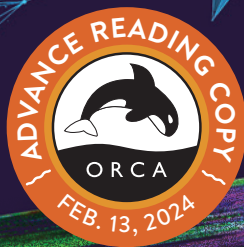


ORCA currents



LEON LEVELS UP

**PAUL
COCCIA**

Leon Levels Up

Author: Paul Coccia

February 13, 2024

In this high-interest accessible novel for middle-grade readers, twelve-year-old gamer Leon is shocked when the cool kid invites him to test out a not-yet-released virtual-reality video game. When a glitch puts them in real-life danger, Leon must battle a dragon to save them both.

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KEY SELLING POINTS

- Twelve-year-old Leon must beat a virtual-reality video game when a glitch puts him and his friend in real-life danger.
- This story looks at themes of loneliness, self-esteem and self-acceptance.
- Virtual-reality gaming is popular and the technology continues to advance. Although the specific technology in the book doesn't exist (yet), it explores what could be possible in the future.
- This story will appeal to gamers, aspiring programmers, tech enthusiasts and fantasy lovers alike.
- This is Paul Coccia's third hi-lo book with Orca, following *Cub* in the Orca Soundings line and *I Got You Babe* in the Orca Currents line.
- Enhanced features (dyslexia-friendly font, cream paper, larger trim size) to increase reading accessibility for dyslexic and other striving readers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Credit: Shirley Coccia

PAUL COCCIA is the author of the bestselling Orca Soundings title *Cub*, which was a Junior Library Guild Gold Standard Selection, and the Orca Currents title *I Got You Babe*. His award-winning book *On the Line* was co-authored with Eric Walters. Paul has an MFA in creative writing from the University of British Columbia and lives in Toronto with his family.

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PAUL COCCIA

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For Xavier, who wanted a gamer story, and
François, who explained the tech to me.

Chapter One

There is no reason Nico Saito should be standing in front of my desk. Absolutely none. Zero. But there he is. Close enough I could reach out and touch him. Not that I would. That would be weird. I won't do that. I can't. Not even if I want to. Not even though I can.

Everything about him looks crisp and ironed. Even his perfectly straight hair. With a movement

of his head, he flicks his hair out of his eyes. Then, like a slow-motion dance, it falls back over his forehead. Nico crosses his arms and shifts his weight onto one leg. He says something I don't catch.

I have no idea how long he's been standing there. I spend every lunch and recess on my laptop, gaming. We're not really supposed to be playing video games at school. But when I play on my laptop, there's less chance a teacher will catch me. They think I'm doing my homework. Really, I'm saving the world from alien invaders and zombies and other monsters.

I pull my earbuds out as my laptop plays some sad music. Game over. When I looked up at Nico, an angry penguin shoved his beak through my player's stomach. That was the last bit of my health bar. I'm dead. No big deal. Start over and try again.

"Sorry. What?" I ask.

"I saw your latest stream," Nico says. "Where you played *Slumber Party Fortress*. It wasn't bad."

It's not exactly a compliment. I'm not sure how to respond. I manage a "Cool."

It's not just that Nico has no reason to be talking to me. It's that he has every reason *not* to talk to me. Nico's dad, Ren, is the founder of Pix Grid, one of the best video-game developers around. *Slumber Party Fortress* is their newest release. Everyone is playing it. Aside from being super fun, their games are on the cutting edge of the latest breakthroughs.

Nico's dad has been on the cover of all these tech and gaming magazines. I guess it helps that he looks kind of like a model. Nico takes after his dad. The modern haircuts. The awesome clothes. The sparkling smiles that look like they came out of a toothpaste ad.

Nico's shirt sleeve slides up. He's wearing the brand-new Pix Grid watch. It won't even be available to buy for another six months! Nico is basically the highest evolution a twelve-year-old can unlock.

Meanwhile I'm still stuck in my starter form. My laptop belonged to my mom until she needed a new one. All my other gear is outdated too. My hair is equally tragic. Mom cuts it at home to save money. When I run my hands over it, I can pull at the parts where it's uneven. My glasses are too big for my face, and my clothes are too big for me too. I wear my older cousin's hand-me-downs, which make me look chubbier than I already am. Mom says it's just the awkward stage before I shoot up. She says right now I'm between the kids' sizes and adult ones. She promises I'll grow. I keep hoping she's right and the awkward stage will end. Soon. But it doesn't seem to be going anywhere fast. For now I'm stuck. I'm short, pale and chubby. A typical, low-level kid gamer. Nothing special.

Nico clears his throat. "Even I didn't know about all those hidden side quests. And I've been playing it since before it was released. I don't know how you found those. Nice one."

“Thanks.”

Nico tosses his hair. It does that slow-motion thing again. “I was thinking we should hang out.”

I almost want to look behind me and make sure he doesn't mean someone else. To ask him if he knows who he is talking to. It takes everything, seriously everything, I have not to let my jaw drop. With my round cheeks and my glasses, I'd probably end up looking like some type of weird fish. The ugly kind that live in the deep parts of the ocean where no light ever goes. I blink. Then I force myself to swallow. It probably looks like I'm gulping for fresh air.

Nico nods. “So that's a yes.” I think even he knows there is no other answer.

If Nico Saito asks you to hang out, you agree. You don't hesitate. You cancel all other plans and show up.

“What are you doing Saturday?” he asks.

“This Saturday? I don't know. Gaming, probably. It's what I usually do.”

“Same. We can game together. My place. Be there at eleven.”

I nod.

“Do you need a ride? I’ll send a car from my dad’s account,” Nico offers.

“Really? That would be awesome. Are you sure your dad is okay with that?”

“Of course.” Nico rolls his sleeve up farther and begins tapping the screen of his watch. “There. It’s done. You’ll get a text when the driver is outside your place. See you Saturday.” Nico turns to walk away.

“Wait,” I say. “How do you know my phone number and where I live?”

This time Nico reaches up and brushes his dark hair off his forehead. “You really need to update the security settings on your devices, Leon. I picked up your details just from standing close to you. You want to be more careful.”

Nico walks back to his friends and sits down in the middle of them. He looks over and catches

me watching them. He gives me a short, fast smile before joining in their conversation.

I run one hand over my head and find an uneven patch of hair I hadn't realized was there.

Chapter Two

The rest of the week, it's as if Nico and I never spoke. He doesn't nod when we pass in the halls. He doesn't even look in my direction. It's like he never invited me over. Like I'm invisible. Which is pretty much what I'm used to anyway.

Still, I kept hoping he'd give me another smile or something. At least then I wouldn't be spending my

Friday night thinking I dreamed up his invitation to game together.

Mom walks into my bedroom as I'm trying to decide what to wear tomorrow. Nothing I own is good enough.

"Want a second opinion?" she asks as she sits on my bed.

I point to the drawer. "All I own are oversized T-shirts."

"You'll grow into them," she says. "That one isn't so bad. It's kind of hip."

I roll my eyes, but only because I'm facing away from her. If she saw me, I'd be in trouble. My mom doesn't tolerate sass. *Hip* is a word for people her age. Nico is beyond hip. I don't know if that translates to *ultrahip* in mom-speak. Or maybe he's groovy. Or something else entirely. Anyway, this could be my one chance to impress Nico. My one chance to get him to like me. If we're going

to end up friends, I've got to look like someone he could be friends with.

Mom stands up and pulls the shirt out of the drawer. "It reminds me of a tattoo. That's nifty."

Nifty is worse than *hip*. "I'm pretty sure that came free with a case of beer. I've never even worn it. And it's got a big stain on it. I can't wear that. Tomorrow is important, Mom."

"This Nico kid has seen you before," she says. "It isn't like he doesn't know how you dress."

"He hasn't seen me outside of school. This is a big deal. Nico's way cooler than I am," I tell her. No sense trying to translate it. It's a fact. Plain and simple. Nico is cool. I am not. It doesn't matter if he's seen how I dress. I want to be better than that. I need to be. It's time to unlock a new level of Leon. A new evolution. "I know you think I'm nifty or whatever. You're my mom. You have to say that stuff. But Nico is legit awesome."

“So you’ve been telling me. I’m still not sure I love the idea of you jumping in a car that some kid—”

“Nico,” I interrupt.

“—orders off his phone—”

“His watch,” I interrupt again.

“—and going off to someone’s house whose parents I’ve never even met,” she finishes.

“But you said I could go. You can’t change your mind last minute. How would that make me look in front of Nico?” I argue. My mom is worried about me spending time with a real kid. That’s kind of funny, since she never worries about me spending time with strangers from the internet every day when I’m gaming.

“I’m not saying you can’t go. I think this will be good for you. I only want you to know you don’t need to do anything to impress some other kid. At least, not anything more than being yourself. He should be impressed with that.”

Easy for her to say. “Some other kid” isn’t the most popular person in our school *ever* with the best dad *ever* who has the most kick-butt job *ever*. Nico may be perfect.

And being myself isn’t impressive at all. It’s almost nothing. It’s why video games are so good. When I turn a game on, for a little while, at least, I’m amazing. I’m a warrior or a race-car driver or a superhero. I can climb buildings and jump from helicopters and fly. I can stop the bad guys and save the day. I can be a winner. The game is designed for me to be great. It’s not always easy, but I can be.

Not like real life at all. That’s designed against me. “Be yourself” is just the garbage adults say to make you feel better when you get picked last in gym class. Or have a drawer full of faded and worn T-shirts. Or come home every day after school by yourself to play online with random people. People you’ll never actually meet because no one ever invites you over to their place.

But hanging out with Nico could change everything. It could change how the other kids see me at school. Nico already thinks I'm a good gamer or he wouldn't have invited me over. If he thinks I'm good in other ways, then the rest of the kids will follow his lead. The same way they do with everything else. He could become my best friend. I could end up with a bunch of friends in real life. There could be marathon gaming weekends and movie nights and sleepovers and...who even knows? Anything could happen. Nico just has to like me first.

I look at my drawer and the pathetic shirts that belonged to my cousin and don't fit me because they're for adults. Not chubby twelve-year-old boys who got too fat for kids' clothes. It's like someone took how sad I am in the real world, washed it too many times, until it was faded, and folded it neatly. Then placed it in the drawer and wished it the best of luck, knowing things would be a big disaster. No

one really wants these shirts. It's why they were given away. It's probably the most depressing drawer in the world.

I look back at my mom.

She stares down at the drawer now. Her shoulders sag. I know she gets how sad that drawer of hand-me-downs is. I can see it in the way she's frowning.

"If we leave now, the mall is still open for an hour," she says. "We can find you something neat. Something black. Black is always stylish. My kid is going to look as great as I know he is for his playdate tomorrow."

"Don't call it a playdate. Those are for little kids," I correct her.

She wrinkles her forehead. "But you're going to play video games at your little friend's house," she says.

"Forget it. Let's go," I say. I head for my bedroom door. "Mom?"

“Yes?”

“Can you fix my hair when we get back?”

“Sure.”

“Good call on the black,” I say. “Nico wears a lot of black.” I pause for a second before I add, “And thanks.”

Chapter Three

The car that arrives Saturday morning is sweet. Black leather seats. Silver handles and knobs. I've got my own air-conditioning and radio controls in the back. There's a box of tissues, and there are even chilled bottles of water and all sorts of snacks. I can choose from three different kinds of chips, five different bags of candy or a handful of chocolate bars. I can have them all if I want. And

they're free. When I asked the driver how much they cost, he laughed.

We pull into Nico's driveway right before eleven. The house is really tall. All straight lines and concrete and modern. It sits on a rise, so there are a lot of steps and landings to go up to the front door. It kind of reminds me of Nico and his dad, Ren. Everything is neat and where you'd expect it to be. The bushes are perfectly squared off. The little bit of grass is mown. There are no weeds. The house looks like it was recently steamed and ironed, same as them.

I look down at my new black polo shirt and dark jeans. They look decent and aren't too clingy. I think they make me look thinner. Mom said that's because they fit well. She even bought me a new pair of high-tops and some new socks and underwear, but only because I needed them and there was a good sale. Most of mine had holes, or one sock had been lost somewhere in the wash,

or the elastic had given up. She insisted on socks with patterns like pizza slices and hamburgers and other things because they're more trendy than plain colors. I'm not convinced she's right. But they are pretty fun, and I do like pizza. Who doesn't?

Nico darts down the front steps. He must run up and down them a lot. He's not looking to see where he's going. He jumps over the last steps to each landing. He never misses one or trips. I'd fall trying to run down those steps.

I get out of the car. I wonder how I'm going to walk up all those stairs without getting sweaty and losing my breath. I'm already worried about pit stains. Another new thing Mom bought me was a stick of deodorant. She tried to be gentle about telling me I was starting to smell bad, but it's more or less what she said. Still, I'd rather she tell me I stink than have Nico get a whiff of me and tell everyone I have a BO issue.

“What are you doing? Get back in the car,” Nico says as he jumps over the last set of steps entirely and onto the driveway.

“Wait. What? Why?” I ask. “You said we were going to play video games together. I thought—”

“Not here,” Nico cuts in. “Why would we play here?”

“It’s your house,” I answer. “Where else would we go?”

Nico narrows his eyes. “You know who my dad is. Right?”

“Everyone knows who your dad is.”

Nico nods. “So you know he owns Pix Grid.”

“But what does that have to do with anything?” I ask.

“It means when I invited you over to play, I didn’t mean at my house. All the cool stuff is at the labs. Get back in the car. I’ll shoot the address into the car’s map system.”

I hold on to the car door. Pix Grid Labs. That's where games still in development are. No one but the designers has even seen them. It's the ultimate place a gamer could be invited to go. I already couldn't believe I would be hanging out with Nico, but I believe it even less now.

"For real?" I ask. I need to be 100 percent sure Nico didn't mean something else. Something not so insanely epic.

"Get in. We're going to be late. And calm down. It's not that big a deal," Nico says.

Maybe not to Nico, who probably gets to go to Pix Grid Labs whenever he wants. But for me, it's a huge deal. I'll probably never have another opportunity to go there. Not unless today goes really well and Nico invites me back.

"It's a short ride," Nico says. He leans forward in his seat. "I'll tell you how to get into the underground drop-off area," he says to the driver. "I have the pass."

If this were a video game, we'd be two spies on a mission. Black, mirrored sunglasses. Long trench coats. Lots of cool secret weapons and gadgets. We'd be going to the base or breaking into some underground lair. We wouldn't be two kids going to play games for the afternoon. It doesn't matter though. We're going to the place where video games become reality. That might even be better.

Nico looks over the selection of snacks. "No cheese puffs?" he asks.

"Sorry, sir," the driver answers. "The dust is hard to clean out of the cars. No more cheese puffs."

Nico huffs and leans back in his seat. Then he leans forward again. "Stop at the nearest gas station. You can run in and buy some."

"Yes, sir," the driver says.

I can't believe Nico can tell an adult to go wherever and buy whatever Nico tells them to. And they do what he says. They even call him *sir* while doing it!

“Do you want anything else before we get there? A slush drink? Chocolate bars? An ice-cream sandwich?” Nico offers.

I’m a little hungry, but my stomach has been a bit funny. I guess I’m kind of nervous, and I don’t want to be sick. Besides, I’m worried about dropping stuff on my new clothes and staining them. And I don’t want Nico thinking I’m a pig who eats junk food all the time. I shake my head.

“Get some extra stuff for Leon. He might want it later. You can charge it to my dad’s account,” Nico says. He turns to me. “You might change your mind.”

The driver pulls into a gas station and heads into the store. He returns with two grocery bags stuffed full. He hands one to each of us.

Nico grabs the water bottles and snacks that were already in the car and adds them to his bag.

This day is already so much better than I could have imagined, and it has barely begun.

Chapter Four

Pix Grid Labs is nothing special from the outside. The building looks like a giant concrete block. A small sign with the company's logo, way up top, is the only thing to let people know it belongs to Pix Grid.

Nico speaks to the security guard who comes to the car. When she gets close, he shows her his pass. She returns to her booth and opens the gate.

“Follow the sign for Shipping and Receiving. The underground entrance is past the loading dock,” Nico instructs our driver. Nico leans back and continues eating his cheese puffs. His fingertips are orange. The driver looks in the rearview mirror. I catch his eye. He reaches over to the passenger seat and tosses me a container of wet wipes.

I open it and hand one to Nico. I freshen up my own hands just in case my palms are gross and sweaty.

There wasn't much conversation as we drove. Minutes ago it was sort of uncomfortable. Now I'm grateful that it gives me time to look around. The plain, boring building is a letdown. I don't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't this.

“Make a sharp right here,” Nico says.

The car pulls into a dead end. There's a set of sliding doors in the wall.

“We'll hop out here. I already left a tip and review,” Nico says as he opens the door and gets out.

“Thanks,” I say to the driver as I slide out. “This was probably the most memorable drive I’ve ever had.”

He gives me a smile and nods.

Nico waits until the car backs out. He taps the same pass on a sensor stuck to the wall. The light on it goes from red to green. I hear the door unlock as it slides open.

I step in after Nico and realize we’re in an elevator. It’s roomier than normal ones, so I figure it must be used to move large pieces of equipment or other big items. Maybe the building is more of a warehouse or storage facility than it is a lab. A place to keep consoles and controllers before they get sent to stores.

With my expectations set much lower, I step out of the elevator after Nico. When I look at the space in front of me, I gasp. It’s huge. The ceiling is way up high, and the walls are concrete, like outside. There are steel beams that suspend sheets of glass

and walkways above us. They look like they're floating in the air. Lights are stuck in the steel, so everything looks shiny and bright.

I turn my head to the left and see an entire wall glowing blue. Small things are moving around in it. It must be an aquarium, but it is several stories high. It's way bigger than any fish tank I've ever seen. There must be thousands of gallons of water in there.

Nico looks to where I'm staring.

"We're going that way. Prepare yourself for something unbelievable," he says. He strides across the open area to the aquarium wall.

I hurry to catch up and stop beside him. Fish swim in front of us. Seahorses and jellyfish too. Farther away in the distance, slightly blurred, there is a turtle and what must be a shark swimming by.

"If you watch long enough, you might see the dolphins or the whale," Nico says.

"No way!"

He laughs. "Give me your hand," he commands as he reaches down.

Nico takes my hand in his and holds it up in front of the aquarium wall. I glance at him and look away, then stare at our hands gripped together. Their edges glow like someone outlined them in the blue light. Nico pushes our hands toward the glass that holds back the water. And I feel a jolt, almost like electricity, shoot from my hand into my body.

But our hands never touch glass. They go right through. The water and fish shimmer and ripple around our wrists.

Nico grins, not letting go of my hand as he steps forward. The aquarium ripples and then seems to swallow him. I get pulled along behind him. I take a deep breath and close my eyes before I follow.

I expect to find my new clothing soaked and clinging to my body. I half-expect not to be able to breathe. Instead all I feel is Nico letting go of my hand.

I spin around to see the same view of the aquarium, but behind us now. I reach out my hand, without Nico holding it this time. The fish and water shimmer as my hand goes in.

“It’s a hologram. One of the designers here programmed it,” Nico explains.

I pull my hand back, and the image returns to how it was before. “I’ve never seen anything like it,” I say.

“That’s because it’s the only one that exists. Come on. Someone’s waiting for us. You’ll love her. Everyone does. Then we play.”

I stand still, watching the fish and water that aren’t really in front of me. But they *are* also right in front of me, even if they only exist because of a computer program. The whole thing is beautiful. I need a few seconds more to take it in before I rush after Nico, who is heading toward two sliding glass doors. They open silently as he gets closer.

Chapter Five

Through the double doors there's a huge desk. It goes across almost the whole width of the room in front of us. It seems to be a keyboard or a lot of keyboards at first. As I look closer, I see a lot of buttons and dials. Several screens are sunk into the desk too. There are three chairs on wheels. They look like if you sat on them, you could easily slide from one end of the giant desk to the other. Beyond

the desk are two massive glass tubes. Tanks. They must be two stories high. They are filled with a blue, glowing liquid that reminds me of the aquarium outside. Metal ladders beside the tanks lead to a steel platform at the top.

A woman not much taller than I am, with wavy hair down to her shoulders, is standing in the room. She's wearing jeans and a T-shirt that has red mushrooms with white spots all over it. She adjusts her glasses. Like mine, they are too big for her face. But she doesn't look dorky like me in them. She's holding a clipboard with a tablet on it, tapping at the screen with a stylus.

She looks up to smile at us.

"This is Gabriella Lucas," Nico says.

The woman holds out her hand and says, "Call me Gabs. Everyone else does."

"I'm Leon Garcia," I reply as we shake hands. "This place is incredible. I can't believe I'm here."

“I know,” Gabs says with a laugh. “Sometimes I can’t believe I get to work here either. It’s a dream come true. So are you two ready to play a brand-new game I’ve been working on?”

“You bet,” Nico says.

I nod. “That would be neat,” I say. I instantly regret it. At least I didn’t say *nifty*. Still, not a great word. I sound like my mom. If Nico and Gabs notice how uncool I am, they don’t show it.

“Nice,” Gabs says. “I’ve got everything ready to go. Up on that platform.”

“Is that where the gaming system and controllers are?” I ask.

Gabs frowns. “Didn’t Nico tell you about what we’d be doing today?” she asks.

Nico answers before I get a chance. “I told him. We’ll be playing a new video game.”

Gabs looks from Nico to me. “Well, yes. That’s true. But didn’t you give him any details?”

Nico huffs. “You said if I brought a good gamer, one who could handle himself during play, we could test out the new game. The virtual-reality one you’re creating. Leon is better than good. He’s the one who found all those hidden side quests in *Slumber Party Fortress*. His streaming video is still getting thousands of hits a week.”

I can feel my cheeks burning. I didn’t know how many hits my video was still getting. My mom made me turn off that sort of data, so I never bother to look. I knew my video was popular. But I didn’t realize it had blown up. Better than all that, though, is hearing Nico say he thinks of me as a solid gamer.

“But you should have given him some more information,” Gabs says.

Nico rolls his eyes right in front of her. My mom would have given me a lecture on being rude to my elders.

Gabs sucks in her bottom lip but doesn't say anything back to him.

Nico turns toward me. "Here's the deal, Leon. Gabs has been working on this top-secret virtual-reality game. It's going to be the next level of VR and will change it entirely. It's that cool and new. She needs two people to test it out. No one else has ever played the whole game through. We can be the first. Unless, of course, you don't want to."

I see Gabs watching me from behind Nico's shoulder. I look from Nico to her, back to Nico.

"Are you down for that?" Nico asks.

I nod. "For sure. That sounds incredible."

Gabs exhales. Her shoulders relax.

"One catch," Nico says. "We have to climb the platform and suit up."

"What do you mean?" I ask. I look up to the steel platform above the tanks. "Like a visor and gloves?"

“Yup. Plus, an actual suit. The game relies on full body tracking,” Nico says.

“It’s an immersive experience,” Gabs explains. “You’ll be able to feel textures and pressures. Even wind against your skin. I’ve checked and double-checked the code thousands of times. This game is next level.”

“I didn’t think that level of VR was possible,” I say.

“Neither did anyone else. But Gabs did,” Nico says. “So you’re in?”

“I’m in,” I agree.

Nico is the first up the ladder. I grip the second ladder, about to start my climb.

I feel a hand on my shoulder.

“There’s one more thing Nico left out,” Gabs says. She lets go of my arm. “When I say immersive, I mean fully immersed. See these two tanks?”

“Yes.”

“You’ll be going in there. And that’s not water in them. Those are tiny robots. Nanobots, in fact. The blue stuff is a thin layer of gel surrounding each one. You’ll put on your suits and helmets up on the platform. Then, to play the game, you’ll each need to get into your own tank and down into the bots.”

I let go of the ladder and stare at the glowing tanks. My eyes focus, and I think I see tiny specks, thousands and thousands of them, moving around. I gulp.

“Get up here,” Nico calls, already on the platform above Gabs and me. “Unless you’re too scared to play against me. You know I never lose.”

Chapter Six

With each step on the rungs of the ladder, there's a hollow metallic sound. It goes through the metal and into my feet, then echoes through the rest of my body.

I can hear my mom somewhere in my head, telling me just that morning as she kissed me goodbye to “have fun and stay safe.”

I wasn't expecting to be plunged into a tank. And when that tank is filled with gel surrounding thousands of microscopic robots, I don't know if it counts as staying safe. My mom might not approve if I asked her, but she's not here. And Nico is. I can't chicken out.

Gabs is climbing the other ladder. She gets to the top faster than I do.

Nico peeks over the edge of the platform. "Are you coming? Hurry up."

He's already got his suit on and looks like a scuba diver. Circular sensors flash red and green over his body. His feet and hands are bare. His hood is pulled over his hair, but Nico still does his hair flick. What looks like a motorcycle helmet is under one of his arms. A pair of gloves and ankle socks are on the table nearby.

"Suit up," Nico says. "Let's get going. I can't wait to see this."

Gabs hands me a suit neatly folded into a square. “You can leave your clothes on that table over there. The suit is built to monitor vitals like your heart rate and breathing. And it can heat up and cool down depending on the temperature of your game setting.”

I look around. “Where’s the change room?” I ask her quietly.

Nico overhears. “There isn’t any,” he says. “Pretend it’s gym class and change already.”

Gabs leans in. “We’ll give you some privacy,” she whispers. “Nico, come on over to the tanks. I want to show you something cool the bots do.” Gabs places an arm across Nico’s shoulders and steers him toward the far end of the platform. They face away from me.

I turn my back to them and take a deep breath. I keep my shirt on as I change and pull the suit up to my waist. Only when I’ve squeezed my thighs and butt into it do I take my T-shirt off and wiggle

in the rest of the way. The last thing I do is pull my hood up.

I look down at my belly, which is sticking out noticeably. My chest is another area that I'd like better if it stuck out less. I doubt Gabs designed a more slimming suit for chubby gamer kids. I hold an arm over my tummy as I turn around, hoping it will hide things at least a little bit.

"Keep your glasses on," Gabs says when they turn around. "They'll fit under the helmet just fine."

"Let's get started! Game on!" Nico says.

"One more thing. You're sure your dad is okay with you two doing this?" Gabs asks.

Nico huffs and rolls his eyes again. "I told you already. My dad wants kids to test out all of Pix Grid's games. He lets me play all the games early. He even lets me stream some of them to build hype. If anyone can find glitches, it will be Leon and me. It's totally fine."

I can still hear my mom in my head. I've been

trying to turn her off, but no luck. If I can't make her be quiet, I'll have to ignore her. If I don't, there's no way I'm getting in the tank.

"All right," Gabs says. "As long as Ren's okay with this. It should all be perfectly safe. The early trials went off without a hitch. I'll check your gear, and we'll make sure we can talk. Then you two can hop in."

Nico plunks his helmet onto his head. Gabs takes two long, thin hoses attached to an air-supply pump along the wall. She screws them onto the top of his helmet and adjusts them. She checks the suit, then comes over to help me.

I'm still holding one arm over my stomach. I hope it's in a casual sort of way.

"You don't need to cover up. You look fine," Gabs says quietly.

"All this gear fits Nico better," I reply. "He looks like he's from the future. I look like a baby manatee."

Gabs snorts. But I wasn't even being funny. I was 100 percent serious. I feel fat and round.

"It's not even close to that bad," she says, going about her work. She helps me put on my helmet. Then she offers me a pair of gloves and ankle socks like Nico's before attaching my hoses.

"Reach in and adjust your glasses before the helmet seals itself."

Nico's voice comes through Gabs's tablet. He says, "It will be like we're scuba diving."

"I've never been scuba diving," I say. My voice comes out from her tablet too.

"With this technology, you can do whatever you want. You can scuba dive or walk on Mars or climb up the side of the tallest building. Anything is possible. At least virtually," Gabs tells us. "You're going to feel something cover your nose and mouth. It's the air mask. Then the whole helmet will suction on. Don't get nervous."

Breathe normally. From now on, we'll talk only through the headsets."

She presses a button on the tablet's screen. It feels like someone's turned on a vacuum over my head. It's more intense around my nose and mouth. After a moment I hear the soft hiss of air going in and out of my helmet through the hoses. I focus on my breathing. It feels weird at first, but then starts to feel normal.

From speakers near my ears, I hear Gabs. "Okay, boys. Whenever you're ready, slip into your separate tanks."

Nico gives a thumbs-up. He takes a few steps back. Before Gabs can say anything, he runs and dives through the air above the tank. I don't need the speakers to hear the crash as Nico disappears below the surface.

I sit on the rim of my tank. Slowly I let my toes dangle over the edge. I slide my feet and legs into

the blue gel. It feels like something is trying to pull me in. I grip the end of the platform.

I take a deep breath and close my eyes. It's now or never. Here I go. I push off. I can feel the blue stuff parting. The visor on my helmet goes black. Something yanks me down. I stretch one hand up into the air. My fingers grasp at nothing. Something cool covers me, and I know I'm surrounded by bots.

Chapter Seven

I try to move, but I can't feel anything. I reach out, or I think I do, to grab at something. There's nothing. I kick out. I'm not even sure if my legs are moving. There's no resistance. It's like my body suddenly stopped existing. It's like floating in nothing but like you are the nothing too. I think I move my head to look from one side to the other, but there is only black in front of my face.

I start to panic. I know I'm wearing a suit, but I swear I can feel tiny things crawling over every inch of me. My skin itches. I'm sure I can feel jolts of electricity sparking on my flesh. Tiny little legs and pincers prickle along my arms, legs, torso, cheeks. My breath starts coming fast. The sound of the air hissing in and out of my mask is the only thing I can hear. I'm panting. What if I run out of air? I struggle, trying to swim up, kicking my way to the surface. I don't even know where the surface is. I'm not even sure where up is.

Then I hear an electronic voice say, *Game play starts in five, four, three, two, one.*

It's like someone flicks a switch. Except it isn't just a light they turn on. Everything comes alive. I feel the wind on my forehead. There is a sky. It's blue like a baby's blanket, with puffy white clouds drifting along. A meadow spreads out before me, tall grasses bending in the breeze with a soft rustle, then straightening. Birds are singing to

one another from the forest of trees I see in the distance.

I can feel my body again. My arms, legs, everything where they are supposed to be. Except when I look, it's not my body. I lift my hands and see they are in leather gloves without fingers. I can feel something in them. Reins. There's something firm under me. I'm sitting on top of a horse. She is off-white with brown spots, like someone sprinkled chocolate chips over her. She exhales, and I feel her muscles shift under my thighs and calves. My forearms bulge with veins. I feel my biceps flex with strength. I turn my head. Slung over one shoulder is a bow, and over the other, a quiver of arrows. I reach up with one hand to touch my ear and find it is longer than I expect. Pointed. From all the games I play, I know who my character is. I'm an elf and an archer. A classic character type.

I decide to see what my new body can do. I slip a foot out of the stirrup and push off the

horse's back. I somersault forward and land in front of the horse. It took no effort.

There's no more chubby, short kid trying to hide his tummy sticking out. I am strong and powerful. I'm tall and ripped. I'm kick-butt cool.

I decide to test my speed with a run. I feel the burn in my thighs and calves as I push myself. And I know that on some level, my real body is doing work too. But in this form, I'm faster than I could ever be in real life. My horse runs beside me, full gallop. We're keeping up with one another. I stop and stomp my foot. The ground is firm. I reach out to feel the top of the long grass. It tickles my palm.

I hear static and know it doesn't belong in the world of the meadow. Then Gabs's voice. "Leon? Leon? Can you hear me?" she says.

I give a thumbs-up, but in case she can't see that, I say, "Hey, Gabs. I can hear you fine."

"Oh, thank goodness! I thought I'd lost you too."

"Huh? What do you mean?" I ask.

“I can’t speak with Nico,” Gabs says. “I can access a little of what he’s seeing, but it’s grainy and breaks up. He’s somewhere on the other side of the meadow. That crash we heard when he jumped into the tank...the bots didn’t have time to separate and allow him a smooth entry. I think it seriously damaged his helmet.”

“So he did a high-tech belly flop? Can you repair it?”

There’s silence from her for a moment. The rustling grass, the wind and the birds in the virtual world are the only sounds I hear.

“Maybe,” she says. “I can’t fix the physical damage to the equipment until he exits the game and comes out of the tank.”

“Then let’s end the game. You can give Nico a new helmet. We can start over,” I suggest.

“Hold on,” she says.

I can hear her typing on a keyboard. Her fingers must be flying across it.

Right in front of me, a frame appears in the middle of thin air. It looks like an old-school arcade screen. Under *PAUSE* it has two options, *CONTINUE* and *END GAME*.

“Try to end it,” Gabs says.

I reach out and tap *END GAME*. My selection gets highlighted. The frame in front of me blinks closed.

“Oh dear,” I hear Gabs say under her breath.

“What’s going on?”

“Interesting. The game says it needs both players to agree to end the game. Another thing I didn’t expect. Nico chose to continue. You’ll have to play. I’ll try to find out which character Nico entered as and establish communication with him.”

“You said you’d tested the game and it was safe. Right?”

There’s a pause. “The trials were successful,” Gabs says, “but limited. We never actually went into

full game play. And I can't be sure what will happen with a damaged helmet. The helmet sealed itself so only air can go in and out of it. That's why you can feel wind but not something like rain on your face. The bots are creating most of the gaming world. They bond together to be the horse under you or the reins in your hand. They're everything you feel. They fill in the space around you two. All the space."

I touch my horse's nose, soft and plush. It's weird to think she's just a bunch of nanobots under my hand. I run a hand over my arm. I can feel the muscles. I pull a dagger from my belt and touch the blade. It's sharp. It all seems so real. And yet... it isn't.

The title screen appears before my eyes.

Welcome to Dragon Hunt, it announces. Let the adventure begin!

There's a bit of static crackle before I hear Gabs again. "Do you understand, Leon? The bots are programmed to fill every available space. If

they can get into Nico's helmet, they'll enter the air supply. Then go into his nose and mouth, until they've filled all of him up too."

Chapter Eight

“But it’s only a game, Gabs. It’s not really real,” I say. And I know as I say it that I wish it was real life. I wish I was an elf or an archer who can spin-jump or run as fast as a horse. But I know it’s all pretend. It’s only coding and pictures and robots. And I’m just a twelve-year-old fat kid playing a game.

“The bots *are* real though,” Gabs says. “I don’t want you to panic. I’m going to figure this out and

get the game back on course. Don't worry. Play like normal."

Something dark blocks the sun. I shield my eyes with my hand and look up. Something that looks like a snake is twisting through the sky. Its shadow covers me as it passes. The thing shrieks. The ground under my feet seems to shake.

It lands in front of me. I draw an arrow. My hands know what to do as I steady my bow.

The creature is furry in some areas but has scales over most of its body. As it swings its head, I see the face of a dragon. It screeches to show its pointed teeth. Two rows of them. It lunges forward and snaps at where I am standing. I roll to the side just in time.

Midroll, I let loose with an arrow. It hits the dragon's scales but bounces off into the tall grass.

I keep avoiding the dragon attacks. I try to shoot arrows when it opens its mouth. I don't land a good hit. The arrows keep bouncing off it.

I'm getting low on them and don't know what will happen when I run out.

As I jump, something hits me in midair. I grab on to it and realize the dragon swung its tail at me. I'm thrown into the grass. I scramble to get back on my feet, but the dragon advances on me. It rears up.

Then it just stops. It turns its head to the side and squints across the meadow. With another cry, it pushes off from the ground into the sky again.

My horse trots over. I get up and swing myself onto her. Her muscles flex as I push my heels in. She speeds across the meadow after the dragon. The wind comes strong across my forehead and cheeks. My body rocks forward and backward as my steed runs.

I see the dragon land and coil itself into a circle. Its claws dart out and grab at something. I hear a person scream and see a man with a crown clutched tightly in the dragon's claws. The dragon pushes off again and slithers through the air.

“Help me!” the man cries. “Someone help me, please!”

I chase after them and see the dragon disappear into a castle on the horizon.

Another screen blinks open along the bottom of my vision. I stop riding to read it.

Oh dear! The evil Lord Tachi has stolen the prince! Get to the castle and save Prince SpearMint before all is lost! The player that rescues him will win his hand and the kingdom.

I turn my head and see other players appear as if out of nothing. I know this type of game. Everyone races to the castle. Whoever gets there and defeats the bad guy wins.

I wonder which character Nico is. I barely have time to consider as they all seem to move forward as one. I dig my heels into my horse again, the grass brushing against me.

I ride without any event until something ahead glints in the grass. I steer my horse to the left and

pull on the reins to slow her. I see what it is as we get closer. Arrows. I reach down and grab them, then shove them into my quiver. It happens as if I've done it thousands of times. It's probably part of the game design. Gabs probably built the characters to do certain actions easily, like shoot arrows, which I've never done before in my life.

I'm feeling pretty confident about myself and my skills. Except I don't straighten up fast enough. The ground gets closer. Then I feel myself hit it hard. Dust flies up around me. My horse slows. She trots in a circle near me but won't come close.

As I brush myself off, I see why. Three ogres surround me.

The largest, sporting a necklace of skulls and jewels, carries a club with spikes. She hits it against her other hand. The spikes don't seem to hurt her.

I grab an arrow and ready myself as they surround me. I don't have time to draw my bow as the ogre swings her club.

With a leap, I land on top of the club as it hits the ground. Before she can pull it free to swing it again, I run up its length. Holding the arrow in my fist, I stab it into her nose. I do a front flip off the club, spinning in midair, to land on her back.

She howls in pain and swings her arms, knocking the other ogres to the ground. I grab on to her necklace. Using it like my horse's reins, I steer her. She keeps smacking the other two ogres.

They hit her back. In seconds they're battling, punching and clubbing one another over and over.

I throw myself off the ogre's back. I pull my bow free as I do. I land in a crouch in the grass. I grab an arrow and shoot it toward the three ogres.

As the arrow flies, it bursts and surprises both the ogres and me. A net opens and lands over them as they continue to fight. It traps them, pinning them to the ground.

My horse runs up beside me and nudges my shoulder with her nose. I pet her before I get back on top of her.

“This game is amazing!” I call out. “I owned those three ogres. They didn’t stand a chance. Did you see my flip? Gabs? Gabs?”

Silence.

Chapter Nine

As soon as I am back on my horse, about to ride toward the castle, the ogres rip through the net. They growl and bare their tusks and teeth. The biggest one is swinging her club wildly. The other two are careful not to get in her way. She smashes the area in front of her and flattens the grass.

I kick my horse forward. She paws the ground but doesn't move more than that. When I urge

her again, she rears back. I barely manage to hold on.

Purple mist floods over the grass toward us. My horse whinnies and turns to run, but something hits us in the back and freezes us to the spot. Ropes made of fiery red light form around me. They are tight, but they aren't hot and don't burn me. The ogres cry out. There are three thuds followed by a cackle.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a hag appear from the purple mist. She uses a twisted branch like a cane and limps toward us. The mist seems to pour off her.

She holds the hem of her robe up when she gets near the ogres. She gives each of them a kick. They snarl and try to get at her, but the magic ropes hold them tight.

As she gets closer, I see empty sockets where her eyes should be. She grins. She only has a few teeth.

“Well, well, well,” she says. “What do I smell? Elf meat. That will make a sweet stew.”

“Unless there’s preset dialogue, no way is Nico the hag,” I say to Gabs. I’m worried we haven’t talked in a bit. I guess she’s busy trying to figure out the whole Nico situation.

The hag holds up a hand, and the ropes tighten. Now they start to get hot. My leather vest smokes, but the heat isn’t too bad. Gabs probably built in fail-safes so players wouldn’t be burned to death. I am starting to feel achy though. This is more exercise than I’m used to.

“I haven’t had elf meat in ages,” the hag says. She cackles again as she hobbles closer.

I push my arms out against the ropes, hoping I can snap them. No luck. They only get tighter, making it harder to inhale. I don’t know how to get out of this one except to break the hag’s spell. If I can, we’ll be free. But so will the ogres. That’s the risk I have to take. I’m not too worried though. If I

can defeat three ogres in this form, I can take care of a hag.

I'm not sure where her magic comes from. The branch seems like just a branch. Even if I could kick and break it, it probably wouldn't stop the spell. I'm running out of options.

As the hag reaches me, I can think of only one more thing.

I lean toward her as much as I can.

She pinches my thigh with her bony fingers. "A juicy one. A better roast than a stew."

She keeps pinching. I keep leaning, even though what I really want to do is get away from her. Far, far away. Still, I keep leaning in. Then I begin to slip in the saddle.

The next thing I know, I'm falling off my horse. For the second time this game. Except this time, I mean to do it. I crash onto the hag. She doesn't see it coming. I flatten her under me.

The ropes disappear. There's no time to spare. I take a deep breath and throw myself onto my horse. I give her flank a smack, and we're off. The ogres circle around the hag. There's a loud blast. I turn my head. Ogres fly through the air. One is coming right at me. I turn my horse to the side. The ogre collides with the ground, barely missing us.

I hear the static in my helmet, then Gabs asking, "Leon? Everything okay?"

My body is sore. There are burn marks on my character's costume where the ropes were. I touch my head, and when I pull my hand away, it is covered in red, sticky blood. It must have happened when I fell. Just because my real-life head is fine doesn't mean my character didn't take damage.

But I survived three ogres and a hag. I fought them and won. I escaped. And I'm back on track to save Prince SpearMint. The castle is getting closer every second. Things aren't just okay. They're awesome!

I smile as I say, "I'm actually really good. This game is so fun. Have you found out who Nico is yet?"

"I can't locate him. I searched every playable character. There are no signs of him," she says. "I'm starting to get worried. He should be somewhere in this world."

"Can't you turn off the game?" I ask. "Unplug it? Or cut the power?"

"I'm not sure," she admits. "A lot has already happened that went off script since Nico damaged his helmet. I don't know how the bots are going to react anymore. If I cut power and they form a solid block, you and Nico could be trapped. It isn't a risk I'm willing to take. The only sure thing I can see in the code is for you or Nico to win. Not a non-playable character but one of you. That will disable the bots and allow me to extract you. And since I can't speak to Nico, I'm counting on you, Leon. You're a great player. You're getting through the game really well. I know you can end this."

I gulp as my horse slows. I dismount. The castle's narrow bridge is in front of us. A moat is far below. The waters look rough, and sharp rocks poke up. The bridge is only wide enough for me. My horse doesn't have enough room to cross.

I let go of my horse's reins. I stroke her nose. "Thanks for all the help," I tell her before I pat her on her rear. "Now go." She gallops away.

I stare at the bridge in front of me. Then up at the castle with its towers and staircases. I don't see a door to get in. I don't know where Lord Tachi is or where he has imprisoned the prince.

In real life, Leon could never have come this far. Leon could never get into the castle and face down a dragon to save a prince. Leon probably would have collapsed, out of breath, somewhere back in the meadow and been eaten by something.

I know all this about me. I also know that right now I don't have to be Leon. I can take a break from that. I can battle ogres and hags. I can do flips in

the air. I can shoot a volley of arrows one right after another. It's how I was designed in the game despite how I was designed for the real world.

The castle stands tall before me, its stone walls strong. I see the top of a tower and know the prince can be nowhere else.

I stand tall before the castle.

"I've got this, Gabs," I say. Then I sprint across the bridge.

Chapter Ten

I'm almost across when I hear the screech. A shadow covers me. Lord Tachi.

He shoots from the sky, then collides with the bridge. I grip the side as it shakes.

Tachi flies into the sky and readies himself for another strike. Other players are approaching the far end of the bridge. He must be making sure no one will reach the castle by destroying the only

way to get to it. He smashes into the bridge again.

I run. My legs and arms pump.

Tachi scrambles. He soars back up into the sky.

I leap the last few feet off the bridge as Tachi hits once more. I press myself against the rocky wall as I hear the crack.

The bridge crumbles and falls into the moat below. Lord Tachi wriggles in the air as he falls with it. Right before hitting the rocks, he shoots upward. With a screech, he flies into the castle.

Unless the other players find a way over the moat, it looks like it's just me. I scan the walls. There is still no door that I can see. Windows are too high up for me to reach. I try to climb, but the rocks are too smooth and I can't get a grip. I try to stab my arrows into the walls so I can scale them. But they don't pierce the stone. I shoot one of the net arrows upward, hoping I can use the net to climb up somehow. The arrow bounces off the stone walls, and the net falls into the rocky waters below.

I smack a fist into the wall. “Can’t you tell me how to get in?” I ask. “At least give me a hint or something.”

Gabs laughs. “That’s the beauty of this game. The world builds itself differently each time it’s played. Even I don’t know how many versions of the castle there are. I couldn’t give you a tip even if I wanted to.”

I thump my fist against the wall once more. The only choice I have is to walk the path along the outside of the castle. And hope to find a way in. The sun is warm, and I’m sweating. I start along the path.

I come to a waterfall and can’t go any farther. There is no way around it.

I press my back against the stones and slump down until I’m sitting. The sun beats down on me. All I want to do is rest.

If I try to cross the waterfall, the force of the water will throw me into the moat. Game over.

With no way through, I guess I have to retrace my steps. Walk around the castle in the other direction to find a way in.

I stand and reach out to cup some water in my hands. I need a drink. When I pull my hands back, the water shimmers in my cupped palms with a blue light. I raise my hands to my lips. The water disappears.

I remember Gabs saying the helmet is designed for air only. I cup the water again, and it does that shimmer thing. I try to throw it on my face. Nothing. No wetness. Not a sprinkle. Not even a drop. I look at my hands. They're perfectly dry.

I sit back down. I keep thinking about the way the water shimmered in my hands.

I have an idea. "Hey, Gabs? Did you design the fake aquarium in Pix Grid Labs?" I ask.

I hear the familiar static of the headphones. "No. But I love it. I've studied that program a lot."

I look at the waterfall. I'm going to try to get through it. I might fall to my death. I might lose the game. But the way the water shimmered was too familiar.

I jump into the waterfall, half-expecting to plunge to a painful death.

Instead I land on a stone floor. I touch my clothing. All dry. I turn to see the waterfall behind me. Just like when Nico pulled me through the aquarium.

I've found a way into the castle. Now to find the prince and save the day.

Chapter Eleven

“You’re inside the castle!” I hear Gabs cheering. “Even I didn’t know the entrance could be in the waterfall. The surprises don’t end with this game.” She sounds rather pleased by that. I don’t think she should. “I just got a blurry visual from Nico. Stone walls. He’s somewhere around the castle.”

“I was thinking,” I say. “You said Nico wasn’t any of the playable characters.”

"I checked and double-checked."

"Did you check the non-playable characters?" I ask. "Like, the prince?"

"You think Nico's the prince?" Gabs asks.

"I don't know. We know I'm in the castle. We know the prince is too. It's a hunch."

"I'll look," Gabs agrees.

I start to walk down the corridor, and a screen pops up in front of me.

You have twenty minutes to save Prince SpearMint and defeat Lord Tachi or the kingdom is lost. Countdown begins now.

"Countdown?" I ask. "Countdown!"

"Oops," Gabs says. "I forgot about that."

"No kidding," I mutter, even though I can hear my mom telling me that muttering and talking back are rude. "What happens if I don't finish the game before the timer goes off?"

There's silence.

"Gabs?" I ask.

“Game over. But in the trials, the game started again from the beginning. In theory that’s not so bad. You could keep playing until you win. Except the real air supply coming from the hose attached to your helmet will run out. You need to win, Leon. We need to get you two out of there.”

“So...to clarify. Nico can choke to death on robots, we can end up trapped in them like cement, and we can run out of air? Any more ways we can die?” I ask.

“Win the game and don’t worry about any of that.”

“Easy for you to say.” I hurry down the hall. The stones slope upward. I must be heading farther into the castle. As I rush, I hear scraping noises against the stones above me. I know it must be Lord Tachi’s scales. He’s patrolling the castle, looking for me.

“Is Nico playing the prince?” I ask. “If you can find a way to let him know I’m in the castle, maybe

we can defeat the dragon together. He can attack from one side. I'll attack from the other."

"He might be. I've got a trace of Nico somewhere in the castle. I can't pinpoint him," she responds.

I see a glimmer of light. I sneak toward it, staying close to the walls and shadows. I can see the central courtyard. There's a ladder on one wall, and on top of the wall is a set of stone stairs. They lead to a tower. Way up high, I see a glint of gold in the tower window. Prince SpearMint's crown. He leans past the sill and tugs at some vines that have grown up along the outside of the tower. He tries to swing a leg out. He's going to escape!

A tail comes out of nowhere. Prince SpearMint is knocked back into the tower. Tachi slams the shutters closed. A wooden board falls and seals the prince inside.

I need to get up onto that castle wall. Then up the stairs to the tower. Easy. Only, I can't be seen

by Tachi. I press myself against the walls more firmly. I am hard to see in the shadows. Or at least I hope I am. I slide along, my back to the stones. I'm afraid to breathe or make a noise in case the dragon hears me.

Tachi is moving, watching the courtyard. He scans the walls. Soon he'll be looking right where I am.

There's a door a few feet from me. I slide over to it and try the handle. It isn't locked! The door creaks as I push it open.

Tachi hears and swings his head in my direction. Our eyes lock before he lunges. I throw myself through the door and slam it shut.

I run. Seconds later the wall explodes. Tachi bursts through. He digs his claws into the stone and leaves deep scratches as he tries to slow himself down.

He's too big for the space, so it takes him a moment to position himself. I race down the halls. Another door! I try the handle. It is open too. I dart inside and throw the door shut.

Another wall collapses. Stones fly into the room. I have no choice but to keep running away.

Room after room I race through, until I'm completely lost. I no longer know where the courtyard is. For all I know, the tower could be directly above my head. I just keep running. I'm nearly out of breath and know I can't keep this up for long.

I try one last door and find myself in the dungeon. There are chains on the walls and bars that run from floor to ceiling. A skeleton is slumped in a corner of the cell. All the things you'd expect in a dungeon are here. The door to the prisoners' cell is open.

The wooden door behind me is ripped off its hinges. Tachi's eye appears in the doorway. He sees me.

Without thinking, I sprint into the cell and slam the door. I'm trapped in a cage. Tachi begins bashing the wall down. I've got nowhere to go.

Desperate, I look around the cell. I see a groove in the floor leading to the far wall. There's a rusted sewer grate. I crouch down and try to lift it. I can't get my fingers under it. I pull an arrow from my quiver. I turn and shoot it at Tachi. It explodes into a net over the dragon's face. He screeches as he claws it off. I grab the dagger from my belt and shove the tip under the edge of the grate. I pry it up and drag it aside.

The hole below is dark. I take one last look behind me. Tachi is free of the net. He slithers toward the cell. He extends a clawed hand and reaches for me.

I jump into the dark hole, not knowing how far I'll drop.

Chapter Twelve

I'm lucky. It's not a long drop. Still, I feel the impact of landing. It sends a jolt up my legs and into my body. Partway down the tunnel I'm in, green moss is glowing. It's not a great light source, but it's enough that I can see the tunnel stretching out ahead of me.

Above, Tachi screeches. Metal twists and pops.

I dive forward as Tachi's claws scratch their way in through the hole. Something hits my leg. Pain. I touch it and know Tachi got me. My leg is cut badly. I can still walk, but it's bleeding. My pant leg is slashed, a clean rip down the side. I drag myself forward along the floor, away from Tachi, who is still clawing, trying to grab at me.

I know I need to take care of my leg before I travel farther down the tunnel. I pull my dagger out and use it to cut my pant leg free. I twist the material and tie it tightly around my thigh. I want to stop as much bleeding as I can.

I use the wall for support. My leg starts going numb, and the pain lessens. It makes it easier to hobble. I pick up my speed, keeping a hand on the wall in case I stumble.

The tunnel separates. Four different paths are in front of me.

I look at the timer in the corner of my vision. Twelve minutes and counting.

I choose the third path, hoping lucky number three does the trick. Not much farther along, the tunnel splits again.

I stop and sit on a rock.

The static crackles. "Leon?" Gabs asks.

I don't answer. My leg feels like it's burning and throbbing. I position it so I can see it better. There's a dark-red gash. The blood is oozing.

"I'm sorry, Leon," she says. "You weren't supposed to get hurt."

I say, "It's just part of the game."

Gabs doesn't answer.

"My real leg is fine, isn't it?" I ask.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this," she replies. "It was supposed to be fun. It's just a game."

"How bad is it?" I ask.

"I don't know. I can't tell. I'm sorry, Leon. I never meant to put you two in danger." Gabs's breathing is unsteady as she speaks. I know she's crying. I know things are worse than she's telling me. "Leon,

I don't have a choice. I'm calling Ren. I need to get you two out of there. Before...well."

I know what she means even though she doesn't say it. I take a deep breath. My head drops into my hands. Before we die. And not just in the game. For real.

This was never just a game. Not for me. This was my shot at impressing Nico. My shot at becoming a popular kid. My shot at being something more than the weird, loner, gamer kid in class. But I know that no matter how many enemies I defeat or games I win, I'm still that kid. I'm not strong. I'm not kick-butt. I'm not a hero. I can't save the prince. Or Nico. Or even myself. I should have known when Nico invited me to game with him that it was too good to be true.

I wish I was still in the back seat of the hired car with a grocery bag full of snacks. I wish I was back in the new clothes that don't quite feel like

they belong to me yet. I wish I was at home with my mom, staring at a sad drawer of oversize hand-me-downs. For once I wish I wasn't playing a video game. I wish I wasn't an elf or a race-car driver or anyone but short, fat, dorky Leon.

I wish I was safe.

I want to cry. Except a part of me thinks that if I do, I'll probably end up drowning in my helmet.

I start to laugh. The small chuckle turns into a hard belly laugh. The laughter runs out and I shake my head, not knowing where to go. I have only two choices left. One, die. Two, try to win. Really, there's only one choice. Even if I'm not a hero, I'm going to have to be.

Chapter Thirteen

I look at the ceiling. There's a patch of moss above me. I reach up to touch it. When it moves aside, I notice the tiniest sliver of light. I press on the moss and hear metal scrape against stone. Another sewer grate. It's too heavy to shift with only one hand, so I push on it with both. Slowly it lifts, and I slide it away.

I poke my head out as far as I dare. I'm on the edge of the courtyard. I can see the wall I need to climb, then the steps and the tower. Tachi is nowhere in sight.

I study the courtyard. The moss from the tunnels is growing through cracks all over the place. Along the stones on the ground, up the walls. I notice it is thicker and seems to grow in squares along the courtyard floor. I realize there are other sewer grates all over the courtyard. And the tunnels that kept splitting—they must all connect, like a web. If I can figure out how to get to the grate closest to the wall, I can climb the ladder to the tower stairs.

I hear something slide across stone. I duck my head back down. A second later and Tachi would have had me. Ignoring the pain in my leg, I run down the nearest tunnel, only to see Tachi's claws reach in ahead of me. I hear the sound of metal being ripped up. Light shoots into the tunnel. He's

tearing up all the grates! I change direction as he yanks out grate after grate.

When Tachi has them all up, I hear thumping. The tunnels shake. Dust falls in front of my eyes. I realize I'd be choking on it if not for the breathing mask. A tunnel caves in. Tachi is destroying the courtyard.

I check the timer in the corner of the screen. Under ten minutes.

I need to get out of these tunnels before he destroys them and traps me under the rubble.

I race toward where I think the tunnels all come together in the middle of the courtyard. Fast as I can, I grab arrows and shoot them down each of the tunnels.

Overhead, Tachi slams into the ground, following the different arrows as they hit the walls underground.

I jump to grab the edge of the hole where the nearest grate used to be. It takes a lot of my strength

to lift myself up into the courtyard. I make a break for it and sprint toward the ladder on the castle wall. I climb it to the top. Then I bolt toward the stone staircase, panting hard. My leg feels like it's ripping open. I don't need to look to know that blood is running down it.

I'm almost at the staircase when Tachi drops in front of me. He flexes his claws and seems to smile as he straightens up. The timer turns red as it hits the five-minute mark.

Tachi stands over me. I ready an arrow. He stares down at me, then flicks his head. It's almost as if he's trying to get his hair out of his eyes.

"Nico," I say out loud. "Nico isn't the prince. Nico is Tachi. Gabs, check the code!"

I can hear the clicks of her fingers flying over the keyboard.

"Holy crow," she says.

Nico screeches at me. I stumble backward. And then Nico discovers that Tachi has another

power. A fireball forms in his open mouth. It flies out and lands in front of me, blackening the stones.

Nico swats at me. I fall into the courtyard. He leaps down. The ground shakes. He opens his mouth wide. Fireball after fireball rains down as Nico sets the castle ablaze.

Chapter Fourteen

“Hold on, Leon,” Gabs says. “Ren’s on his way from another part of the lab. He’s almost here. Buy some time.”

“I can’t buy any more time. There are only minutes left,” I answer as I roll and manage not to get set on fire. My real-life mask stops me from breathing in the smoke, but I can still feel the heat on my body. And there’s a haze covering everything.

The castle is not only on fire but is falling apart around us. Stones rain down between the fireballs. Where they hit, the castle crumbles.

Static in my headset. “Leon? This is Ren Saito. Nico’s father.”

Under different circumstances, I’d barely be able to talk to Ren. I’d be too nervous and awestruck to get the words out. But right now I can’t answer because Nico lunges at me. He slashes, whipping his tail back and forth. He snaps his jaws. I don’t have time to tell Ren how amazing he is. Not when his son is attempting to kill me.

I reach back and shoot arrow after arrow. I can’t find a spot where they can pierce Tachi. They strike and ping off, useless. I’m nearly out of arrows.

“No!” Ren screams. “Don’t hurt him! You can’t!”

This time I know I roll my eyes. “I can’t *not* hurt him. He’s going to kill me. I have to defeat Tachi. It’s the only way to win the game.”

“But you’ll kill Nico if you do,” Ren says. “If you shoot Tachi, you shoot Nico.”

“Like my leg?” I ask.

“Yes,” he says.

I lower my arm with the bow and then sprint behind a pillar. “But if I don’t win the game, Nico dies. Maybe me too. If I do win the game, I have to kill Nico. No matter what, Nico dies.”

“Leon, listen carefully,” Ren says. “Get to the prince. You must stay nearby and keep him in your sights. Gabs and I will reprogram Nico into him.”

Nico smashes the pillar and tries to bite me. I jump-roll away.

“Can’t you do that now? Before your son eats me?” I ask as I evade another attack.

“No. You need to see the prince for him to exist. It’s how the game renders the world. It would take way too much time and power to create an entire world all at once. So the game only creates stuff as it needs to. For things to exist, they must be in your

field of vision or close enough to touch. The prince is too far away from you right now. Get to him, and we can transfer Nico to him. He's the closest living thing we can do it with."

I look down and see something green. "Moss. Moss is living."

"That doesn't help us," Ren says. "Moss is coded as landscape, not a living creature. Fake to your left. Nico always favors the left when he plays."

I do what Ren says before I run to the right. It works.

"Time is running out, and we need to change the code. Hurry," Ren says. "Please."

I run and leap onto the rubble. I begin to climb over the broken rocks and stones and pieces of fallen wall. I jump over fireballs until I'm at the stairs leading to the tower. Nico is scrambling up fast behind me.

He snaps at me. Without thinking, I turn and thrust my bow forward like a shield. It lodges

in his mouth. His jaws press down, and my bow snaps in two. The broken pieces shoot at me and knock me backward.

I glance at the timer. Less than two minutes left. Even if I could get to the prince, it wouldn't leave Ren and Gabs enough time. I've lost.

I roll onto my stomach. My hand brushes something soft. More moss is growing between the stone steps. Something in it glimmers.

I look closer and see a green beetle. Quickly I pluck it from the moss and hold it in my fist.

"It's not the prince," I say, "but will this do?"

"Yes," Ren answers. The sound of keyboards clicking fills my ears. "Hold on to it. But not too tight. It needs to stay near you and stay alive. Quick, Leon! He's about to strike again! Run!"

Sixty seconds, a voice announces. The countdown is flashing.

I clench my fists, the beetle in one hand. Up the stairs. I can hear Nico behind me, swiping.

Thirty seconds.

I yank the door open. Prince SpearMint grabs my arm. I turn in the doorway as I drop to my knees.

Fifteen seconds.

Nico rears up above me and screeches. There's nowhere for me to move. I can't feel the beetle moving in my hand. I know there's no more time.

Ten seconds.

I feel the hot breath of the dragon shoot over me—he's about to bite down. I know his teeth sinking into my skin is next. The prince screams.

Five seconds.

A fireball forms in the back of Nico's throat. Nico warned me he always wins.

Two seconds.

I grab an arrow from my quiver and thrust it in front of me.

One second.

Game over.

Chapter Fifteen

Everything is black. There is music. I listen, expecting it to be the sounds of a harp. No, no harps.

Hands are pulling at me, dragging me onto a hard surface. Something is yanked from my head. Cool air hits my face. Not my game face. My real-life face.

I blink. Gabs is kneeling beside me.

“You did it,” she says. “You defeated Tachi. He bit down on the arrow and died. You won the game.”

I sit up. “Nico,” I say. “What about Nico?” I turn my head.

Ren is seated on the platform, holding his son. His hair and clothes look perfect and smooth. His face is lined and hard. Ren slides Nico’s helmet off. There’s a big chunk missing from it. Nico’s eyes don’t open.

“We tried,” Gabs says. “You were holding the beetle so tight. We weren’t sure it was still alive when we reassigned him.”

I scramble to my knees and get up. My legs ache. A sharp pain shoots up one. I glance down. The leg of my suit is sliced off and tied above my knee. My leg has a cut down the calf. It isn’t deep red or bleeding. It’s not nearly as bad as it was in the game. It shouldn’t even need stitches.

I hurry over and drop down beside Ren. I look at Nico.

Please. Please don’t be dead. Please don’t let me have killed you.

Ren gently eases the hood of the suit back from Nico's head. Nico's hair swings as if in slow motion, wet with sweat, across his forehead and into his eyes.

"You did your best, Leon," Ren says. "You won the game with only a second left. You did everything we could have asked of you."

Nico's suit isn't damaged at all. I look at his chest, expecting to see it rise and fall as he breathes. The sensors along the suit all flash red.

"An ambulance is on the way," Gabs says, coming up behind me.

Ren lays Nico down.

I reach out to touch Nico's hand. I take off one of his gloves and hold his hand in both of mine.

I stare down. His fingers curl around my hand. He holds it like he did before we walked through the aquarium wall. The same feeling of electricity jumps from my hand through the rest of my body. I squeeze Nico's hand. He grips mine back.

Nico's eyes open. He tries to push himself up to a sitting position.

Ren grabs Nico and wraps his arms around him. "What were you thinking? You should have never gone into that game. What is wrong with you?" he asks Nico. "Do you even know how dangerous that was?"

"Do you even know how unbelievable that was?" Nico asks. "This is going to be Pix Grid's best game ever. I was a dragon, Dad. I flew. And I could breathe fire. That was the coolest game I've ever played."

"You almost died," Ren says. "Do you get that?"

Nico rolls his eyes at his father. "No one died. Calm down. It was just fun and games."

Ren opens his mouth, probably to argue.

Before he has a chance, I ask, "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Other than losing, I'm fine," Nico says.

He tries to stand up, but Ren puts a hand on his son's shoulder and keeps him in place.

Nico continues, "You played hard. Next time—"

"There won't be a next time," Ren says.

"There's got to be. We need a rematch. Best two out of three. No way I'm losing to Leon again." Nico flicks his hair out of his eyes and grins. "And Leon?" he asks, looking at me and smiling.

"What?" I ask back.

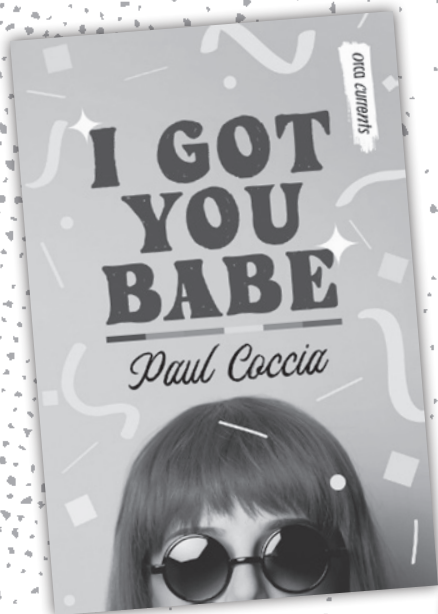
"Next time I'm not going so easy on you. Promise."

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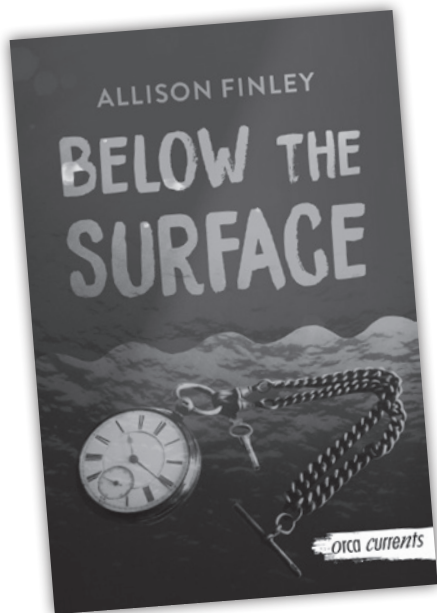
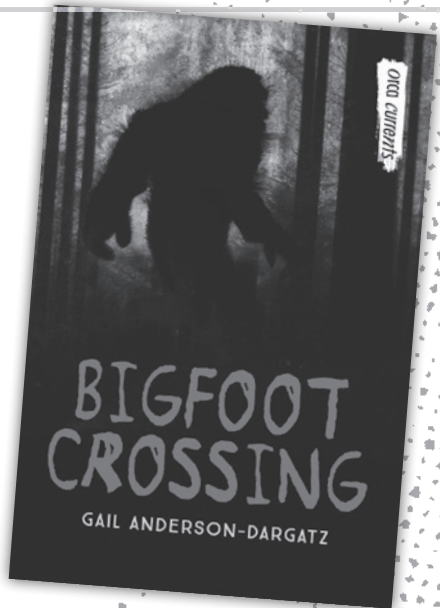


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Paul Coccia is the author of the bestselling Orca Soundings title *Cub*, which was a Junior Library Guild Gold Standard Selection, and the Orca Currents title *I Got You Babe*. His award-winning book *On the Line* was co-authored with Eric Walters. Paul has an MFA in creative writing from the University of British Columbia and lives in Toronto with his family.

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