

CHAPTER 1

SQUINT AND ROCK

Double vision stinks. And triple and quadruple vision is even worse.

Sitting at a table in the school commons, I squinted through my thick glasses, trying to see the comic I had been working on for months. The images overlapped, and I had to figure out which was the right one. I blinked hard and rubbed my temple with the eraser end of my pencil.

I had just more than a month until the deadline for Grunger Comics' "Find a New Comic Star" contest. And that isn't much time to write and draw a full twenty-two-page comic. They were going to publish the top five winners online, and the grand-prize winner would get their comic in actual circulation. They probably wouldn't have too many

thirteen-year-olds enter. And they probably didn't expect a thirteen-year-old to win.

Clenching my eyes shut for a moment, I took in a deep breath and scratched my head under my shaggy brown hair. "Time to shatter some expectations," I whispered to myself. At home, I may have said it louder, but in the commons at school . . . no way.

I always drew in the commons before school. My grandma dropped me off on her way to her job at the Holiday Inn so I didn't have to take the bus. That put me at school forty-five minutes early, but it was worth it. I hated the bus. I still had to take it home, though. Now it was only about five minutes before the first bell would ring, so a lot of students were filing into school.

I looked down at my drawing.

A teenage superhero and his dog surfed in on what looked like a flying red carpet. Stars streaked past them as they sailed through the night sky and curled around mountain peaks. They dodged a falling boulder just as the mountains opened up to reveal a huge metal castle. They landed at the base of the massive building, the dog leaping off before they stopped. Then in a quick, smooth motion, the red material curled up around the boy's neck. It was his cape, a magical gift from the Empress, and it looked fantastic behind his black outfit.

The boy and his dog slowly approached the

SQUINT

massive metal door on the front of a hulking titanium castle. Everything about the building looked thick and impenetrable.

"I should probably sneak in, like a ninja," Squint, the boy in my comic, said.

I had everything he said memorized so I didn't actually have to read the dialogue boxes. That was good. Less stress on my eyes and fewer headaches.

Rock grunted in his low, gravelly voice. Rock was a creature that looked like a bulldog but was made entirely out of rocks. He was, of course, magical as well, forged from magma by the Empress. "But sneaking in isn't your style, is it?" Rock said, sitting down on his tail made of a string of pebbles.

Did I mention Rock could talk?

COMIC RULE: Make your characters unique.

I think a talking rock dog qualifies. Of course, Squint's awesome too. His name was a little weird, but original. His team had started calling him Squint because of the way he narrowed his eyes every time he used his power. Well, his former team. Giving characters strange names, like Squint, is almost a comic rule too. Just ask Ant-Man or Squirrel Girl.

I kept a list of rules I learned in my notebook. That way I

could thumb through my notebook and make sure my work followed them.

But Rock was right. Sneaking around wasn't Squint's style.

Squint narrowed his eyes. In one fluid motion, he pulled both his daggers from their small sheaths on the sides of his belt and jabbed. The daggers were his last gifts from the Empress. Two thick streams of light shot from the short blades. VAROOSH! VAROOSH! They seared through parts of the door, leaving gaping holes with sizzling edges where the thick hinges had been.

Squint twirled one of the daggers in his hand while holding the other at the ready as the remains of the hulking metal door crashed to the ground. KABOOM!

"That was dramatic," Rock said.

"You're just jealous," Squint responded, approaching the gaping doorway.

"Guilty," Rock said, raising a paw. "But now the entire planet knows we're here. And just the two of us going in is a suicide mission."

Squint smiled over his shoulder. "Don't make excuses. You know you want to come."

Rock wagged his stony tongue for a moment, then stretched, his rocks separating a little then bouncing back into their shape. "Of course I do." He ambled over to his master.

Something was off with Rock's leg. I had to tilt my head to see it.

I erased a little of the shading and fixed it. My heart beat faster thinking about how good this story was going to be. And when I won—I mean, if I won—everything would change. I wouldn't just be the crazy kid drawing comics by himself in the commons. People would know who I was. They would all read my comic and ask for autographs and stuff. Taking the bus home would be great, no more Gavin putting his feet on my bench or throwing paper wads or pretending to draw like me, but with his finger up his nose. Lots of girls would want to talk to me, but it might take them a while to get up the courage to do it. And I'd walk right up and say hi to Chloe Williams and she would say hi back. Maybe she'd even get all shy.

It would be the complete opposite of the last time I tried to talk to Chloe. When I heard her group had won a dance contest, I summoned all the courage I had and went to say something to her after class. I walked up to her desk on my way to my seat and said, "Hey, good job on the dance contest." And I rambled a little, like I always do when I'm nervous. "I wasn't there, but I hear you were amazing. I would have come, but my grandparents wouldn't drive me. I'm sure you did so much better than I could. I can't dance to save my life. Sometimes I try and watch myself in the mirror, and it's bad."

She ignored me completely. Well, I think she did. I hadn't talked very loud, and Gavin had cracked a joke next to her, but she didn't even turn my way.

That wasn't going to happen anymore.

CHAPTER 2

THE RULES

Squint and Rock entered a warehouse-sized metal room, which was surprisingly empty. No guards yet.

“I’m not sure that I want to be called Squint anymore,” Squint told Rock. “I always wanted to be called something that had to do with my daggers. Like Lightblade or Firefling or The Lightning Kid.”

“What about Boy Who Talks Too Much When We Are Supposed To Be Sneaky?” Rock asked.

Squint winked, then yelled into the darkness, “Knock, knock—we have an appointment to save the Oververse!”

Rock shook his stone head.

In answer, at least ten programmed assassin bots

instantly slithered and clanked out of holes. *Chak-a-chak-akk-chk-chk-chk*. Each looked like a robotically enhanced octopus that left a trail of slime as they scrambled toward their prey. On the ends of their legs were guns and spinning razors.

It was an ambush. A slippery, deadly ambush. A present from his former friends.

It hadn't always been just Squint and Rock. Squint had been part of a group of supernatural soldiers, the Five Centurions. Charged with protecting the Empress, they were called Centurions because each of them was worth at least a hundred regular soldiers. But Squint's teammates had betrayed him, kidnapping the Empress they were supposed to keep safe. Squint was here to get her back. And now that he was close, they had sent out the assassin bots.

COMIC RULE: Give your team of superheroes a cool name, like the X-Men, the Justice League, the Avengers, or the Fantastic Four. I thought the Centurions qualified.

COMIC RULE: Give your main character an interesting backstory. If possible, have it include the villains. It heightens the tension.

"That's a rude welcome," Squint said, looking at the approaching bots, then down at Rock. "But I guess I did slice down their huge metal door."

"Not to mention the yelling," Rock said.

Squint shrugged, then narrowed his eyes. The

bots fired first, their shots echoing around the room—*BRATATATAT!* In one swift move, Squint jabbed with one of his daggers while pulling his bulletproof cape in front of him with his other arm.

The fight was on.

I heard a chair skid across the floor. Not in the comic. Next to me. “Hey,” someone said.

I jumped a little. Nobody ever sat at my table. Plus, I was pretty wrapped up in the comic just then. Fighting cyborg octopuses . . . octopi . . . (however you say that) . . . is intense.

I looked up at a boy with dark skin, short hair, and shoulders as thick as my legs. He was a little blurry, but I knew who it was. Gavin. And his new best friend, Travis, was next to him, taller and thinner than Gavin, with blond hair that reached his shoulders. They sat down. I covered up my comic with my arm as my insides rolled. What were they doing here?

But they weren't alone. Chloe, Emma, and another girl I thought might be in one of my classes followed. Chloe sat, while the other two stood behind her.

My mouth almost hung open.

The Chloe. Pretty-black-hair-tan-skin-smells-like-coconut-lotion-popular Chloe sat down at *my* table.

What was going on? Apparently, I had entered some sort of strange dimension where people like them came to sit with people like me. A completely alternate reality. What rules of the universe were going to change next? We lose all gravity? Students like homework? I mean, Gavin and I used to talk

and sit together at lunch, but that was three years ago. Fourth-grade stuff. The rules of the middle-school universe obliterated all of that.

MIDDLE-SCHOOL RULE: Everyone is grouped according to looks, talent, and popularity.

MIDDLE-SCHOOL RULE: Groups don't mix.

My middle-school rules weren't as organized as my comic-book rules, but I wrote them down in the back of the same notebook. Maybe one day I'd make a comic about middle school because innocent elementary students should be warned.

"So Squint, why are you sitting here all by yourself?" Gavin asked, gesturing with one of his thick arms. Squint wasn't just the name of the main character in my comic. It was also my nickname, because I squint a lot. Stupid eyes.

I shrugged, still covering up my comic. Gavin knew the answer. He was just getting in another dig.

"What are you drawing?" Gavin asked, pointing at my paper. Ever since we got to middle school, Gavin had been hanging out with Travis, the tall kid who strutted down the halls like he thought he was a rapper or something. Sure, they were on the football team together, but other than that I didn't know why Gavin would hang out with him.

"My comic," I said, moving my sheets away from them and toward the edge of the table. I wanted to slip the pages

into my portfolio case before Gavin and the others looked at them or said anything. My grandma bought the case last year to keep my work safe. It looked like a stiff brown envelope the size of a poster. “You know, my normal stuff.” I tried to sound casual, but my thick glasses slid a little farther down my nose, probably because I didn’t seem enough like a dork already. I really hated my glasses. They didn’t stop my double vision, but they did help with some of the blurriness.

“Oh, interesting,” Gavin interrupted, not actually sounding interested. Then he snatched a sheet out of my grasp. Man, he was fast. He looked at it for a second, curling his lip. “We have an appointment to save the Oververse?” he read. That was such a cool line, but he read like it was cheesy dialogue on the back of a cereal box. “And the guy is called Squint? Like you, but he’s supposed to be a hero or something?”

I didn’t answer.

Gavin laughed and passed it back to Travis.

Travis barely glanced at it. “Weird,” he said under his breath and he gave it to Chloe. He didn’t even give it a chance.

Weird? My stomach turned not knowing whether to be angry or sick. It wasn’t weird. It was amazing. How could they not see it? And now Chloe was looking at it. She would see it, right?

While Chloe held it, Emma and the girl whose name I couldn’t remember looked at it over her shoulder. I could see fuzzy versions of Emma’s red hair and the other girl’s dark, straight hair, but I tried to follow Chloe’s eyes.

There wasn't much to follow. After a few seconds, Chloe turned her head toward Emma and said, "Rock dog?" It was like she was asking why we had to do math homework, or why the school served squash with lunch. Like asking why something strange even existed.

I tried to swallow, but it caught in my throat.

"We have a question for you," Gavin said, then looked over at Chloe.

"Oh, yeah," she said, dropping my comic sheet like it was a piece of scratch paper. I snagged it and quickly slid it into my portfolio case.

Safe. I hoped.

If it was even worth keeping safe. Maybe it was better to keep it hidden away.

But Chloe had a question for *me*? Did she want to hang out, or want my number or something? No. That would be crazy. I wasn't in her league. At least not until I won the comic contest.

Chloe moved her black hair behind her ear and leaned in. My heart thudded in my chest.

"Has anyone ever told you that you were cute before?"

Whatever speed my heart had been going before, it quadrupled. No. More like twenty times faster. It was thundering like a stampede of wildebeests. Or like Juggernaut charging an enemy.

MIDDLE-SCHOOL RULE: A pretty girl is one of the most powerful forces in the world. (Every joke is funnier

if a pretty girl says it or if a pretty girl laughs at it. Everything she says feels truer. And some people believe pretty girls really have power over time and can make it move in slow motion when they look at you and smile.)

I couldn't freak out. I had to play it cool. Squint in my comic could keep his wits. So could I.

But I couldn't stop thinking, "Whoa. Chloe Williams asked me if anyone had told me I was cute before." The girl that made me look forward to English class.

This was like a movie. The best kind of movie. The kind of movie where the underdog gets the girl.

I tried not to gulp. "Nah," I said, willing my pulse to slow down. My mind filled with other rambling thoughts, but I tried to keep them all in. Cool under pressure. Like Squint the Centurion.

Chloe squinched up her pretty lips. "I didn't think so," she said, and shook her head.

Everything stopped. That wasn't what she was supposed to say. That wasn't what happened in books and in movies.

She didn't *think so*?

She didn't think anyone had called me cute before? Now instead of thudding, my heart didn't know what to do. It almost wouldn't beat. It was like the stampeding wildebeests had all collided with each other. Or Juggernaut tripped and crashed and burned.

Gavin, Travis, and the girls just looked at me for a moment, searching my face. It was way too quiet until Gavin

erupted in laughter. Travis, Chloe, and Emma joined him. I couldn't tell if the other girl did or not. I was having a double vision moment.

MIDDLE-SCHOOL RULE: Everyone is always trying to look better than everyone else.

I hated that rule.

"Just kidding," Gavin said, and slapped me on the back, almost knocking my dumb glasses off my nose.

"We thought of it a second ago and we had to try it out," Travis said.

A joke. It was all a setup. How did I not see that coming? Back in elementary, Gavin and I had been on a few football teams together. Gavin was our quarterback. He was really good but always needed attention for it. I was the short wide receiver who could always catch Gavin's crazy throws. He joked then and I dished it back out. He was always teasing. Gavin once told me that his grandma could catch better than I could. I told him I'd be happy to prove that with a little game of catch with his grandma. She never took me up on it.

That was before my eyesight changed. We didn't play anymore. We didn't jab back and forth anymore. It just went one way.

MIDDLE-SCHOOL RULE: Even if you have been friends for most of elementary school, when you go to middle school, if one person's eyes have started going bad and they can't play football anymore, and you live in a town

where football is all that anyone ever talks about, then that kid with the bad eyes isn't as cool as he used to be and you don't have to hang out with him. At all.

My chest felt hollow and I wanted them all to go away so I could scrape my dignity off of the floor and get myself ready for what was already looking like it was going to be a horribly long day of school.

Gavin went to slap me on the back again, but decided against it.

“You have to admit, that was pretty good,” Travis said.

I didn't have to admit it, but I gave him a fake smile and nodded anyway.

Chloe and Emma were still laughing as they walked away. The girl with the dark hair I think I recognized from science class smiled as she left. Gavin was the last to turn and point at me with both his fingers. Like he was so charming or something.

As they left to tell their other friends how funny they were, I squinted and pulled my comic back out of my portfolio case. I had to finish it. I had to win the contest. And when I won, everything would change.