

THE KÁMBUR CHRONICLES



BY CHAMP THORNTON AND ANDREW DAVID NASELLI

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THE SERPENT SLAYER
AND THE SCROLL OF RIDDLES

BY CHAMP THORNTON AND
ANDREW DAVID NASELLI


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DEDICATION

CHAMP

To my son Jack,
in the good fight, may you always wield the
"sword of the Spirit"

ANDY

To my daughter Gloria,
who loves the Serpent Slayer

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CHAPTER 1

THE UNEXPECTED OUTCOME

The playing card taped to Emmet's bike frame—so it would sound like a motorcycle—was working perfectly! But Emmet wasn't impressed by its roar, not today. Right now, he just hoped they could get away.

Alongside his sister Nomi, Emmet pedaled furiously, standing up, leaning forward. Sweat ran down his olive-toned skin and his mop of thick black hair stood straight up in the wind. His backpack—packed for summer adventures—shifted from side to side as he strained to go as fast as possible.

Out of the corner of his eye, Emmet could see Nomi beside him. Darker skinned, her curly hair bobbed against her backpack. She was determined, afraid, and keeping up. *Not bad.*

Though they were both twelve, Nomi was five inches taller and could outrun her brother any day. But on bikes, Emmet was usually the fastest. Today was an exception; they were neck and neck, zooming past trees and houses. Soon they would take the narrow dirt path, deep through the woods—and away from Tobias.

Tobias was eleven, but instead of looking like he was in the fifth grade, he looked like he could've been in eighth—for the third time. He was big. And he was new. Tobias lived just down the street from Emmet and Nomi. His family had moved from New York City, four hours away, to their little coastal town of Lewis last year.

THE SERPENT SLAYER

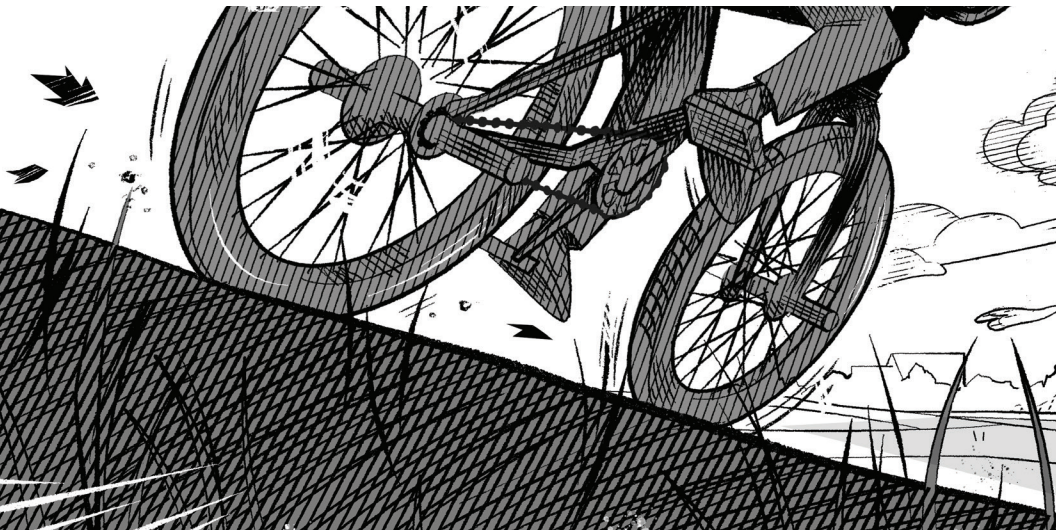
Tobias was also loud and annoying. All through last school year, he seemed to delight in making life difficult for Emmet and Nomi. And they didn't know why. Last Halloween, he snuck up behind Nomi, reached into her sack of candy, grabbed a huge handful, and ran away laughing.

He hadn't even eaten the candy. Emmet saw him throw it away when he thought no one was looking. Another time, when it snowed, Tobias had thrown snowballs at their snowman. And when Emmet went outside to talk to him, he tackled him and shoved his face in the snow. Now whenever they were outside playing, it seemed that Tobias had nothing better to do than tease them or taunt them or burp so loud even the neighbors could hear.

Now Tobias was chasing them on his blue BMX bike, and he was getting closer every second.

Emmet and Nomi's trail bikes hit the path with a bump, and their tires dropped off the sidewalk onto the well-worn dirt path. One hundred feet ahead, the trail disappeared into the woods. But they had no plans of stopping. They flew through the woods, up the gulley, and out into the back of the next neighborhood. Now if they could only lose Tobias on a side street.

Emmet, in the lead, pointed to a street up ahead. *Turn right. Quick, before . . .* Emmet looked back. Tobias's bike exploded out of the woods. Too late! He had seen them.



THE UNEXPECTED OUTCOME

Now they had to make another turn—fast. Emmet whipped around to face front.

Ugh! He had led them onto a dead-end street.

"Between the houses!" yelled Nomi, pointing ahead at two houses—a brick one and a bright yellow one—at the end of the street.

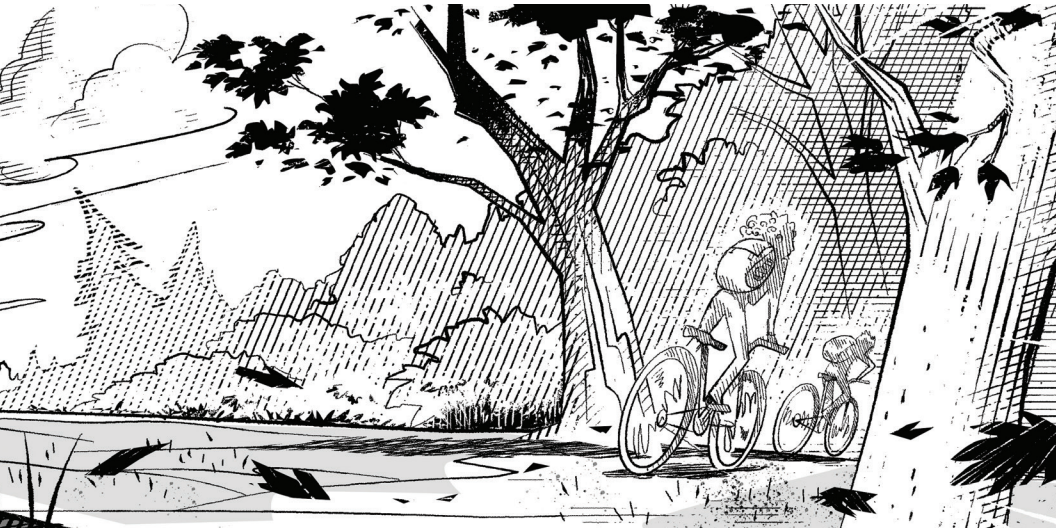
"Don't yell," said Emmet. "He'll hear us."

Nomi crinkled her eyebrows, "Says the guy on the 'motor-cycle'?"

The bikes hit the curb, zipped down the driveway, bounced across the grass, and into the backyard behind one of the houses. They skidded to a dusty stop at the edge of the trees and peered back.

Nomi's white metal water bottle had flown out of her backpack and was lying in plain sight on the grass beside the driveway of the yellow house. She must have forgotten to zip the pouch.

Though Nomi was mature for her age, Emmet couldn't believe how disorganized she could be. He always said her room looked like a middle-school art show that had been struck by a tornado. Finding her homework, or even her hair-brush, was quite the feat.



THE SERPENT SLAYER

"Your new water bottle!" sighed Emmet. Then he added, "I'll go get it."

"No, wait. He'll see you," said Nomi.

"I just hope he doesn't see your water bott—" Emmet began, just as Tobias skidded to a squealing stop, right in front of the water bottle. He grinned, picked it up, and held it up with his right hand.

"Hey, you dropped something!" he shouted. "You want this? You're going to have to come get it."

"You're going to get it," whispered Emmet.

Tobias repeated, "Come and get it!" He dropped his bike to the ground and was now tossing the water bottle back and forth between his hands. "Come. And. Get. It."

Something inside Emmet snapped. He threw his bike to the ground. When the bike landed with a thud, Tobias took his eyes off the water bottle to see what Emmet was up to. And at that moment, he missed the water bottle. Instead of catching it, Tobias hit it with his left hand and sent it clanging across the driveway.

"That's it!" Emmet shouted. *Enough of Tobias and his huge, annoying self,* thought Emmet. *Enough of Tobias's bullying.* He might have gotten away with stealing Nomi's Halloween candy, but he wasn't going to get away with stealing her new water bottle.

He was furious at Tobias—so angry he wasn't thinking. And what happened next would replay in Emmet's mind for quite some time. Emmet lunged toward the ground, grabbed the closest rock he could find, and threw it at Tobias as hard as he could. Too hard.

The rock missed Tobias by a long shot. But it didn't miss the window.

CHAPTER 2

INTO THE WOODS

Sometimes Nomi just didn't understand Emmet. They were both twelve, but no one asked if they were twins. They were adopted and couldn't have been more different.

Emmet was precise and particular. He loved organization (almost as much as jokes) and had the tidiest room in their house. But sometimes he also had a temper.

The window shattered with a CRASH so loud that Nomi thought the whole neighborhood heard. Then—it seemed almost in slow-motion—Tobias was jumping away from his bike and reaching down to the ground. His eyes locked on Emmet.

Emmet froze. In a flash, Nomi grabbed him by the arm and yanked him toward the woods. She wasn't about to just stand and wait for Tobias's revenge. "Run!" she shouted.

Suddenly, everything was happening at double speed. There was no path. But it didn't matter. They were racing past tall trees and through clumps of knee-high bushes. Leaping over tangled vines thick as fences. They knew Tobias was right behind them. And they had to hide.

Then she saw it. The bush she'd passed wasn't like the others. This shrub was massive. They jumped behind it. Nomi looked closer. It wasn't a bush at all, but hundreds of vines, formed together like a canopy. And there, cloaked beneath countless, weathered leaves, she saw what appeared to be a door handle.

THE SERPENT SLAYER

Nomi pulled at the latch. It didn't open. A combination lock, with a round dial, held the door shut. Nomi fiddled with the lock and a second later had it open. "Quick! Inside!"

Emmet didn't move. "What?" he gasped. "How did you—?"

Nomi cut him off. She was in a hurry. "Sometimes people leave the lock one number off the solution. You just spin the dial one click, and you're in. Let's go."

Emmet shook his head. "It's trespassing. You sure?"

Nomi wasn't sure. But the right thing to do was to protect her brother. And not getting caught by Tobias or whoever owned the home back there wasn't a bad idea either.

With a few quick tugs, she cleared enough vines to open the door. Emmet joined a hand, and a second later they had the door just wide enough to slip inside. They pulled the door almost closed and waited, catching their breath in the darkness.

"What is this place?" asked Nomi. "It smells like our basement."

As their eyes adjusted to the darkness, the shed came into focus. A table ran along the side of the shed, with a shelf on the wall above it. Some yard tools stood stacked against the opposite wall. A few cans of bright yellow paint sat on the ground, but mostly there were boxes—a stack in the corner, a dozen or so crammed under the table and a few on top. And all alone on the shelf above the table sat a wooden case.

"I guess this shed belongs to the guy who owns the yellow house," said Emmet, pointing at the paint cans. "We should get out of here."

But Nomi couldn't take her eyes off the wooden case. It was the size of a small suitcase and topped with a closed lid, and it had three drawers on one side. She recognized it. "Oooh. That looks like a sketch box—for art stuff. I wonder if there's anything in it?"

"Leave it alone," said Emmet, peeking out the crack in the door.

INTO THE WOODS

She reached up, took the case, and placed it on the table. "I'm not gonna take anything." And with that she flipped up the metal latch and opened the top.

"Empty," she said. "But the drawers might . . ." She pulled the knob of the top drawer. Nothing.

Then she opened the bottom drawer. It moved about an inch but no further.

"It's stuck. I think something's caught." Then she jammed her fingers into the opening and tried to pry it open just a bit and pulled. The drawer slid free. Inside lay a small package.

Emmet turned back from the door. "I don't see Tobias anywhere. He's the worst. If I were as big as he is, I'd clobber that guy."

Nomi reached down, picked up the package, and smoothed her fingers over its thick, rough paper wrapping. "I wonder what this is." She turned it over. There was writing on the front. Nomi strained to read the words.

"What in the world?!" She excitedly turned to Emmet. "It has our address on it!"

"Cut it out, Nomi," said Emmet.

"I'm not kidding! Look!"

Emmet examined the package. "OK, fine. I see. It's weird, but it's not ours. Put it back where you—"

"The writing's all smudged," Nomi interrupted. "And I can't find a return address." She turned it sideways for a better look. "But it *is* addressed to us . . ." And with that, Nomi carefully slid her fingers under the loose tape at one end of the package and opened the flaps. "So it'd be ours anyway, right?"

The package was filled with crumpled pieces of paper. Nomi removed a few wads of paper and stopped.

Inside the box, in the middle of the paper, was something small and dark. Just a bit bigger than a golf ball.

THE SERPENT SLAYER

She slid the object into her hand. "Whoa! What is this?!"

"Don't drop it!" said Emmet.

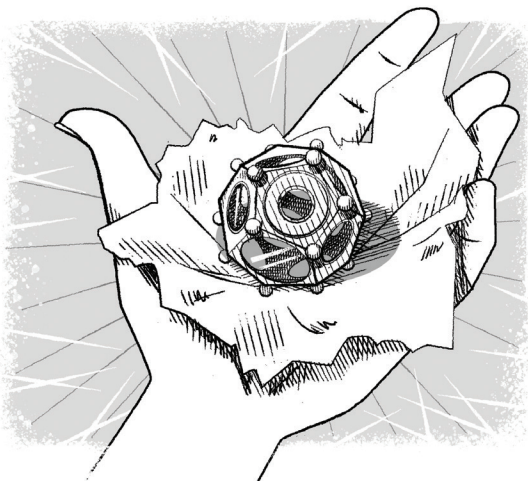
Nomi carefully set the object on the table. "Maybe we should open the door and get some light in here." So Emmet poked his head out and looked around. Not seeing any sign of Tobias, he pushed the door open as far as he could and stepped back inside.

In the light from the door, they could see more clearly. The small object on the table was made of metal. It was covered with tiny knobs that served as feet on which it sat. Then Nomi noticed that it wasn't exactly round. After two tries, she decided that it had twelve sides. Every side was flat and contained what looked like a tiny round window pane, but each window was a different size.

Emmet nudged one of the legs, rolling it onto another of its sides. "What is it? Maybe part of a game, like dice?"

"Is there any writing or maybe numbers on the sides?" asked Nomi. She reached to pick it up and examine one of the panes more closely. Immediately she pulled back her hand. "It's soft. The round windows aren't made of glass. I think it's wax."

"Maybe it's a candle or something, or . . . I got it! A candle-holder!"



INTO THE WOODS

"I don't know. Maybe," she said. "But I'm sure I've seen it before. Somewhere."

"What?! You've seen this before? No way. Come on, Nomi, let's just leave it and get out of here."

"No, I'm sure I've seen this before." She snapped her fingers. "I think it's on the sign of the bookstore in town. The Scrolls and Lit Shop!"

"OK, good," said Emmet. "Let's go."

Nomi turned toward him with a huge smile on her face. "Really? That's awesome. Mom did say we could go into town today."

"No, I meant, we should go *home*," said Emmet.

"Oh, come on, Emmet. I want to know what this thing is!"

Emmet pointed at the little metal object. "We can't take it! It's not ours! And we really shouldn't even be in here."

"But it is addressed to us. Don't you want to know what that means? Come on, we'll bring it right back!"

"OK, fine. Whatever, but *I'm* not carrying it," said Emmet as he looked outside to see if all was clear. "And remember," he added over his shoulder, "this was *your* idea."

After scanning the area, Nomi and Emmet left the shed and closed the door. No sign of Tobias or the owner of the yellow house. They headed back toward their bikes.

Before Emmet had even started pedaling, Nomi was already on her bike and moving down the driveway.

She stopped and looked back. "Come on, slowpoke, let's go!"