

The Silent Bells

CH. 15 OF ? • CANONBALL BOOKS

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

N.D. WILSON

15

SERPENT RAIN

THE LONE BELL WAS STILL RINGING, BUZZING Antigone's bones and clanging in her ears without any sign of quieting. If Antigone survived the night, she knew her hearing would never be the same. But she had worse things to worry about at the moment. The two iron bell tongues hanging in Antigone's hands were not meant to be used as weapons, but they were heavy enough, like primitive hammers, and she had seen Wiglaf splatter Naga skulls with them. So, when a slippery, gray-skinned man lunged past Rupert and tumbled onto the planks at Antigone's feet, snapping at her shins with two mouths, she didn't hesitate. Antigone swung both iron clangers as hard as she was able, crushing the hairless gray skull against the floor and splattering bloodless mushroom flesh across her feet. But she didn't even have time to be disgusted.

"Go on, Tigs!" Rupert yelled. "Ring the bells!"

The stone walls of the belfry were open below the beamed ceiling, and snarling, gray mushroom men with extra toothy mouths in their throats were spilling in over those walls on all four sides. Rupert Greeves was still barefoot, still shirtless, and still striped with old scars exaggerated by the firelight, but the pale dust that had coated his skin when he'd prostrated himself on the belfry floor was now a sloppy paste, a chalky sweat mud running down his dark skin.

Rupert leapt past Antigone, Dracul blade gripped in both hands. He had not stopped moving since the first wave of climbers had scaled the tower. A flash of steel unevenly trimmed a row of invading fungal arms and heads. Jaws still snapping, the heads landed like pumpkins on the belfry planks, and Rupert kicked them into the piles of mushroom flesh already mounded in the corners. Antigone shuffled in place, kicking fungus off her feet.

There was only one way that this could end.

The grim reality of the situation began gumming up the gears in Antigone's mind. Her limbs were heavy, her fears deadened to numbness. Her brain was working just well enough to realize that she must be in shock. This must be what it felt like to be the rabbit surrounded by coyotes, the seal swarmed by sharks, the deer staring into the bright eyes of an eighteen-wheeler.

It felt like...nothing. Adrenaline had spiked too high and tripped something inside her.

"Antigone!" Rupert shouted, "Now! Get them ringing!"

Rupe jumped back in the other direction, to the tower ladder in the floor hatch. Rupert's blade hissed, severing another head and two claws on the top rung. The mushroom carcass tumbled back down the crowded shaft. "And don't let the teeth touch you, Tigs! Ever!"

Teeth. Antigone looked at the nearest creature crawling in over the wall of the belfry. Teeth. There were so many—sharp and gray and small in the more human mouth above the jaw, but enormous and sharky when the creature lolled its head back to gape a much larger mouth where jaw met throat.

Rupert and his blade were not slowing. If they had, Antigone would have been torn to pieces within a few seconds.

The subject of Antigone's study was suddenly split in two—from scalp to stomach—by Rupert's blade. The creature had no guts. No blood. Just slimy, white and gray mushroom flesh, releasing a cold smell like the center of a damp and rotting log.

And then Rupert slapped Antigone's face. Not hard enough to knock her down or knock her out—which he could have done. Just hard enough to snap her head to the side and set her cheek on fire. And then he moved on.

Blood streamed out of Antigone's nose, and she blinked her watering eyes into focus.

Right. Feeling flooded back through her, bringing fear with it. She couldn't be in shock right now. Shock was for weak little girls who got eaten. Not for Smiths.

"Stay in the fight," she said aloud, and she could see Captain John Smith's laughing eyes as she did.

Stay in the fight, the Captain had said. Until ye hear the angels sing. There were no angels. Not yet. At least not louder than the bell.

Spitting a mouthful of gloppy blood onto the planks, and trusting that Rupert would chop and kick and kill any snapping mouths that came her way, Antigone finally managed to focus on the two remaining empty bells, and the heavy iron tongues in her hands.

Did it matter which tongue went with which bell? Did anything really matter at this point? She was stuck in a tower surrounded by thousands of fresh-born, fungal monsters. What could bells do, really? A bell had caused this whole problem in the first place. What she needed was a flamethrower.



Antigone reached up the square skirt of the bell on her right, fishing for an iron loop with the heavy tongue in her hand. The tongue lurched into place like a magnet, strong enough to tug her off balance. But there wasn't time to investigate. Turning her attention to the last bell, she found its iron loop, and the last tongue did the same, jumping home in her hands.

Rupert had made a big deal about choosing the correct bell to ring first, but the situation had changed. Antigone placed her palms flat on the two bell skirts and gave them both a shove. The bell on her left was as solid and immovable as a stone column. The bell on her right swung easily, and the second tongue of Borodon pealed in its ancient home for the first time in centuries, doubling the song of its brother.

Antigone shoved the third bell again, but it wouldn't budge.

And then two long-fingered hands closed around Antigone's throat and flung her down onto her back.

The world went silent. No bells. No snarling. Antigone didn't even hear her own screaming. The creature snapped at her throat, but she elbowed it in the side of its head before throwing her arms up over her face. The creature went straight for her exposed side, lolling its head back, clamping its massive, armored throat mouth around her ribs. Cold teeth, dozens of them, ripped into her, worming between her ribs, burrowing for her lungs.

The creature began to shake Antigone like a dog with a toy.

Someone was singing.

Who was that? Antigone wondered. It was a man's voice. Growing louder. Closer.

Her father. Her father was singing a Gaelic song she hadn't heard him sing since she'd been tiny, riding on his shoulders as he hiked the cliffs above a raging California sea after the rain. She was riding on those shoulders now. She could smell the salt on the cold wind and feel the scratch of his unshaven jaw against her hands.

"English," she had shouted at him. "I want to sing!"

Lawrence Smith switched to English.

Antigone Smith joined in.



Rupert had expected the first bell to spring a trap of some sort. When he had humbled himself, prostrate on the floor of the belfry, Antigone had believed him to be choosing which bell to ring first.

Rupert had been choosing, yes. But when he had reached the point of no return, he had been unwilling to ring the bells with any impurity of heart or mind. He had known the cost of his choice would be high, and a stillness in his soul had been required, a quietness, a peace. The ringing of the bells must only be performed as a sort of prayer; the prayer, he had hoped, of a righteous man crying out for deliverance.

He had prayed for deliverance, but he had been given an onslaught of mushroom men instead. Rupert hated mushroom men. They were easy enough to deal with alone, especially when newborn, still soft and damp from the soil. But this crop was well beyond counting. When Antigone froze up, his arms had already felt as heavy as mud. There had been no time to grab her focus gently. And not long after he had slapped her, the second bell was ringing.

At least he had a sword sharp enough for the task. The Dracul blade could slice steel as easily as fungus, and even the stone walls were no threat to its edge. Rupert dragged the blade down the length of a wall like he was trimming a hedge, and then he hesitated. What trap would the second bell spring? He looked up at the manor house on the hill and

then down at the ruined city around him.

The tower was coated with climbing fungus, and the ruins were packed tightly with more, like a crowd outside a stadium, eager to enter. Or the hatching of a great crop of spiders.

And then something else leapt into view—an enormous golden dragon, spewing white hot flames in the ruined streets, flinging mushroom men with his wings, trampling them with his talons, toppling walls with his tail.

Wiglaf had let himself go.

And then Antigone screamed.

Rupert spun around, already knowing he was too late.

A large gray creature, skin shining in the firelight, was on all fours beside the bells. Antigone dangled, limp in his jaws. As he shook her, three others looked on, stretching clawed fingers toward her, eager for a turn.

Some fury is only possible when rage is with oneself.

Rupert reacted without thought, without fatigue, with only anger. The mushroom man lost the top of his head and then the knobby stripe that served as spine. Legs and arms followed, along with chunks of his observers. Bellowing like a true Avengel, Rupert Greeves spun and slashed and slashed and slashed until Antigone's body was surrounded with the mulch of toadstools. And then, breathing hard, Rupert dropped onto his knees beside her.

"Tigs!" he yelled, searching her throat for a pulse. "Antigone Smith, you may not die!"

She was humming. No, singing. A simple tune with archaic words. Words Rupert knew well.

"Against the wizard's evil craft," Antigone mumbled. "Against the death-wound and the burning, The choking wave...the poisoned shaft..." Her voice faded and the words were lost beneath the bells.

"Protect me, Christ, till Thy returning," Rupert finished in her ear. Glancing in every direction as the arms of gray creatures once again began hooking over the belfry walls, Rupert lifted Antigone's torn shirt to assess her wounds.

Beneath the tattered safari shirt, winged shapes, shimmering white on white, moved across a tight, untorn skin of spider silk—Angel Skin, first woven directly around Antigone's torso by armies of spiders, obedient to the charmed touch of Arachne.

"Thank the Father," Rupert said. "Arachne, you're an angel. Your ribs might be broken, but you'll live, Tigs!" Rupert jumped back to his feet and lunged with a precautionary helicopter stroke in every direction. "At least for now!"

Only a few new mushroom men had spilled into the belfry. Rupert split them all quickly.

That couldn't be all of them.

Could it? Had they really run dry?

BOOM. The tower shivered beneath Rupert's feet. Once. Twice. And then again.

A sheet of golden white fire erupted past the belfry, launching dozens of charred gray-skinned men into the darkness. The fire climbed into the night sky and was gone, but it left behind crackling flames in the beams and roof of the belfry.

Two bells were ringing. One stood silent.

Grabbing Antigone by the front of her mauled safari shirt, Rupert yanked her all the way upright, sliding his free arm behind her. Her head wobbled and she blinked slowly, trying to reenter reality...but failing.

Rupert slashed two men climbing through the trap door in the floor and then patted Antigone's cheek with his sword hand.



Still nothing.

With a blast like a jet engine, another sheet of flame roared past the belfry. The beams were all blazing in the roof now. Silent or ringing, the bells wouldn't hang for long in a fire.

Turning in place and lugging Antigone with him, Rupert made sure he hadn't overlooked any invaders and then stabbed his sword into the plank floor, freeing up his hand to dig deep into a pocket on his thigh and pull out a little wallet of mostly broken vials. Flipping the worn leather open, Rupert managed to find a small vial that was still intact. Black flakes and green leaves drifted in clear liquid. Plucking a rubber stopper from its mouth, Rupert waved the vial beneath Antigone's nose, and then, without waiting for a reaction, he poured the entirety into Antigone's gaping mouth and clamped it shut until she had swallowed.

Within two heartbeats, Antigone jerked like she'd been shocked. Her eyes rolled and her limbs stiffened. For a long moment, she was as rigid as lumber leaning against Rupert's arm. And then just as quickly, she blinked, gasping, and her body relaxed.

Rupert gripped Antigone's shoulders and stood her upright. Then he plucked his sword out of floor and pressed the hilt into Antigone's hands.

"Keep your feet!" Rupert shouted over the bells. "And kill everything that climbs in!"



Breathing was hard. Antigone's ribs were screaming louder than the bells. The Angel Skin she wore did not prevent injury. It entered the wound with the invading blade or arrow or bullet, and then mended the wound as it exited. But cracked or broken bones were beyond its charms. And in this case, dozens of fungal fangs had torn into her side. Antigone could feel the Angel Skin working—it was a cold, buzzing, ticklish sensation in every laceration—but she could also feel where it wasn't working. Tucking her right elbow down over her ribs, she switched the sword into her left hand and stumbled in a circle, tripping over piles of gray limbs. Recapturing her balance, Antigone then leaned on the sword like a cane. Rupert was shoving on the silent bell with one hand. The skirt wouldn't budge. He banged on it with his fists and then leaned his full weight against the bell with both hands.

Mushroom men, some blackened, some missing limbs, and some on fire, began climbing into the belfry again. Rupert ignored them, focusing on the stiff bell.

"Ring," he grunted. "Ring!"

"Rupe," Antigone said. "Rupe!" The Dracul blade had a nice balance to it and felt at home in Antigone's hand, but she'd never been that great with her left hand, and more than a year had passed since Rupert and Nolan had made her train with cracked ribs. Cracked. Or badly bruised. Antigone hoped they were just bruised. Bruising would be manageable much sooner than fractures. At least if she survived the night.

This bell tower was nothing like the training rooms of Ashtown, where she had spent weeks and months working with blades of every length, all with steel far inferior to the one she now held.

An involuntary laugh gurgled out of Antigone. Ow.

"Don't do that again," she muttered to herself. "No laughing." Although it was funny.

When Rupe had forced her to train with cracked ribs before, she had thought him cruel, and she had even cried for some time after. And although she had tried to hide her pain—and her shame at the pain—from Cyrus, he had still been mad at Rupert for days afterward. Cyrus

had directly challenged Rupert about his pointless cruelty. And while that training session had happened with cracked ribs on her left side, enabling her to use her dominant right hand, now she knew how to fight with rib damage.

"Pain's just noise, innit?" Rupert had said. "Treat it as false till you're through the fight and can assess the real damage."

Antigone pinned her right arm even tighter to her side, folded like a chicken wing. She needed her torso to remain as stable as possible, fighting almost entirely from her left shoulder. If she didn't, every shock of pain would break her focus...and her guard.

In the small belfry, mounded with chopped fungus, agile footwork wasn't even an option.

"On your back!" Rupert yelled. "Tigs!"

Antigone spun in place with her left arm and blade already extended. Two fungal men were lunging for her and the Dracul blade split them both at the waist. Easily. More easily than a sharp kitchen knife through mushroom. Her spin carried her all the way around, blade hissing toward Rupert's broad back where he was still working on the stiff and silent bell.

Antigone jerked her arm down just in time, burying the blade in fungus and plank beside Rupert's feet.

Yanking it free, Antigone slipped backward, barely catching herself. The searing pain in her right side was muffled by the shame she felt for almost slicing Rupert in half.

Antigone had barely felt any resistance to the sword at all. Her adrenaline had managed to climb to new highs, pumped by a jack-rabbiting heart. It wasn't enough to be wounded and fighting for her life and for Rupert's life and for the future of the world. She was also now armed with something that made her a danger to herself and—in the small, fungus filled belfry—to Rupert. Given her weakened state and her already weaker left arm, a blade this sharp was good for well-aimed, precise blows. Bad because Antigone was at her worst, stumbling and off balance, drunk on pain.

Three charred and smoking mushroom men erupted from the ladder in the floor, one after the other, all scrambling for Rupert.

Antigone jumped forward, reacting without thought, before pain could even be processed. She swung for speed, which generated more force than needed, but her control was much improved.

The blade felt warm and right in Antigone's hand, like it had been made more her. As the third monster tumbled into thirds, Rupert turned from the bells and faced her, flames crackling above his head.

"They must be rung in order," Rupert said simply. "A bell is missing. It must be."

"Missing?" Antigone asked. "How?"

Rupert didn't answer. A large, white-hot dragon rose up in the night sky beside the open belfry. Six pulsing wings knocked Antigone backward a step with warm, dry wind. Her short hair, sticky with effort and humidity, blew back from her face and dried in place, faster than if she'd stuck her head out of car speeding through a desert.

With two taloned forelegs, the dragon gripped the top of the belfry wall. Antigone raised the sword to attack, but Rupert grabbed her, pulling her further back. A spiked, golden tail wormed into the belfry and wound itself around the burning beams in the roof above the bells. A moment later, the dragon yanked the roof free of the tower and threw the entire thing away into the night, sending large portions of the stone walls with it. But the bells remained—two swinging, one still—hanging from their own crackling beam supported by what remained of the stone belfry walls. Almost delicately, the dragon leapt up onto the beam, gripping it like a parrot on a roost, stamping out the flames. Not yet finished, the



dragon plunged his long, spiked tail down the ladder shaft in the belfry floor, splintering the ladder and filling the shaft completely.

Antigone and Rupert and a dragon stood on top of the tower, now naked to the wide starry sky. The sound of the still ringing bells softened beneath the vast expanse.

“Wiglaf,” Rupert said, “we have a problem.”

The dragon raised its head, and with a sound that was part waterfall and part trumpet, sent a pillar of white fire up toward the stars.

The surge of light from Wiglaf’s blast revealed an enormous column of winged creatures swirling in the darkness above Rupert, Antigone, and the ringing bells. As the dragon fire passed through the storm, dozens of pairs of wings exploded into flame, and writhing, legless bodies began to tumble down toward the belfry, trailing sparks and burning feathers.

“Alright,” Rupert said. “More than one problem.”

Armed with rifles and revolvers, Diana Boone, Jeb, Niffy, and several of the household guards tumbled onto the shattered, glass-covered patio in time to watch the golden dragon begin laying waste to hundreds of mushroom men on the grassy slope below the house and around the ruined city. Wiglaf’s dragon burned swathes through the mob with flames as bright as sunlight, while he also lashed and cracked his long spiny tail like a whip, splintering and splattering fungal bodies on impact.

But there were thousands of the earth-hatched mushroom men, and the outside of the belfry tower seethed with climbing forms in the dim light, as if it had been built from liquid stone.

A second bell began to ring.

“What’ll this one wake, then?” Niffy asked. And then he cupped his hands to shout. “Oy!” he bellowed. “Wiglaf! Flap those wings and fetch our friends down!”

“He’s not going to hear you,” Diana said. “Not with those bells ringing, and not while he’s going off like a bomb.” Diana raised a short lever action rifle to her shoulder. It looked like a prop from an old western, with a worn wooden stock and a barrel that had silvered with age. She began to fire at the tower.

“Not with you shooting,” Niffy said, covering his ears. “It’s useless! We need to get out of the cursed place!”

Jeb and three of the household guards joined in, firing at the writhing tower surface with no specific targets.

Diana emptied and loaded her rifle three times before the dragon reached the tower and began to rise around it in a fiery corkscrew, half-climbing, half-flying, purging the invaders with flames and tail.

The firing squad all watched, warm guns in hand, as Wiglaf blasted the tower clean before finally stripping the burning roof from the belfry and flinging it into the darkness. Diana could see the bells now naked on their beam, and two human shapes still upright beside them.

Antigone and Rupe were still alive.

“Thank God,” Jeb said.

“Thank Him when that golden beastie devil is safely back in his blister,” Niffy answered. “Why is the third bell not ringing?”

Wiglaf lifted his head like a coyote and spewed a geyser of white fire straight up into the night.

“I think—” Diana’s voice caught in her throat as her eyes swept the sky, taking in the thousands of creatures that were circling in a storm above the house and the ruins. Her hands tightened around her rifle, but Diana knew it would be useless against so many targets. She felt Jeb step closer to her.

Niffy swore loudly. The household guards ran back into the house, glass crunching beneath their boots.

“Tailed bats?” Niffy asked, rolling up the sleeves of his robe. Neither Boone answered. “Basilisks?” Niffy tried.

“Jaculus vipers,” Jeb and Diana answered together.

“We need to leave,” Jeb added. He tugged on his sister’s arm. “Now.”

“Not without Rupert and Antigone,” Diana answered, pulling away.

“Jeb, we can’t.”

“We will,” Jeb said. “One way or another. We get out of this place, or we leave this life. We can’t help them from here, Di. They have a dragon.” Jeb looked at Niffy. With a flash of light as it became visible, the Irish monk unwound the golden patrik of the Cryptkeepers from around his waist and gripped it by the tip of the tail. The serpent grew, twisting and extending away from the monk until it was more than twelve feet long, rearing up with a head the size of a football.

Even in the craziness of that moment, the glowing, golden patrik made Diana think of Cyrus and Patricia. Where was he right now? Would she see him again, and if she did, would she have to tell him that she had abandoned his sister in a tower swallowed by a cloud of Jaculus vipers?

Three, red fat-bodied snakes slap landed on the patio in front of the patrik, all gaping their fangs and fanning goose feathered wings while hissing louder than angry tomcats.

Diana jerked backward and fired her rifle from the hip on pure reflex. The head on the central viper exploded. The wings flailed and the body coiled and writhed without purpose. Niffy’s patrik struck the viper on the right directly in the face. Jeb shot the snake on the left.

“We’re fine,” Diana said. “We don’t have to run yet.”

“Di...” Jeb said.

“Not yet!” she said. “Please.”

More vipers began slapping down onto the patio with a percussion like raindrops at the begin of a storm. A dozen. Fifty. Two hundred. Diana couldn’t argue anymore. With her eyes up on the tower, now erupting with dragon fire like a volcano, Diana didn’t fight as Jeb dragged her back inside.



Near the center of the crypt, Cyrus crouched on a flat stone, surrounded by puddles of black, trash-littered water. He was inside the ring of stone sarcophagi that encircled the roost where the ancient bell hung. The crypt, the water, and the bell were all glowing silver with Patricia’s light. The little snake was wrapped around his left hand, and his thumb was firmly tucked in her mouth, preventing her from disappearing.

Cyrus rubbed the fingertips of his right hand together, smooth with the buttery residue of the coffee cake he’d consumed, punctuated with the occasional grit of sugar. Through vents and grates in the tunnels they had crawled through to get here, Cyrus could hear the voices of old women, chattering in the cloister above ground.

Ringan yawned loudly and stretched her small arms high before wrapping them back around her knees. She was perched on the edge of a stone casket above a large black pool that surrounded three of the most intricately carved stone caskets. The edge of the pool even reached the stand that held the bell.

“Do you expect a sign of some kind, child?” Ringan asked. “Is there a clock set to chime?”

“I saw what happens if I get this wrong,” Cyrus said. “If I ring it too early, my sister... well, I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Solomon’s Seat is not easily understood. Too much perception can paralyze a small creature. And humans are most definitely small creatures. Did it show you what you risk if you ring it too late?”

Cyrus nodded. A single bubble appeared in the dark water by Cyrus’s toes. Cyrus stared at it until it popped. It was quickly replaced by another.

“It did,” he said.

“And?” Ringan asked.

“I don’t want to talk about that either. There were a lot of things I could have done, and my sister would have died in all of them. This is the choice I made, and I’d rather not screw it up. What will you do when I’ve rung the bell? You said it could never be rung again.”

“It can’t,” Ringan said. “And it won’t. When it has been rung, I will die.”

“What?” Cyrus looked at the little woman on the casket lid, perched at the feet of a carved medieval king. “You’ll die?”

“I will,” Ringan answered.

“And you’re in a hurry?” Cyrus asked.

“I am,” Ringan said. “Now, don’t you dare pity me, lad.” She smiled. “I have been in this place for quite some time. Lifetimes. I was ready for mortality centuries ago. To tell the full and complete truth, for a while after he moved on, I was furious with Brendan for leaving me here. If he wanted the bell watched, why couldn’t he have done it? But I got over that some time ago. And I took up hobbies. Lots of gardening. More gardening than any woman needs.” She paused. “My death may not be immediate. But if it is, do not mourn me.”

“You’re a transmortal?” Cyrus asked. “And Brendan is the one who made you that way?”

Cyrus didn’t get an answer. The skin on his arms and back tightened into goose bumps, and he shivered, still in his crouch. What was that? His head began to throb in pain, and he shut his eyes tight. Even Patricia’s soft silver light was too much for him. Invisible knives plunged into his side, and Cyrus rocked backward, splashing onto his backside in the puddle. But the moisture was the least of his sensations.

Gory visions raced through Cyrus’s head, playing out inside his eyelids. A monstrous man with two mouths was ripping his sister to pieces in one. In another, she escaped with a vicious bite, but the wound sprouted teeth like tree fungus and they had consumed her completely. In another, she fell from a high tower, burning alive. And in the last, she was smothered by blood red *Jaculus* vipers, drowning in their coils.

Dripping sweat, Cyrus opened his eyes and threw up all his coffee cake in the black water beside him.

Ringan was on her feet, watching him, concerned.

“Are you okay?” she asked. “Cyrus? Is this your signal?”

Cyrus didn’t answer. Crawling forward through the cool dark water, he rose to his feet and scrambled toward the bell, grabbing onto the iron roost and using it to support his weight.

Cyrus gave the bell a push.

Nothing.

Groping up inside the bell, he grabbed the tongue, cold and rough against his palm.

He spat his mouth clean. “When I’ve rung it,” he gasped. “How do I get off this island?”

Cyrus flung the tongue inside the bell and then immediately covered both of his ears. Rather than slowing, the ringing grew, filling every corner of the tunneled crypt and multiplying echoes.

“Now what?” he shouted, turning back to Ringan.

The small woman was in a heap beside the casket, face down in the pool.

“No!” Cyrus yelled, splashing through the water. “Wait! Not yet!”

Grabbing onto Ringan’s shoulder, he tried to lift her face out of the water. Instead, he lifted the old saint entirely, as easily as if he were picking up a doll. She was as light as paper mache...and just as lifeless.

And as Cyrus stood there, cradling the woman’s husk, wondering how to start her heart or her breathing, or somehow keep the centuries-old woman around for just five minutes more, she began to crumble into dust in his arms. Every clang of the bell pulsed through her body, shaking loose another cloud, shivering and sifting her down to pale dust on the water.

There was nothing he could do for Ringan. But he hoped Antigone would be better off.

Cyrus propped what remained of the old woman against the stone casket and brushed her hair back from her face.

“Thank you,” he said. And Cyrus straightened. “Now what?” he asked. And he knew he was the only one who could answer.



Wiglaf in dragon form surrounded the top of the bell tower with a dome of billowing fire, but the vipers careened into his flames undeterred by their own destruction. They were falling as thick as hailstones now, their charred bodies flapping wing bones burned featherless as they writhed in drifts already well above Antigone’s knees. Soon, they would be up to her hips. She had never thought being smothered by snake carcasses was a possible death, but clearly, it was.

Even so, despite having venomous half-dead and dying snakes piling up all around her, and feeling more and more certain that she was about to die, the smell was actually the worst part. Feathers gave off an awful scent, even when burned singly. But Wiglaf was torching hundreds of pounds of feathers with every snort and blast.

Antigone’s eyes were streaming. Her nose was streaming, and she was forcing herself to breathe through her mouth, torching the inside of her throat and triggering her gag reflex as a result.

“Tigs!” Rupert yelled. “Grab on!” He was holding onto Wiglaf’s tail, just above the sparking and sputtering spines near the golden tip.

Antigone scrambled back up on top of the snake drifts and lunged toward Rupert.

The two ringing bells were still swinging, now even with her face. The third remained frozen and stiff in place. Antigone hooked her arm around the dragon’s tail beside Rupert. The hot scales peeled skin from her hands, like she had grabbed onto a too-hot pot on the stove that had been wrapped in sandpaper. But her other choice was death.

“Go!” Rupert shouted at Wiglaf, slapping the tail. “Go, Wiglaf!”

Still blasting fire, the dragon began to pulse, all six of his wings billowing heat and snake bodies in every direction.

Antigone felt herself lifting off the bed of snake dead, sliding off the tower above the bells.

“Stupid bell,” Antigone said, lifting her legs to pass above the beam. “Stupid, stupid, stupid!”

And she stomped the rigid bell with her heel.

The bell skirt swung. The last tongue of Borodon clattered in its home, and the cacophony became a song with three voices. No, there was a fourth voice, too. A fourth bell singing from somewhere out of sight.

On all sides, the vipers turned and fled. The firelit ruins of the city below began to shiver and tremble and tumble into rubble with a sound like thunder.

Antigone laughed, hanging in the air from a golden dragon’s tail. And then she began to cry.

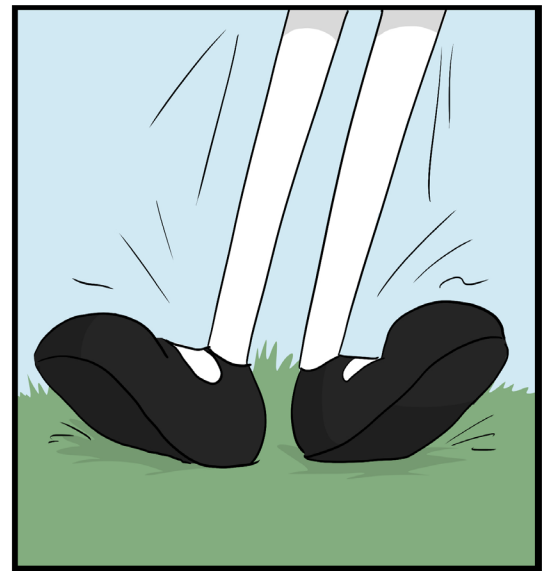
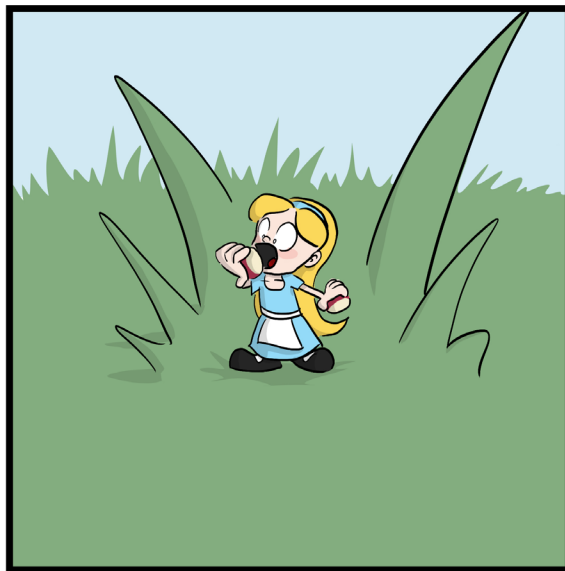
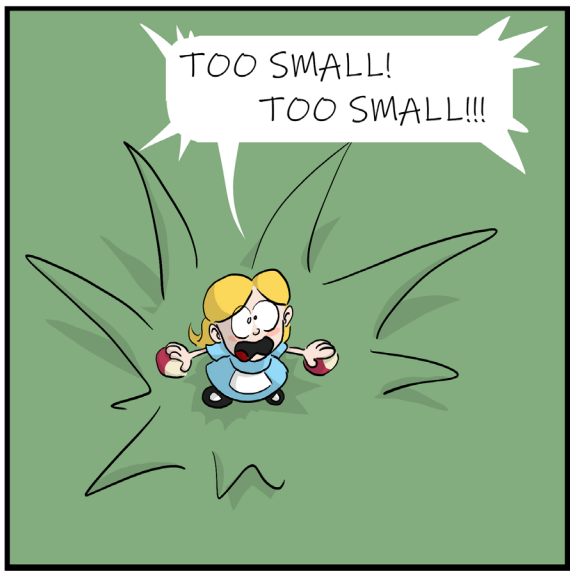
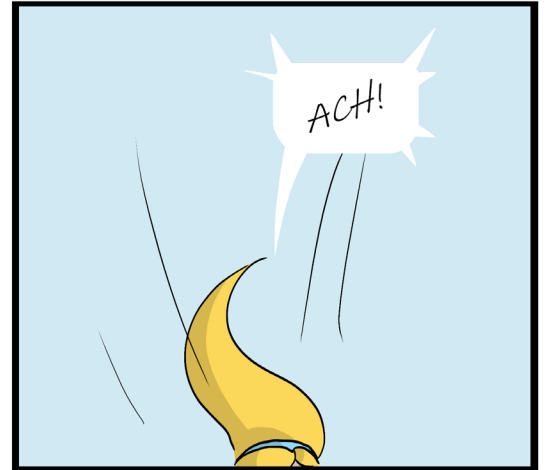
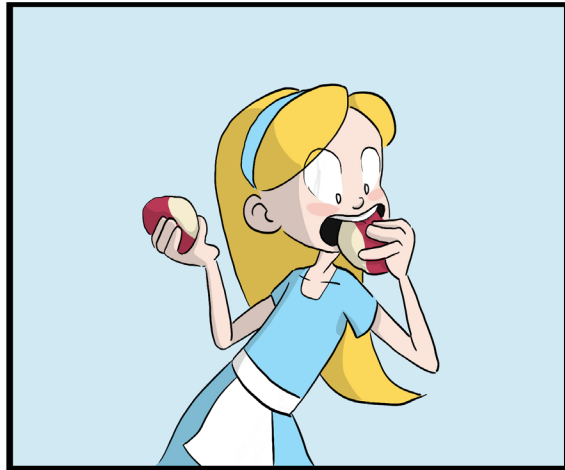
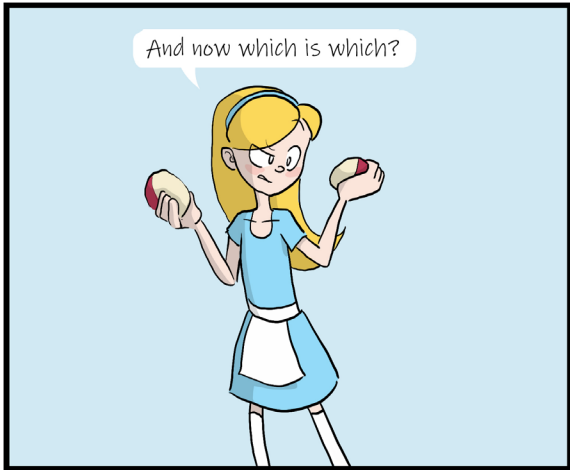
END OF CHAPTER 15 ✨

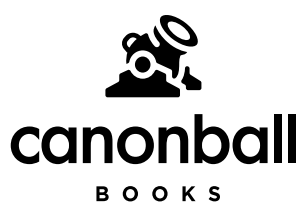
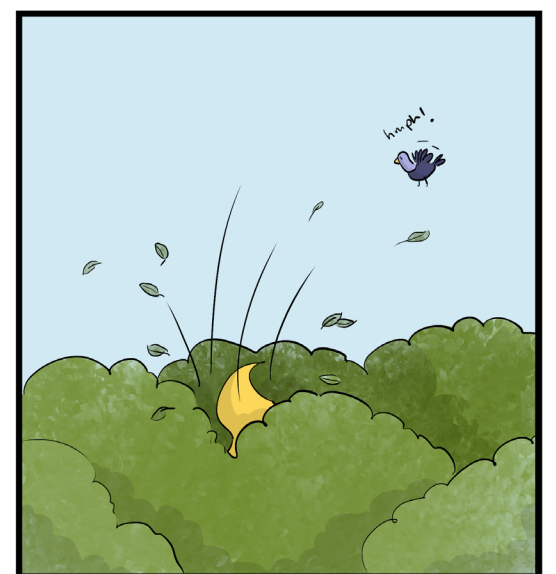
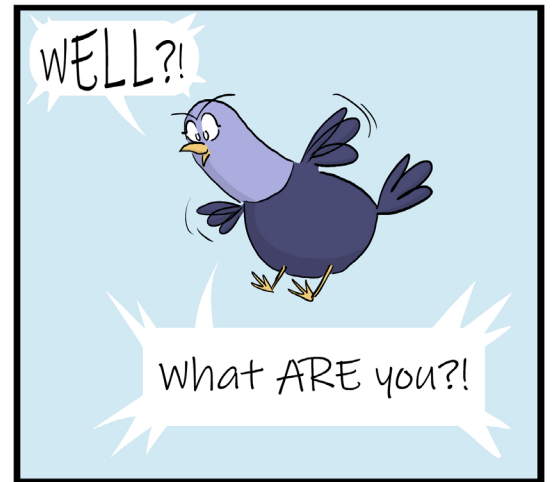
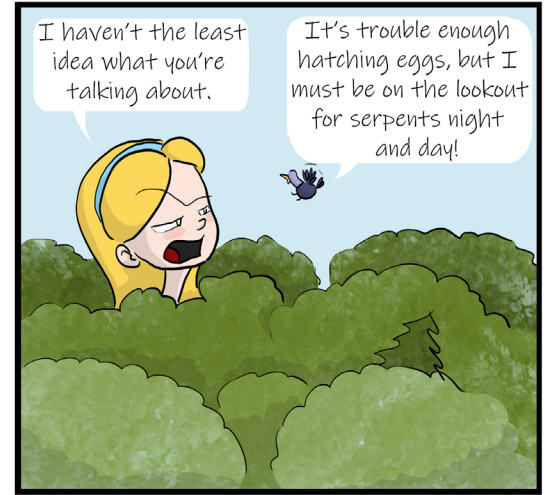
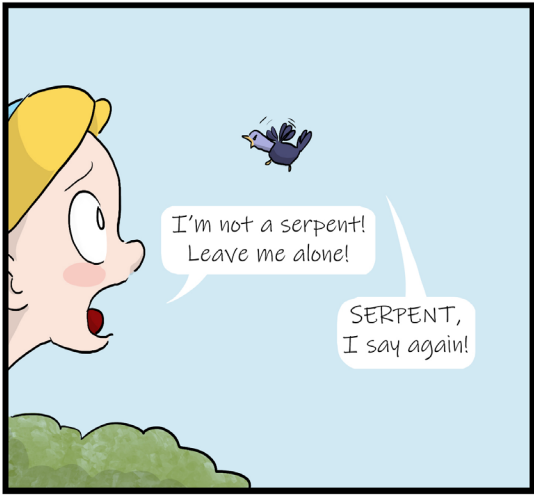


THE FUNNIES

ALICE

BY LUCIA LINN





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Eat right.

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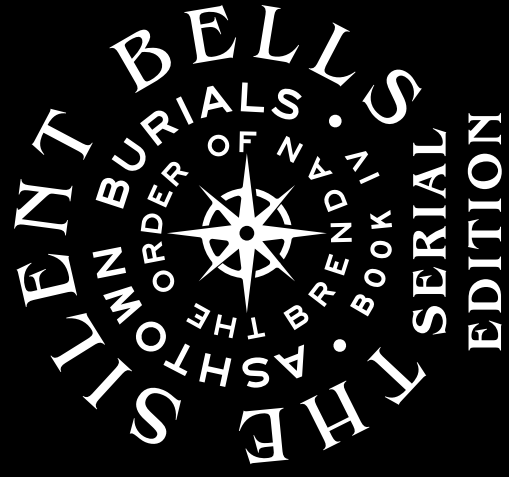


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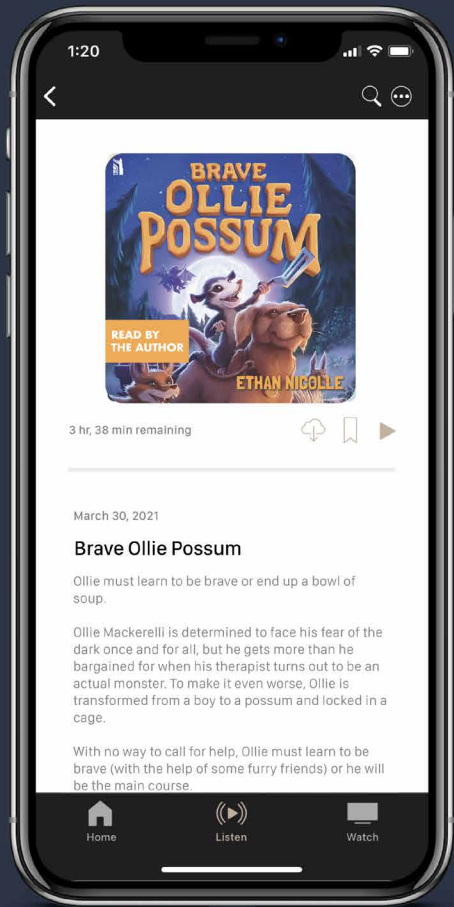


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CHAPTER 15



CHAPTER 15



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