



THE LAST KIDS ON EARTH

and the *COSMIC BEYOND*

NETFLIX
A NETFLIX
ORIGINAL SERIES

The *NEW YORK TIMES* bestselling series

MAX BRALLIER

Illustrated by DOUGLAS HOLGATE

Max Brallier

**The Last Kids on Earth
and the Cosmic Beyond**

«HarperCollins»

Brallier M.

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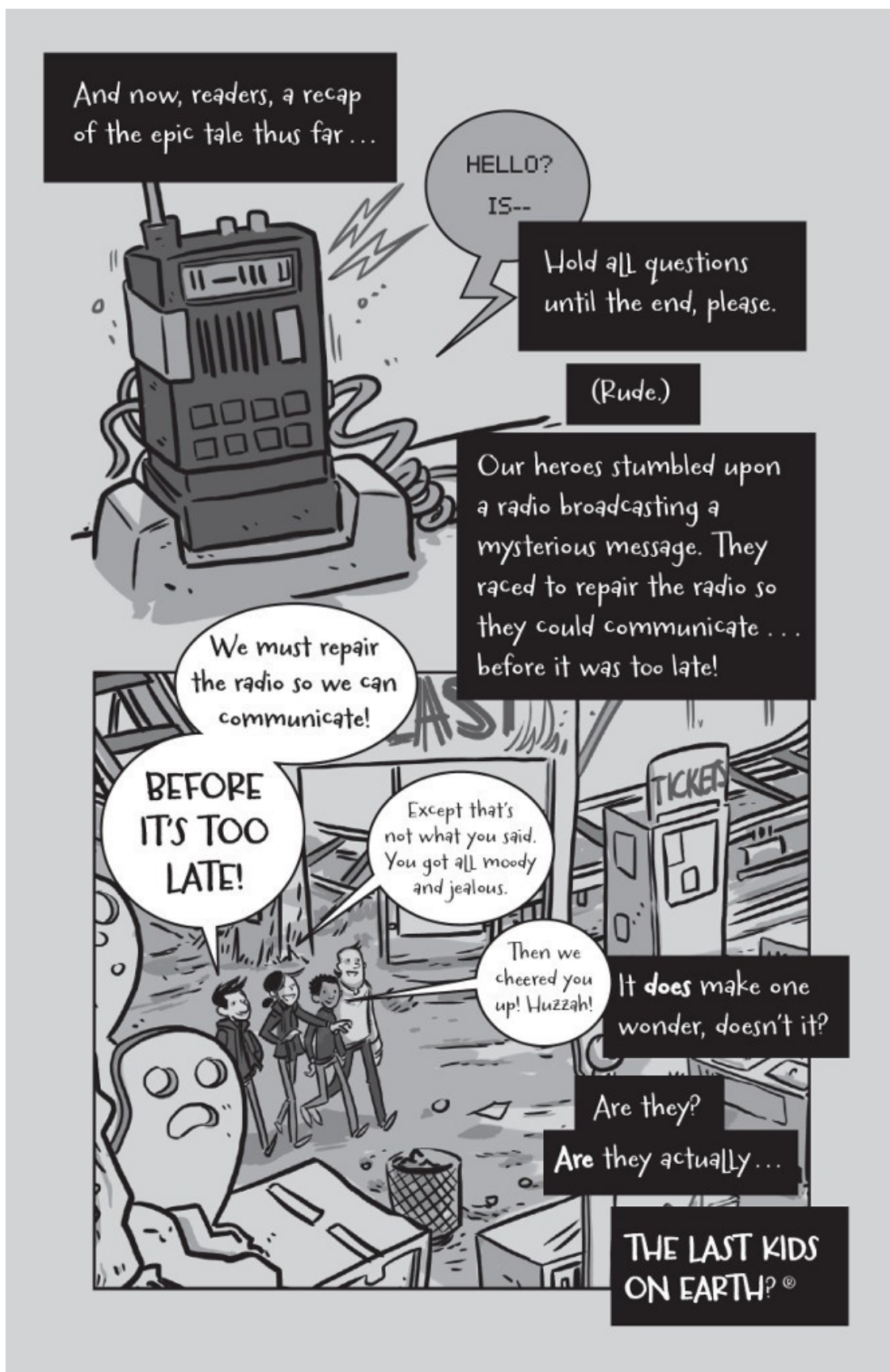
Soon to be a major NETFLIX series! ‘Terrifyingly fun! Max Brallier’s The Last Kids on Earth delivers big thrills and even bigger laughs.’ Jeff Kinney, author of Diary of a Wimpy Kid. The newest installment in this New York Times bestselling series introduces new monsters, new bad guys, and tons of new laughs – Diary of a Wimpy Kid meets The Walking Dead! It’s the first winter after the Monster Apocalypse. For Jack and his buddies, that means sled catapults, epic snowball battles, and one monstrous Christmas celebration. But their winter wonderland turns dark when a villainess begins hunting them. And this villainess is different – she’s a human. When the villainess steals Jack’s prized monster-slaying tool, the Louisville Slicer, he vows to get it back. But it won’t be easy. Jack and his friends soon discover that the Louisville Slicer is the key to a dark plan that threatens the entire world – and beyond ... The Last Kids on Earth series: The Last Kids on Earth The Last Kids on Earth and the Zombie Parade The Last Kids on Earth and the Nightmare King The Last Kids on Earth and the Cosmic Beyond

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For my Lila Bean.

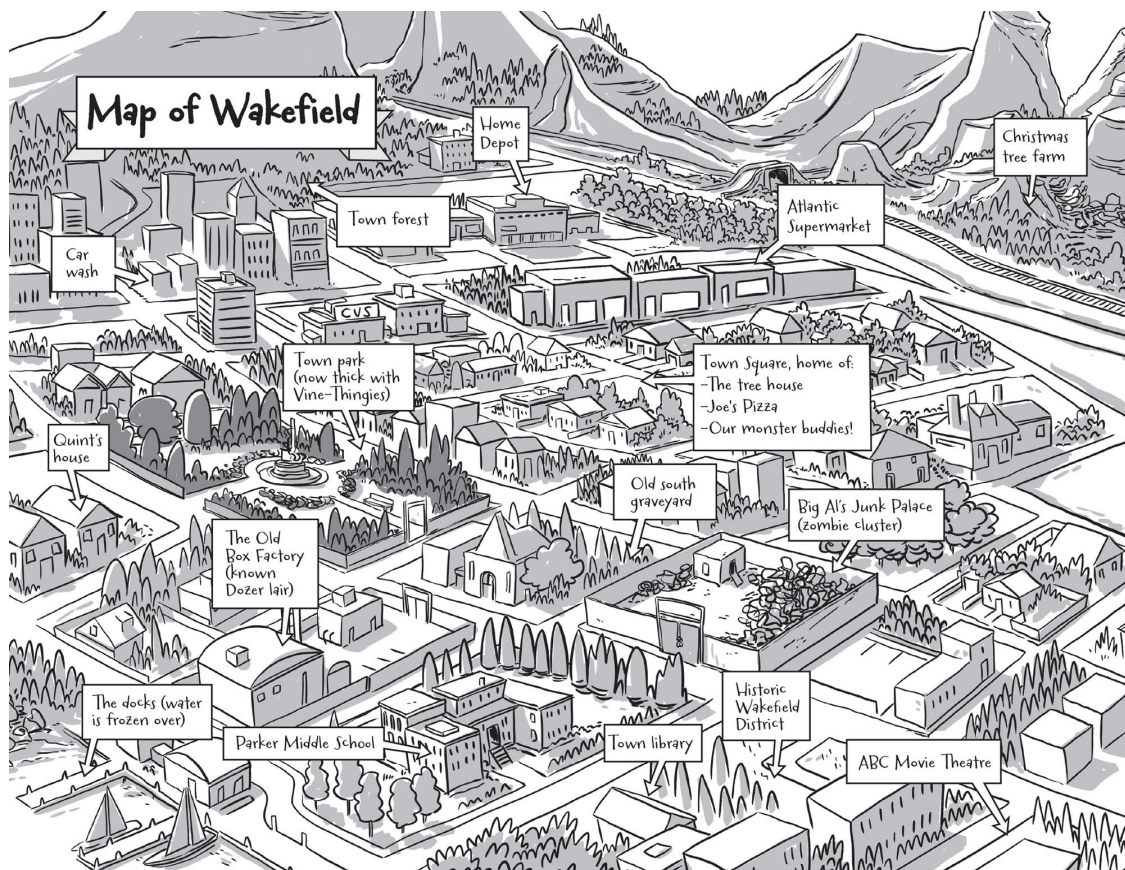
– M. B.

For Turtle and Panda.

– D. H.

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chapter one



So, we are about to be astro-blasted. Catapulted and *launched*. Propelled off the roof of our tree house by something called the Sled-Shot.

Why? Why load ourselves into a massive slingshot and blast ourselves off the roof?

Why did some old guy climb Mount Everest? BECAUSE IT'S THERE!!!

Actually, that's not the reason at all. The Sled-Shot was of course not just 'there'. My best friend, Quint Baker, built it.

'Quint, are you sure this is safe?' I ask.

He thinks for a moment, then says, 'No. But I'm not *not* sure.'

'What's the matter? A little nervous, Jack?'

That's my buddy-crush, June Del Toro. I know she's teasing me, but I actually do feel kind of queasy. Usually, I'm super gung-ho about all things action, no matter the danger. But not this.

I give the Sled-Shot a final look before I slide in. 'Quint, this looks like a weapon for medieval siege warfare! Or for defending a castle against an army of orcs! Or for storming a castle *with* an army of orcs! This would be helpful if we were under siege, but we're very much *not* under siege.'

June grins. 'We are under *snow*.'

'Not the same,' I say. 'Not even kind of sort of the same.'

'But *they* think it is,' June says.

They are the monsters who are our friends. The dozen or so monsters up here with us in the tree house, helping us prepare for blast-off. And the many other monsters down below, in Wakefield Town Square.

And it's true. The monsters are probably more worried about the snow than they would be about an army of orcs. They are not inspiring confidence . . .



Hey! No one's got dibs on my monster buddy Rover and definitely no one is sleeping in my bed! I glare at Skaelka. She's the one with the big axe.

My big buddy Dirk Savage – the final member of our foursome of friends – says, 'Enough talk! We're going. Equip helmets.'

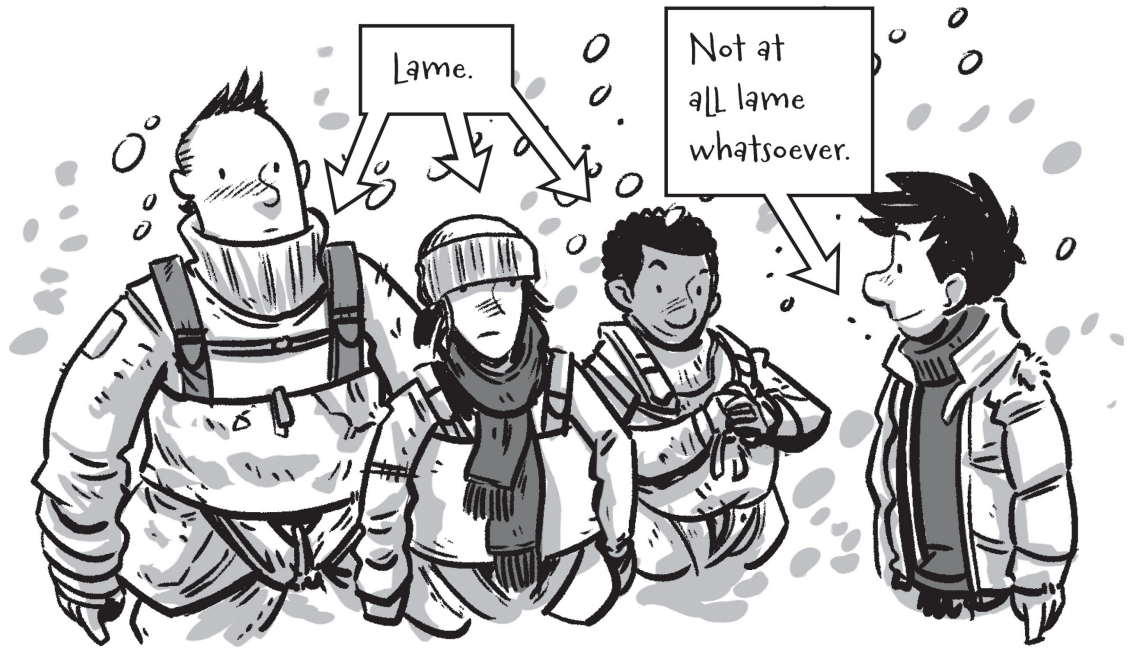
'Helmets equipped!' we respond.

'Equip inflatable donut rafts!' Quint shouts.

'Equipped!' my buddies say.

'Equipped!' I say. But that's only partly true. See, Quint designed instant-inflate donut rafts. They're basically airbags for your body. But I'm Jack Sullivan! I don't need that! Quint's a worrier, though, so I agreed to wear it.

What I *didn't* tell him is that I filled mine with delicious snacks! I mean, honestly – what are the odds I'm going to need an instant-inflate raft? Not high. But the odds I'm gonna want delicious snacks? WAY HIGH. Plus, I get to walk around looking less lame than my buds – see?



‘You may fire when ready!’ Quint says to the monsters. There’s a big grin on his face. It is the grin of someone who has always wanted to say ‘you may fire when ready’ and just finally got his chance.

Skaelka cocks back the sled. The tree house rattles. I hear whirring, I hear clanking, I hear gears turning. This is happening and there’s no stopping it. And then . . .



My stomach doesn't *just* flip. My stomach does a jackknife, a cannonball, and follows it with an atomic belly flop. We fly through the air for so long I feel like E.T. And . . .

SMASH!

We crash through the roof of a Chinese takeout joint, barrel through Wendy's, explode through the Blue Point Diner. A total sled rampage.

Ahead of us is a truck, tilted on its side, covered in ice. It looks like something out of a racing game.

And I see something else just past the truck.

A monster.

A monster, standing massive in the swirling snow, waiting for us. A single, giant fist rests on the ground. The monster leans forward. It snarls, and –

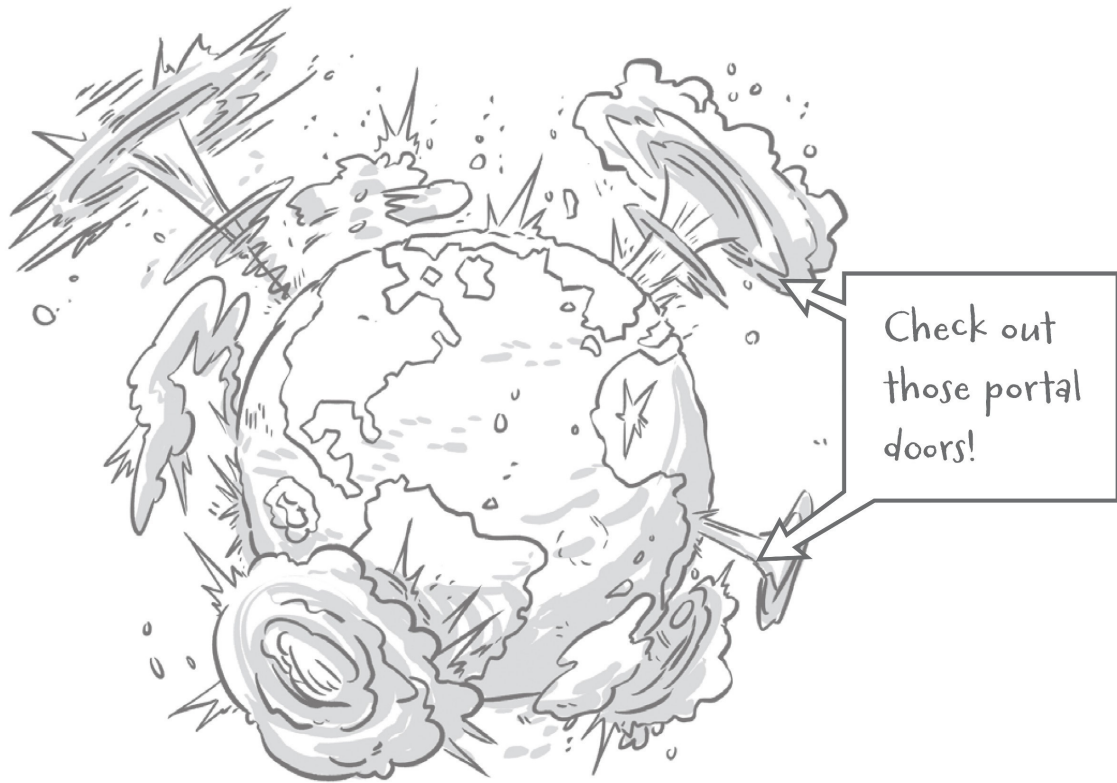


Actually – y’know what. HOLD UP!

Now is a good time to explain a few things. Like, y’know – WHY we are sailing through the sky in a death sled. In fact, it’s time for a real-deal recap . . .

PREVIOUSLY ON. . . THE LAST KIDS ON EARTH:

It all started seven months ago – with the Monster Apocalypse. Interdimensional portal doors opened above the earth – like this . . .



Those portals flung *crazy stuff* into our world: massive monsters, creepy creatures, and slimy shrieking strangeness. Plus – and this is big – the *horrible zombie plague* that turned most of humanity undead.

There are good monsters and there are bad monsters. The good monsters are now our buddies! They live in our little town – Wakefield – in the Town Square.

The bad monsters are *bad*. They worship the diabolical ultra-villain Řezzŏčĥ the Ancient, Destructor of Worlds. But, good news . . .

Řezzŏčĥ is still stuck in the other dimension! He tried to come to *our* world to do bad stuff 'cause that's what inter-dimensional villains do. But we shut down his plan!

For a while, life was great! Me and my buddies and our monster pals battled evil and had fun. But a month back, everything changed . . .

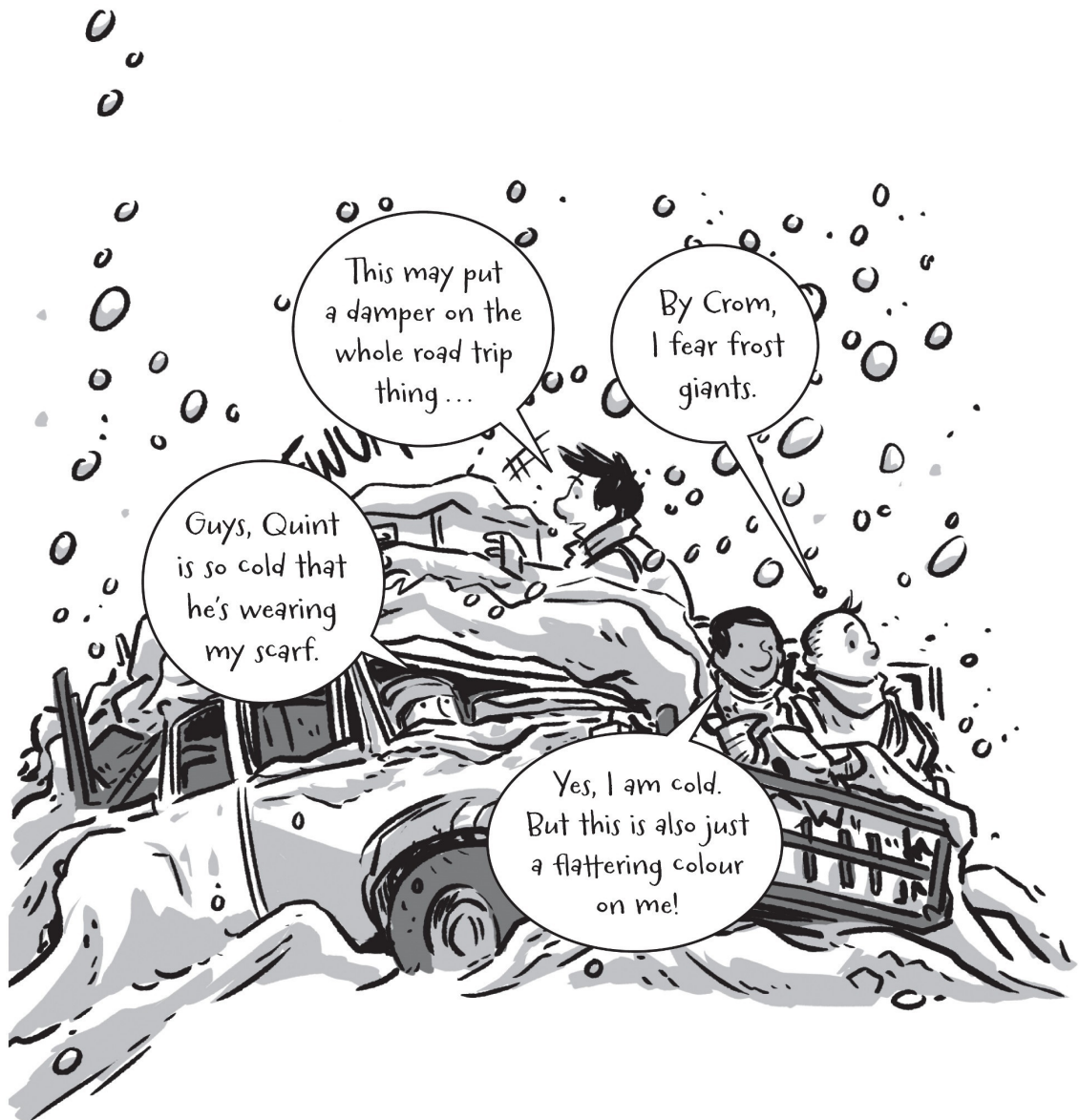
We found a RADIO.

And that radio picked up a broadcast from OTHER HUMANS . . .



So, just last week, we were like: ROAD TRIP! Destination: NYC. We packed up our monster-battling truck, Big Mama, and we were about to start our journey. But then . . .

A snowstorm hit. A snowfall so strong it might have been sent by the ice lords themselves!



This nasty snow storm trapped us and put our journey on hold. That didn't actually bother *me* at all, 'cause I felt bad leaving our monster buddies, anyway. See, the concept of snow was *totally new* to the monsters.

And it freaked them out.

Big time.



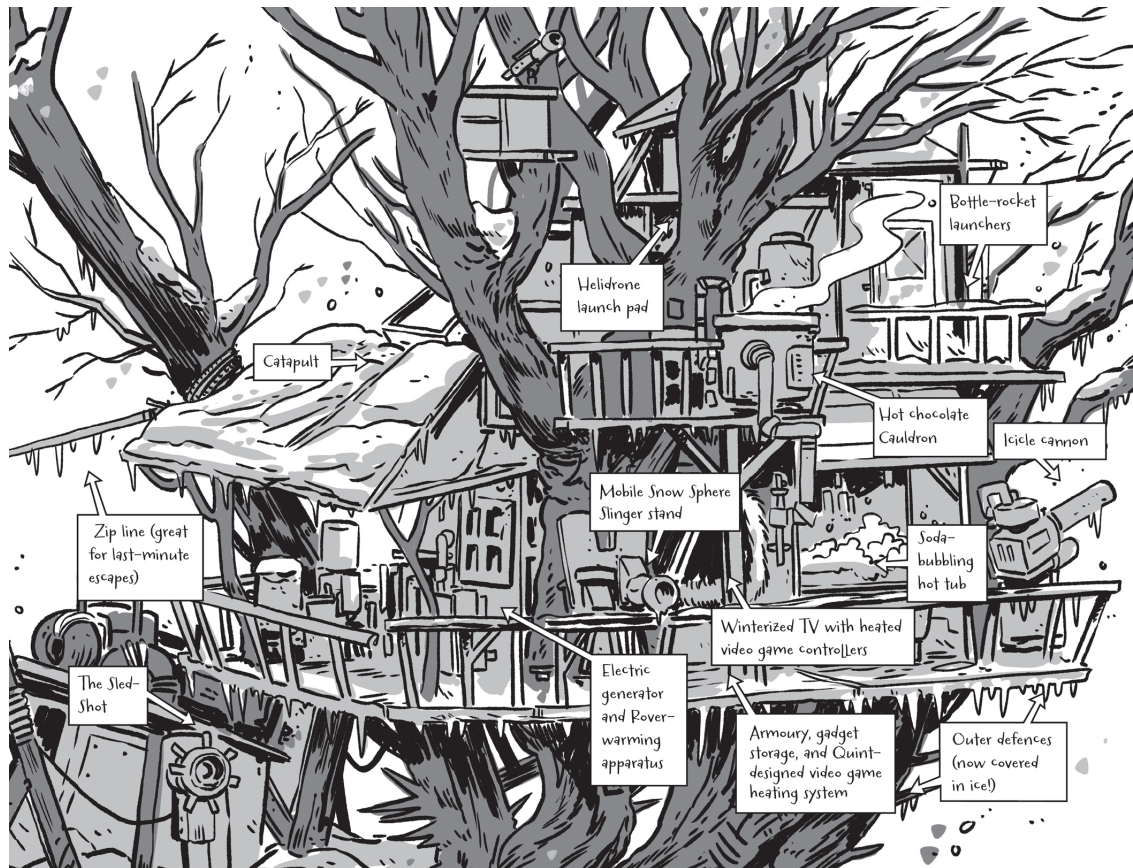
So, we were TRAPPED and the monsters were FREAKED.

And I mean – Earth is my dimension. My world. And I didn't like the monsters being afraid of the snow – I felt like a bad host!

So I was like, 'I will PROVE that snow is nothing to be afraid of! I'll prove it in the most death-defying and dramatic way possible! We'll attack the snow head-on – by sledding! INSANE sledding – like ROCKETING OURSELVES FROM THE TREE HOUSE IN A SLED!'

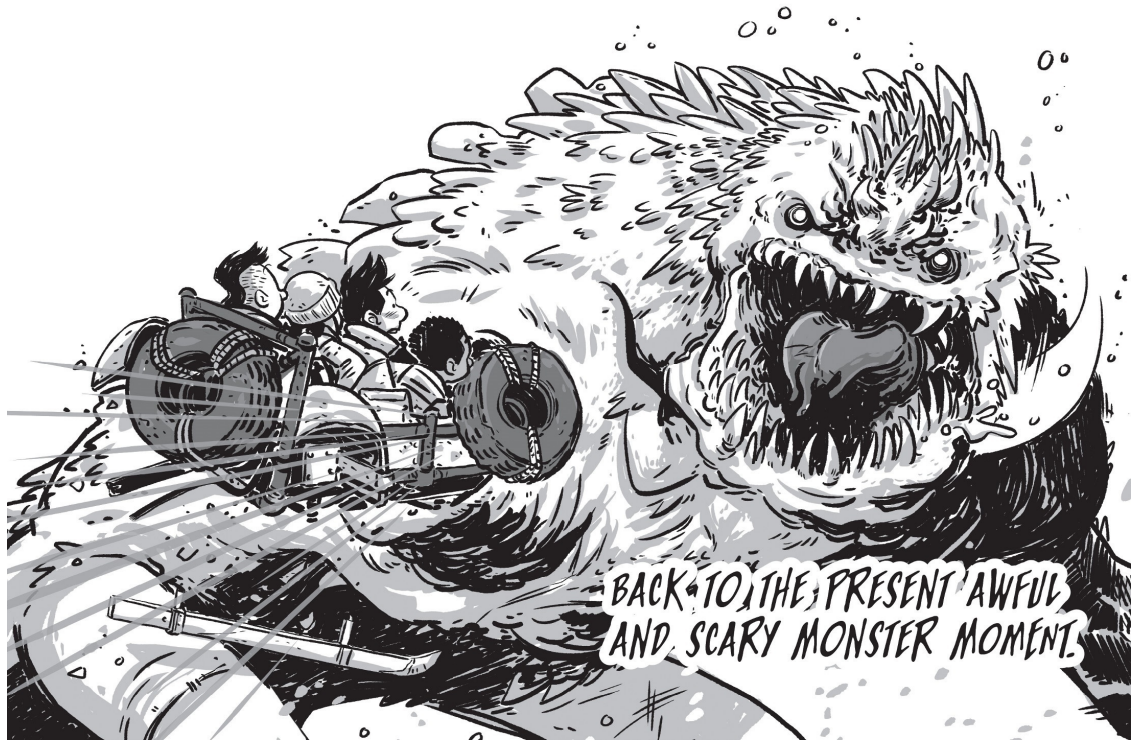
First, we winterized the tree house. Take a peek . . .

The biggest winter addition was the Sled-Shot. See, the first rule of life after the Monster Apocalypse is that *there are zero rules*, so you can and *should* do everything in a totally ridiculous fashion!



Actually, I lied – the first rule is don't get bitten by a zombie and also don't get eaten by a monster – but after that, it's the rule about over-the-top ridiculousness.

So, we climbed into the Sled-Shot, our monster buddies flung us, we went sailing *way too far and way too fast*, and now . . .



‘Dudes!’ June cries out. ‘We are on a direct collision course with that one-armed monster’s mouth!’

‘I know it, I know it!’ I say.

Rapid-fire, I analyze the situation, seeing every possible manoeuvre and attack. I think it’s a skill I picked up from watching too many movies, reading too many graphic novels, and playing too many video games . . .

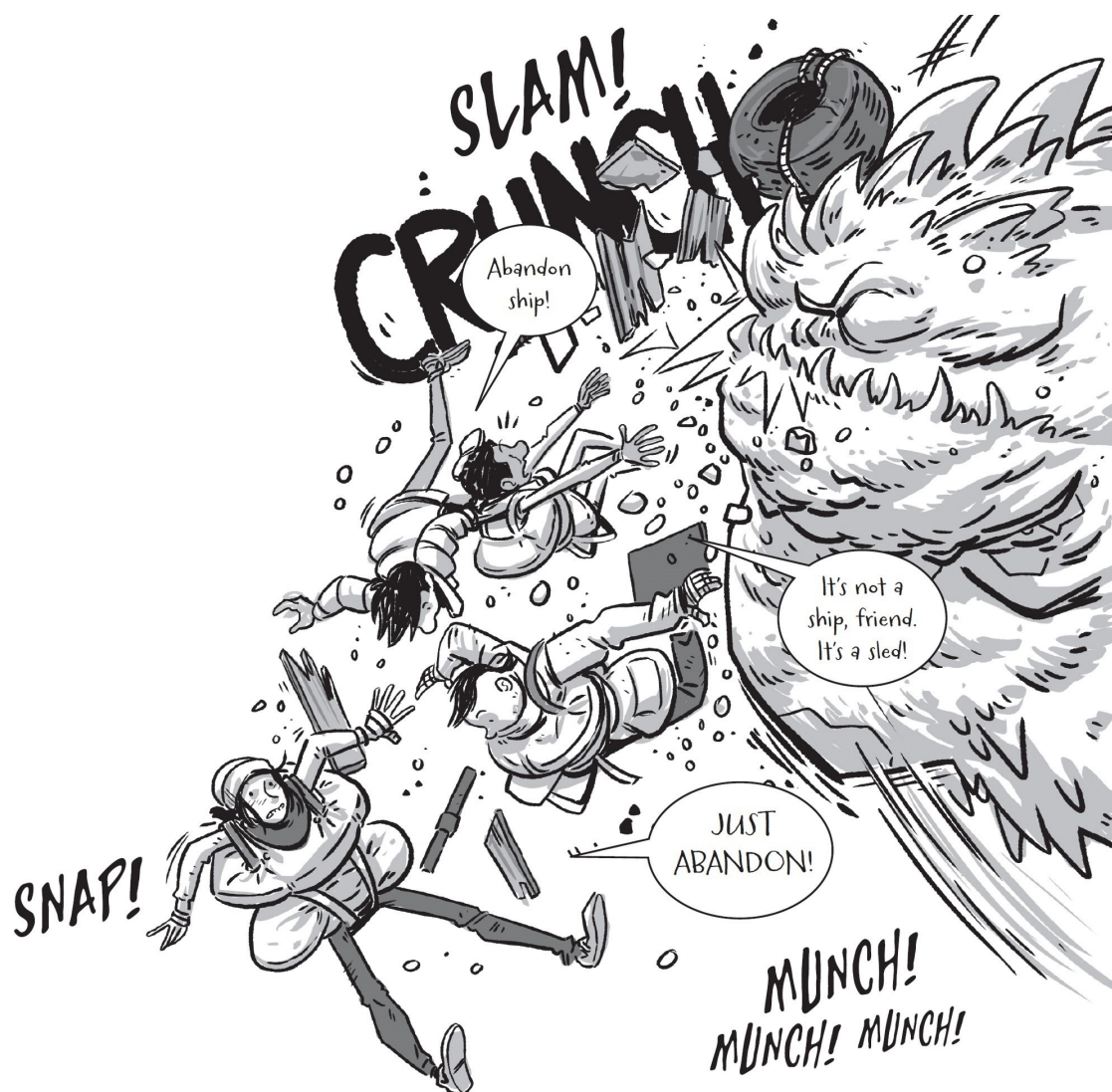
So as we sail toward the great monster’s maw, I realize the courageous, valiant, lion-hearted action that must be taken . . .

‘OVERBOARD!’ I scream. ‘FLEE! EMBRACE YOUR INNER COWARD, BUDDIES!’

‘But my vehicle, Jack!’ Quint cries out.

Quint’s brain is *not* an action hero brain. It’s a different, awesome brain. But he simply cannot process abandoning something he’s worked so hard on. He doesn’t worry about the imminent death.

So I have to worry about it for him. I grip his sweater and –



chapter two

Overboard was the right decision.

There's a *gulp* – and the great beast's belly rumbles. The sled has been swallowed. Two seconds later and he would've swallowed *us*, too.



A monstrous roar cuts through the air.

'C'mon!' June shouts. She yanks me to my feet. Dirk pulls Quint from the snow, and we race out onto a wide street.

Snow whips through the air, like I'm inside a snow globe. It's like when you have to get up in the middle of the night to pee but you can't see *anything*. Only then, the worst-case scenario is you fall into an open toilet. Here the worst-case scenario is – y'know – death by monster.

CRUNCH!
CRUNCH!
CRUNCH!

Our bodies bounce. The snow-cracking CRUNCHES are deafening. The monster's coming after us, but I only see its huge stomping legs.

'Guys! We need to get to cover!' I shout.

I'm using my Louisville Slicer like a cane, staggering forward while poking around. And that is *not* what the Louisville Slicer is for. It's for battling monsters! It's my ultimate weapon. I slayed Blarg with the Louisville Slicer! I battled Thrull with it! I sliced the lassos that held the King Wretch with it!



BLARG:
Big, brutal beast.



THRULL:

Man-monster! Undercover traitor monster!



KING WRETCH:

This dude gave me weird dream-visions and then his chest opened so Rezzoch could talk to me and, yeah, it was **nuts**.



THE LOUISVILLE SLICER:

My radical weapon.

It did damage to **all** these bad dudes.

I mean, that bat is basically my lightsaber!

CRUNCH!

The monster stomps grow louder. Up ahead, I see an opening – like the mouth of a cave . . . What the – where *are* we? I thought we were in the suburbs, but now we’ve stumbled upon some sort of cave situation?

‘Whoa, whoa,’ Dirk says. ‘Could be frost giants. Frost giants live in caves – learned that from *Conan the Barbarian*.’

June sighs. ‘Dudes, *really*? It’s not a cave! It’s the car wash!’

Another *CRUNCH!*

‘In we go!’ I say, and we race into the car wash tunnel.

Even inside, the cold is crippling. Quint’s teeth are chattering. We really need to upgrade our winter outfits – if we don’t, hypothermia might take us down before a monster –

RAWRRR!

The monster’s howl slices through the car wash, bouncing off the walls. ‘The big guy found us!’ June cries. It’s at the entrance.

The beast’s hot breath warms the air, turning the car wash tunnel into a humid haze.

Through the mist, I see the monster: a giant, one-armed beast with a single fistacular paw. One massive . . .

-MEATHOOK!-



This monster – *Meathook* – bends down. It peers into the car wash tunnel.

And that’s when I see there’s something *on top* of the beast. A figure wearing a dark cloak that snaps in the wind.

I gulp.

We carefully inch forward, peeking out around the tunnel's corner. We watch the figure's arm raise and clasp the cloak.

A hood is pulled back.

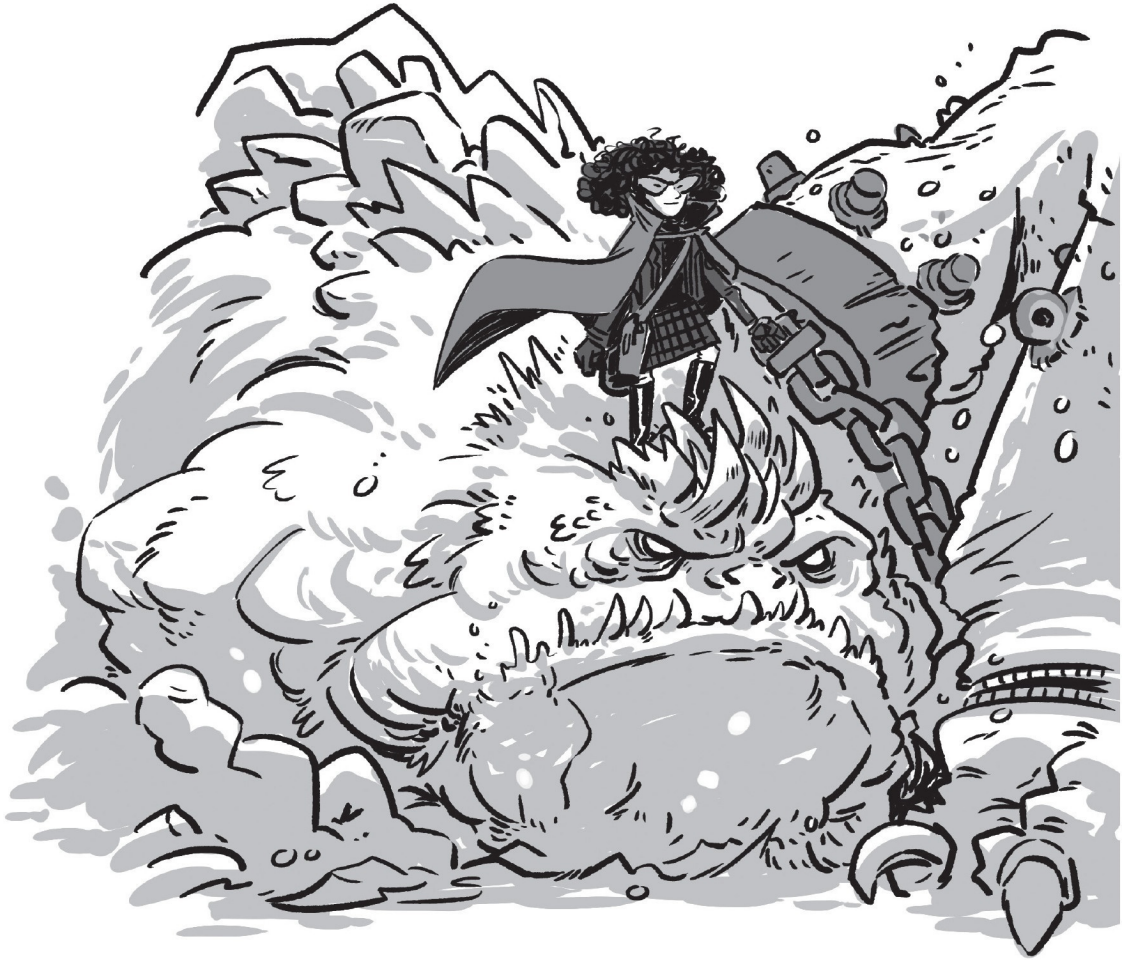
And then –

'Whoa!' I exclaim.

'Oh my,' Quint says.

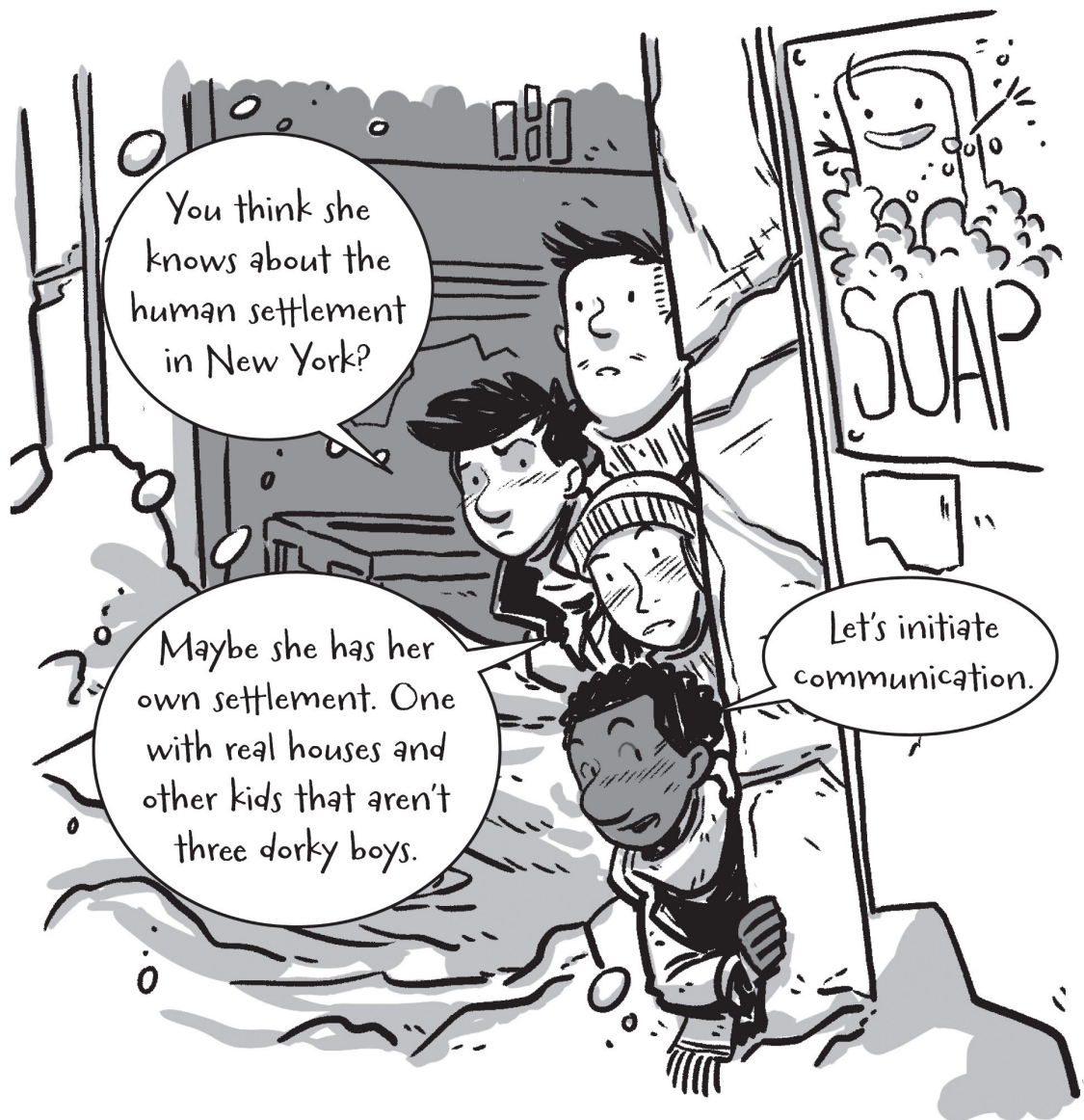
June stammers, 'It's – it's – it's a person. A human!'

chapter three



This is monumentally unexpected. This woman atop the monster is the first other human we've seen. Until we heard that radio broadcast, we didn't even know other humans still *existed*!

June grabs my sleeve and twists it tight. Her eyes are high-beam wide.



'Hold up, hold up!' I say. 'This human's intentions may not be great. She is, y'know, *riding a giant fanged beast!*

June shakes her head. 'You ride Rover! He's a giant fanged beast!'

'Maybe *technically* he's a beast – but really he's just a big fluffy monster-dog!' I say. 'This monster here looks like something out of a demon's nightmare! Plus, it ate Quint's sled!'

Quint is jittery beside me. I can almost hear the wheels in his brain spinning away with curiosity and excitement – *clink, clink, clink*.

And like that, he goes to make contact . . .



From the tunnel, we watch the human eye Quint. Then the monster tilts its head. Then – *HARRRUGH!*

The monster raises its fist, and I can see what's coming – Pancake Quint. 'Crud!' I scream as I race out to grab my friend.

'I miscalculated!' Quint cries out. 'That human is a villainess!'

'No kidding!' I yell, pulling him across the snow. 'And that monster's a meathook!'

Meathook's fist comes slamming down, snow erupting, throwing us back into the car wash.

The monster's fist opens and it reaches into the tunnel. It swipes and thrashes. Luckily, the arm is not long enough to reach us.

And he's not pleased about it.

But then –

Footsteps outside. Human footsteps. Suddenly –

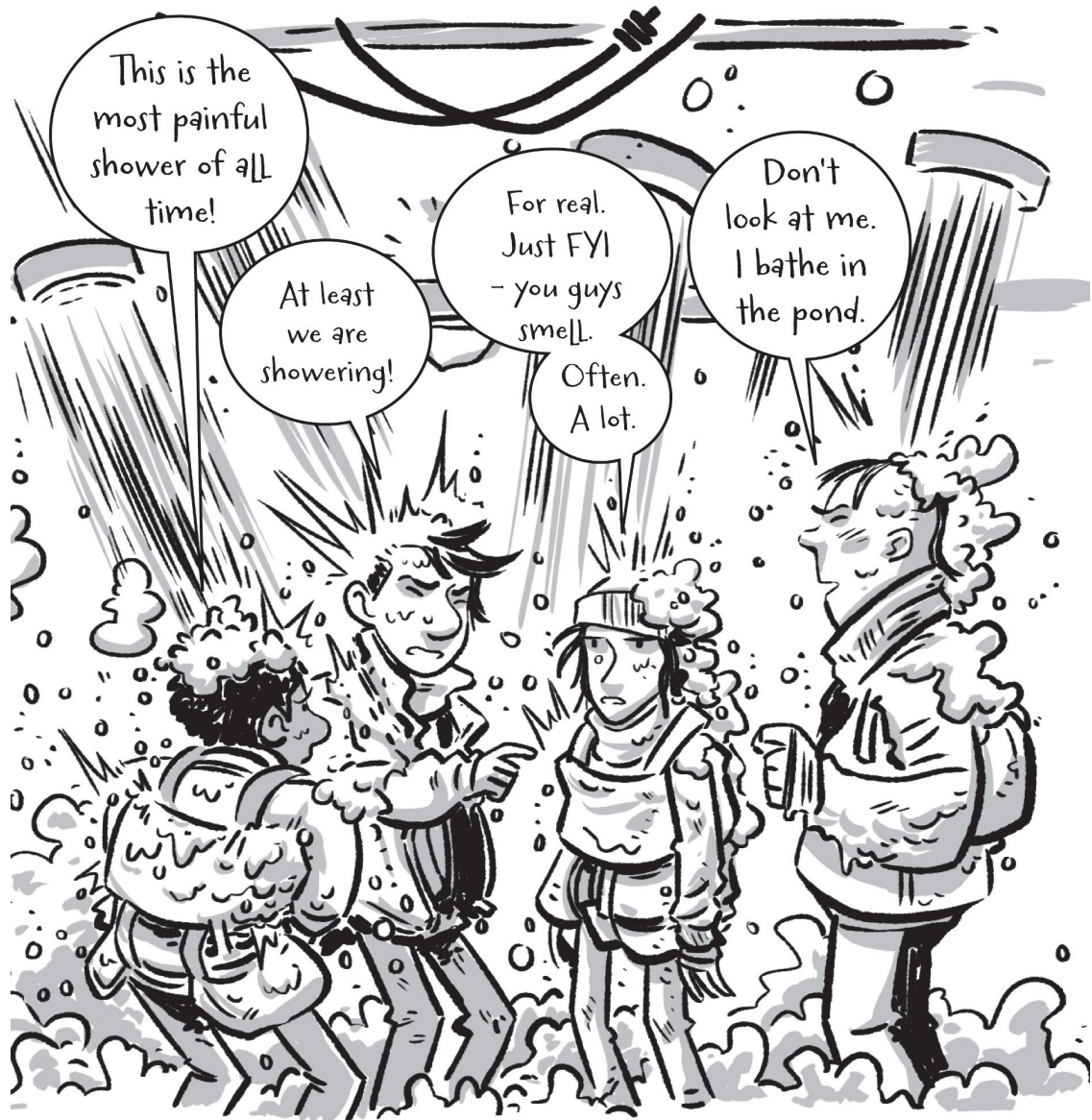
POP! SIZZLE! An electrical hum. Harsh fluorescent overhead lights flash on.

'THE CAR WASH! IT'S ALIVE!' screams Dirk.

The automatic car wash conveyor suddenly jolts us forward . . .

So, I've been through a drive-through car wash many times. Always in a car, naturally. And I thought it would be just so *goofy and fun* to go through one on foot. Not true.

The nozzles are as strong as fire hoses! Snow, dirt, and gunk fly off us.



A roar echoes down the length of the car wash tunnel. I see the monster appear at the exit. It is now waiting for us, where the conveyor ends. Our conveyor belt of *cleanliness* is now a conveyor belt of *doom*, carrying us on a deadly path to a fang-filled mouth.

'Run back! The other way!' I shout.

But the whole thing is moving too fast – it's like trying to walk down an up escalator. Our only choice is to embrace the conveyor!

Massive brushes whack us! Then we're dried off – hit with high-pressure air and smacked with huge strips of towel.

We race down the belt. Every step is like Flash-style hyperspeed. We burst through a big wall of flapping thingies and then the conveyor belt *hurls* us out of the tunnel.

My feet slide across black ice. I spin past Meathook, managing to stay upright. In an instant, I've lost track of my buddies.

I reach out, feeling for something I can use as cover. My hand finds metal. Hmmm . . . *smells* like a Dumpster. I yank open the Dumpster lid and dive inside. It clangs shut behind me.

I hold my breath, because I don't want the monster or the Villainess to hear me, but also because the Dumpster smells like death.

I grip the Louisville Slicer tight against my chest. I expect a long, dramatic moment to pass – with breathing, and terror, and waiting – but it's *only an instant!*

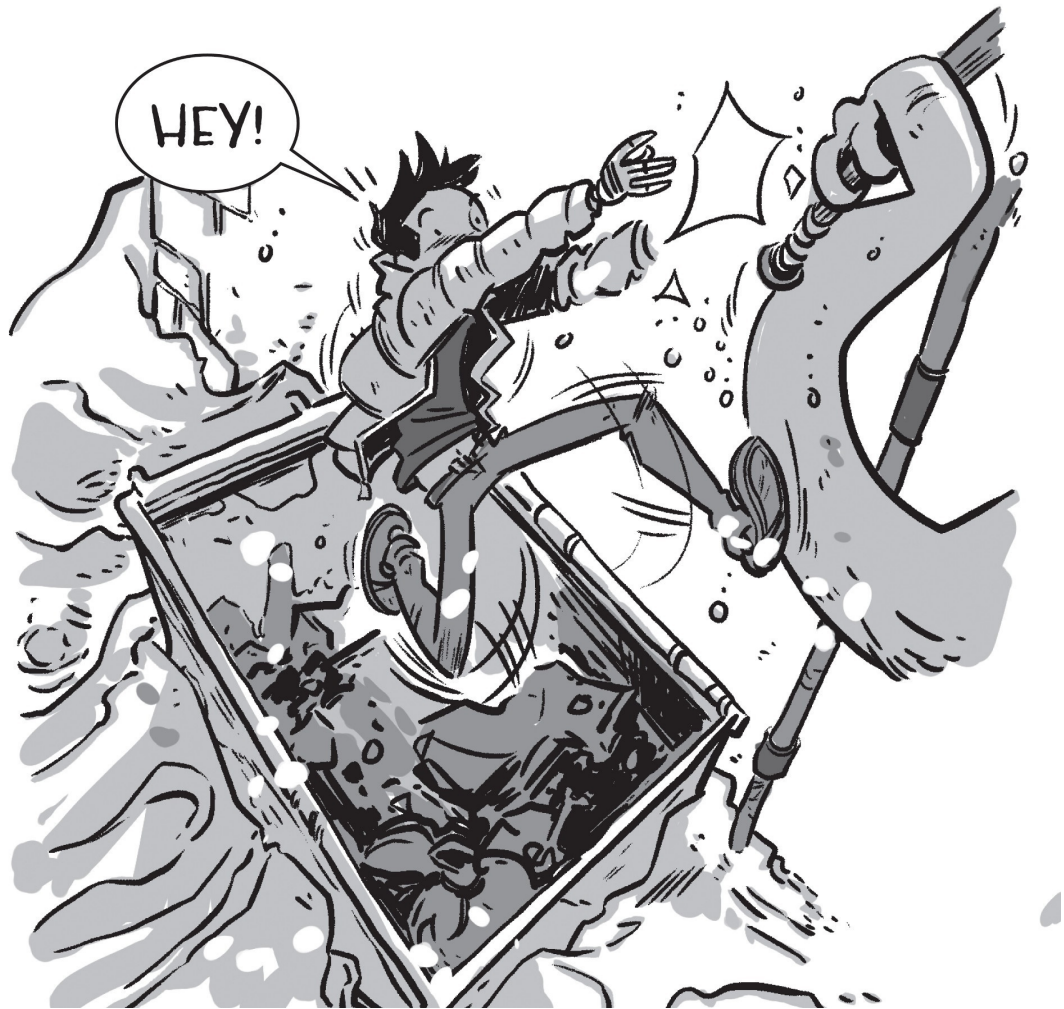
YANK! The Dumpster lid is *ripped* open, and something awful enters . . .



KRAK!

Meathook's grey-purple tongue snaps and smacks me across the face. I half expect it to follow that with a French kiss of death. Instead, small, fleshy slivers of tongue wrap around the Louisville Slicer!

I throw my other hand around my weapon's handle. Meathook *pulls* – a vicious, terrible *jerk*. My arms are nearly ripped from the sockets, like I insulted a Wookiee, and then –



‘Give that back!’ I demand, as I crash to the ground. ‘That’s *my* weapon, I named it *the Louisville Slicer*, and it’s *not* for you!’

CRACK!

I see June, beneath the monster, whacking its leg with her flagpole spear. But she might as well be hitting it with a very long pretzel rod, because it does nothing.

Atop the monster, glaring down, is the Villainess. She chuckles, Meathook’s tongue snaps, and my blade is thrown upward, flipping end over end, until –



'Jack, forget about it!' June shouts.

She pulls me away. And as she does, I see that the enemy has dropped something. A card on the ground. I scoop it up, as –

SPLATOOT!

The monster spits, but it is *not* a monstrous puke-wad that flies from this brute's mouth. It's . . .
OUR SLED!

It crashes to the snowy ground, flips, rolls, and completely *shatters*.

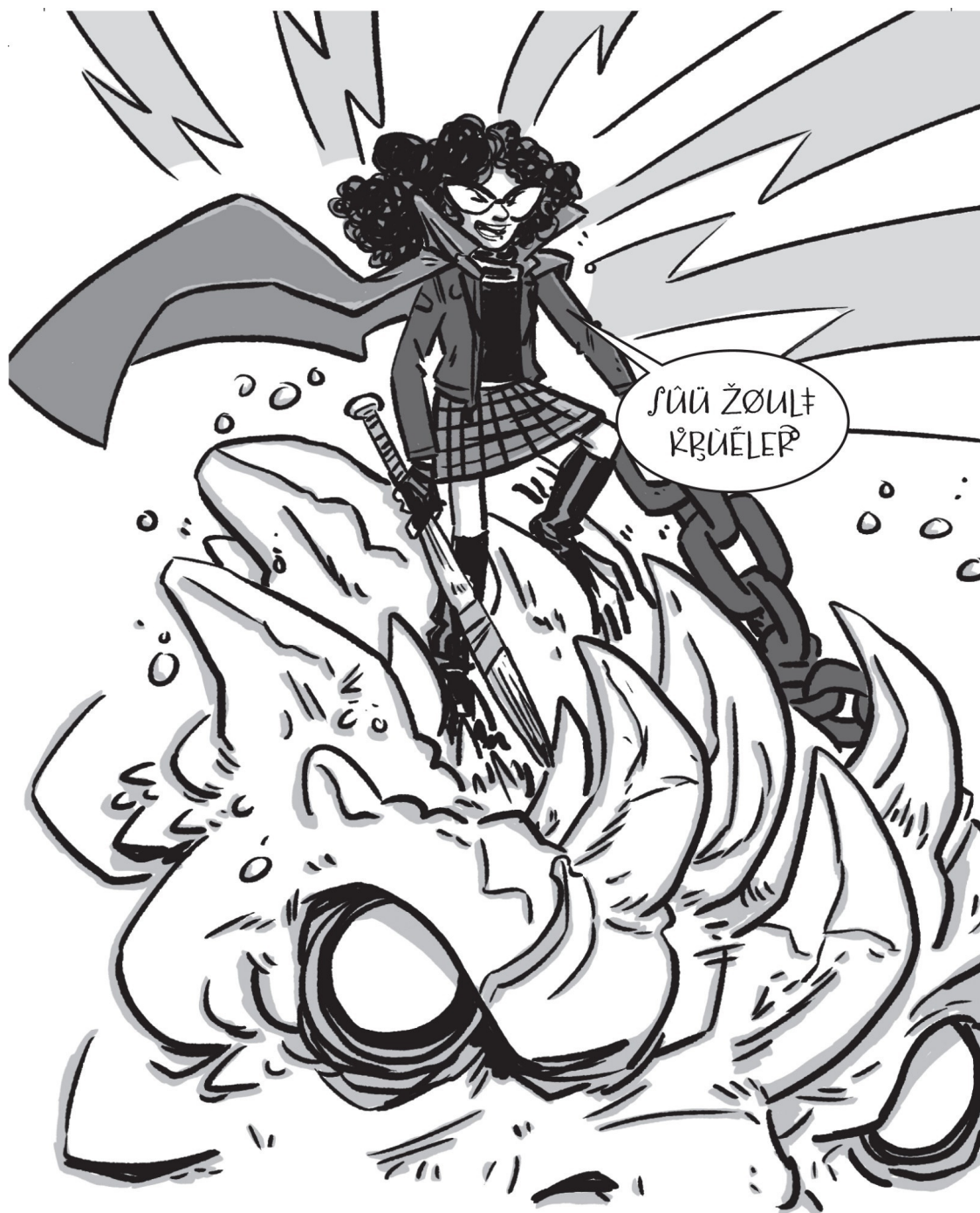
Quint whimpers. 'My creation . . . it is no more.'

A screen of snow is kicked up, giving us enough cover to race down the street. After three blocks I pause to look back. Through the haze of snow, I see bits of the monster. One second, just white flakes – and then the dark shadow of the thing.

And the Villainess.

On top, holding my blade.

She must know we're still watching – because she suddenly *screams*. But the words that come out – they're – they're not *human*.

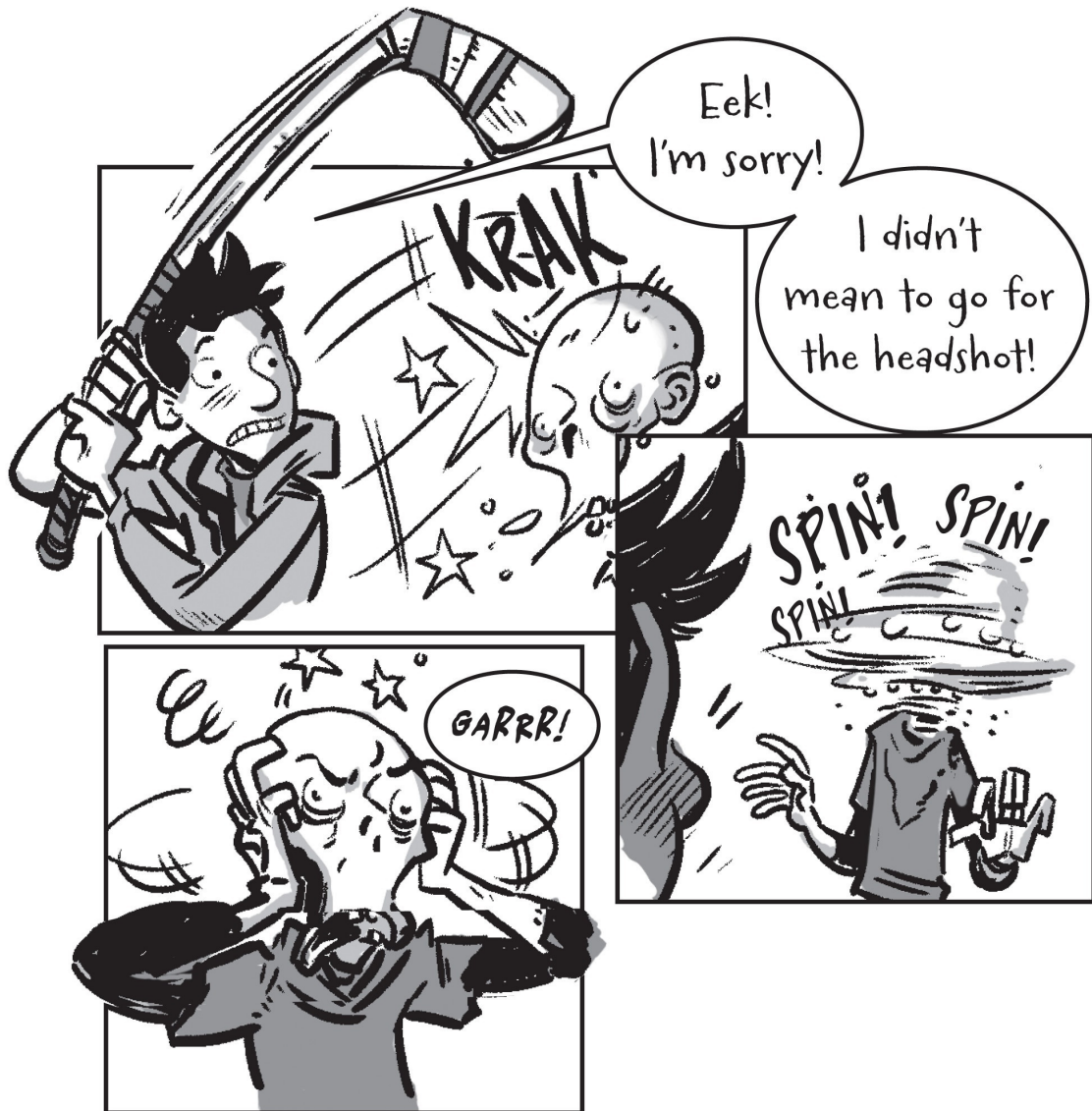


I gasp. We all do. That's the language of Rezzóch the Ancient, Destructor of Worlds.

chapter four

The whole walk back to town, our heads are spinning. I mean, not *really* spinning – that would be weird because human heads are not designed to spin. In fact, a spinning head is probably fatal . . . Unless you're a zombie.

Oh man, zombie heads can spin. One time I whacked one with my hockey stick, and –



So maybe not technically spinning, but yeah – we *are* confused. We just got whooped.

Whooped by a human!

A human who speaks the language of Rezzöch!

A human who stole *my Louisville Slicer*!

I'm lost in a general sort of 'feeling sorry for myself' vibe – which is not a Jack Sullivan-type feeling. I *never* feel sorry for myself. The worse things get, the more gung-ho positive I am. That's like my trademark!

Well, actually, the Louisville Slicer is my trademark. And . . .

CRUD, SHE STOLE IT THE HUMAN STOLE MY TRADEMARK!

I mean, what's Luke Skywalker without his lightsaber? Just a farm boy with a whiny streak. Or what's Katniss without her bow and arrow? She's probably the first tribute to bite the big one, that's what.

We're coming into Wakefield Town Square – the place where me, my human buddies, and the good-dude monsters live in awesome harmony. Monster City!

And in Monster City I see worried monster faces.

'Aww,' I say. 'That's nice. They're sad for me 'cause I don't have my bat.'

'Jack, they have no idea you lost your bat,' June says.

'Didn't lose,' I say. 'Stolen.'

June sighs. 'You know what I mean . . .'

'Um, no – actually I *don't* know what you mean. Retainers are lost. Phone chargers are lost. This is *GRAND THEFT*!

June groans. 'OK, fine, Jack, whatever. Bottom line: the reason the monsters are bummed is just because now they're *extra* afraid of the snow.'

June's right. I see it on their faces. Fear.



'No, no – the *winter* didn't hurt us. It was a bad human and a giant monster!' I shout.

I catch sight of Bardle. He's the first monster friend we got to know well. And he's eyeing me like he knows something is up. He beckons to us from the doorway of his home base, Joe's Pizza.

Moments later, we're inside, sitting in an old grease-stained booth. Bardle's across from me . . .



Bardle pours me a cold grape soda, and I knock it back it one big swig. I was going to deliver a very serious, dramatic speech – but I start talking, my friends get excited, and it just comes out . . .



Bardle's face freezes. 'A human spoke that language? Are you certain?'

I nod.

'What did she say?' Bardle asks. 'I must know the words!'

Quint is good with languages. He's been taking French, Spanish, and Bulgarian since like third grade. 'I'm not certain I can pronounce it,' he says. 'It was something like . . . SOO ZUT CROOLER.'

June knows Spanish, because her parents spoke it at home. Her attempt sounds like, 'ZOUL SUT CRULLER.'

'Guys, she didn't say *cruller*, I say. 'Why would she say *cruller*? Crullers are delicious snake donuts and I don't think she was talking about snake donuts.'

June sighs. 'Jack, crullers aren't snake donuts. They're just long pastries that have –'

'NOPE! SNAKE DONUTS!' I say.

Dirk suddenly slams his fist on the table. His voice is a growl. 'Guys, this is *serious*. Stop talking about snake donuts.' He seems embarrassed to try, but then says, 'Bardle, I heard something like – ahem – SUU ZOULT KRUELER.'

Bardle's eyes narrow. Whatever Dirk said – he got it right. Bardle gently massages one of his long ear hairs. 'This means . . . IT HAS BEGUN.'

'Wait – *what's* begun?' June asks.

Suddenly a cold darkness seems to pass over the room. I shiver. The lights flicker. It's a coincidence, I'm sure – just ice on the generator – but it's eerie.

Bardle shakes his head. 'I do not know what's begun. But for some reason, a human speaks the language of Řezžůčh. That human stole your blade. And with it, that human has begun *something*.

Bardle suddenly stands . . .



chapter five

That night, the strange human villain haunts my dreams, like the baddie in an '80s horror movie . . .



I wake up shivering. Partly from the cold – because yeah, IT IS FREEZING. My winter sleeping outfit is someone's weird old Halloween CHEWBACCA COSTUME. And Quint's makeshift heater – a bunch of PlayStations and Xboxes piled on top of one another – is not working.

But mostly, it's a shiver of fear.

That was a *human* villain. A human villain using MY WEAPON as part of a bad-dude plan. We need to find that human and retrieve my Louisville Slicer. And soon! Because if this monster-riding human decides to attack, I'm afraid we're unprepared . . .

See, our *monster town* is now a *ghost town*. The monsters are huddled up inside stores and shops inside Wakefield Town Square, too terrified of the snow to come out.

This *must* be fixed.

I brew some hot chocolate, and the smell soon has my buddies waking. ‘Guys,’ I say. ‘This villain lady knows stuff about Rezzöch. So, if a fight goes down – and fights DO KIND OF ALWAYS GO DOWN AROUND HERE – then we need our monster buddies ready to rumble alongside us. And they are *not* ready to rumble.’



Moments later, we're outside having a –

LIGHT-HEARTED, JUST-HORSING-AROUND, BUDDY SNOWBALL BATTLE!

‘Isn't winter the best?!’ I shout as I hurl a snowball.

‘Such a delight!’ June says.

Monsters start watching. Some are huddled up in blankets, peering through frosty windows. I think I even see one watching through a mailbox slot. I grin.

‘Guys, play up the fun!’ I whisper. ‘Everyone loves a good friendly snowball fight!’

That's when Quint appears on the deck of the tree house with an armful of snowball artillery. Our old-fashioned snowball battle turns awesomely post-apocalyptic and gadgetfied.

Dirk wields our old Tennis Blaster 2000 – which is now the *Mobile Snow Sphere Slinger* – and things intense . . .



We're all giggling and laughing and freezing.
And it's working. A monster comes shambling out and joins the fun!
Unfortunately, that monster is Biggun. He scoops up a Biggun-sized snowball and –
FROSTY BIGGUN BLAST!



And that's the end of that. The Biggun Blast freezes us to the core. We spend the rest of the day in the tree house, huddled up near the video game systems, trying to get warm.

And the monsters are now *extra* freaked out. They've become afraid of snow in both *flake* form and *ball* form.

When we've finally finished thawing out, Dirk makes a suggestion: ice fishing.

'Fish for ice?' I ask. 'Why would we *fish* for *ice*? Ice is everywhere! The whole world is basically a Super Mario snow level.'

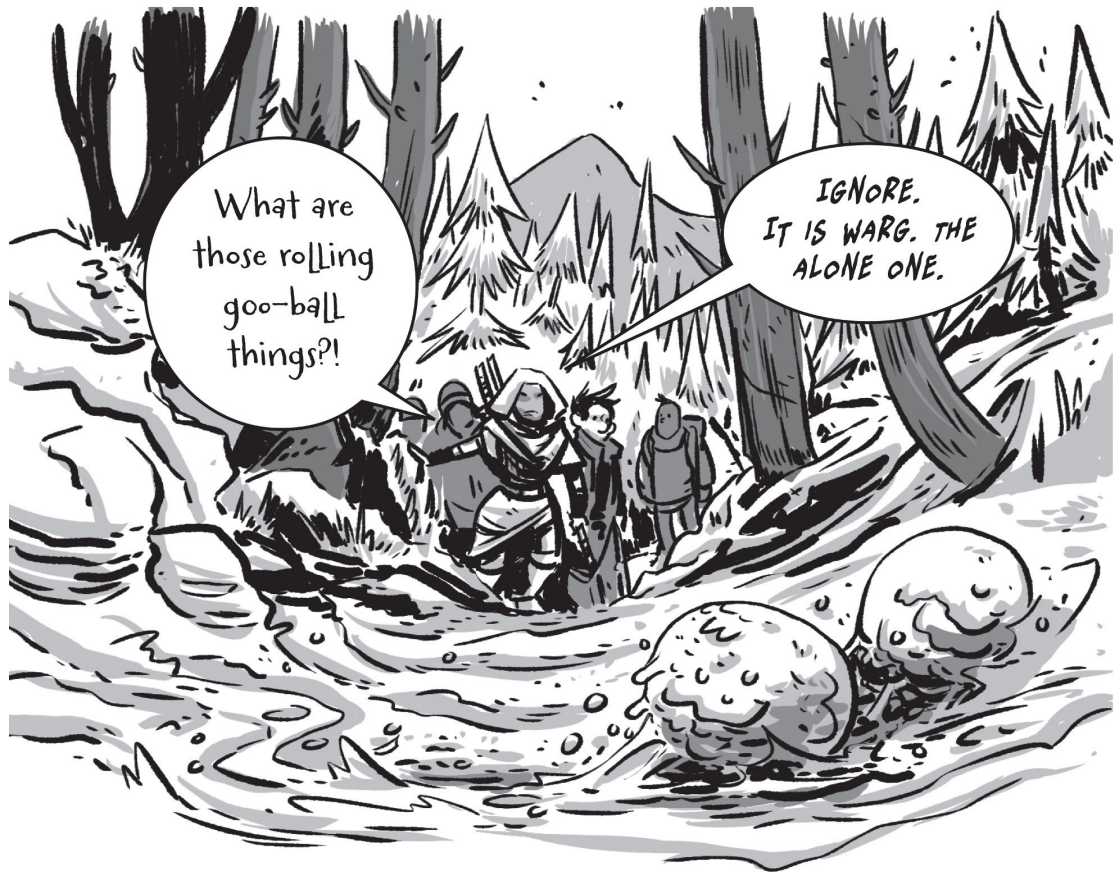
'No, dork,' Dirk says. 'You fish for fish *through* a hole in the ice. It's my favourite part about winter. C'mon. I know a spot.'

We convince Skaelka and a few other monsters to join us. They agree – but only after I promise they'll get to eat GIANT HUNKS OF RAW FISH.

We're walking along a wooded trail, freezing our butts off, when I hear movement in the trees.

'Whoa, look!' Junes says. 'Two little critters just went tumbling past!'

Skaelka halts. A strange snarl sound escapes her nostrils and her hands tighten around her axe. She suddenly means business.



‘What’s the alone one?’ June asks.

‘One not in the community,’ Skaelka says. ‘One that does not matter.’

And the way Skaelka says it – it’s clear the conversation is over. Skaelka is no big fan of the *alone one*.

At the lake, I learn something that’s a bummer: ice fishing is the most boring thing on earth. You drill a hole in the ice and you just sit there! That’s literally it! **THE WHOLE THING!** You can’t even *talk* because apparently that ‘scares away the fish.’

After the fifth hour of cold nothingness, I say, ‘If monsters don’t get me first, I *will* die of boredom.’

‘Hey! No talking!’ Dirk says. ‘Listen to nature. Hear the peace and quiet and –’

ICE TENTACLE BURST!

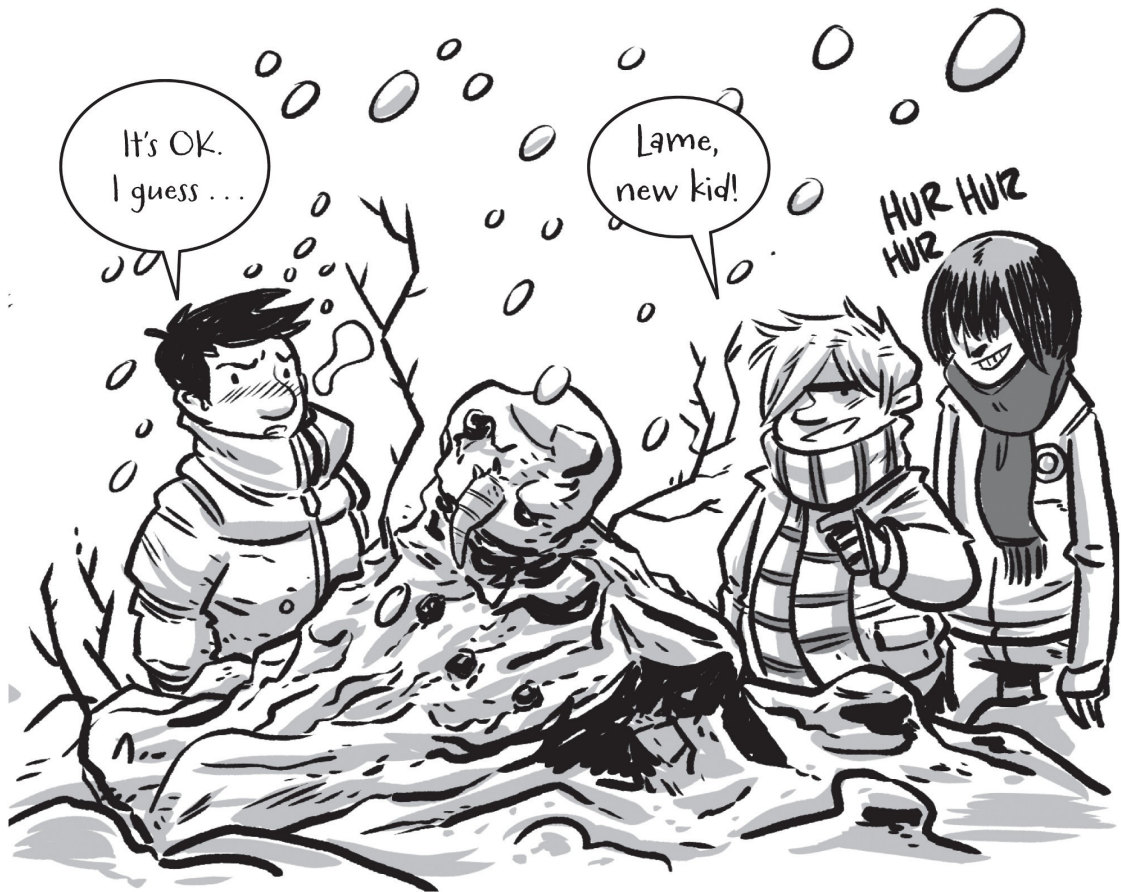


So . . . fishing was a big fat icy fail. The only thing we caught was a cold. And there's no way Quint with a runny nose is going to get *any creature* excited about winter.

I'm sitting in the tree house, bemoaning all this, when Quint says, 'SNOWMEN!'

'Snow *creatures*!' June declares.

I keep my mouth shut – but I have thoughts on snowmen. One word: **OVERRATED**. It's one of those things that *sounds* awesome but is never as good as you think it's going to be. I always start off excited about building some massive amazing snowman, but then a few hours later –



But, we actually do pretty good! Dirk is, like, a master snow craftsman. He even gets out a tool kit and carves a totally beautiful ice sculpture. Dude is full of hidden talents.

It's going well – until the monsters get a load of our constructions – and then it goes *bad* . . .



"What about ice skating?" June asks. "Ice skating is fun. And before you give me grief – I'm not talking *regular* ice skating. I'm talking *end-of-the-world-ice-skating*. Down the old highway that runs to the beach and boardwalk!"

Dirk's in, because he's a hockey master. June's in, because she's generally athletic, nimble, and above-average at everything. Quint's in because he doesn't like being left out of things.

It goes awry – of course.

It goes awry because this massive hibernating horror wakes up and goes *nuts* . . .



I'm beat; totally out of ideas for turning our monster friends into winter-lovers. And even worse, we're no closer to figuring out what the deal is with the Villainess and what she did with my Louisville Slicer! She could be – I dunno – slow dancing with it right now!

Argh.

I need a long winter nap. So I head to our hammock, but when I get there, I see that June's beat me to it. And she looks even more bummed out than I feel.

Oh, real quick – our hammock is not a regular hammock. It's a monster winter hammock and it's kind of the best.

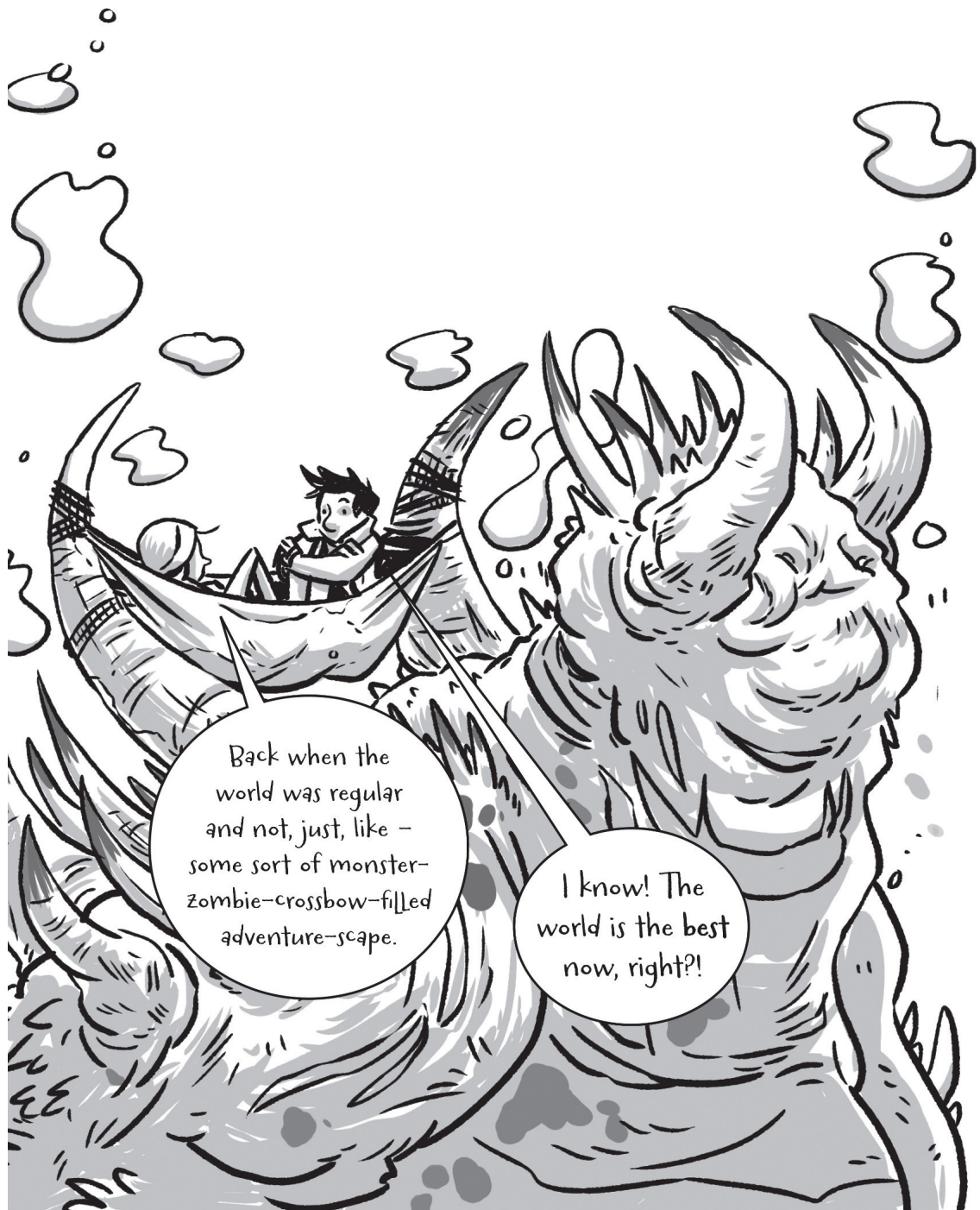
See, after the temperature dropped we discovered that one monster – Kylnn – constantly radiates heat. His whole body feels like some sort of living fireplace!

So I, being a napping *expert*, grabbed a hammock from the local Home Depot and strung it up. I suspended it from Kylnn's biggest back spikes. I'm pretty sure I have created the single most snugly sleeping spot on planet Earth.

I sit down next to June. We lie there for a bit, just quietly looking up at a cloudy blue sky.

'You OK, buddy?' I finally ask.

June shrugs and pushes off from a spike, swinging us out. 'It's just all this winter stuff. It reminds me of – y'know – *Christmas*. It's got me thinking about last year's Christmas. *Normal Christmas*.'



June shoots me a look. Oh right. I forgot. She doesn't love the 'monster-zombie-crossbow-filled adventure-scape' the same way I do.

June continues. 'When we were getting ready to set out on our road trip for New York, I had this idea. I'm sure it was just a total pipe dream of a hope – but I thought we might get to New York. And find my family. And in time for Christmas. Then I could celebrate Christmas, for real. But I guess not . . .'

I'm not sure what to say. See, I was an orphan, never had a real family. When the world went to the monsters, my foster family of the month fled. Here, with my buddies and our monster community, I finally feel like I *do* have a family. But for my human friends – it's the opposite.

Sometimes I forget that the gung-ho happiness that comes so easy to me is way harder for everyone else. And I *can't* keep forgetting that.

It's not right.

It's not being a good friend.

And being a post-apocalyptic monster-battling tornado of wannabe cool – that stuff's great, that stuff's important. But it's not even a *fraction* as important as being a solid buddy. And that's what June needs right now.

Then it hits me. Two birds, one stone!

I sit up and grab June by the shoulders. 'June, I can't give you that classic family Christmas – but together we CAN have our own totally original joy-missile of a Christmas with *just* our best buddies in the world! We can make up our own new traditions! Like Christmas fireworks – aren't those the best?'

'Christmas fireworks aren't a thing, Jack.'

'THEY ARE NOW!' I say. 'Also, Christmas pie-eating contests! June, this is actually *amazing*. We have the chance to design our own awesome Christmas. Just as crazy, weird, and *whatever* as we want!'

June shifts in the hammock. She blows into her hands, thinking. 'And you know what – since Christmas is the best . . .'

I smile and nod. 'If there's one thing that can convince the monsters that winter is A-OK, it's Christmas!'

'Boom,' June says. 'Seal it with a fist bump.'

We walk back to the tree house. At the ladder, June suddenly stops. She looks deep into my eyes. I'm wondering if this might be sort of a romantic moment or something, but instead . . .



‘You’ve got your Louisville Slicer, and you love it!’ June says. ‘I want to feel that sort of love for a monster-battling weapon.’

It’s true.

My love for the Louisville Slicer is a once-in-a-lifetime love. I could write a song about it.

June deserves that sort of love!

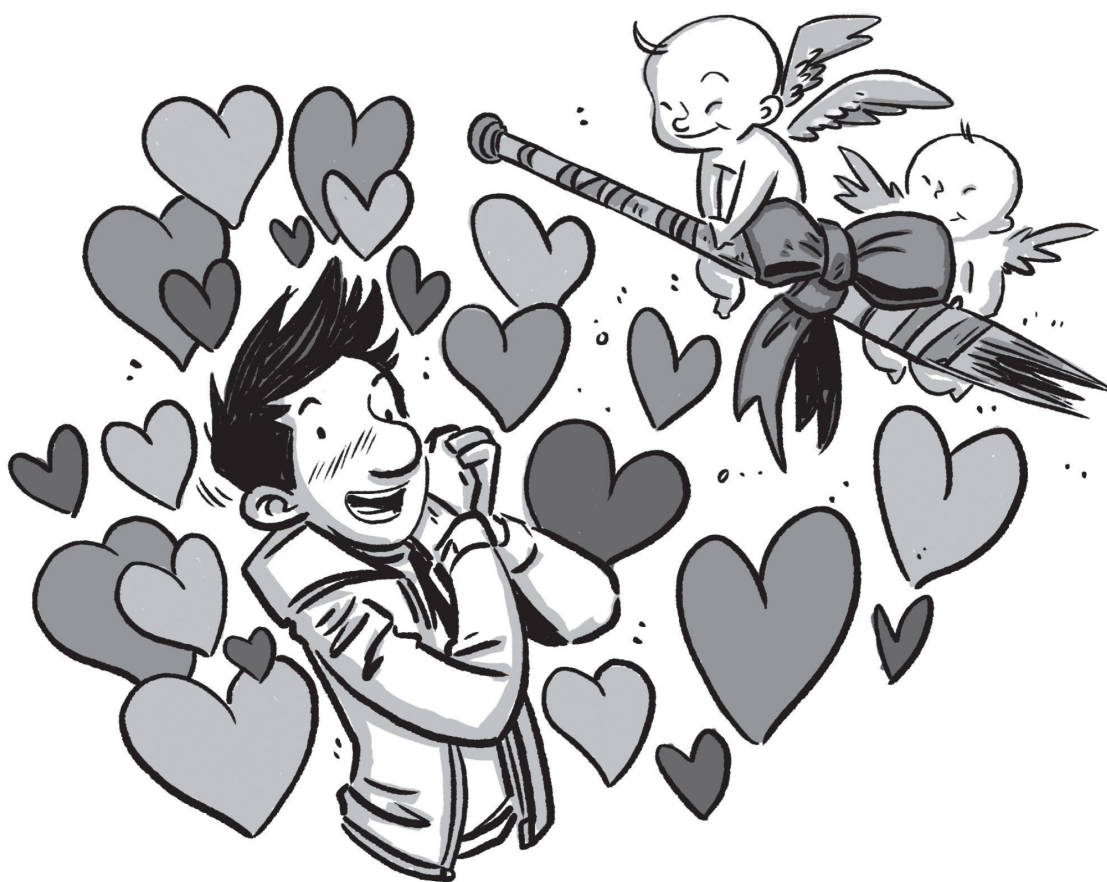
That will be my Christmas gift to her. One post-apocalyptic monster-battling tool TO RULE THEM ALL!

And you know what else?

I have lost my love.

No. Worse. My love was stolen from me! It has fallen into the hands of an enemy! And that enemy is up to *something*.

I’m not just waiting around. I need to *go and get it*. I need to find out WHO this villain is. Because only then will I get what *I* want for Christmas . . .



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