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DACTYL HILL



SQUAD

BOOK ONE



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CHAPTER ONE OUT THE DOOR AND AWAY

“**M**ARGARET!”

Magdalys Roca sat on her bed in the girls’ bunk at the Colored Orphan Asylum and closed her eyes. Her day satchel was packed, her uniform was on, shoes buckled; she’d wrestled her hair into a tight bun the way the matrons insisted she do. The triceratops wagon was leaving any second for the theater, and the theater was just about the best place to be as far as Magdalys was concerned.

But . . .

“Margaret Rocheford, come here this instant!”

She had sworn, *sworn!* to herself that she wouldn’t answer to that name anymore. She would answer to her *real* name, the way her brother Montez said it, the way her long-gone sisters

had: *Magdalys* with that *y* drawn out long and sharp *eeeees*, like a melody.

The matron's footsteps clack-clacked up the marble hall, paused, and then turned with a squeak and headed away again.

When Montez was there and he did say her name like the song she knew it to be, she didn't really care what Miss Henrietta Von Marsh called her. But now he was gone too, gone six weeks and two days to be exact, and sure the other kids called her *Magdalys* (and *Maggie*, *Mags*, or *Mag-D*, depending on the day), but it wasn't the same; it was a stumble not a song, and she certainly wouldn't be responding to Margaret. And Rocheford even less. So *Magdalys* sat there, and she tried not to think of the show she would miss at the Zanzibar Savannah Theater.

"The trike wagon will just leave without you, I suppose," Von Marsh called out as the hallway double doors squeaked open. "Shame, really. I heard the Crunks are performing *The Tempest* tonight." And then the doors slammed shut and the clack-clacking got quieter and quieter.

The Tempest! It wasn't *Magdalys's* favorite Shakespeare play, but she'd read it (she'd read most of them) and she was instantly filled with wonder: How would Halsey and Cymbeline Crunk, the two lead actors of the only all-black Shakespearean company in New York, bring that story of exiled wizards and lovers and monsters to life? Who would

play which role and how would they do the beast Caliban and what kinds of stage dinos would they use and how would the rowdy crowd react and . . .

Dang it! Magdalys thought, jumping to her feet and grabbing her satchel. She wasn't going to let Von Marsh's stubbornness make her miss out on some good theater. She shoved open the door and blitzed down the brightly lit corridor, her footfalls echoing all around her.

A bunch of kids were studying and playing board games in the first floor common area. "Whoa," Bernadette and Syl yelled as Magdalys blew past. "Slow down, Speeds McGee!" Sweetie Mae called after her. But Magdalys didn't have time to stop and banter. She wasn't going to make it, and then she'd be mad at herself all night, and her already bad mood would sink beneath the floorboards as she imagined all the fun Two Step and Mapper and Little Sabeen were having without her.

"Careful now," old Mr. Calloway called when Magdalys slammed open the front doors and rocketed down the big, fancy staircase. "I just mopped!" Magdalys slowed a bit so she wouldn't slip and splatter herself all over the stone walking path ahead. Mr. Calloway had escaped a provisional farm in upstate New York long before Magdalys was born, and she tried to be as nice to him as she could.

"Sorry, Mr. Calloway!" she called over her shoulder. "See you tomorrow!"

"Alright!" Mr. Calloway called back.

Up ahead, Varney, the orphanage's huge old triceratops,

grunted and stomped his feet. Great big folds of flesh hung down from his massive belly and dangled in dollops over each other along his four thick legs. The two horns poking out from his forehead were dull and his sleepy eyes had bags under them, but Varney still managed to make the supply runs twice a week and take the kids on field trips to the theater now and then. In the orphanage library's tattered edition of *The Field Guide to North American Dinos, Pteros & Other Assorted -Sauria* (which everyone just called the Dinoguide), Dr. Barlow Sloan described triceratopses as *noble and docile beasts who wanted nothing more than to sit around chewing on grass and leaves all day, but were perfectly willing to ride into battle and march for weeks on end if called upon to do so by their masters.*

Magdalys always wished she could spend more time with Varney. Dinos were much better than humans, mostly. They didn't make up names for you or judge you for how you wore your hair — they just lumbered around eating and pooping and carrying people places.

But it was only a few years ago that New York had passed a law granting black citizens the right to dinoride, and white people in Manhattan still bristled and stared when they saw someone with brown skin astride those massive scaly backs. Magdalys had no idea why anyone would want to keep her from dinoriding just because of the color of her skin, but she knew the orphanage certainly wouldn't let any of its wards near any dinos, except Varney, and him only every once in a while.

So Magdalys mostly had to be content with watching the great beasts cavort along outside her window: The lamplighter's iguanodons would pass first thing in the morning, extinguishing the lanterns as the day broke. Then the commuter brachys would stomp past, passengers cluttered on the saddles and hanging from straps along the side. By noon the streets would fill with stegosaurus lugging supplies and the duckbill riders in fancy dress clothes, heading off to important meetings, while microraptors scurried across the roads, carrying messages or making nuisances of themselves. Most of the trikes and raptors had been sent down south to fight the Confederates, but every once in a while she'd see one of those too. Magdalys could watch them out her window all day, but it wasn't the same as being out there with the dinos.

"Heeyah!" Marietta Gilbert Smack called out, and Varney heaved forward, pulling the wagon hitched to his back into motion.

No! Magdalys thought, sprinting through the big ornate gates enclosing the orphanage. A stitch opened up in her side. *Wait!*

Varney stopped with a snort and sigh. He turned his big horned head and directed a single droopy eye at Magdalys. Magdalys skidded to a halt. Had Varney somehow . . . ? It couldn't be. The old trike blinked once, then seemed to nod at her. Magdalys gasped.

"Mags!" Two Step yelled.

“Magdalys!” Little Sabeen squealed. “You made it!”

“So you decided to accept your name after all, *Margaret*,” Henrietta Von Marsh said, a smug smile sliding across her face.

“No.” Magdalys grabbed Two Step’s outstretched hand and heaved herself onto the wagon. “I decided to go to the theater with my friends.”

“Hold the wagon, Marietta,” Von Marsh said with a withering scowl. She glared at Magdalys, who had made herself comfortable on the bench beside Two Step and Little Sabeen. “Young lady, when I call your name, I expect you to answer.”

“I will answer,” Magdalys said. “When you call my *real* name.”

“Your *real* name is Margaret. Period. Your” — she curled up her lips in distaste — “*other* name no longer applies.”

Magdalys took a deep breath, willing herself not to unleash the volcano fire of rage she had bubbling up inside her. *Can’t we just go*, she thought, half hoping old Varney had somehow really heard her a few moments ago, half feeling like she was completely bonkers for even thinking that. *Go . . .*

“That is a remnant of the life you left behind,” Von Marsh went on. “A life, I might add, that you don’t even remember. You’re in America now, not Cuba. And you will present yourself in American society as a proper little colored girl, as long as you are under my roof.”

Varney grumbled like a tired old man and then heaved forward, pulling the wagon out of the driveway and onto Fifth

Avenue. “Hold the trike, I said, Marietta!” Von Marsh hollered, nearly toppling from the sudden lurch of movement.

“Good thing,” Magdalys muttered as they rumbled out into the early evening streets of Manhattan, “we’re not under your roof.”