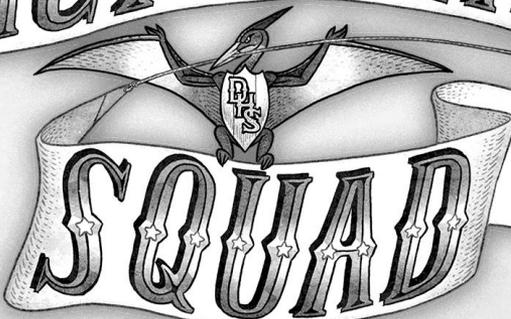


DANIEL JOSÉ OLDER

DACTYL HILL



SQUAD

BOOK THREE
THUNDER RUN



SCHOLASTIC PRESS • NEW YORK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available
ISBN 978-1-338-26887-4

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 20 21 22 23 24

Printed in the U.S.A. 23
First edition, June 2020

Book design by Christopher Stengel



CHAPTER ONE TOAD, TOAD, TOAD

FOR A FEW moments, a strange quiet settled over the Atchafalaya Swamplands. Magdalys Roca, standing on top of a gigantic toad, looked over to her brother, Montez, whom she'd traveled all the way from New York City to rescue. He stared back at her from the shattered fifth-floor window of a dilapidated mansion; peeling pink shutters dangled off rusty hinges on either side. He carried a sighted rifle, the kind the sharpshooters used, and that made sense: He'd become a soldier in these past couple months of war, a sniper. He'd taken lives, and now, so had Magdalys. And she was a soldier now, just like him.

"Um," Corporal Wolfgang Hands said from a window a few floors down. He was a big man with a dashing mustache, light brown skin, and a black eye patch. He'd gotten his men to

the safety of this swamp mansion after their medical convoy had been ambushed, and this was where Magdalys and her friend Mapper had found them, hemmed in by Confederate Bog Marauders with more on the way. Magdalys had sent the enemy scattering when she'd brought her giant toad crashing down from across the lake. But she could already hear the rustle and yells of the swampland guerrilla soldiers regrouping. "You do know how to control that thing, don't you, young lady?"

"Sure seems like she does," someone yelled. "Unless it just happened to take her to us and scatter the Marauders."

"The other two are still giving 'em a good lickin' out on the lake," a young soldier with a nasty scar down the center of his face pointed out. The others scoffed and rolled their eyes. "No pun intended!"

Magdalys smirked. Last time she'd looked, the two toads behind them had been lashing out at an attacking brigade of mounted sinornithosaurs with their humongous tongues, swallowing a few and knocking others out of the sky in wild spirals. She looked Corporal Hands dead in the eye. "I do control these toads, sir," she said. "My name is Magdalys Roca and I'm the greatest dinowrangler in the world."

"And I'm Mapper!" Mapper said. "I mean, I'm Kyle, but they call me Mapper."

"Wait, you wrangle dinos?" Montez said.

"Wait, as in the famous Magdalys Roca that Razorclaw over here won't shut up about?" Corporal Hands said.

“Wait, as in the Magdalys Roca who I sent that dactyl-gram?” another soldier yelled.

Magdalys gaped at him. That gram — the matrons of the Colored Orphan Asylum had given it to her the night of the Draft Riots back in July; the night everything changed. “Private Tom Summers?”

He nodded. “The same! Glad you made it! But I didn’t mean for —”

“Enough chitter chatter!” the corporal hollered. “Those Bog Marauders’ll be back here any minute, and remember, with only one bite from one of their sinosteeds you’ll be —”

“Dying slowly in a pool of your own vomit and drool,” the other five soldiers all groaned at once.

“We remember,” Montez said. Then he hoisted his rifle up, squinted through the sight, and let off a shot that Magdalys heard whiz past her and then land with a distant juicy thunk. She whirled around as the caw of a sinornith rang out, saw it plummeting from the sky, its rider already splashing into the lake below with a yelp.

“Whoa!” She looked back at her brother, blinking. “You really are a crack shot.”

“Time to go,” Montez said. “They’re almost here.” He disappeared from the window, gathering his things, and Magdalys had to remind herself he was still that goofy kid who loved reading and looked out for everyone at the orphanage. Kind of.

JUH!! the huge toad beneath her boomed. It was a

guttural, raspy chirp that only Magdalys could hear, or feel really, as it seemed to rise like a tiny marvelous earthquake from within her. And she understood it, this ancient creature's strange one-sound language — he was ready to go too, and he wouldn't wait long. Behind her, two of the dactyls they'd flown into the swamplands, Beans and Dizz, huddled protectively over the third, Grappler, who'd been wounded just before they found the toads.

Come! Magdalys sent her thought arcing to the lake behind them, felt it reach the other two toads, felt their attention turn suddenly toward her. *Come!*

“Brace yourself,” she said to Mapper, and then the whole planet seemed to rock with the sudden explosive landing of a toad on one side of them, and then again as the second one landed on the other side.

“Yeeesh!” Mapper yelled, steadying himself.

Magdalys wiggled her eyebrows at him. “I warned ya!”

He shook his head. “What happens now?” Mapper had been with her all the way from New York — in fact, he was the only one left of the tight-knit squad they'd formed back in Brooklyn. Two Step and Sabeen had been swept up in the Battle of Chickamauga and were probably holed up in Chattanooga with their new friend Hannibal and the rest of the Army of the Cumberland, surrounded by Confederates and anxiously awaiting General Grant to help them escape. Cymbeline Crunk, one of the greatest Shakespearean actresses ever (as far as Magdalys was concerned, anyway) and a Union

spy, had flown to Tennessee with General Grant on the back of Stella, the giant pteranodon that Magdalys had saved from a silo back in Dactyl Hill. And Amaya was headed west to find her father, an eccentric general in the US Army, and figure out the riddle of her Apache mother.

Kwa-THOOM!! A mortar shell hurtled through the top tower of the mansion, obliterating it and showering Magdalys and Mapper with debris and broken glass. She glanced at the window Montez had been in just as he poked his big toothy grin out of it and waved. "I'm alright!"

"Let's move out!" Corporal Hands yelled.

Magdalys exhaled. Just like that, after all that . . . her brother could've been killed. Could still be killed.

She narrowed her eyes at the approaching sinornithosaurs as the corporal barked orders. "Summers and Bijoux, take the toad on the left! Toussaint and Briggs, the right!"

At some point along the way, the journey had stopped being just about saving Montez, and become something much bigger inside Magdalys. *The Union needed her*, generals kept saying. With her abilities, she could crush the Confederacy. And she knew it was true.

"Aye, aye, sir!" The men called as the magnificent toads lowered themselves toward the windows.

She'd seen firsthand how being able to get inside the minds of dinosaurs could sway the tide of battle. And she'd seen what could happen when agents of the Knights of the Golden Circle, a secret society trying to build a slavery-driven empire all

throughout the Americas, had used it to their own ends. In fact, she'd seen it less than an hour ago, when Earl Shamus Dawson Drek, a Bog Marauder who had the same power she did, had bombarded her with swarms of dinos. She'd bested him, breaking through the lock he had on those reptilian minds to divert the attacks away from her and Mapper, but it took everything she had. And Drek was still out there.

She knew they had to be stopped. She knew she was one of the few who might be able to do it. So she'd agreed to join the US Army.

But it wasn't the Union she cared about, not really.

"Roca," Corporal Hands called, "you and I will hop on with your sister here."

Montez nodded and, as bullets whistled through the air around them, climbed out the window and leapt onto the snout of the toad.

Her brother. She watched him make his way up toward her. Yes, it was still for him that she'd done this, but now it was for all her brothers, and her sisters too. She thought about the plantations they'd flown over as they approached the Atchafalaya, the scars etched across her friend Big Jack Jackson's back. No one she loved would be safe until the Confederacy fell and the Knights of the Golden Circle were defeated forever.

Montez slipped and let out a grunt as he scrambled for purchase — that hide was slippery with slime and swamp water, but the warts and folds allowed for easy footholds. A few more shots rang out but whizzed harmlessly past. Montez

pulled himself to his feet, and then made it to the top and wrapped Magdalys in a quick hug as Corporal Hands grumbled and stumbled his way out the window and toward them.

She had an army at her back now. And General Grant had given her the command of her own special elite unit of dinowarriors, had even put it in writing. She could hunt down the Knights and take apart their organization piece by piece.

“Thanks for rescuing me,” Montez whispered.

She punched his shoulder. “Anytime, big bro.”

And taking apart the Knights was exactly what she planned to do.

She turned to the lake behind them, and the toad waddled from one side to the other, turning too.

“Whoa! Whoa!” Wolfgang yelled, his hands stretched out to either side for balance as he made his way up to them. “Gotta warn us when he gonna do that, young lady!” He scurried to the spot between the toad’s eyes where Magdalys, Mapper, and Montez stood prepping their weapons. Out over the lake, the sinornith riders yelped and let off a volley of musket fire.

But before Magdalys could take apart any evil organizations, she’d have to get out of this mess.

“Get ready,” she yelled. The three soldiers around her raised their weapons. Off to either side, Toussaint, Briggs, Summers, and Bijoux did the same.

JUH!!! the toad burped urgently, lowering itself. Then it hurtled out over the lake amidst the crackle of gunfire.

“ATTACK!!”