head withdrew.

Sancia waited, still frozen—she could still hear them talking below. Then, slowly, their voices withdrew.

She let out a sigh. *This is a lot of risk to get to one damned carriage.*

She finished climbing and came to the top of the chimney. The boards there easily gave way to her push. Then she clambered out onto the roof of the building, lay flat, and looked around.

To her surprise, she was right above the carriage fairway—exactly where she needed to be. She watched as one carriage charged down the muddy lane to the loading dock, which was a bright, busy blotch of light in the darkened foundry yards. The foundry proper loomed above the loading dock, a huge, near-windowless brick structure with six fat smokestacks pouring smoke into the night sky.

She crawled to the edge of the roof, took off her glove, and felt the lip of the wall below with a bare hand. The wall blossomed in her mind, every crooked stone and clump of moss—and every good handhold to help her find her way down.

She lowered herself over the edge of the roof and started to descend. Her head was pounding, her hands hurt, and she was covered

in all manner of filthy things. *I haven't even done step one yet, and I've already nearly got myself killed.*

"Twenty thousand," she whispered to herself as she climbed. "Twenty thousand duvots."

A king's ransom, really. Sancia was willing to eat a lot of shit and bleed a decent amount of blood for twenty thousand duvots. More than she had so far, at least.

The soles of her boots touched earth, and she started to run.



The carriage fairway was poorly lit, but the foundry loading dock was ahead, bright with firebaskets and scried lanterns. Even at this hour it was swarming with activity as laborers sprinted back and forth, unloading the carriages lined up before it. A handful of guards watched them, bored.

Sancia hugged the wall and crept closer. Then there was a rumbling sound, and she froze and turned her head away, pressing her body to the wall.

Another enormous carriage came thundering down the fairway, splashing her with gray mud. After it passed, she blinked mud out of her eyes and watched it as it rolled away. The carriage appeared to be rolling along of its own accord: it wasn't pulled by a horse, or a donkey, or any kind of animal at all.

Unfazed, Sancia looked back up the fairway. *It'd be a pity, she thought, if I crawled through a river of sewage and a pile of rats, just to get crushed by a scried carriage like a stray dog.*

She continued on, and watched the carriages closely as she neared. Some were horse-drawn, but most weren't. They came from all over the city of Tevanne—from the canals, from other foundries, or from the waterfront. And it was this last location that Sancia was most interested in.

She sunk down below the lip of the loading dock and crept up to the line of carriages. And as she approached, she heard them whisper in their mind.

Murmurings. Chatterings. Hushed voices. Not from the horse-

drawn carriages—those were silent to her—but from the scried ones.

Then she looked at the wheels of the closest carriage, and saw it.

The interiors of the huge wooden wheels had writing upon them, a sort of languid, joined-up script that looked to be made of silvery, gleaming metal: “sigillums” or “sigils,” as the Tevanni elite called them. But most just called them scrivings.

Sancia had no training in scrying, but the way scried carriages worked was common knowledge in Tevanne: the commands written upon the wheels convinced them that they were on an incline, and so the wheels, absolutely believing this, would feel obliged to roll downhill—even if there was actually no hill at all, and the carriage was actually just rolling along, say, a perfectly flat (if particularly muddy) canal fairway. The pilot sat in the hatch of the carriage, adjusting the controls, which would tell the wheels something like, “Oh, we’re on a steep hill now, better hurry up,” or, “Wait, no, the hill’s flattening out, let’s slow down,” or, “There’s no hill at all now, actually, so let’s just stop.” And the wheels, thoroughly duped by the scrivings, would happily comply, thus eliminating the need for any horses, or mules, or goats, or whichever other dull creature could be coaxed into hauling people around.

That was how scrivings worked: they were instructions written upon mindless objects that convinced them to disobey reality in select ways. Scrivings had to be carefully thought out, though, and carefully wrought. Sancia had heard stories about how the first scried carriages didn’t have their wheels calibrated properly, so on one occasion the front wheels thought they were rolling downhill, but the wheels in the back thought they were rolling *uphill*, which quickly tore the carriage apart, sending the wheels hurtling through the streets of Tevanne at phenomenal speeds, with much mayhem and destruction and death ensuing.

All of which meant that, despite their being highly advanced creations, hanging around a carriage’s wheels was not exactly the brightest of things to do with one’s evening.

Sancia crawled to one wheel. She cringed as the scrivings whispered in her ears, growing louder. This was perhaps the oddest aspect of her talents—she’d certainly never met anyone else who could hear

scrivings—but it was tolerable. She ignored the sound and poked her index and middle finger through two slits in the glove on her right hand, baring her fingertips to the moist air. She touched the wheel of the carriage with her fingers, and asked it what it knew.

And, much like the wall in the passageway, the wheel answered.

The wheel told her of ash, of stone, of broiling flame, of sparks and iron.

Sancia thought, *Nope*. The carriage had probably come from a foundry—and she was not interested in foundries tonight.

She leaned around the back of the carriage, confirmed the guards hadn't seen her, and slipped down the line to the next one.

She touched the carriage's wheel with her fingertips, and asked it what it knew.

The wheel knew soft, loamy soil, the acrid smell of dung, the aroma of crushed greenery and vegetation.

A farm, probably. *Nope*. *Not this one either*.

She slipped down to the next carriage—this one your average, horse-drawn carriage—touched a wheel, and asked it what it knew.

The wheel knew of ash, and fire, and hot, and the hissing sparks of smelting ore . . .

This one came from another foundry, she thought. *Same as the first. I hope Sark's source was right. If all of these came from foundries or farmland, the whole plan's over before it began.*

She slipped down to the next carriage, the horse snuffling disapprovingly as she moved. This was the penultimate one in line, so she was running out of options.

She reached out, touched a wheel, and asked it what it knew.

This one spoke of gravel, of salt, of seaweed, of the tang of ocean spray, and wooden beams soaking above the waves . . .

Sancia nodded, relieved. *That's the one*.

She reached into a pouch on her rig and pulled out a curious-looking object: a small bronze plate inscribed with many sigils. She took out a pot of tar, painted the back of the plate with it, and reached up into the carriage and stuck the little bronze plate to the bottom.

She paused, remembering what her black-market contacts had told her.

Stick the guiding plate to the thing you want to go to, and make sure it's stuck hard. You don't want it falling off.

So . . . *what happens if it falls off in the street or something?* Sancia had then asked.

Well. Then you'll die. Pretty gruesomely, I expect.

Sancia pressed on the bronze plate harder. *Don't you scrumming get me killed*, she thought, glaring at it. *This job's offering enough damned opportunities as it is.* Then she slid out, slipped through the other carriages, and returned to the fairway and the foundry yards.

She was more careful this time, and made sure to stay upwind of any guards. She made it to the drainage tunnel quickly. Now she'd have to trudge back through those fetid waters and make straight for the waterfront.

Which was, of course, where the carriage she'd tampered with was also bound, since its wheels had spoken to her of sea spray and gravel and salty air—things a carriage would only encounter at the waterfront. Hopefully the carriage would help her get into that highly controlled site.

Because somewhere on the waterfront was a safe. And someone incomprehensibly wealthy had hired Sancia to steal one specific item inside it in exchange for a simply inconceivable amount of money.

Sancia liked stealing. She was good at it. But after tonight, she might never need to steal again.

"Twenty thousand," she chanted softly. "Twenty thousand. Twenty thousand lovely, lovely duvots . . ."

She dropped down into the sewers.



Kill the Farm Boy

Once.
A pun.
A time.

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHORS
DELILAH S. DAWSON
AND
KEVIN HEARNE

Kill the Farm Boy is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents either are products of the authors' imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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1.

IN A FOREBODING TOWER, GLOWING WITH PORTENT OR POSSIBLY POLLEN



Many moons ago in a principality far, far away, a hirsute lady slept in a tower that was covered in thorns. In general, such an occurrence would not be considered worthy of note, for people slept in towers all the time regardless of their current level of hair growth.

But in this particular case, it was not just the lady who slept. Almost everyone in the castle was magically sleeping, including the earl and countess and even Oxnard the guard, sitting in the kitchen with his mouth open, eyes closed in bliss, forever eating a piece of cherry pie, thereby creating with each passing minute a new world record for extended pie eating. Dogs, horses, children, knights, the bathing woman with soap in her eyes—everyone stood or sat or lay as if frozen in midaction, even when such actions were wildly inopportune.

The sole exception to the rule was the owner of a lonesome, warbling voice that could be heard every so often singing songs about remembered conversations, and how awfully quiet sleeping people tended to be, and how if someone didn't arrive with groceries soon, a certain someone would go to sleep and wake up dead, because

Oxnard the guard didn't have the keys to the tower door on him and they were nowhere to be found, plus the door itself had turned into solid stone, and all the other exits and castle walls were likewise impossible to manage and food was getting rather scarce, especially cheese.

There was little else of note besides the roses peeping out from the thick blanket of vines. The plush fuchsia blossoms were as beautiful as the thorns were sharp, and there was an abundance of them both, together with a cloying scent of attar and some dizzy, happy bees that seemed to possess a particularly charmed ability to not succumb to sleep and thereby patter to the ground like furry grapes.

There was also an abundance of portent swaddled about the place. Oodles of it. A surfeit, even.

Something would go down there soon.

But for now, the lady slept.

And drooled a little, probably.

2.

IN A SQUALID BARNYARD IN BORIX, REDOLENT OF FECES AND ANGST



The very worst part about drudgery, Worstley thought, was all the blasted drudging one had to do. Nothing joyful or fun or frolicsome around the corner for a lowly farm boy like him to look forward to. Just more drudgery of a mind-sapping, soul-sucking nature—and on a good day, no cause for involuntary upchuckery.

At least he'd become somewhat accustomed to cleaning up the barnyard after his older brother, Bestley, had been stabbed in the heart by Lord Ergot for being too handsome. Some said barnyard duties were a step up from scrubbing the chimney, but Worstley wasn't so sure. It had been almost nine months since he'd last vomited at the smell of assorted animal dung, but it was a constant struggle. It was still his least favorite chore, and he had to do it every other day: walk out there with a shovel and a sack among the goats and the pigs and the chickens and those dratted geese that goosed him whenever they could and scoop up whatever foul turds they had excreted since the last time he'd cleaned up. And after that, the stables awaited the same routine. Only then could he have a sad waffle with

no syrup on it for breakfast. He didn't think his mother made them properly: rumor in the village had it that waffles weren't supposed to be gray.

Like most cheerless days in Borix, the sky was the color of his mother's waffles. Worstley sighed at the clouds, exasperated. "Would it kill you to let the sun shine through every once in a while?" he said.

The demon geese honked at the sound of his voice and waddled his way, hissing, wings extended in a threat display. Worstley raised his shovel in front of him protectively. "Go on, now. Shoo!" he said.

As he fenced with their snapping beaks for a few seconds, he couldn't help muttering, "There's got to be a better way to live than this."

Had he been in a musical, he thought, right then would have been the perfect time to sing a sad song about his woeful lot in life while emphasizing his eternal optimism and plucky heart. Although he'd been born in this very barnyard—right there by the bucket of lumpy slop—he'd always felt that he was meant for greater things, for some important purpose in the larger world. But there wasn't so much as a gap-toothed troubadour around to strike an obliging opening chord rhapsodizing about his shining future. Lord Ergot had hanged them all for singing a little ditty about his poky short sword on his wedding day.

The geese fended off, Worstley checked the position of the black billy goat that occasionally found it amusing to ram him from the blind side and bleat a laugh as he clutched his back and winced. So far the goat was staying still—Gus was his name—but he was watching Worstley carefully from the other side of the barnyard near the fence. Or at least Worstley thought Gus was watching him; it was hard to tell. The goat's eyes never seemed to point in the same direction.

"Don't even think it, Gus," Worstley called.

Gus bleated, lifted his tail, and ejected a fresh pile of pellets out his backside.

“Oh, great. Why do people think animals are cute?” Worstley wondered aloud. “They’re just nasty.”

“Aw, you got it easy, kid,” a voice called from the fence to the right of the billy goat. Worstley’s eyes slid in that direction and spied a diminutive form perched on a post. “Goats ain’t nothing. You want a dangerous pile of poop, wait until you get a load of dragon dump. It’s hot and sulfurous and will burn the hairs right out of your nose.”

“Who are you?” Worstley asked. “Better yet, *what* are you?”

“C’mere, kid. We gotta talk.”

Keeping a wary eye out for attacks from geese and goat, Worstley drew closer to the fence to get a better look at the speaker.

Whoever she was, she had a set of double wings like a dragonfly’s branching from her back, thin and translucent and veined with iridescent colors. They were the most beautiful things Worstley had ever seen. But the owner of said wings wasn’t precisely the image of a proper fairy. A rather large mole with three stiff and proud hairs sprouting from it was rooted on the side of her left nostril. She had two black holes where teeth should’ve been, and the three remaining molars were capped with gold. A single eyebrow not unlike a furry caterpillar wriggled about on her forehead.

Worstley would’ve expected a glittering dress, dainty as a flower, but such was not in the offing. She wore a shirt that looked more like a used handkerchief, possibly swiped from someone with the plague. Her dull red pants ballooned over the thighs with the right leg bunched at the knee, revealing one blue threadbare sock. Her left pants leg fell to her ankle, but that foot was sadly sockless. Dirt rimmed her toenails, and she radiated a powerful funk that might’ve been fungal in origin.

In short, she resembled a fairy about as much as Worstley looked like a prince.

“Are you all right?” Worstley said.

“Of course I am. I mean, apart from it being too blasted early, I’m fine.” She belched robustly. “Ah, that’s better.”

Worstley blinked. "Right. It's just that you don't look—"

"Like what? You'd better not say a fairy, kid," she said, pointing a warning finger at him. The finger appeared to have a booger affixed to the tip. "I'm a pixie. Name's Staph."

"Staph?"

"That's what I said. I'm here to change your life, so we should probably get on with it so I can do something more productive with my day than talking to some scrawny cheesehole."

Worstley took a step back and looked around, suspicious. He'd always dreamed of seeing a fairy, but never one that smelled quite so terrible. "Is this a joke? You can't be a pixie."

Staph blanched and looked over her shoulder to make sure she still had wings. The motion made her wobble unsteadily on the fence post. "Wings are still there. I'm a pixie. What the puck else would I be? A bogie?" She waggled her booger-tipped finger threateningly at him and cackled.

"Are you drunk?"

"Not as much as I'd like to be. Now look, kid, I'm here to tell you something important. The good news and the bad news is that you're the Chosen One. You have a destiny, and I'm here to bless you with it. Or curse you, whatever. Anoint you, let's say."

"This has definitely got to be a joke. Who put you up to this?"

The pixie rolled her eyes. "Gahh, enough with that, all right? Nobody cares enough to play a joke on you, farm boy. This is destiny, all gen-u-wine and bona fide. What's so hard to believe?"

"I thought pixies were supposed to be named Butterblossom or something, and they're, like, I don't know . . . clean."

Staph's eyes bulged, and she held up her boogery index finger to scold Worstley. "First, Butterblossom is a no-talent harpy who invades homes at night and eats little kids' pet hamsters." She held up another finger. "Second, clean people have no fun and they only bathe because they can't think of anything better to do. But me, I've seen some right bloody business and I know things."

Worstley shrugged and sighed and shouldered his shovel as if to say that if he had to deal with someone else's crap in the barnyard, it should at least be the physical rather than the metaphorical kind.

"Don't believe me? Okay, I'll prove it to you." The pixie hawked up a loogie and spat it at his feet. "I've got more magic juice than a poisoned apple orchard in Chumpspittle. That's an ordinary goat over there, right?" Staph pointed at Gus.

"He's kind of annoying, but otherwise, yeah."

"Watch this." Staph glared at the goat and thrust out a hand in a clawed gesture. The billy goat rocked back as if struck and began to choke and spit, its yellow eyes rolling back in its head. The pixie produced a tiny wand and added some extra oomph to whatever she was doing, and the goat fell over.

Worstley dropped the shovel. "Hey, what are you doing to Gus? Stop it!"

"Already done," Staph said as she lowered her hands and put the wand away.

Kneeling by the fallen and unbreathing billy, Worstley was unsure how to give mouth-to-mouth to someone with such thin, filthy lips full of such snuggled yellow teeth. Fortunately, Gus's round belly puffed up with air, and he rolled over and onto his callused knees, coughing.

"You okay, Gus? C'mon, buddy. If you're dead, Mom'll kill me. Or, actually, that might save me a step . . ."

"My name," said the goat, newly gifted with speech, "is Gustave, not Gus. Get it straight, Pooboy." His voice was more cultured than Worstley's and filled the boy with rage that only made him sound more the bumpkin.

"What did you—?"

"That's your name, genius. Pooboy. As in the boy who scoops up my poo."

Worstley bristled and said, "That's so juvenile, you—" but Staph cut him off before he could finish.

“Look, will you forget the goat and listen to me now? He’s not important, but I’m for real, and I’m telling you that you’re the Chosen One. You have a special destiny. You’re going to do great things.”

“Why me?”

“Hey, it wasn’t *me* that chose you, okay? I just got sent here to do the deed. If I’m gonna choose a hero, you can be darned sure it’s not gonna be some whiny, pathetic punk named Pooboy.”

“That’s not my name! It’s Worstley!”

“Whatever. Like that’s any better. Anyway, you’re hereby anointed, so get to it, will ya?”

“Get to what?”

“Saving the world. Or changing it. Or both. The aura kind of takes care of everything, and it’s not my problem anymore. All’s I need is a drink and the occasional night of debauchery at the local halfling bar and I’m good. But you’re not good, right? You’re a pooboy named Worstley living in the most wretched earldom in Pell. Time to move on, don’t you think? Find your destiny, get some songs written about you. Do something worth singing about.”

Staph turned to go, and Worstley yelped and reached out a hand, although he chickened out of actually touching her. They were short on soap around the farm, after all.

“Wait, that’s it? I mean, what have I been chosen to do?”

“Gadzooks, boy. Or zounds. I don’t know which is more appropriate in this case, and I get them mixed up.”

“Me, too,” Worstley admitted.

“But I do know one thing: you gotta figure out your destiny your own dang self.”

“But I’m really new to all this. Don’t you have a suggestion about where to begin?”

The pixie shrugged, scratched idly at her belly, and pointed vaguely to the southeast. “If you amble along that way a while on the road to Tenebruss, you’ll come across the earl’s tower. His castle, too, but the tower’s the thing.”

“So?”

Staph blew out a frustrated sigh. “So people don’t go to the trouble of building a tower unless they want to protect something they think is valuable inside it. Odds are you’ll find some treasure in there. Either that or the patriarchal son of a nun is trying to protect the virtue of his daughter. She’ll probably be clean and boring, in which case I bet you’ll take a shine to her. Go thou, verily, forsooth, swear by your troth or something. Or just do your chores here in the muck for the rest of your life. Doesn’t tweak my tuppence either way. I’m done here.” She turned her back on Worstley, blasted him with a powerful if squeaky fart, giggled, and flew away in an unsteady looping trajectory, leaving a trail of dull glitter in her wake.

“Wow. Did that just happen?” Worstley gagged, trying to wave away the pixie’s parting gift.

“Sure did,” the billy goat said. “Say, why don’t you begin your quest to change the world by giving me something good to eat for a change. Go in the house and fetch your father’s boots. They smell delicious.”

At the sound of the goat’s voice, Worstley whipped his head around so fast that he heard something pop in his neck. “So I wasn’t imagining it. You really can talk now.”

“Boots, Pooboy. Now. Read my lips.”

“Your lips don’t match your words very well.”

“Goat lips are different, aren’t they? Now hurry up.”

Worstley wasn’t about to argue with a goat—no, wait. He totally was.

“Forget that noise! You heard Staph. I’m the Chosen One. That means I’m done with this barnyard. Done with you. Done with this life! I’m going to go to that tower and things are going to be better. I’ll be able to go up to the baker in town and ask for a slice of real cake! The fancy kind, with frosting and no mold!”

Gustave snorted. “You really ought to think that one through, okay? You have trouble defending yourself against me and a couple of geese. You have no weapons and no armor. You’re like, what, ninety pounds? World out there is gonna crush you.”

“Nah, it’ll all work out. I was *chosen*. I have a *destiny*. You’ll see.”

“No, I really won’t. I’m staying right here, where it’s safe.”

“Okay. Stay if you want, but my parents are planning to eat you in a couple weeks. Mom won’t shut up about all the curry recipes.”

Gustave stared at Worstley so long that the farm boy thought the goat had lost the ability to talk.

“You know what?” the goat finally said. “I’m tired of this barnyard, too. Can’t remember the last time I saw a she-goat. Maybe they’re all in that tower we’re supposed to go find. An entire tower of goatly delight. Sweet nannies galore.”

“Yeah! Let’s go! I just need to pack a few things.”

“Don’t forget your father’s boots.”

Worstley’s parents, unfortunately, were less than understanding about his announcement that he was off to seek his fortune as the Chosen One, anointed by Staph the pixie. A bit of flailing and wrestling ensued as they tried to lock him up in the root cellar “for his own good,” but when Gustave intervened and told them to let him go, they tried instead to set the goat aflame.

“Evil magic!” his mother shrieked. “Evil in our home! Kill it with fire!”

Worstley’s father let him out of a choke hold and dashed to the hearth, fetching out a burning branch.

“Get thee gone, demon!” the decrepit and toothless thirty-two-year-old man shouted, waving his torch.

“Y’all are intense,” Gustave said, backing out the door and dropping a batch of emergency plops in self-defense. Worstley’s father followed, and then came Worstley himself, all gangly limbs and wild eyes, clutching a loaf of bread and a jar of pickled herring. The goat and the boy quickly outpaced their elders down the road toward the village.

“That’s all you got?” Gustave said, eyeing Worstley’s bundles and trying very hard to frown but lacking the proper facial musculature.

“I just grabbed what I could on the way out the door.”

“You could have gotten the boots!”

“He was wearing them, and he wanted to burn you alive.”

“That’s no excuse. You just had your arse anointed by an honest-to-gods pixie. You ought to have better luck than this.”

“Well, I’m sure we’ll do better in town. Look at the sky. The clouds are parting for once! It’s an omen, Gus!”

“Or it’s just weather. And again, the name is Gustave.”

“Fine, Gustave it is. But I think you’re both right and wrong. You’re right that I should have better luck. And I will, when there’s something I truly need. I don’t need my father’s boots—”

“Yes, you do. You need to give them to me.”

“No, I don’t. I need to go to that tower and score the first notch in my hero’s belt. And once I’ve got that experience, you know what I’m going to do? I’m going to find Lord Ergot and make him pay for killing Bestley. Because a Chosen One sets things right.”

“I thought a Chosen One just leaves a trail of blood and chaos behind him.”

“What do you know about it? You’re a goat! You’re wrong about that—and wrong about the weather, too, which is what I meant to say before you interrupted me! That break in the clouds is an omen! Of justice! Of light beating back the darkness! Of the dawn of the age of Worstley! Does that not sound noble?”

“It sounds like an era of shame and incontinence.”

Worstley scoffed. “You have no ear for poetry.”

“Maybe not, but I have an ear for nonsense.”

“I was *chosen*. Wait and see.”

“I don’t have to wait to see that you’re putting too much faith in a drunken pixie.”

“Wrong again.”

But Gustave was right—about the weather, at least. It soon began raining in a very nonmagical style. There were no rainbows, no leprechauns, and, after a few brief moments, no gleaming sun parting the clouds. Just a boy and his goat taking their first muddy steps toward a moist, squelching destiny.

THE COMIC BOOK YOU CAN PLAY!

Hocus & Pocus

THE LEGEND OF GRIMM'S WOODS



MANURO
GOROBEI

COMIC
QUESTS

Originally published in France as *Hocus & Pocus: L'épreuve des fabulins* in 2016 by Makaka Éditions.

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Drawings by Gorobei

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HOCUS & POCUS

THE LEGEND OF GRIMM'S WOODS

MANURO
GOROBEI



STOP!

THIS ISN'T A REGULAR COMIC BOOK!

In this comic book, you don't read straight through from first page to last. Instead, you'll begin at the beginning, and soon be off on a quest where you choose which panel to read next. You'll go on an adventure, solve puzzles, and collect magical objects—because YOU are the main character!

It's easy to get the hang of once you see it in action. Turn the page to see an example of how it works!



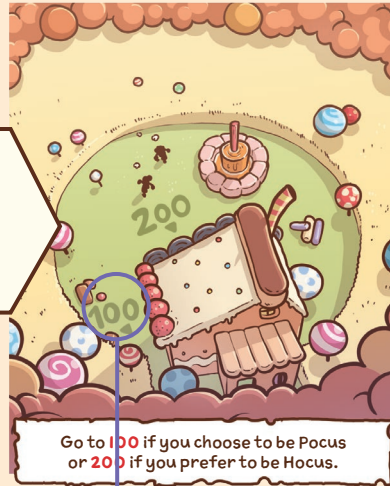
POCUS



HOCUS

HOW TO PLAY COMIC QUESTS

1 First, pick where you want to go in the panel—doors, paths, signs, and objects can all have numbers.



2 Flip to the panel with the matching number.

3 Continue reading from there, making more choices as you go to complete the quest!



HOW TO PLAY COMIC QUESTS

As you go, use the handy Quest Tracker sheets on the next few pages to log your progress. Use a pencil so you can erase. (You can also use a notebook and pencil, or download extra sheets at comicsquests.com).



Here are some of the things to look out for as you go!

THE MAGICAL CREATURES

Choose your magical creature by checking the corresponding box on the Quest Tracker.

AWAKE OR ASLEEP?

- ◆ At the beginning of your adventure, your creature is awake.
- ◆ Each time you call upon it, it will help you, but then it will fall asleep from exhaustion. To remember when your creature is asleep, check the **Zzzz** box on your Quest Tracker.
- ◆ If your creature is sleeping and you need its help, you will have to feed it. (See “Food for Your Creatures,” below.) Once your creature has eaten, it will wake up. Erase the checkmark in the **Zzzz** box on your Quest Tracker to remember that it’s awake.

FOOD FOR YOUR CREATURES

- ◆ At the beginning of your trip, you will need to build up your reserves of food. Each creature eats something different. For example, if you have Trampoturtle, you will need dandelions. Whirlybird eats worms. Look on your Quest tracker to see which food your creature eats.
- ◆ Look closely in each drawing to find your creature’s food. When you find it, check a box beside that food on your Quest Tracker.
- ◆ If your creature needs energy to wake up, feed it **two units** of its food and uncheck two boxes on your Quest Tracker. You just used up those units.

THE STARS



During your trip, you will often see stars. These appear when you do a good deed or when you are very wise. Pick them up along the way and check the right boxes on your Quest Tracker to show off to your teachers when you get home.

PUZZLE-SOLVING SYMBOLS



When you solve a puzzle, you will see a small symbol next to your current panel’s number. If you answer correctly, you’ll go to a panel that shows the same symbol. If it does not match or there is no symbol, it means you answered incorrectly. Go back to the puzzle and try again.

HOW TO BEGIN

Start the adventure at page number 1, but you won’t read the pages in order. You will follow the instructions and turn to the page indicated by the choices you make.

- ◆ Either the narrator will tell you where to go
- ◆ Or you will be able to pick a number hidden in the picture. Look closely! Sometimes the numbers are small and well hidden.

GOOD LUCK! LET THE ADVENTURE BEGIN . . .

☆ QUEST TRACKER ☆

TRAMPOTURTLE



ZZZZ

BOXOBULLFROG



ZZZZ

WHIRLYBIRD



ZZZZ

OTHER MAGICAL CREATURES

..... ZZZZ

..... ZZZZ






NOTES

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FOOD FOR YOUR CREATURES

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 BONES (Wolfoclock)	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/>

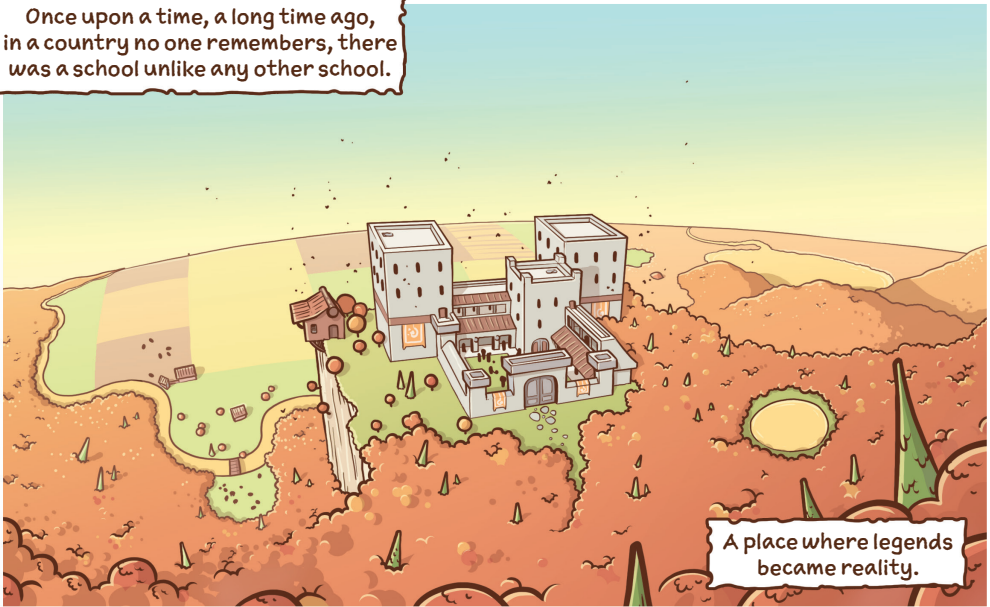
STARS





**BEGIN
YOUR
QUEST!**

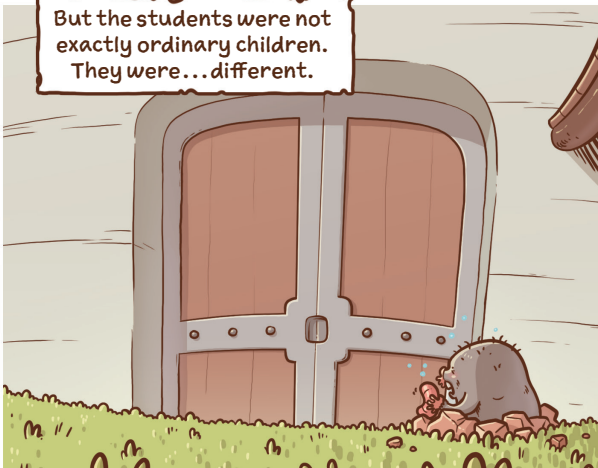
Once upon a time, a long time ago, in a country no one remembers, there was a school unlike any other school.



Like every school, this one had teachers and students.



But the students were not exactly ordinary children. They were... different.



The students are over here, see, not that different after all...



The students possessed a fabulous power that allowed them to become friends with magical creatures.



No adults were able to have this special relationship with the creatures. Only a few lucky children did.



So the children were not only trained to know these creatures but also to study and protect all the other animals, trees, and flowers.



If the children worked hard and were especially skilled, the best ones would become Masters of the magical creatures.



Then, with their magical pet, they would be able to protect people in danger.



All while having amazing adventures.

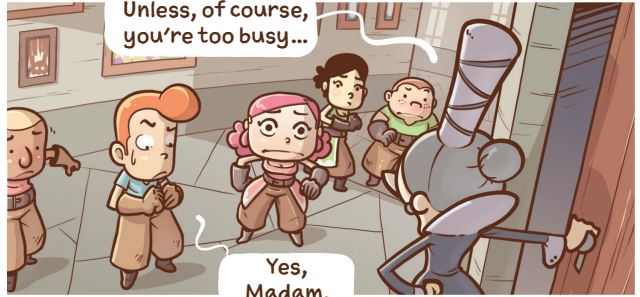
Hocus and Pocus!



Come into my office, please.



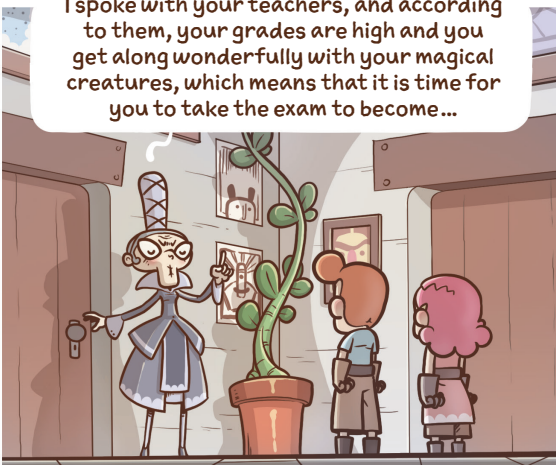
Unless, of course, you're too busy...



Yes, Madam.



I spoke with your teachers, and according to them, your grades are high and you get along wonderfully with your magical creatures, which means that it is time for you to take the exam to become...

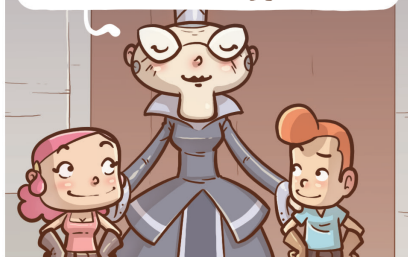


Masters of the magical creatures!?





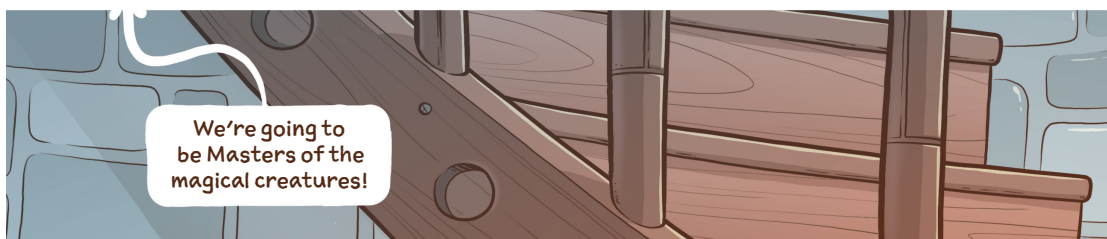
You were wise to come to us.
Rest assured, I am putting this
rescue mission in very good hands.



Don't worry, sir. The magical creatures
are the best trackers in the world.
They will find your children in a flash!

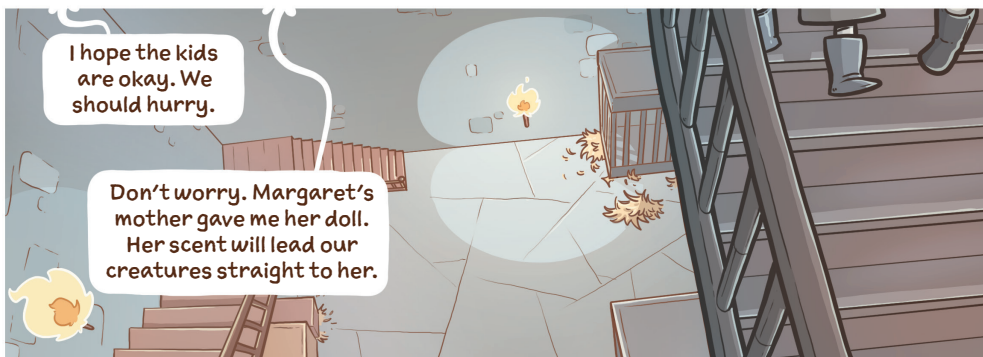


We're going to
be Masters of the
magical creatures!



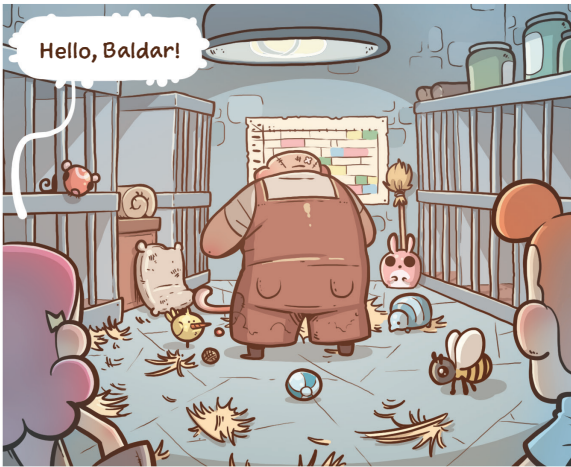
I hope the kids
are okay. We
should hurry.

Don't worry. Margaret's
mother gave me her doll.
Her scent will lead our
creatures straight to her.



Let's just hope that
Baldar fed them recently.
Otherwise they'll be asleep.





Students usually carry their magical companions in a special pouch. If they didn't, the creatures would quickly tire and fall asleep just when their powers are needed! Now it's time to choose your own magical creature. Which one will it be:



Trapoturtle, who can launch you high in the air when you jump on her back.



Boxobullfrog, who keeps a bunch of weird things in its mouth to take when you need them.



Whirlybird, whose beak can dig large holes in anything, from wood to stone.

STARRING ARCHIE, JUGHEAD, BETTY & VERONICA

UNTOLD COMIC TALES FROM THE HIT TV SERIES ON 


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ALL-NEW STORIES



VOLUME THREE

AN ARCHIE COMICS PRESENTATION

UNTOLD COMIC STORIES FROM THE HIT TV SERIES ON 

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STORIES BY **ROBERTO AGUIRRE-SACASA**

HANDS ON A HARDBODY

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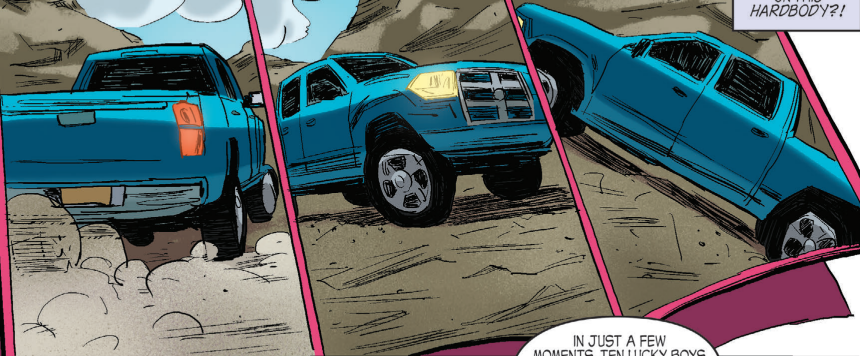
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MILITARY-GRADE, ALUMINUM ALLOY BODY WITH 480 POUNDS OF TORQUE. YOWSAH!

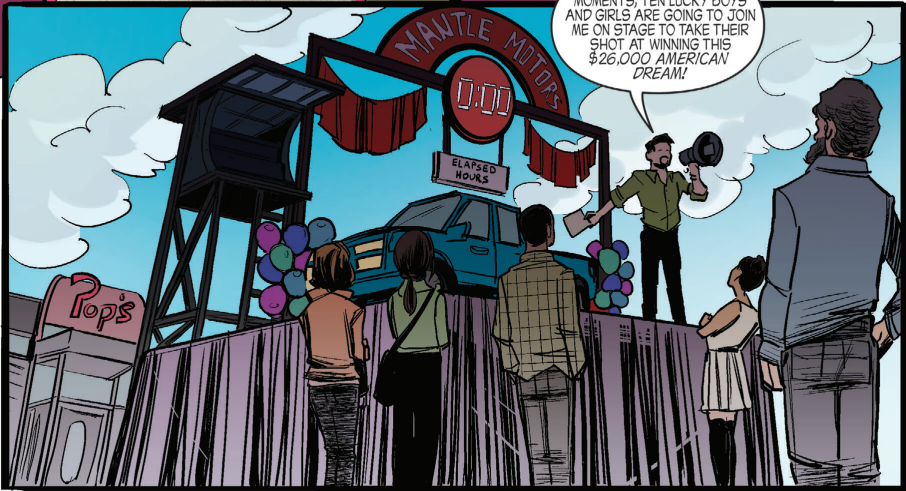
10-SPEED AUTOMATIC TRANSMISSION TO POWER THROUGH THE TRICKIEST OF TERRAIN. YOWSAH! YOWSAH!

AND A BEST IN ITS CLASS HIGHWAY FUEL ECONOMY RATING OF 28 MPG. YOWSAH! YOWSAH! YOWSAH!

WHO WOULDN'T WANT TO GET THEIR HANDS ON THIS HARDBODY?!



IN JUST A FEW MOMENTS, TEN LUCKY BOYS AND GIRLS ARE GOING TO JOIN ME ON STAGE TO TAKE THEIR SHOT AT WINNING THIS \$26,000 AMERICAN DREAM!



LADIES AND GENTLEMAN, MANTLE MOTORS, IN ASSOCIATION WITH POP'S CHOCK'LIT SHOPPE, IS PROUD TO BRING YOU—HANDS ON A HARDBODY!

IT'S SIMPLE AS PIE, FOLKS: THE LAST CONTESTANT WHO HAS HIS OR HER HAND ON THE TRUCK WINS IT.

ALL THEY HAVE TO DO IS HOLD ON.

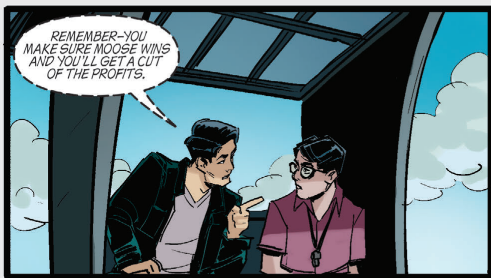
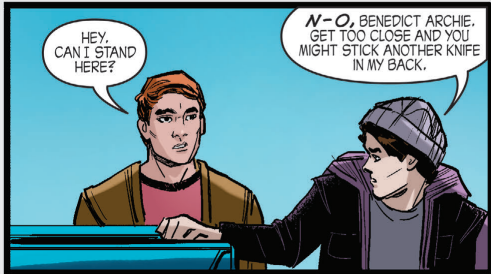


NOT LIABLE IN THE EVENT OF A FLASH FLOOD. ARE WE EXPECTING A FLASH FLOOD?

I'D LIKE TO INVITE THE CONTESTANTS UP ON STAGE NOW.

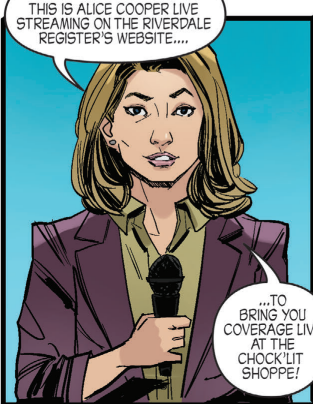


AS THEY GET SITUATED, I'LL GET A FEW RULES OUT OF THE WAY...



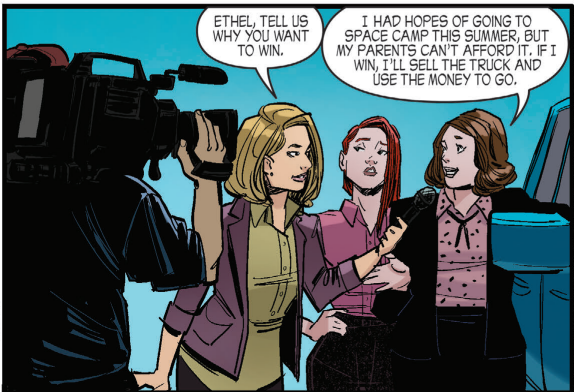


I'VE GOT 5/2 ODDS ON ANDREWS, 15/1 ODDS ON ETHEL, ANY TAKERS? IT'S A BEAUTIFUL DAY! WHO'S FEELING LUCKY?



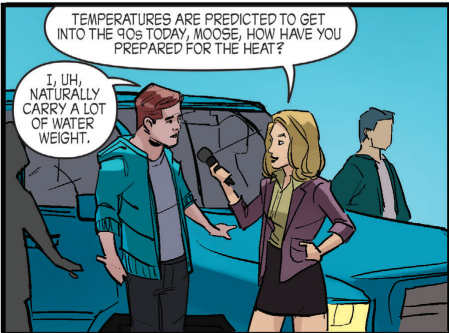
THIS IS ALICE COOPER LIVE STREAMING ON THE RIVERDALE REGISTER'S WEBSITE....

...TO BRING YOU COVERAGE LIVE AT THE CHOCK'LIT SHOPPE!



ETHEL, TELL US WHY YOU WANT TO WIN.

I HAD HOPES OF GOING TO SPACE CAMP THIS SUMMER, BUT MY PARENTS CAN'T AFFORD IT. IF I WIN, I'LL SELL THE TRUCK AND USE THE MONEY TO GO.



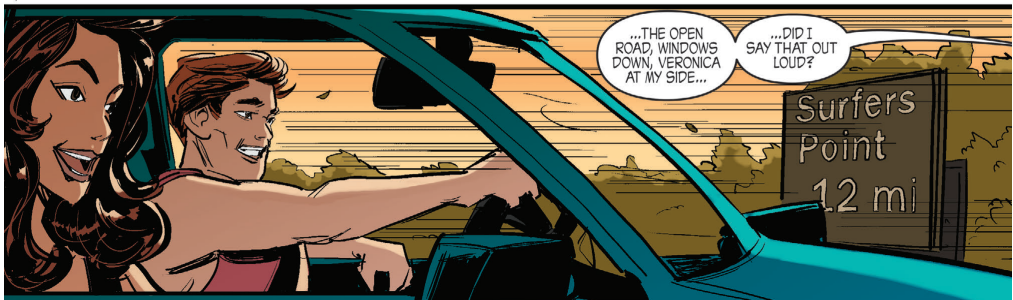
TEMPERATURES ARE PREDICTED TO GET INTO THE 90s TODAY, MOOSE, HOW HAVE YOU PREPARED FOR THE HEAT?

I, UH, NATURALLY CARRY A LOT OF WATER WEIGHT.



AND WHAT'S MOTIVATING YOU TO STAND HERE FOR HOURS ON END, ARCHIE?

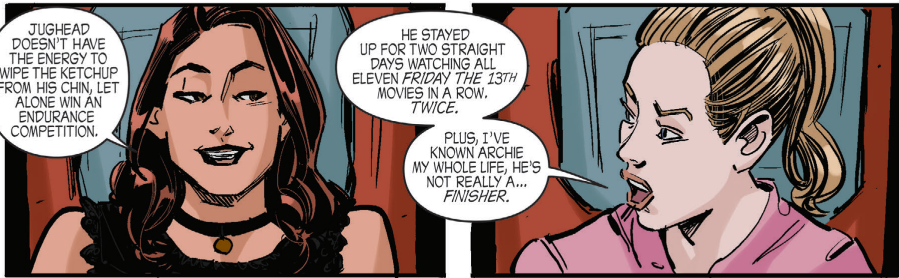
OH, A FEW THINGS...



...THE OPEN ROAD, WINDOWS DOWN, VERONICA AT MY SIDE...

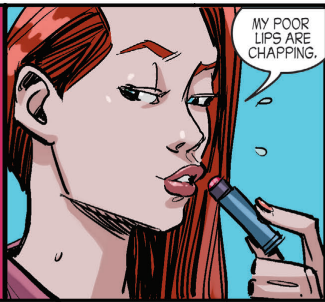
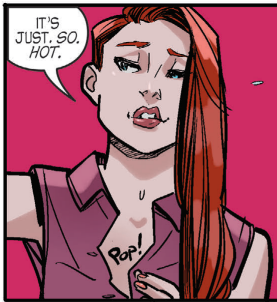
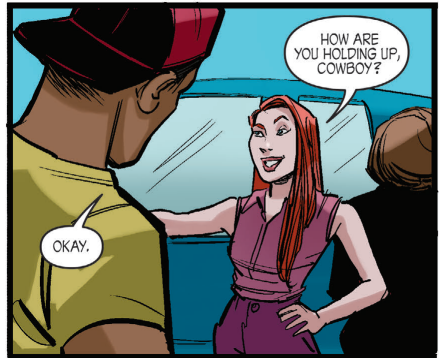
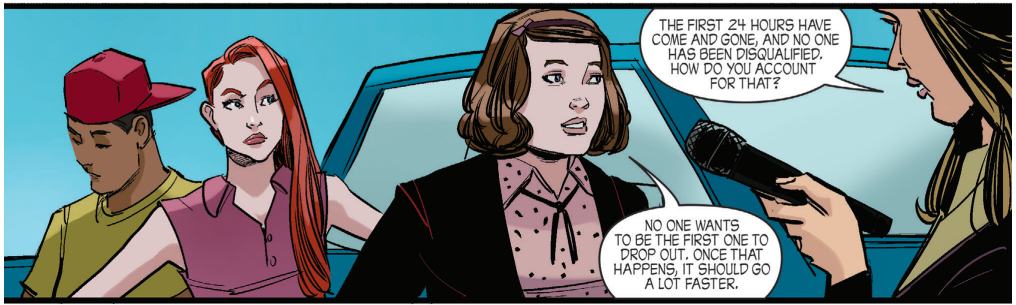
...DID I SAY THAT OUT LOUD?

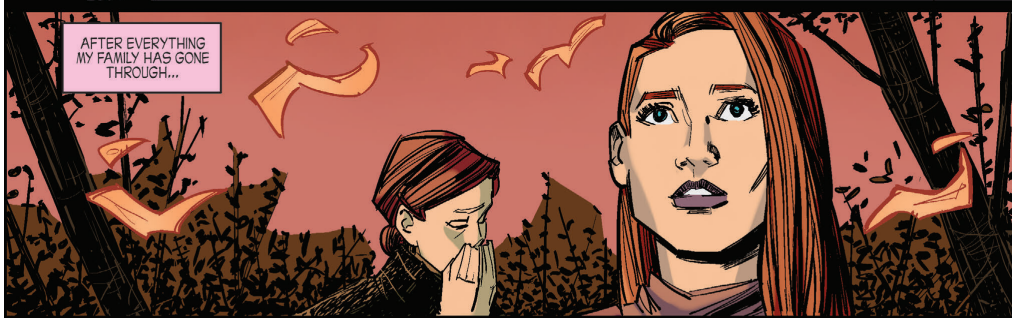
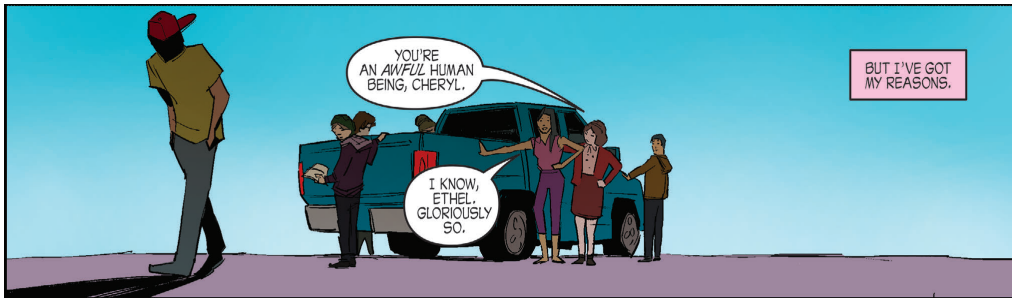


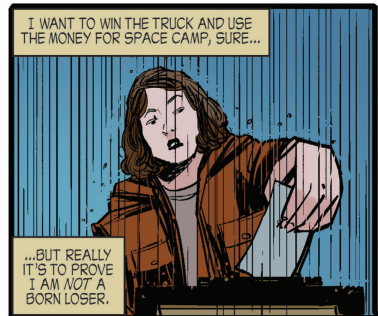
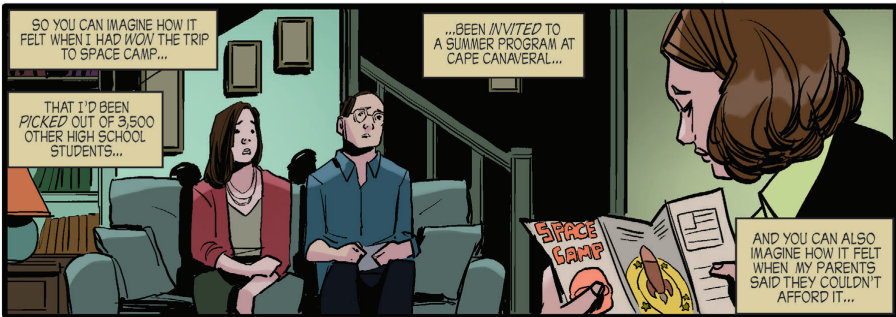
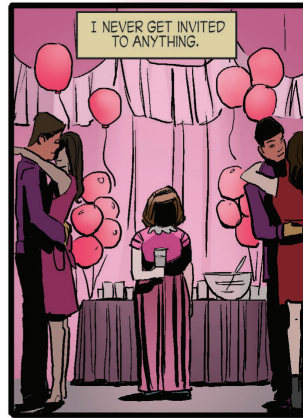
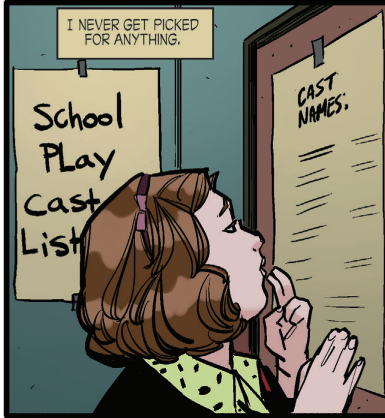
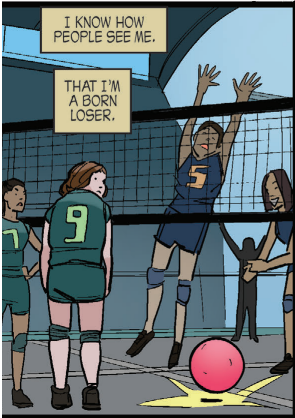


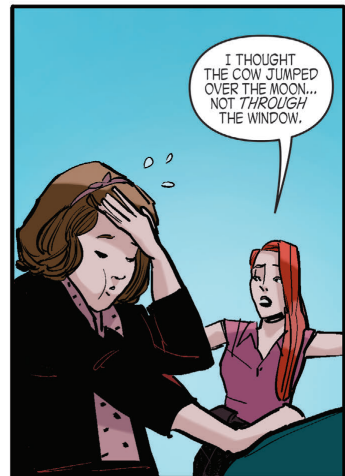
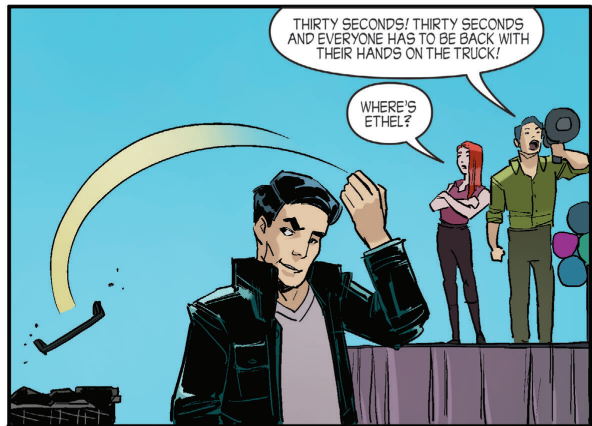
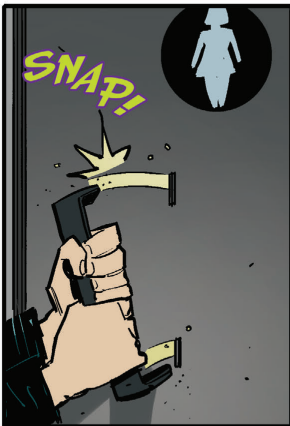
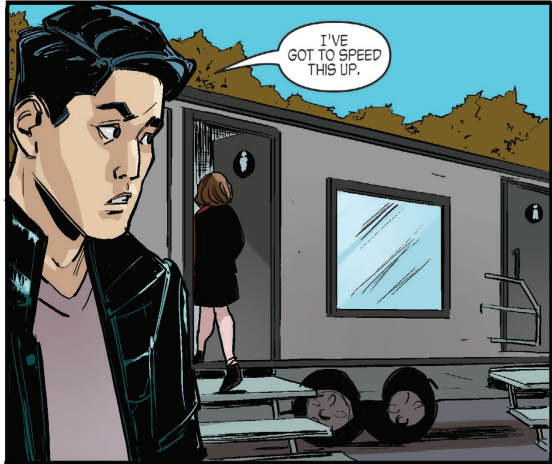
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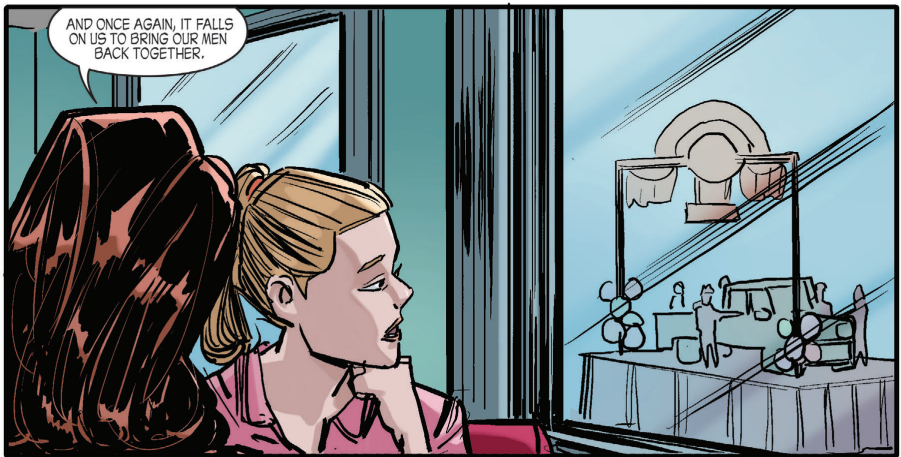
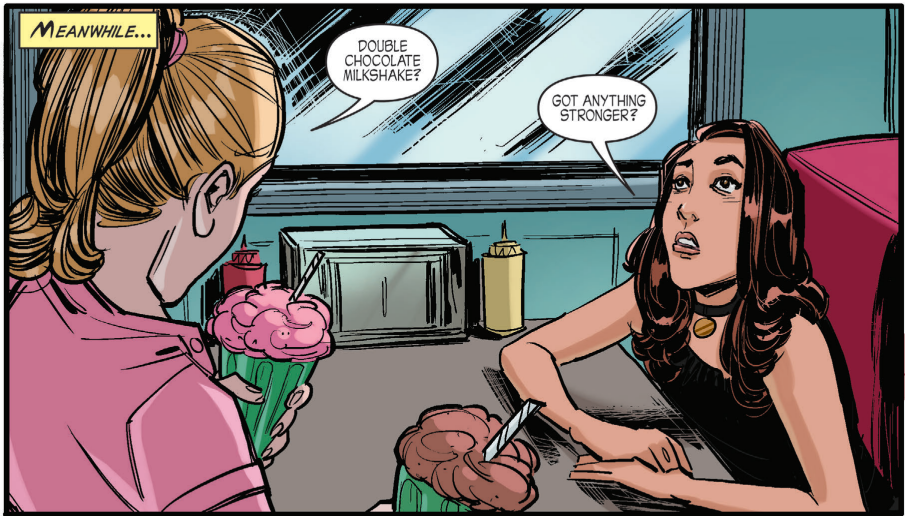












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THE CRASH



TRACEY
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CHAPTER I

I'd like to find whoever came up with the phrase “everything happens for a reason” and give them a piece of my mind. Because the exact last thing anybody needs to hear when their world is completely screwed up is that it's actually a good thing. Like, even if you had a magical time machine that could go back and fix your mistakes, you totally shouldn't use it? Yeah right. *Nobody* really believes that.

Of course, there's really no good thing to say after everything's turned into a complete and utter mess. Better to keep moving forward, try to fix your mistakes, and hope everything eventually works out. I feel like I should have something wiser to say here, but nope. That's all I've got. Oh, that and the time machine thing. There's always that.

Anyway, the mistake I wish I could go back and fix happened days ago. How many days, I couldn't tell you. Time is sort of . . . a mess right now. But one Friday, some time ago, my best friend and I were headed to participate in the social event kickoff of the school year, also known as the homecoming game.

I'd convinced Lonnie to go with me, even though neither of us were sports fans. We were gamers, really. Sports—outside

of a video game—was not high on our list of priorities. But I figured homecoming was one of those hallmark high school experiences they make a big fuss about in the movies, why not check it out? As a newly minted freshman, I was secretly excited about high school. It was like unlocking a new level in the video game of life—full-sized lockers for larger inventory, bigger bosses like the SATs, you get my drift. Lonnie, on the other hand, was not so convinced about homecoming. So I sweetened the deal, literally. I told him that I'd make my famous brownies and bring a blanket so we could huddle up together with chocolate in our teeth. I'd like to think it was the brownies and the blanket that appealed to him, but I'm not sure. I mean, there aren't a lot of high school juniors that would want to be seen hanging out with a freshman, but we had been friends since I was six and he was eight. So we kind of went beyond the usual high school friendship parameters. Still, the point of all this is, it was all my fault. Everything that happened is on me.

Lonnie showed up around five. I bounded out with brownies and the blanket, got in the car, let him drive off, and we started talking about Minecraft. Our usual convo.

“Did you build all the traps?” he asked.

I scrunched up my nose. I hadn't. Mainly because I forgot.

“Actually, I thought it would be better to build up on the base instead. I decided to make the floor of the greenhouse glass, so you can look down on everything.”

“You mean you didn't finish what you said you were going to. Again.” Lonnie sounded more like a disappointed dad than my friend, putting me on the defensive.

“I'll get back to it after I finish the new greenhouse,” I said. “I don't know why you have to get on my case about it.”

“Bianca.”

“Lonnie.”

“You need to stick to the plan. This whole world is going off the rails. If we want to have something that works really well, we have to do what we set out to make. Isn’t that the whole point of the test world? Perfect it there, and then move it to the real game?”

“I thought the point of the test world was to do crazy stuff so we could see what works and what doesn’t. To go as bonkers as we can go, blow stuff up, make a mess, and never have to fix it.”

Lonnie sighed. He passed his hand over his close-shaven head, and squeezed his eyelids down for a second as if he was in pain. When he opened his eyes again, they were a cloudy gray, like the sky, not the sharp steel gray that meant he was in a good mood.

“I thought you wanted to do this project,” he said. “You said you wanted to craft a whole world. New landscapes. Entire villages. A whole set of society rules, and then mess around with it.”

“Yes, but—”

“But first we have to make it. And to make it, we need to have a plan, Bianca.”

I didn’t mean for us to fight. I wasn’t sure what to say to get him to stop breathing heavily like he was an angry dragon cooking up a fire to blow in my direction.

“You never follow the plan. First you say you want to do something, and I say, ‘Okay, here’s the plan.’ Then you say, ‘Great plan!’ And then you don’t even pretend to do what I outlined.”

Oh, so this was going to be a full-on fight.

“But here I am being your chauffeur,” he added.

“You just got your license. You need the practice,” I said. “Plus, think of all that horizon-expanding you’ll be doing by finally going to an actual sporting event!”

“Since when do you like sports?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Since it’s my first time ever going to a big school thing, and I just want to see what it’s like to be out with the masses.”

“‘Masses’ is just another word for mobs. Trust me, high school’s not all that it’s cracked up to be.” He turned, screeching down Elm Road. “Where is the stupid field again?”

“Two streets down and then a right,” I said smugly.

He pulled up at the light and revved the engine. Even his body movements seemed annoyed. I sucked in my top lip and chewed on it as I pulled at one of my cornrows and wrapped and unwrapped it around my finger.

“You know, they’re bulldozing the playground,” I said suddenly.

The light changed and he lurched forward.

“So?”

“Do you want to see it before everything’s gone?”

“What for?”

“Uh, because it was the scene of our greatest adventures?” I asked. “Because it’ll never look like that again? Because it was *our* place first?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Do you remember how to get there?” I teased. He turned his steely gray eyes on me, and I grinned. I knew that look. It meant that our little fight was over.

Instead of turning right on Grandview, he turned left.

The playground already looked like a ghost town. The swing seats were gone. All that was left was the A-frame, mottled blue from the faded and peeling paint. The rope bridge was lying half in the black rubber mulch, one end still attached to what used to be the climbing wall when all the foot- and hand-rests were still attached.

I climbed up the ladder, which wobbled now that it wasn't attached properly, and I went down the tube slide, coming out at Lonnie's sneakered feet.

"Have a go?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I'm surprised this is the first renovation they're doing since we were little," he said. "They probably should have condemned it a long time ago."

"But it's our place!" I said.

"It *was*," Lonnie replied, not unkindly. This playground was where we'd met, and where we'd become friends and imagined our first worlds together. We would pretend to be swashbuckling pirates on the rope bridge, launch ourselves like trapeze artists off the swings, and defend our fortress from invading imaginary zombies. In fact, one of our first projects in Minecraft was to create a better version of the playground. The ground was always lava, naturally.

After all this time, we always stuck together, even as the playground itself fell apart.

"Remember the time I tried to flip off the monkey bars and you broke my fall?" I asked, looking to stoke some nostalgia.

"Yeah, I got a broken wrist for my troubles," Lonnie said, shaking his head. "You never were a great planner even then, always wanting to push the limits but never thinking about the follow-through."

"You know, if I wanted a lecture, I could just go to class." I crossed my arms.

Lonnie shrugged and kicked the faded yellow plastic cap from something and walked off to what used to be a dome of monkey bars. Most of the bars were in a pile on the ground. I followed him. He stared down at the pile quietly. The sun was just going down, casting an orange glow over the playground. Silence settled around us.

He was right. This place wasn't ours, not any longer.

“Let’s just go,” I said.

“Homecoming rally, yeah!” he mocked.

I reached my hand out to him and felt a jolt of electricity when he caught my fingers, swinging them as we walked back to the car. Most people thought it was really weird, the two of us hanging out the way we did. A two-year difference in high school is a chasm. Especially when you’re going to two different high schools. It’s like trying to have a conversation with someone on the other side of the Grand Canyon with nothing but your cupped hands around your mouth. He turned over the engine, and made a U-turn on the tiny street, then peeled off.

I pulled out my phone and loaded the Minecraft app.

“If you’re going to give me grief all night over not building your dumb traps, you should at least appreciate this sick glass floor I put into the greenhouse.”

I waved my phone screen in his face.

“Look!”

“Bianca, quit it. I’m driving.” Lonnie batted the phone away with an arm.

He turned sharply to the left, tires screeching. The orange glow from the setting sun blinded us momentarily and we skidded a little, and Lonnie turned the wheel to right us. Then we realized, too late, that something was coming toward us, that we must have run the red light, but we still weren’t able to make out whatever the object was with the sun in our eyes, but we knew it wasn’t a small thing. It all felt like it was in slow motion, a few seconds strung out into years, until a robotic female voice suddenly blasted over the car’s speakers.

“Proximity alert! Evasive action recommended!”

The air in the car went from electric excitement to sharp fear in an instant, as an oncoming car came straight for us too fast to do anything about it.

Once the car was close enough and blocked out the sun, I could see the other driver's face, though not clearly. He had dark eyes and straight hair that spiked in every direction. His head lurched back as his green car collided with our blue one. I remember how the metal crunched as we crushed into each other, folding blue on green on blue on green, how pieces of things began to fly around. Glass, metal. At one point, even the light seemed to fracture and splinter off, bursting into fractals of beams, searing my eyes and my skin. And then there was the smell of smoke. And the taste of blood. And the scrape of something against my body that felt like it had gutted me open somewhere in the middle. I wondered if I'd been halved. I turned, trying to see if I could figure out what was happening, if I could see Lonnie's face to know from his eyes just how bad it all was. But I couldn't see him. It was like he'd disappeared and all that was left was me, and the blue car and the green car that now looked like one wrapped-up thing with glass tinkling as it fell like rain all around me, and the shocking realization that the man from the other car was right up on me, like we had been riding together. He was right there. I could reach out and touch him. And I tried. Only my hands didn't move. Nothing moved but the cars still rippling toward and away from each other. So, I tried to scream for Lonnie, but nothing came out of my mouth.

And then everything went black.



CHAPTER 2

There was a halo of light over me. I panicked for a moment until I realized it was just a streetlamp. I must have been lying on the ground. Only, I couldn't feel anything. Not the ground, not my body. I couldn't even move. I tried to say something, but my mouth didn't work either. A woman with a blond ponytail leaned over me, frowning. She looked up and mouthed something to someone I couldn't see. No, she was talking. But I couldn't hear her. I couldn't hear anything. Only my eyes seemed to be working, and even that . . . Everything was dim, and restricted, as if I could only look up.

I tried to move something. Anything. A finger. My tongue. Nothing worked. I wondered if I was dead, and my spirit was just hanging out for a bit before it went to . . . wherever spirits go. Maybe it was stuck too, and couldn't move. Maybe we were both paralyzed.

The blond lady was wearing a shirt that had a patch that read HOLY ANGELS HOSPITAL EMERGENCY MEDICAL TECHNICIAN. She seemed to be moving her hands over my body, doing I don't know what because I still couldn't feel anything, or move my eyes enough to see.

I wondered if we were still at the site of the accident, if Lonnie was nearby, if he was in the same shape as me, if the other driver was there too, if he could feel anything, if my parents or my sister knew where I was, if this was where I'd die.

My vision wobbled and shifted as if I was being moved. The halo of light from the streetlamp was gone. Above me the sky was dark, much darker than it was when Lonnie and I left the park. I tried to think of how long it takes for the sky to get so dark. A few minutes? Hours? How long had I been there?

Then my other senses started to come back.

First, the EMT's voice rang out over me. "Get her in the rig!"

Behind that was the sound of sirens, people shuffling about, shouting things I couldn't make out, and the unmistakable sound of metal warping. I heard the crunch of gravel underfoot, and the click of something snapping into place beneath me. I was being moved, slowly and smoothly. The stars twirled.

Smell came next. A burst of pungent smoke and acrid rubber. Sweat, and something earthy.

Then I tasted blood in my mouth. I moved my tongue and tried to feel around. Everything was tender, and I felt jagged pieces against the tip, and bare spaces of swollen gums.

More sounds. Screaming. Crying. Moaning. The car's alarm was going off, as the robo-voice calmly intoned that help was on the way.

Lights flashing red against the shiny white paint of the ambulance.

The inside of the ambulance. Smooth white roof. Metal latches on supply bins overhead. The face of the EMT lady and another guy leaning over me. One smiling, the other frowning, only I kept mixing up which was which because

my eyes couldn't focus on one or the other, and I kept being bumped, and the siren was going, so we must have been on our way to Holy Angels.

We hit a smooth, straight patch of road and my vision became less jangly.

It was the man. The man was smiling.

Next, I was lifted out and the smell of antiseptic immediately washed over me. The hospital lights were a bright white. Someone should tell them it wasn't soothing. They should get halo lights like the ones out on the street. I closed my eyes and heard squeaky, sneakered feet running beside me as the wheels on the gurney swiveled and bumped over the hospital floor. I saw the light still beaming down through my eyelids, and I could tell every time someone leaned over me because they cast my face in shadow.

Suddenly, I started to feel again. It began like a wave at my extremities. My feet and hands felt like the skin had been peeled back. I could feel everything and it was all pain. I screamed out and the running picked up speed. The pain moved inward to my stomach and then radiated out to the top of my head. There was nothing that didn't hurt. My legs, my arms, my torso, my neck, my head, my mouth, my eyes. I felt like I'd been through a grinder. I couldn't stop screaming even though it hurt my throat even more. I couldn't stop. I think they were trying to make it stop. I could feel them moving me, jostling me, and I could hear them trying to tell me something, but I couldn't make anything out over the sound of my own screaming. I could only make out the way I felt, and the way everything hurt, and I thought, *Is this dying?* I tried to tell them, "Make it stop!"

Then everything did.

I woke up in a small beige room with vertical vinyl blinds, and equipment beeping around me. There were two upholstered chairs with wooden arms sitting on either side of a beige plastic table with attached wheels. A blue blanket covered my body. I couldn't see what condition I was in other than my legs appeared to be much larger than usual, so I figured they were both in casts. Awesome. I couldn't see my arms either. I tried to move them and couldn't. Either I was armless, or whatever anesthesia they had me on hadn't dissipated yet. I felt groggy with a side order of dull pain all over. At least I could move my eyes to look around. I was alone. It was just me and the beeping monitors, and a pink plastic jug that was sweating on the wheeled table. But no cups. I stuck my tongue out of my mouth. My lips were dry. I could have used some water, but my voice didn't seem to be working, so I couldn't ask even if I wasn't alone. I tried to move my fingers to see if there was a call button or something nearby to let someone—anyone—know that I was awake and they could start tending to me, or telling me what happened, or anything, but I still couldn't feel my fingers or tell whether or not I still had any.

I wondered what I looked like.

I wondered where everyone was.

I wondered what happened to Lonnie.

When I woke up again, I got an eyeful of hospital ceiling tile. The really generic kind that's a hybrid of gray and beige—my foggy mind thought, *Greige?*—laid out in a grid that makes you want to count it, especially if it's the only thing you can see. The lights were dim and I couldn't tell if this was the same room I was in before, or if I'd been moved. It was smaller than I remembered, and there seemed to be less humming and beeping than the last time I was conscious.

That was progress, I guessed. I tried to move, was unsuccessful again, and this time I couldn't see my body at all because I was lying flat. Maybe my legs had disappeared. Or my entire body. I wondered if a person could technically survive as just a head.

I also considered that the drugs were making me loopy. It seemed a wise assessment of my mental faculties.

The door opened and closed, and I heard my mother whispering, "How much longer, do you think?"

"It's going to be a difficult recovery, Mrs. Marshall. Her injuries are extensive. We're going to have to take it one day at a time."

I heard something like a muffled cry and then my father's voice. "Carrie would like to see her. I'll bring her by after school."

Carrie didn't have school on Saturday. I wanted to ask what they were talking about. But then it occurred to me that it probably wasn't Friday anymore, or even the weekend. I tried to say, *Hey guys*, but what came out was a rather elegant "Unghh." I'd been reduced to the vocabulary of a Minecraft villager.

My parents ran over to the side of the bed, excited that I seemed able to vocalize at all.

Hey, I tried again. "Uhh" came out.

"Bianca!" my mother said softly. Tears rolled down her face, tracing light-brown tracks in her makeup.

"How are you feeling?" my father asked.

I tried to nod. It hurt.

Next, a woman in a white coat came up and my parents moved away. She had large dark brown eyes and a black braid that came down over one shoulder. When she leaned in closer, her hair moved away from her name tag. It read DR. NAY.

“Hello, Bianca,” she said. “Glad to see you awake.”

“How long have I been out?” I tried to ask. But there was more moaning. And some drooling, I’m sorry to say. My mother leaned in with a paper towel to catch the dribble, wearing her worried face.

“It’s been almost a week since your accident,” Dr. Nay said, as if I were perfectly coherent. “You’re finally stabilized enough for us to wake you.”

“What’s the damage, Doctor?”

Dr. Nay tapped a few buttons on her tablet and a hologram projected from a camera attached to the tablet’s edge. A miniature version of me displayed before my eyes. It was eerie, like looking at a blueprint version of yourself.

“You’re very lucky, Bianca. If you’d had this same accident a few years ago, I’m not sure we would have had the right technology to help you through it.”

I certainly didn’t feel very lucky, being in a full-body cast and all, but I took her word for it. Dr. Nay tapped a few more buttons and the hologram of my body glowed red in nearly ten different spots. The news was abysmal: two broken arms, a broken thigh bone, three broken bones in my right foot, two broken ribs, a collapsed lung, and a concussion. I looked like a game of Operation gone horribly wrong.

“Good thing you’re a fighter,” Dr. Nay said.

I didn’t recall being aware enough to fight, or know who was around me, or even how I managed to get to this hideous little room that smelled of pine cleaner, medicine, and pee—which I hoped was not my own, but I knew probably was.

Dr. Nay leaned over me and adjusted the flow rate on a bag that fed into an IV. I suddenly felt something on my right go colder, and I smiled again, able to feel my arm at last. The coldness spread and washed over me, then more dullness descended like a fog. Dr. Nay continued talking over me to

my parents. There seemed to be a lot to tell. I tried to follow along, but I was struggling to hear. I was struggling to feel. I was just struggling. Like swimming upstream against a strong tide. And then it was lights out again.

Third time's the charm, I thought when I woke up again. This time, the light was brighter, my body was propped up, and I could see around the beige room, with the covered chairs, the plastic table with the wheels, and the sweating pink jug again. *Déjà vu*. Except for my father, who was sitting in one of the chairs, reading *InfoTech* magazine. For an old guy, he's always on the cutting edge of all the newest tech stuff. Well, I guess it's his job.

"Hey," I said. This time it actually came out as a recognizable word, which surprised me, so I made a little sound that was half hiccup and half moan. Yeah. It was as weird as you imagine. Trust me.

My father practically jumped out of the chair. "Hey," he said. "How are you feeling?"

I shrugged, or at least I thought I did. I don't think any part of me actually moved.

"What happened?" I asked, knowing full well what happened, but unable to come up with a better question.

"You got banged up pretty badly," he said in a low voice, as if saying it any louder might make things worse. He reached over to one beeping machine and touched the screen. It made me nervous, but nothing happened. "You're going to be here awhile." He sighed. "You had a couple of surgeries, and there are some casts." He put his warm hand on my forehead. "We had to get you a plastic surgeon, too. So the scarring won't be so bad."

I must have flinched or something, and his face blanched.

“It’s not so bad. And you’ll be fine. You’re out of the woods, as they say.” He chuckled, rapped his magazine on the plastic bed rail, and took a step back. He clearly didn’t want to say any more.

“Lonnie?” I asked.

“What?” he asked. His face looked totally pained. Then he blinked a couple of times, and looked ill. “Bianca—”

The door opened and Dr. Nay strode in. “Good morning, Bianca! How are you feeling?”

Like I’ve been hit by a car, I wanted to joke, but thought better of it.

My father stepped aside so she could get closer. She took the stethoscope from around her neck and listened to my chest. “Breathing’s good, finally.”

Wasn’t I breathing? When wasn’t my breathing good? I wondered.

She looked over at my father and nodded. “She’s a champ, this one.” Then she turned to a tablet that she had placed on the table, tapped the screen a couple of times. Smurf me, blue and floating above the device, reappeared as Dr. Nay walked me through all the surgeries that had happened while I had been out.

“All the tests are coming back better,” she said. “Now it’s just a matter of recovery, which means you may be here at the hospital awhile.”

My father looked at me with his sad eyes, and I felt my heart sink. How much was this going to cost us in bills? How much school was I going to miss?

“We’ve administered the strongest painkillers we can under the circumstances,” the doctor continued, looking at my father, “but the nurses say she’s still waking up every few hours, trying to move. She’s at the most we can safely give her right now, which is probably why she’s awake and

comfortable enough. But we have to make sure she stays still.”

I didn’t remember waking up. I didn’t remember pain, but the look of horror my father gave me said that he’d probably seen this waking-up live and in person.

“What I’m saying is that we’re not going to be able to give her any more for a while, and she’s awake, so it might be . . . a difficult evening.”

My father nodded. The muscles around his jaw tightened, and his fists gripped the bed rail hard enough that I thought it might snap.

“I’ll be with her all night,” he said. “Her mother will be here in the morning. We’ll get through it.”

With that, Dr. Nay left, and my father adjusted the blankets that were covering me. Slowly, the sensations in my body started coming back, and I began to understand what Dr. Nay was talking about, and why my father had looked so worried. It was like being dipped slowly into molten lava. You maybe think, *Oh sure, I can have a toe seared off, or even my foot, no prob!* But it just kept on consuming more and more and more of my body. I felt weak with pain. Even looking at my father’s face hurt. Because he couldn’t do anything, and I was mad at him for not being able to do anything, and then mad at myself because I knew he was helpless and this was torture for him, too.

But also? It was all my own fault.

It was the middle of the night when I woke up again. My father was asleep on the chair with the magazine draped over his chest. His shoes were off and he was snoring lightly. The door to my room was open, and a shard of light hit my face from what I guessed was the nurses’ station. I still couldn’t find a call button, but I figured that the time had passed for more medicine, because everything felt dull again. The pain was down to a smolder. I would have liked some water, but

I didn't want to wake my dad. I had no idea how long he'd been up. His clothes were a mess. His usually neat hair was a tangled mat. He might have been here for hours, if not days, without a break. Someone had to be home with Carrie. I remember he said something about him and Mom switching out, so maybe he was due for a break soon.

But there was a huge part of me that was glad that my father was asleep and there was no one I could call. Because I knew the moment they thought I was well enough, the moment they figured I could handle a real conversation, there were going to be questions. A lot of them. And then they'd all know what I'd done, that everything was my own fault.

A shadow crossed my door, and someone with a small voice whispered, "Hey."

"Hey," I managed.

And then a boy about eleven years old walked in, wearing pajamas that said *GAMER 4 LIFE*, and a robe with glow-in-the-dark planets all over it.

"Who . . . ?" I asked. It was all I could manage. My throat hurt to talk.

"I'm A.J. I'm in the next room," he said. He came a little closer, but stopped when my dad snorted a really loud snore, and the kid seemed surprised anyone else was in here. A.J. came up to the machine with the IV and tapped the screen. This seemed to be an established way of communing with patients. I made a note of it for if I ever went into another patient's room. Assuming I was ever able to walk again.

"I'm—"

"Bianca Marshall. I know. I saw your chart when Dr. Nay came in."

"Oh," I said.

He grinned.

“Lonnie,” I said. “Elon Lawrence.” It took a lot out of me to manage that much.

A.J. looked confused. He shook his head. His tight dark curls wobbled on his head. “No, you’re Bianca,” he said, stressing every syllable in my name.

“My friend,” I said. “We were in a car. He might be worse.”

A.J.’s eyebrows shot up. “Worse than you?” he asked. “You’re pretty bad. Anybody worse off than you would probably be dead.”

I waited for him to laugh, or grin, or say that he was just joking. But this kid was straight-up telling the truth as he saw it, and there was a stabbing pain across the top of my head that told me that he was right, that worse off than me was not survivable. And that if anyone had something good to tell me about Lonnie, they would have already.

“I could sneak into the nurses’ station and see if I can find his chart, though,” A.J. offered.

This had the immediate effect of dulling the pounding anxiety that was rising through my chest. Or maybe it was the medication. There was a series of beeps, and then the machines around me whirred a bit. Seconds later, I started feeling a little better. “Thanks, A.J.,” I said. When he turned to leave, I saw something in his hand. “What’s that?”

He turned back. “These?” He held up something that looked like a white plastic headband. “They’re VR goggles,” he said. He moved closer to show them off. “You can watch movies and stuff, but I’ve been playing Minecraft.”

“I like Minecraft.”

“Yeah?” A.J.’s eyes really lit up at that.

“My friend and I have been building a world together,” I said, a little surprised at how much I could talk. I glanced at the nearest machine. Yep. It was definitely painkiller time.

The kid blinked and nodded, I guess waiting for me to add some details.

“It has lots of villages with different configurations and rules and stuff.”

That brightened the kid right up. “Oh yeah? I just like to play survival mode. I use mods, though, and I even made some of them myself!”

“That’s cool,” I said.

“You should check these goggles out then,” he said. “They’ll blow your mind.”

Before I could respond, A.J. had come up to the side of the bed and placed the goggles on my head. The two ends pinched the sides of my temple. Though compared to what the rest of my body was feeling at the moment, it was nothing. I felt a tickling sensation on either side of my face, and it spread across my forehead. Suddenly the pain across my head rose like a tidal wave, but I tried not to moan or wince because I didn’t want to upset a kid who probably figured he was doing me a solid.

I opened my eyes and was surprised to see that the hospital room had completely disappeared. The game was already queued up, paused in the middle of whatever A.J. had been doing before.

“It’s a little weird at first,” he warned me. “But you get used to it after a while.”

He wasn’t kidding. Being thrust into a fully-realized world that was mid-play was disorienting. It was brighter than my hospital room, that’s for sure. And the unrealistic cartoon shades of green and brown and blue felt a little like a smack in the face. I started looking around at the forest biome I’d been shoved into, and realized that if I looked somewhere for a while, I’d start moving in that direction. The movements were sudden, and made me want to hurl immediately. I closed my eyes and tried to breathe deeply, not wanting to

say that I wanted out. I had a small child to impress, after all. Plus, there was a feeling of just being a head with no body. I tried to move again, and felt a lurch in my stomach.

“Are you gonna throw up?” A.J. asked.

“No . . . I . . . um . . .”

“Maybe you should stop,” he said. Without warning, he pulled the goggles off and, to tell you the truth, I don’t think that was any better. Returning to the real, dull world made me feel extra sick, and I turned to the other side of the bed, away from the kid, and threw up.

As I tried to wipe my mouth on the edge of my blanket, A.J. backed away to the door. My father stirred but didn’t wake up. A nurse came running in, looked at the kid, at me, back at him, and then walked slowly over to clean me up. There was hurl in my braids. I wasn’t really thinking about my aim when I spewed.

“Groooss,” A.J. said.

“Get back to your room,” said the nurse. “I’ll come check on you later. You know you’re not supposed to be out walking around. And you’re definitely not supposed to be in other people’s rooms.”

My dad woke up then, straightened, and tried to make sense of what was going on.

A.J. made a face, but backed all the way up to the door. “Getting in and out is tricky,” he said. “Not everybody can do it. There’s a different way out you can use that I can show you.” He shrugged. “It’s mostly for noobs.”

“Get out of what?” my father asked.

“Just the game,” A.J. said, showing him the goggles.

I took offense at the noob comment and wanted to tell him that I could do it, but obviously I was not at my best in this moment, lying in a hospital bed mashed to a pulp with a

nurse wiping vomit off me. I watched him back off into the hall and disappear.

But I was going to show him that I could. I was no noob.

What kind of gamer would I be if I couldn't do it?

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