

A thick, dark gray border with a pixelated, blocky appearance surrounds the central text. The border is composed of small squares and rectangles, creating a jagged, digital edge.

PIXEL RAIDERS

DRAGON LAND

**BY STEPHANIE BENDIXSEN +
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Dedicated to my friend Adam Chant, for his passionate advice on great books, and our shared love of science fiction. —**S.O.**

For my two wonderful nieces, Chloe and Leela. I hope this feeds your unquenchable sense of adventure. —**S.B.**

For Rose, my fiery little “Norbert.” —**C.K.**

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INTO THE FIRE

"REMEMBER OUR ORDERS! FLY TRUE, STRIKE FAST, LIVE LONG!" the huge dragon bellowed. The powerful beast was soaring through the air so fast, its smooth green scales were hard for Rip and Mei to grip.

The nearby dragons flew in a V formation behind them, and Rip realized they were getting ready to attack. "Mei! I think this is a dragon battle!" he yelled.

"Yeah, I kind of guessed that the hundreds of dragons flying RIGHT NEXT TO US were getting ready to fight!" Mei shouted, still clinging tightly to the dragon's neck, which was quite warm and seemed to be getting hotter.



Rip was holding on to the dragon behind Mei, but could barely hear what she said. The roar of the wind and the *FWAP FWAP FWAP* of the huge beast's wings was deafening.

"It's like we're in the opening scene to an epic role-playing fantasy game!" Rip yelled excitedly at the top of his lungs. "We've entered another game or level or something!"

"Hey, Rip, let's talk about that later . . . we have to get off this thing or we might, you know, die!" Mei called back as a bug flew into her mouth, causing her to cough and splutter.

Then, without warning, the dragon corkscrewed downward, nearly throwing Rip and Mei off.





Rip vomited.

"GROSS!" Mei grimaced.

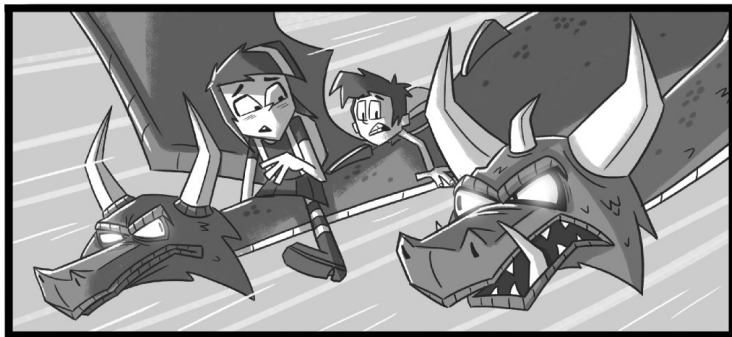
"Oops, sorry."

"HUUUUUUUMANI!" A deep voice rumbled like thunder, right next to Mei's head. It was another green dragon, keeping pace alongside them and staring right at Mei. The misshapen fangs in its mouth were long and sharp, and the eyes were red like fire. Mei could smell its horrible fishy breath. This was not like the blocky creatures they had encountered in the last game. This dragon looked much scarier.

"FREY!" the dragon called out. "THERE IS A HUMAN ON YOU!"

"WHAT? GET IT OFF!"

Frey, the dragon Rip and Mei were clinging



to, sounded horrified. She swung her head back and forth, trying to see them. As she did, Rip slipped and was spun around Frey's neck. He vomited . . . again.

"GET IT OFF! GET IT OFF! EWW!" Frey yelled.

"I DON'T WANT TO TOUCH IT! AHHH! THERE'S ANOTHER ONE AROUND YOUR NECK TOO! AHHHHHH!" The other dragon sounded a little panicked.

Frey broke away from the formation of dragons, diving and spinning, trying to shake off Rip and Mei.

"Don't let go, Rip!" said Mei, glancing at her full health on her digital wristband. "If we fall here, we might not survive!"

Rip clung on even tighter, but at the sound of Mei's voice, Frey's flying became more



erratic.

She started doing barrel rolls, clearly desperate to shake them off.

"Can't we ... uh ... talk about this ... uh!" Rip tried to reason with Frey, as they were flung left and right, up and down. "You can just let us off ... gently, you know!"

"DON'T YOU DARE SPEAK TO ME, VILE HUMAN!" Frey growled with fury.

"I don't think he likes us!" Rip yelled to Mei.

"AND I AM NOT A HE!" Frey added.

"Sorry!" Rip said. "I'm new to dragons! And ... uh ... *BURP* ... flying! Uh-oh, I think I'm gonna ..."





"NOOOO! YUCK!" Frey bellowed and dived straight down. She headed for a thick, dark part of a forest below. Rip and Mei had totally lost visuals on the dragon army, but could hear what sounded like lightning storms and explosions off in the distance.

"TIME FOR A BATH, DIRTY HUMANS!" Frey roared.

