

FOILED

Written by Jane Yolen

Artwork by Mike Cavattaro



:01

First Second

NEW YORK & LONDON

TEXT COPYRIGHT © 2010 BY JANE YOLEN
ILLUSTRATIONS COPYRIGHT © 2010 BY MIKE CAVALLARO

PUBLISHED BY FIRST SECOND.

DISTRIBUTED IN CANADA BY H.B.
FENN AND COMPANY LTD. DISTRIB-
UTED IN THE UNITED KINGDOM BY
MACMILLAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS, A
DIVISION OF PAN MACMILLAN.

ALL
RIGHTS
RESERVED.

DESIGN BY
COLLEEN AF
VENABLE

FIRST SECOND IS AN
IMPRINT OF ROARING
BROOK PRESS, A DIVISION
OF HOLTZBRINCK
PUBLISHING HOLDINGS
LIMITED PARTNERSHIP
175 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW
YORK, NY 10010

FIRST SECOND BOOKS
ARE AVAILABLE FOR
SPECIAL PROMOTIONS AND
PREMIUMS. FOR DETAILS,
CONTACT: DIRECTOR OF
SPECIAL MARKETS,
HOLTZBRINCK PUBLISHERS.

CHAPTER HEADING
ILLUSTRATIONS COPYRIGHT
© 2010 BY CHRIS SPENCER

CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION
DATA IS ON FILE AT THE
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

PRINTED IN [TK] 2009
IN CHINA BY [TK]

FIRST
EDITION
MAY
2010

FIRST

EDITION

ISBN: 978-1-59643-279-6

BY ART
WE LIVE





FOR MADDISON JANE STEMPE-PIATT AND COURTNEY AQUADRO WHO INSPIRED IT BY FENCING.

FOR DAVID STEMPE WHO WAS THERE AT THE BEGINNING, IF NOT THE END.

FOR MARK SIEGEL WHO ASKED FOR IT ONE LOVELY DAY IN HIS OFFICE.

FOR NEIL GAIMAN, CHARLES VESS, LINDA MEDLEY, AND MIKE MIGNOLA WHO SHOWED ME IT COULD BE DONE.

FOR TANYA MCKINNON WHO HELD MY HAND THROUGH THE PROCESS AND LEFT ENCOURAGING MESSAGES ON MY MACHINE.

FOR AVERY MENCHER WHO LENT ME HIS NAME AND—WHILE HANDSOME—HAS NEVER, TO MY KNOWLEDGE, BEEN A TROLL.

AND OF COURSE FOR MIKE CAVALLARO WHO HAS MADE IT ALL REAL.

—JANE YOLEN

TO MY PARENTS, FRANCESCO AND GEORGIA CAVALLARO, FOR YEARS OF LOVE, SUPPORT AND ENCOURAGEMENT, AND IN LOVING MEMORY OF CARMELITA GAGLIARDI.

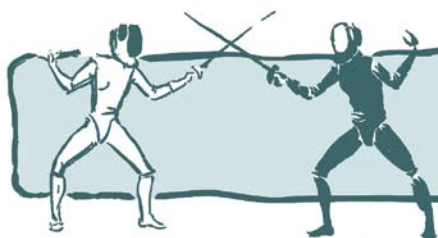
ALIERA'S DRAWINGS BY MARGAUX WINCHOCK AND SAMANTHA CAVALLARO.

COLORING ASSIST BY GRACE LU, ZIGGY CHEN, ALISON WILGUS, ERIN FINNEGAN, CHRYSOULA ARTEMIS-GOMEZ, AND TORI SICA.

THANKS TO: MARK SIEGEL, JANE YOLEN, GINA GAGLIANO, CALISTA BRILL, COLLEEN VENABLE, DEAN HASPIEL, TIM HAMILTON, SIMON FRASER, LELAND PURVIS, JOAN REILLY, GEORGE O'CONNOR, JOE INFURNARI, JEFF NEWELT, SYNNOVE TRIER, RALPH ENGELMAN, AND ALL OF ACT-I-VATE.COM.

SPECIAL THANKS TO LISA NATOLI.

—MIKE CAVALLARO

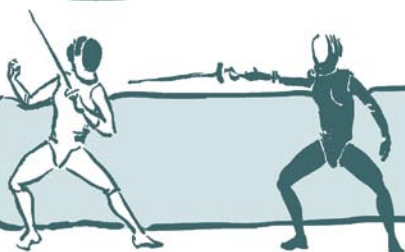


1. Engagement

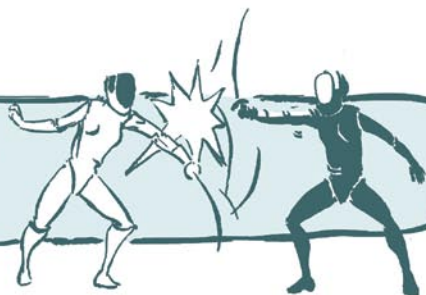
2. Invito



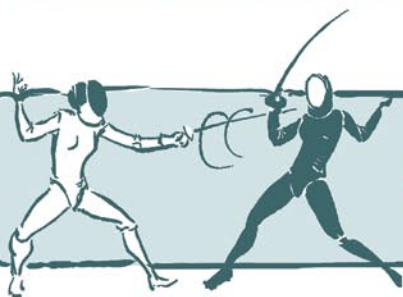
3. Point in Line



4. Prise de Fer

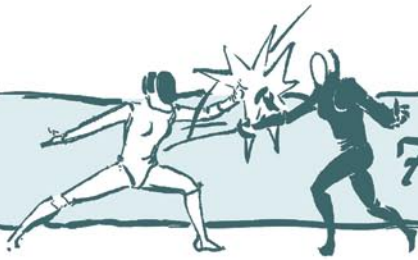


5. Derobement



6. Lunge



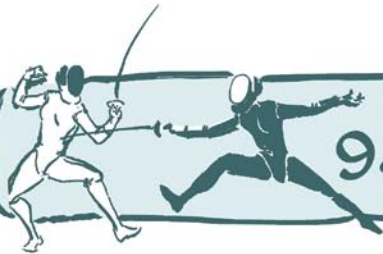


7. Parry-Riposte

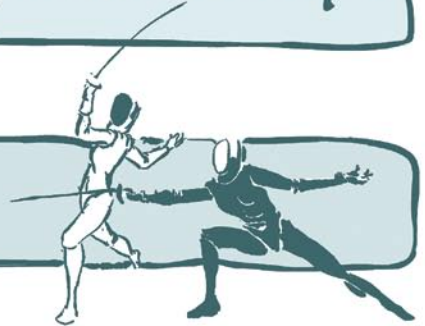
8. Counter-Riposte



9. Coupe de Temps



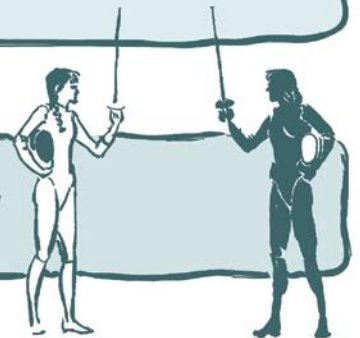
10. Esquive



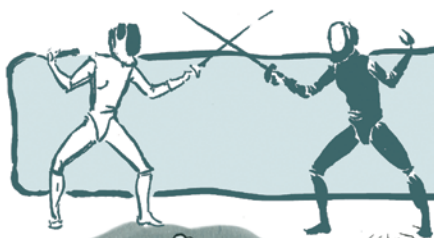
11. Remise



12. Disengagement



1. Engagement



I want to tell you this story.

No—

I have to tell you this story.



It's about yesterday, when I went on a date with Avery Castle, carrying my weapon—

it's a fencing foil my mom found at a tag sale and I lost it in Grand Central Station.



No, I didn't leave it in Avery's heart...

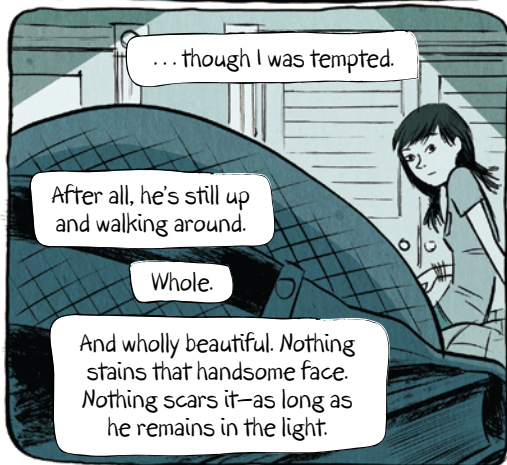


... though I was tempted.

After all, he's still up and walking around.

Whole.

And wholly beautiful. Nothing stains that handsome face. Nothing scars it—as long as he remains in the light.



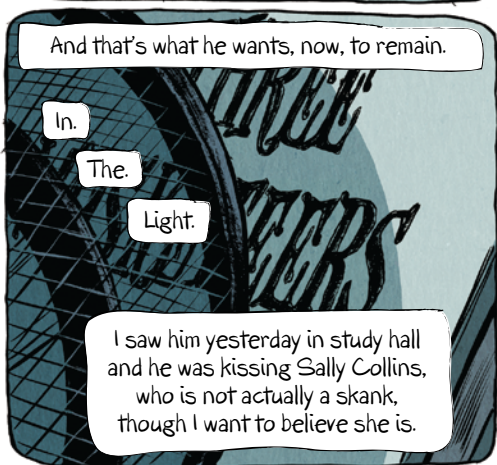
And that's what he wants, now, to remain.


In.

The.

Light.

I saw him yesterday in study hall and he was kissing Sally Collins, who is not actually a skank, though I want to believe she is.



A girl with dark hair in pigtails is standing on a bed, looking into a large, ornate mirror. Her reflection is visible in the mirror. The room has a window with a view of a city and a painting on the wall.

The story I have to tell you is not about Avery, it's about me, and fencing, and what I learned while masked.

It's about defense and defenders.

It's about power, and I don't mean electricity.

It's about family.

Most grownups will tell you things are revealed when you take off a mask.

But they're wrong, as they often are.



Everything.



About that tag sale—my mom goes to dozens of them. Tag sales, moving sales, old book stores, rag shops. She practically lives at the Salvo—the Salvation Army store.

My father says she likes to borrow other people's history since she doesn't know her own.



Instant ancestors. She got those at an auction in a dead person's apartment.

Ugh.

Doesn't that make you shudder?

It does me.



I mean, my Aunt Hannah, her sister, doesn't go to all those sales. Doesn't need a fake history.

Just because their mother died young and they had to go into care...





I have no idea
how my mom finds out
about these sales.

Newspaper ads?

Signs
on telephone
poles?

Seances?

Obituary notices?

The morgue?

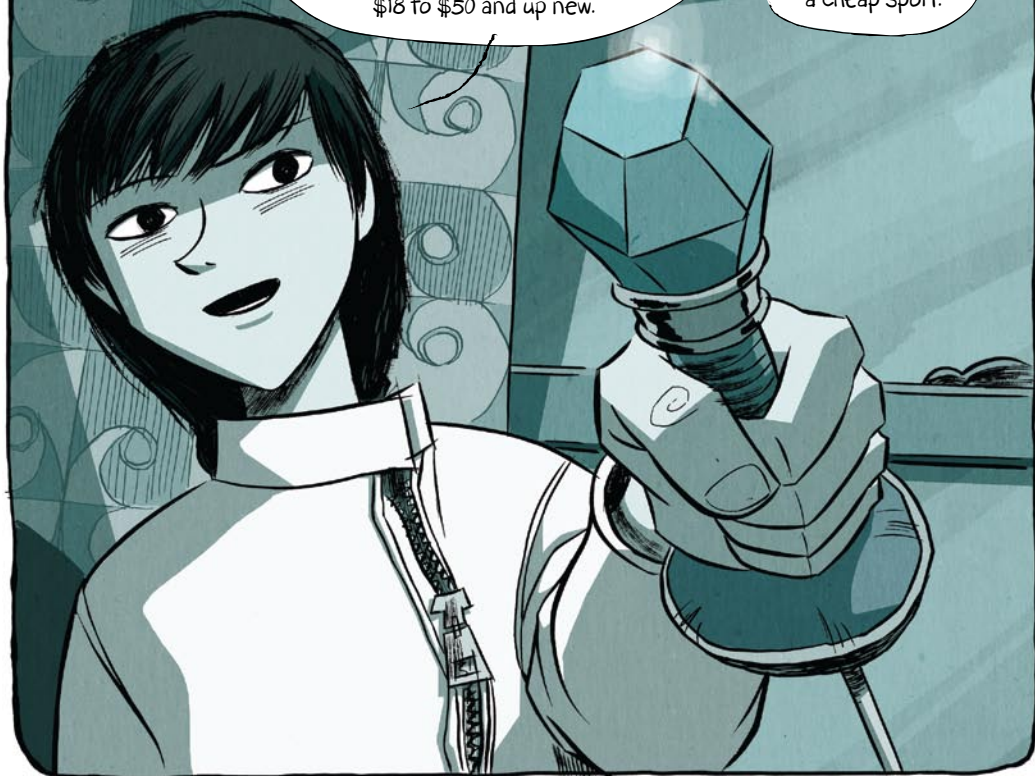
All I know is that this sale was held at a school, and a Chinese lady and her daughter were selling household items. You know—broken-down chairs, old teapots, dresses two sizes too small for them.

Oh yes—and a fencing foil.

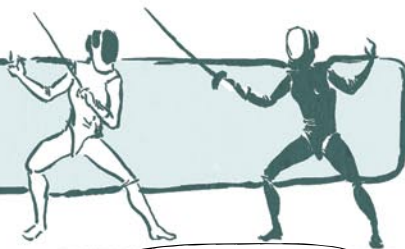


Doncha just love the jewel?
But it was only two bucks. And
I needed a new practice foil and those
things cost anywhere from
\$18 to \$50 and up new.

Fencing is not
a cheap sport.



2. Invito



Something else you need to know: a foil is not the only "sword" fencers use, but it's the modern version of the original practice weapon for dueling.

Fencing foil is very technical, which is why I like it. Aggression is not the only way to power to a win.

It's a hard thing to remember when all you want to do is smash your opponent's face in,

When fencing with a foil, the valid hits must be scored on the opponent's torso with the blade's point.

Quarte
(prime)

Septime
(quinte)

Hitting someone on her legs, arms, or face mask does not count.

to maim,

to kill.

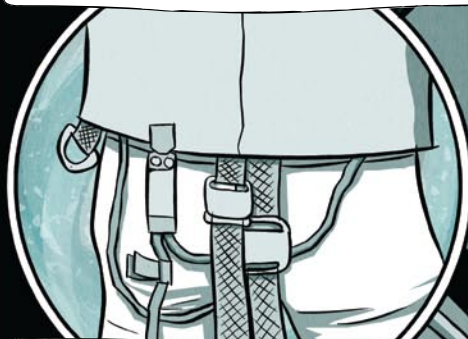
HAH!

Just kidding.

But it does take control. Precision.



In competitive fencing we wear metallic vests, with a body cord that runs from the weapon, through the jacket, and out the back like a tail.



That tail plugs into a machine. The hits are registered by electric impulses. It takes very little but controlled movement by a good technical fencer to score points.



Trust me.


I know.





One is
a sport,

and
one is...
not.



I have been fencing since I was eleven years old. My school was on the sixth-floor walkup of a building without air conditioning.

That summer was brutally hot. Put a mask and jacket on a fencer under those conditions and only the most determined survive.

That was the summer
I made the junior team.
I did more than *survive*.

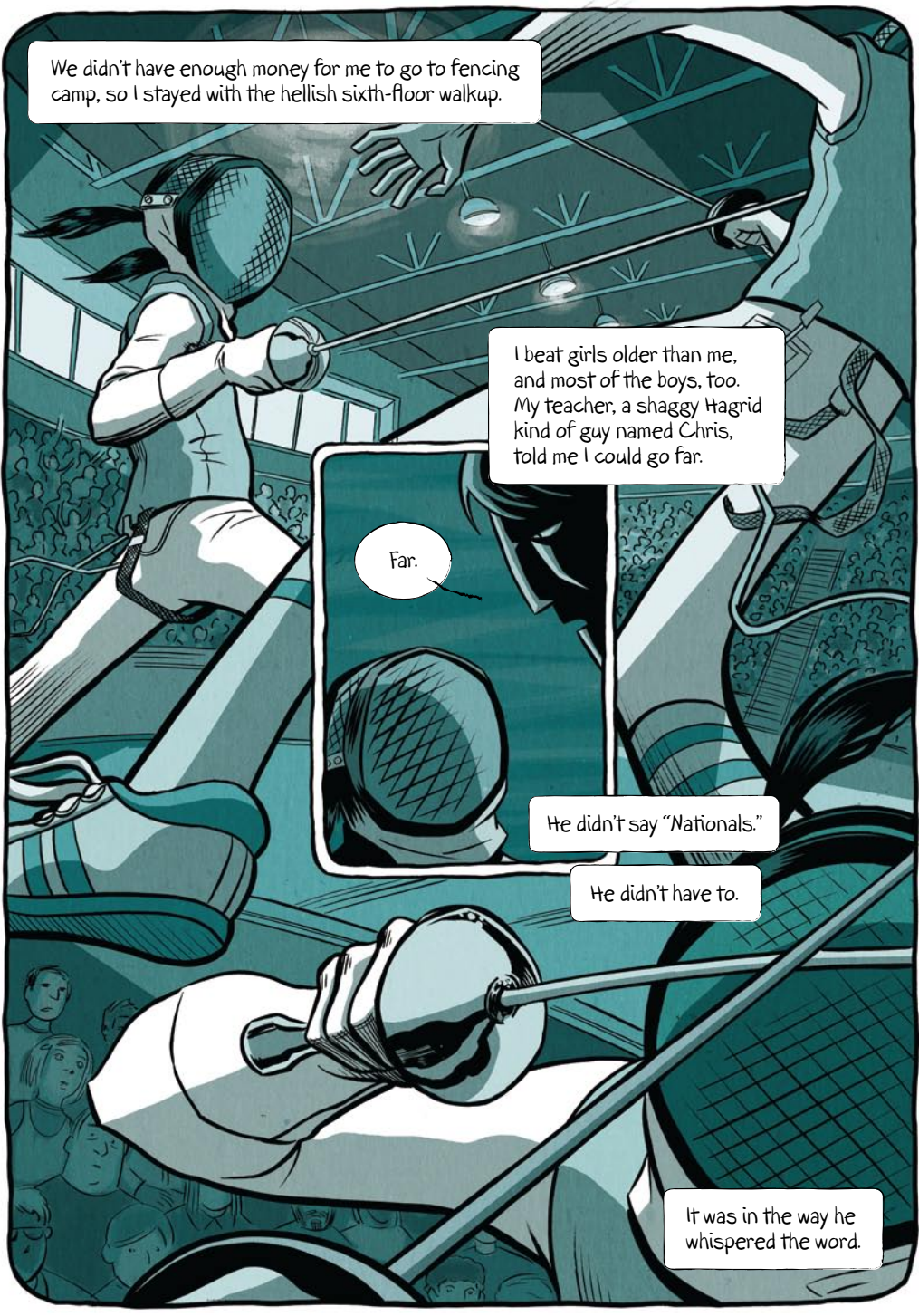
I prevailed.



fencing School

Defen
Selfe
Confu





We didn't have enough money for me to go to fencing camp, so I stayed with the hellish sixth-floor walkup.

I beat girls older than me, and most of the boys, too. My teacher, a shaggy Hagrid kind of guy named Chris, told me I could go far.

Far.

He didn't say "Nationals."

He didn't have to.

It was in the way he whispered the word.




I nodded, taking off my mask,
wiping the sweat out of my eyes.

I didn't smile at him
and he didn't smile at me.

It wasn't that kind of relationship.








Then I put the mask back on and faced my next opponent, a redheaded seventh grader, Stephen Grady, who liked to remind me his name—




—isn't pronounced "Step Hen."

Of course that made me want to call him that all the more.

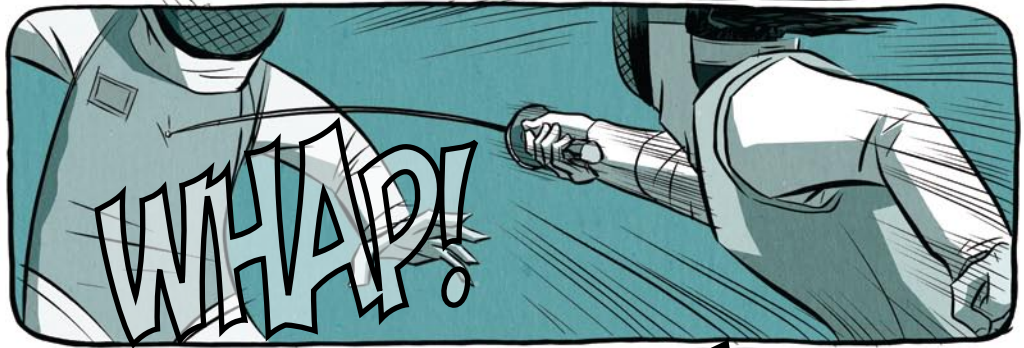


He thought he was The Dread Pirate Roberts from "The Princess Bride"

Lots of flash and dash and even a bit of shouting.



He should have studied saber instead of foil. They tend to yell as loud as they want and act like idiots.



My father enjoyed how I stood there calmly beating kids way older than me.

**GO, ALIERA!
ATTA GIRL!**

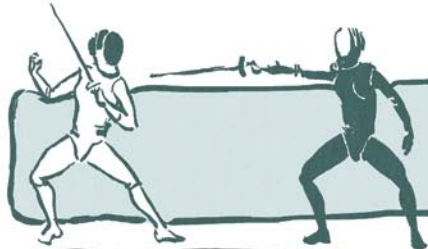
I wish she'd apply that concentration to her school work.

I was eleven. I didn't have that much homework, and what I had was boring.

Who needed to know the names of all the state capitals anyway? I knew the name of ours—Albany.

That was enough.





3. Point in Line

Now I go to the smallest high school in the city
and we still have cliques, even though most
of us have been in school together for ...

... well, *forever*.





There are the *jocks* and *jockettes*—
but fencing doesn't count.



The *goths*—but I don't look good in black.



The *nerds*—but my grades aren't high enough.



And the *preps*. Ugh.





Of course I had to have special permission to bring a weapon to school. It's "peace bonded." That's what Ms. Pucci, the vice principal, calls it.



My bag has a special lock on it. I wear the key around my neck.

That's so ...

so ...

James Bond.



And like James Bond, I was a *loner*. That was okay.



Okay until the start of tenth grade that is.



A new boy came to school.

Avery.

Avery Castle.

Is that a name or *what*? He shouldn't have been in Hallowell High. He should have been in the movies.



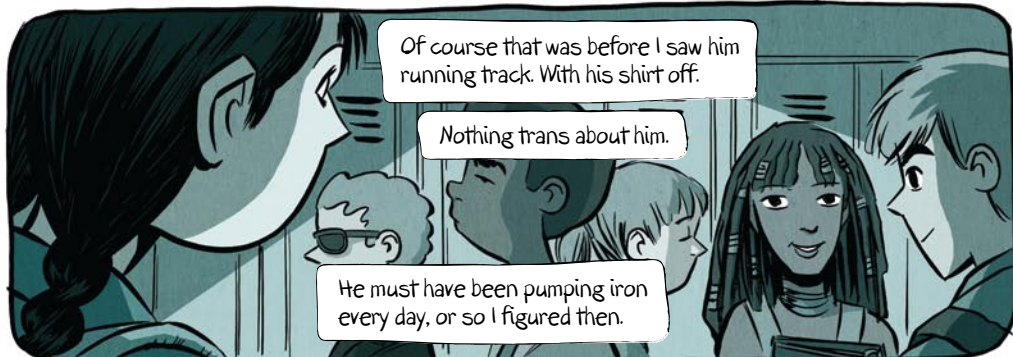
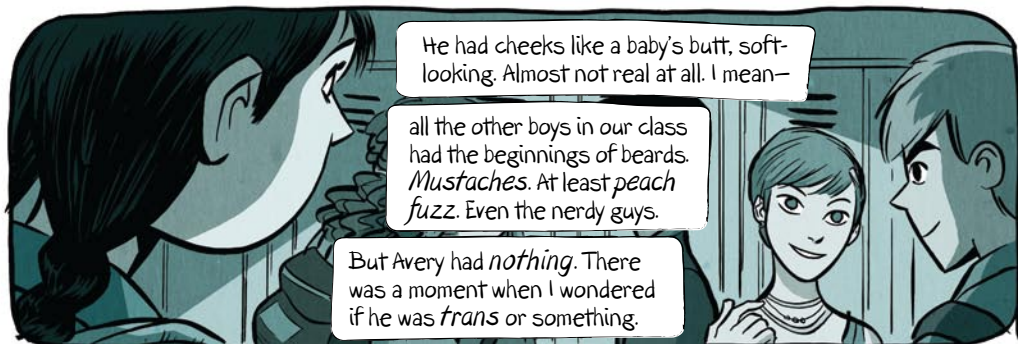
He was definitely the cat among the pigeons. Girls fell into his path as if by magic, and it didn't matter whether they were jockettes, goths, nerds, or preps.

He had a smile for them all. A *big* smile. Full of *teeth*. Sometimes, it seemed, too many teeth. That's a joke.

Or maybe not.



A hundred fifty years ago, the girls would all be dropping handkerchiefs in front of his Nikes. Or what passed for Nikes back then.





So I forgot about him.

Yeah.

Right.

The world doesn't work that way.
In case you haven't noticed.







But *dance*? Never happen.

At least not with a boy.

Or anyone.



Just me alone in my room.

Not even looking
at the mirror.

Prince Charming all the way.

Maybe he can't help it.

I mean if he's being charming
to me, it must be like a dripping
faucet he can't turn off.



Frankly, it gives me the shivers.



He's working it too hard.



Actually, he made me tremble—



—and I wasn't sure why.



Suddenly, irrational as it was, I wished I had my weapon in my hand. The practice weapon.

With the stupid jewel.



I'd never actually heard that pronounced, only seen it written in *fantasy novels*.



What next?

Would he talk about *gibbering monsters* and *tesselated castle walls*? *Ichor* and the *fey*?

Aliera Carstairs.



That name's familiar.



Do I know you?



Protect the heart, Aliera.

How can you know me? You just got to Hallowell.

Still...



Come and
get 'em!



This is not a
gender issue.




Surprise
me, ladies and
gentlemen.

UGH

EAK

RIGHT

IDIOT!




One of you does the *surgery*,
the other does the *writery*.



GROAN



Surprise me!



Enough with
the surprises.





Better than live things.

Those, too.



Is he trying to make me shudder?



Pax?

You speak the old tongue.

Huh?



I don't mind writing down... the results.

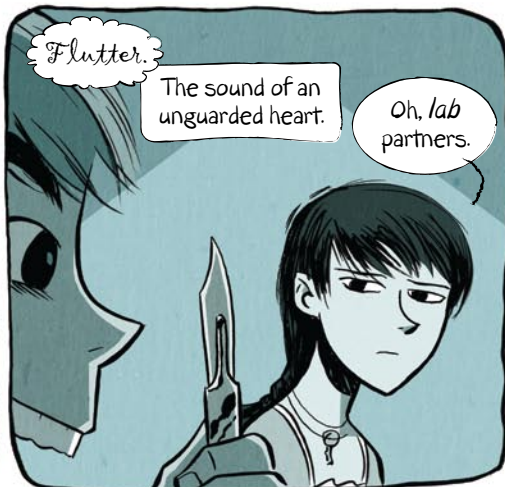
I hoped you'd say that.

Better he does the cutting.



I'm color blind and might miss something. I mean—

gray is gray after all.





Every time I tried to say something to Avery, I began to stutter.

I'd never been that close to such a handsome guy before.



In fact, the only boys I'd been close to
were the ones I'd beaten with my weapon.

If you can call that "close."

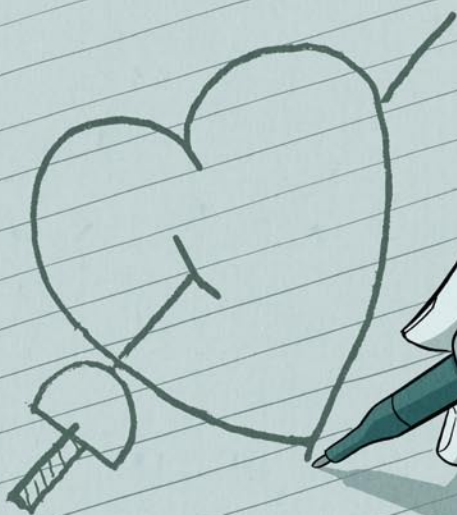
- September 4th, Frog Day 1

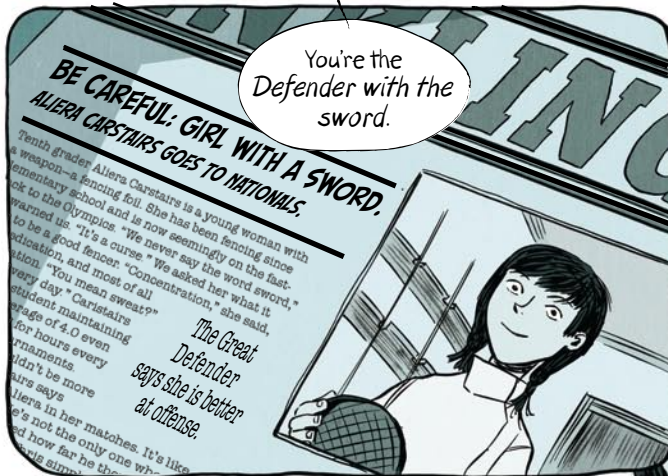
Like Step Hen Grady, who's now in tenth grade
and sometimes looks at me funny when we fence.



I could hear Chris's voice once again in
my ear. "Protect your *heart*, Aliera."

Too late.





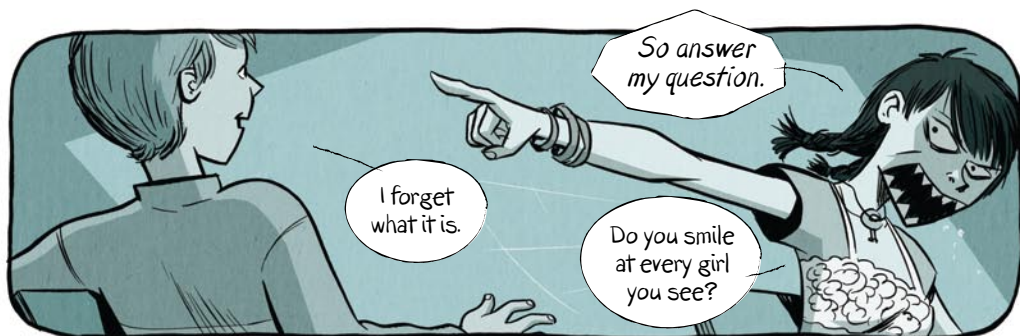




WHA

I bet you are.





I was back to stuttering.

heart fully exposed.







That made me giggle. I don't giggle well. I sound more like an old horse than a girl, all snorts and snuffles.



Then he stuck a pencil up the frog's butt and made it flop around. That was so brutal and odd, it stopped my giggles cold.

We spent a month on the frog.
I was a careful recorder.

DAY 1: Frog here.

I want to be
elsewhere.

Day 3: We identify outside parts.
I draw them in the journal.

DAYS: First slice.

I prefer pizza.

DAY 8: We identify inside parts.
Liver. Intestine. Kidneys. Brain.

Ick factor high.

DAY 10: Stomach contents: flies and more flies.
Or flecks. Or fleas. Or flora. All looking like fluff.

Yuck factor high.

By the time we were halfway done, Prince was in pieces and I was in love. With Avery, not the frog. It didn't matter that he was occasionally odd. I like odd. And his oddness was outweighed by his beauty.



Yes—*beauty*. If you'd asked me last summer if a boy could be beautiful, I'd have laughed. But that was before I met Avery.



I certainly kept my guard up outside of class and didn't speak to him anywhere but in lab.



Every verbal thrust I parried. I doubt he knew how I felt. Or maybe he assumed all the girls felt that way so it didn't matter.

It mattered.

Day 12: Avery carved away frog's googly orbs. The Prince has eyeballed his last fly.

Day 17: Flippers flensed.



eyeball

Flensed—that's a word I learned in English class when we studied *Moby Dick*. I explained it to Avery. It was odd he hadn't had to read it in his old school, it being a classic and all. Plus, he seemed to know other strange words.

Smart as well. I should have expected that.



He didn't say as well as what. That hurt, but it didn't matter. I was used to hurt. You can't fence and not get hurt. My mother still flinches at all my bruises, but I wear them like medals.

Does love need an explanation? How should I know? I had nothing to go on.

No boys had ever looked twice at me, except maybe *Step Hen*. And now that I think of it, he probably was only looking at me to find a flaw in my fencing technique.



He is
gorgeous,
Sally.

Yeah.

Doesn't
know a rat's
about kissing,
though.

Like he
learned it from
a book.



Bet he
knows better
now.



Next time
we go on a picnic,
he'll be bringing a
tongue sandwich.







In the lab, I'd replaced the stuttering with a kind of ironic commentary. I knew as little about kissing as Avery did. And while he was learning with Sally, I had a distinct feeling—which is somewhere between actually knowing something and a big sloppy guess—that I'd never have a chance to find out.



What I knew was something about attacks and lunges. About parrying. And a bit about defense.

But not enough.


The Prince formerly known as Frog.



The Prince is no longer charming.



4. Prise de Fer



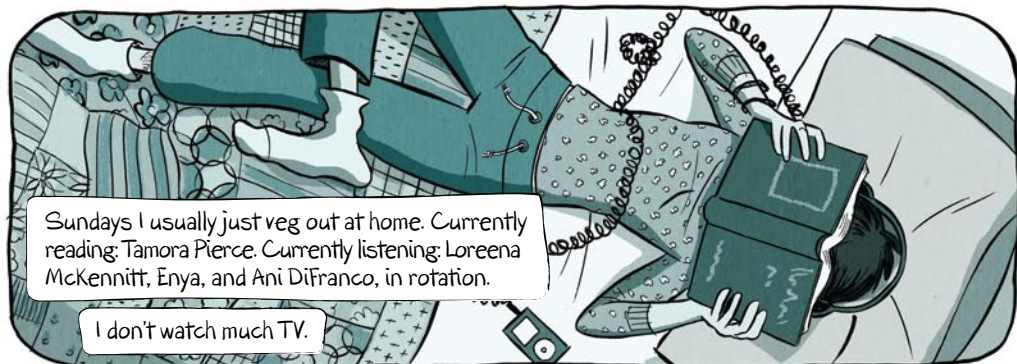
My regular daily schedule was to leave school right after my last class and go to fencing. If that sounds boring, it wasn't.

It's just what I did.

What I *liked* to do.

To get to fencing practice meant taking two buses and two subways, though it only takes one subway and one bus to get home. If that sounds like some strange magic, trust me—it's nothing but the New York City transit system at work.

Saturdays I spend most of the day fencing, then head to my Aunt Hannah's and cousin Caroline's house in Brooklyn Heights. A lot of fencing, you're thinking? If you want to go to Nationals, if you want to get "far," it's necessary.



Sundays I usually just veg out at home. Currently reading: Tamora Pierce. Currently listening: Loreena McKennitt, Enya, and Ani DiFranco, in rotation.

I don't watch much TV.



About those Saturdays at Aunt Hannah's: I do role-playing games with my cousin Caroline, who's two years younger than me.



She's had rheumatoid arthritis for as long as I can remember.



I may fence, but she's always been the brave one.

When we play, Caroline's always the queen. I'm captain of her guard, the expert swordswoman, Xenda of Xenon. Not much of a stretch, but it's fun in a dorky sort of way. We play with more passion than it deserves. Than either of us ever really understood.

I love Caroline. We've done role-playing since she was really young, and that makes our Saturdays an unbreakable date. Like a promise. Or an oath. And it gives Aunt Hannah time off to go shopping or whatever. Like Caroline, Aunt Hannah never complains.

Xenda rolls and gets 10 magic points.

But she'll never be as smart as Queen Furby.

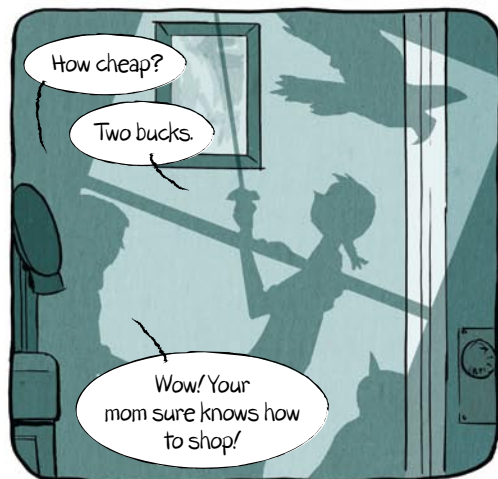
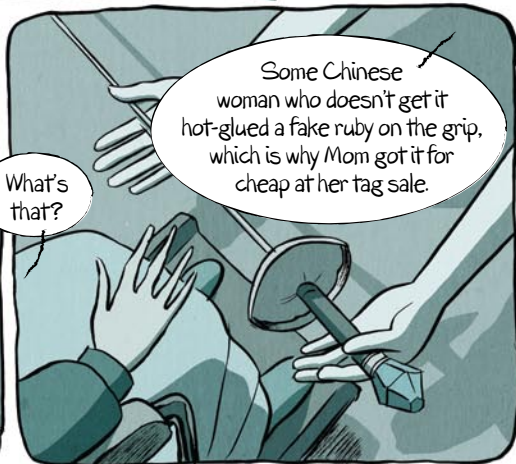
or as magical as her wizard cat who speaks all the animal languages of the world.

She says "Beware of frogs and princes."

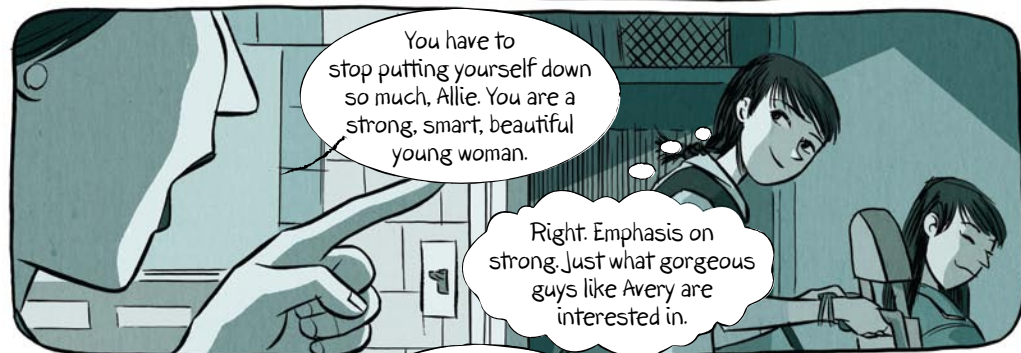
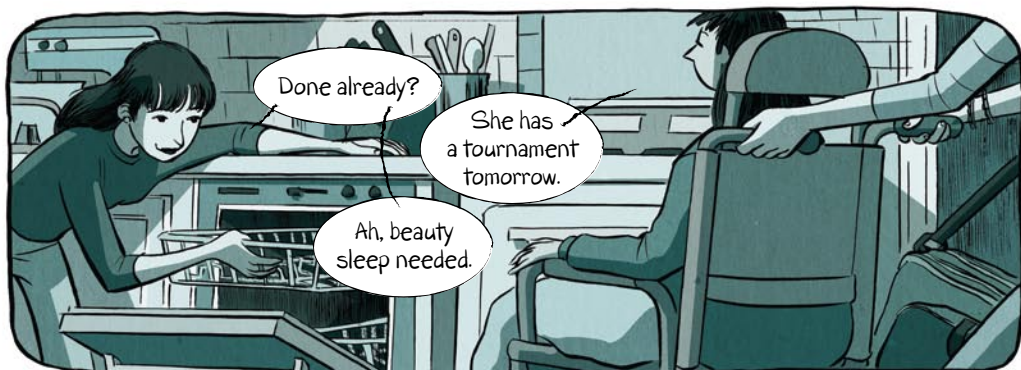
MRRROW

I'd been entertaining Caroline with stories about the lab and Avery.

She sounded a little jealous.









Good luck
in the tourney,
my hero.

See you next
Saturday?

Of course,
my queen. When have
I ever missed?



Only when
you're in tournaments,
mighty Xenda. But of course
I forgive you that.

It brings
glory to the
kingdom.

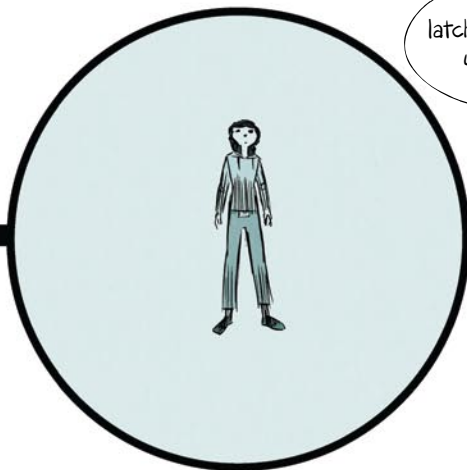
And there
was last year when
you had...

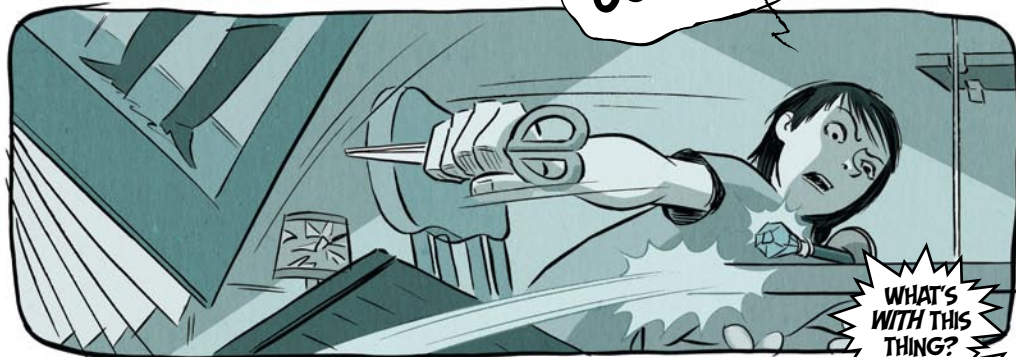
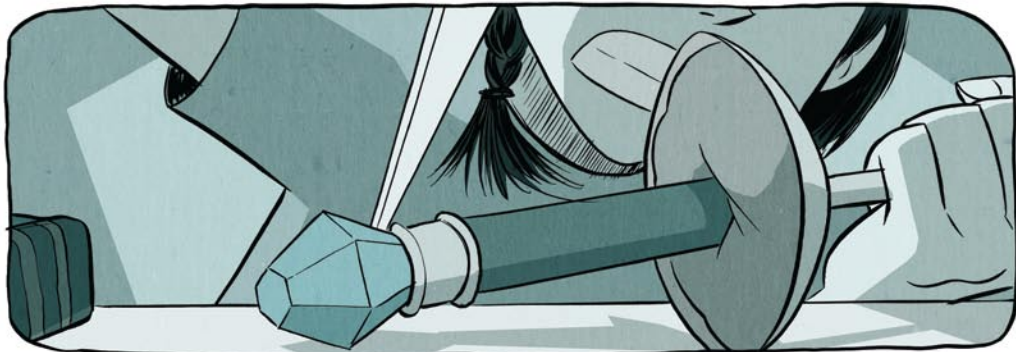


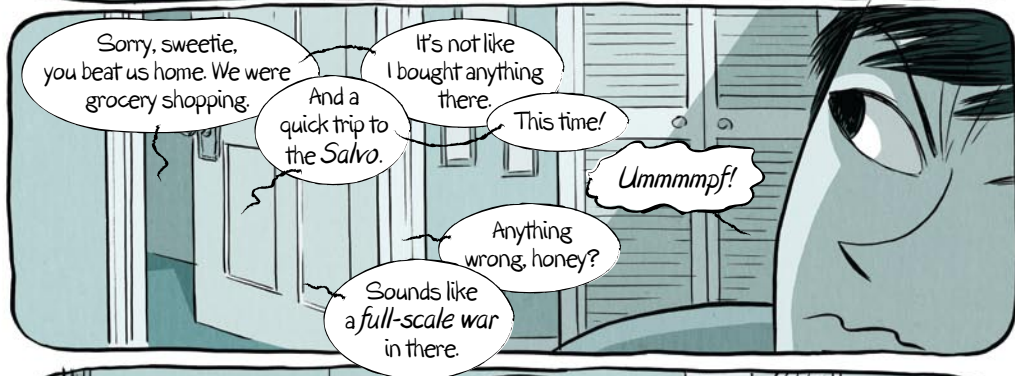
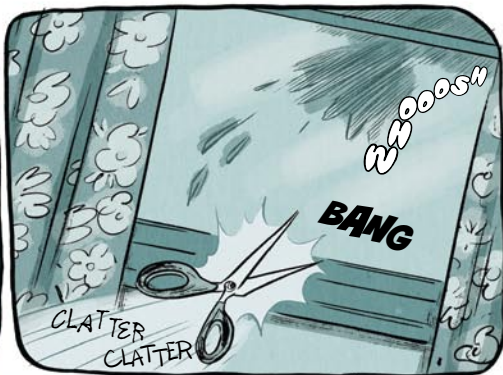


Hi, everyone,
I'm home!



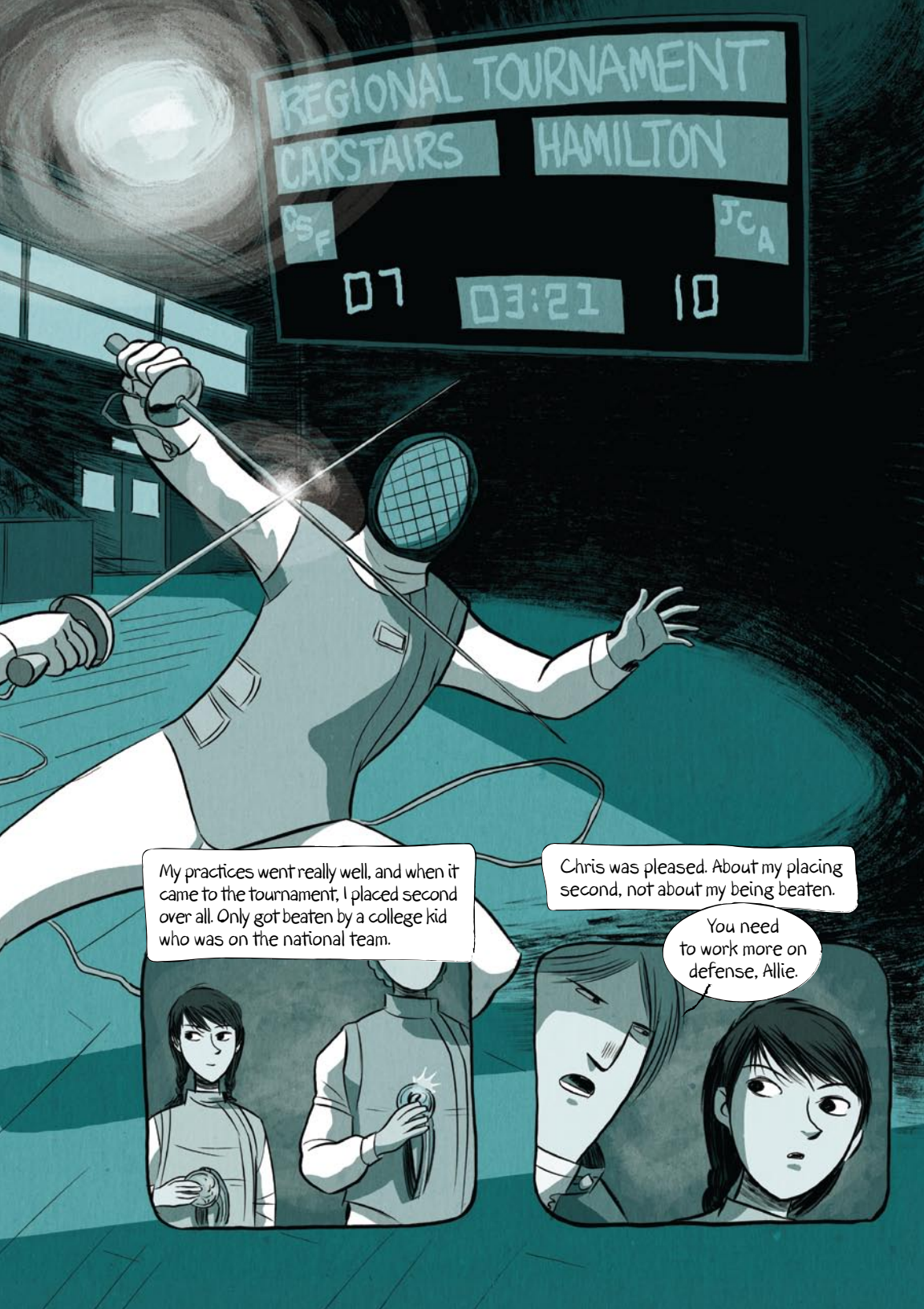






I never did get the jewel off, but as it was a practice weapon, not the electrified one I use in tournaments, it didn't matter. What surprised me was that the jewel didn't overbalance the foil. In fact, in some strange way it seemed to help.





REGIONAL TOURNAMENT

CARSTAIRS

HAMILTON

CSF

JCA

07

03:21

10

My practices went really well, and when it came to the tournament, I placed second over all. Only got beaten by a college kid who was on the national team.

Chris was pleased. About my placing second, not about my being beaten.

You need to work more on defense, Allie.



So now you know all about my so-called life. School, fencing, more fencing, to Caroline's, and home. Which is why the next Friday, right before school was out, when Avery asked me to a movie, I forgot all about protecting my heart.

Chris was right about my weak defense.

So, Al...
you busy
tomorrow?

Saturday?

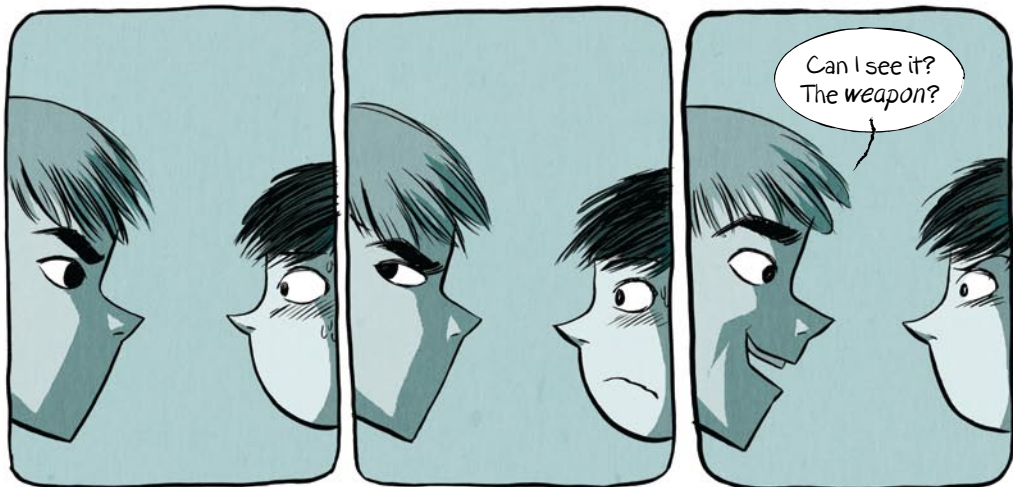
Yes...
no...
why...?

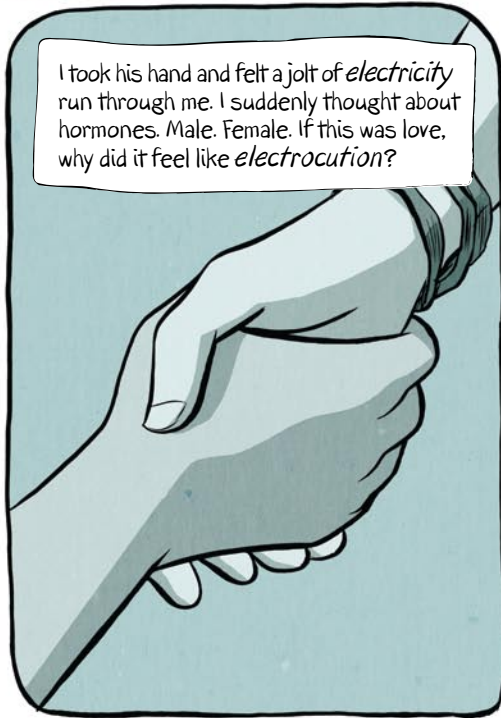
Would you
like to go
to a movie?

With me?











He said it as if he'd never heard the word before, or at least never heard it spoken aloud.



Caroline. Queen Furby. My heart sank when I thought of her waiting for her champion, who was more interested in a boy than...

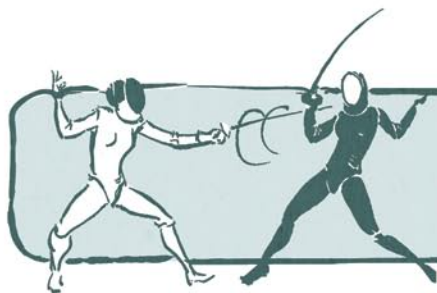
But my heart didn't sink as much as it should have.

Saturday at four it is. A date with a girl with a sword.

Weapon!

Whatever.





5. Derobement

I didn't do well in fencing practice that Saturday. The new foil with the jewel felt odd in my hand, as if I had no right to it. Or no right yet. And of course, how could I concentrate anyway? Things seemed to have shifted, inside me, if nowhere else.



I worried about my clothes, about not washing my hair. (Like an idiot, I'd forgotten to bring shampoo.)

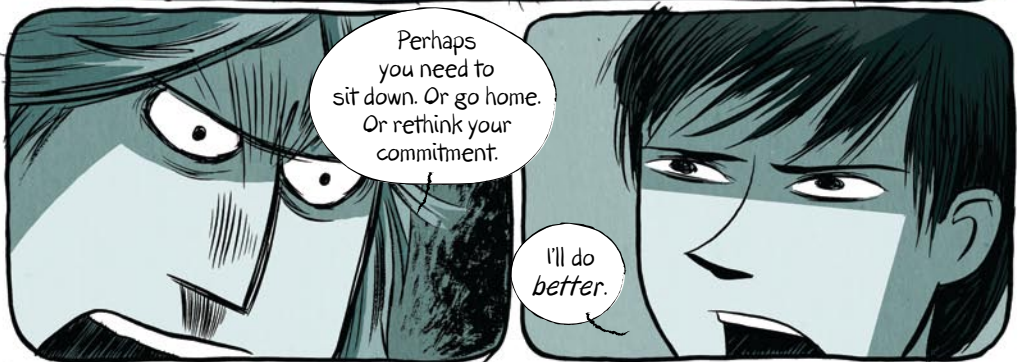
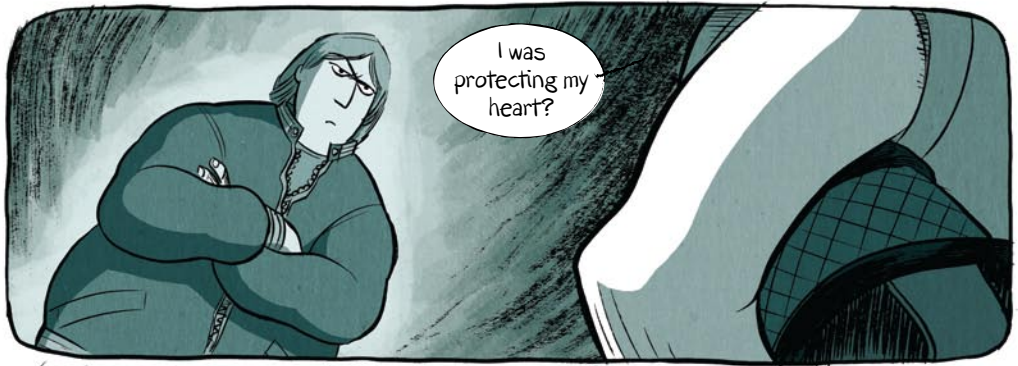
I worried about hauling my fencing bag around with me on a date.

Fencing school has a rule about not leaving personal equipment overnight.









SCORE



I didn't do any better and Chris sent me packing. Some defender I turned out to be!

SCORE



SCORE



Never mind.

More time for getting ready for my date.

With beautiful Avery.



Who somehow is attracted to a woman with a weapon. I didn't like to think about that last item too closely.

I was afraid if I did, I might not like what I found.





So I ate two butterscotch candies.

After fencing, I always need a bit of sugar to shock my system.

Most of the other kids drink that blue power drink, but it looks too much like Windex to me.

I took a long shower in the school's tacky bathroom, with its missing tiles and the showerhead that spits out lukewarm water, winter and summer.



After toweling off, I got into fresh clothes. Actually, they weren't all that fresh because of being stuffed into my bag.



Queen Furby,
I'm not going to get
there today.

No, I...
I feel fine. Really.
Actually, I have...

I have...
a date.

Yes, with
a boy. Yeah, a kind
of prince. The one
in the lab.

Okay—
I promise I'll
tell you everything.
Not that there
will be...

well...

... anything to tell.
Nothing x-rated. Sure.
Next Saturday.

Absolutely.

My hair still wet,

clothes a bit pongy,

flushed from all
the exercise,

I left for my
big date.

I was hauling the bag, in which I had my
dirty clothes, wet towel, breast protector,
underarm protector, knickers, glove,

mask,

jacket.

possibly because no one but me wanted to be opposite the guy
who was showing a piece of his anatomy that looked remarkably
like the frog after we were halfway through skinning him.

I was ready to throw up.

Or give up.

or get up and leave the train.

But I made it, with fifteen
minutes to spare.



butterscotch candies,

two body cords,

two electric foils,

and my new practice foil
with the stupid jewel that
would *not* come off.

No one gave me a seat on the bus,

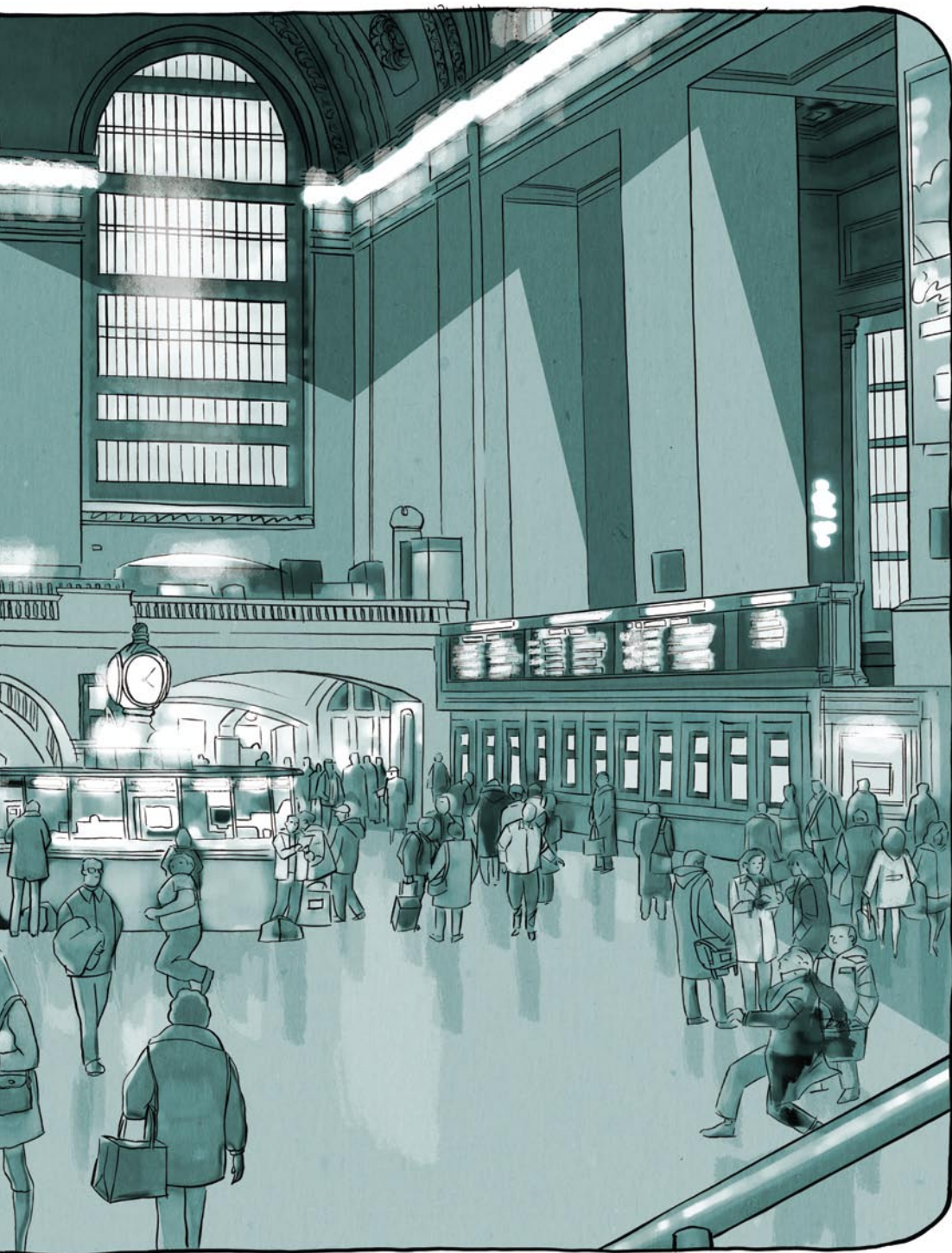
though I got a seat on the subway,

hailed the bag and my
now-quaking self

up the stairs,

and into Grand Central Station.





6. Lunge



Fifteen minutes late!



Of course, he's often late to lab, too.



I'm not worried.

Yet.




After all, this is New York. Trains and buses are always slow. Traffic is regularly gridlocked. If this were Camelot or Middle Earth or HarryPotterland, or Queen Furby's kingdom ...

Besides, real guys—well, they have no sense of time.

Or so I've been told.

By my mother!



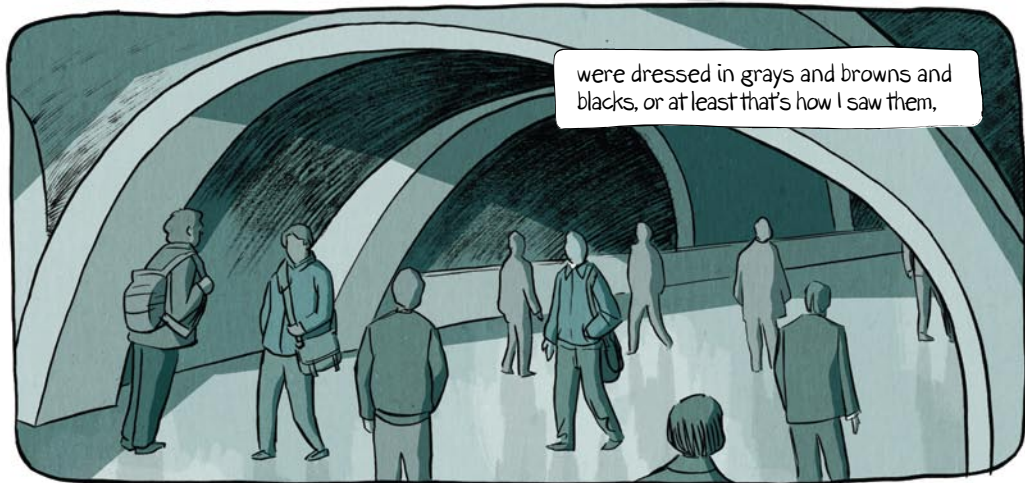
I unzipped my bag and got out the butterscotch candies.

But as another fifteen minutes went by, I stopped watching the clock and started watching the people. Watching people is something I'm good at.

Dating them—
evidently bad.



Most of the folks rushing for trains



were dressed in grays and browns and blacks, or at least that's how I saw them,



as if train-catching demanded a uniform.

But occasionally, oddly, someone hurried by,



almost as if flying.



One dark-skinned woman
with a coin-trimmed head-
dress hurtled past me.

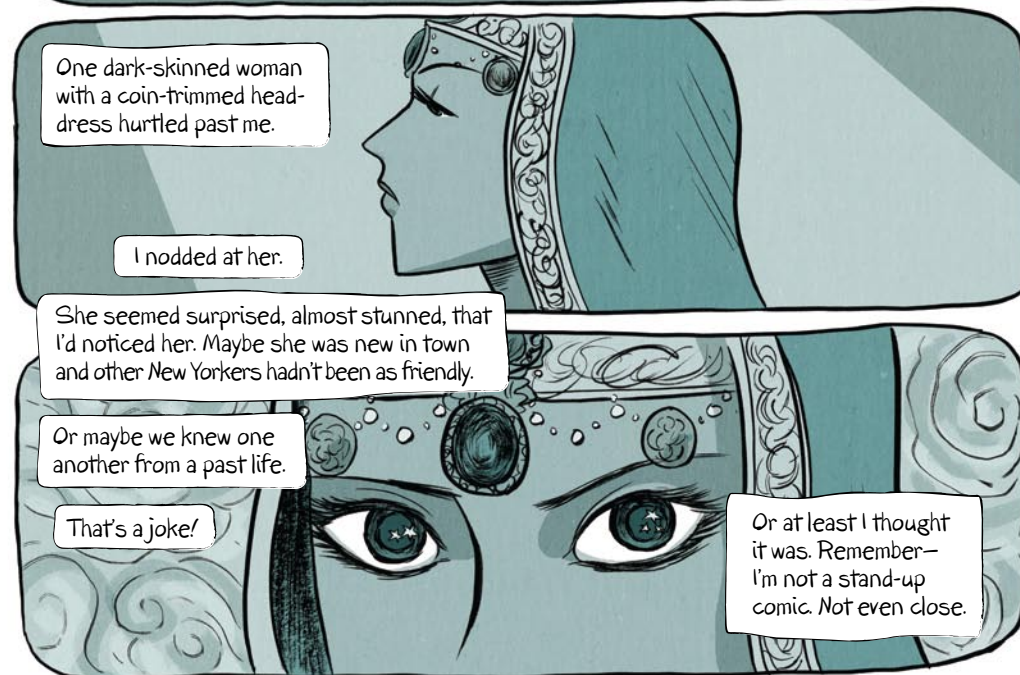
I nodded at her.

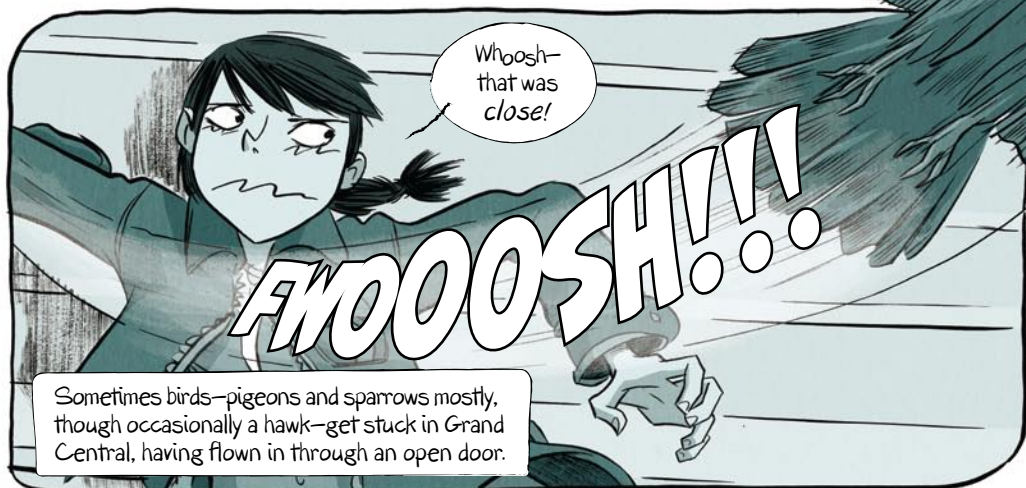
She seemed surprised, almost stunned, that
I'd noticed her. Maybe she was new in town
and other New Yorkers hadn't been as friendly.

Or maybe we knew one
another from a past life.

That's a joke!

Or at least I thought
it was. Remember—
I'm not a stand-up
comic. Not even close.

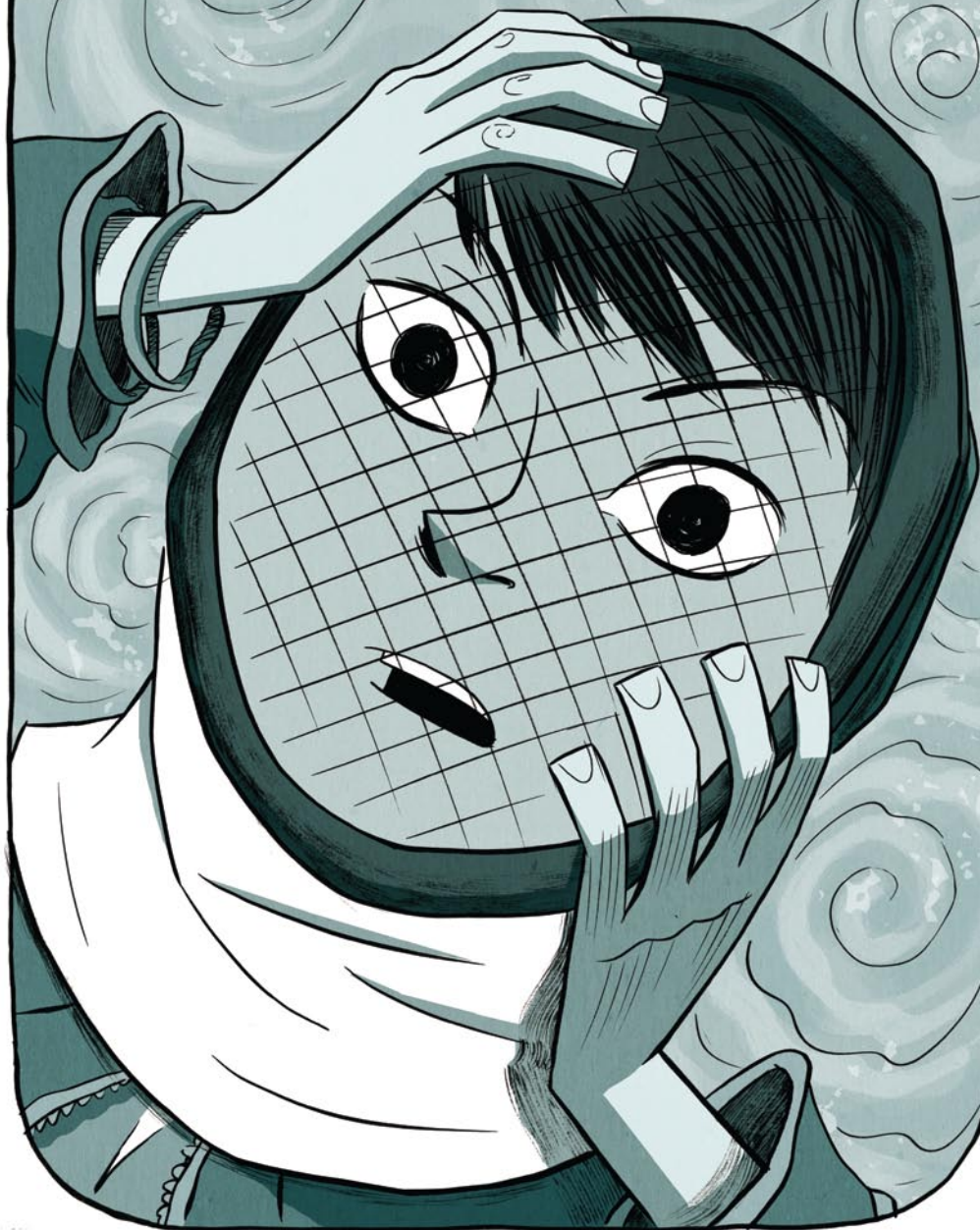








And that's when everything changed.





As I looked through the dark mesh of the mask,
I saw that the bird was not a bird at all. It was a ...



This is
crazy!

I can see ...

color ...

and ...

a small red dragon that flew to the
ground, pounced on the butterscotch
I'd dropped, and flew off again.



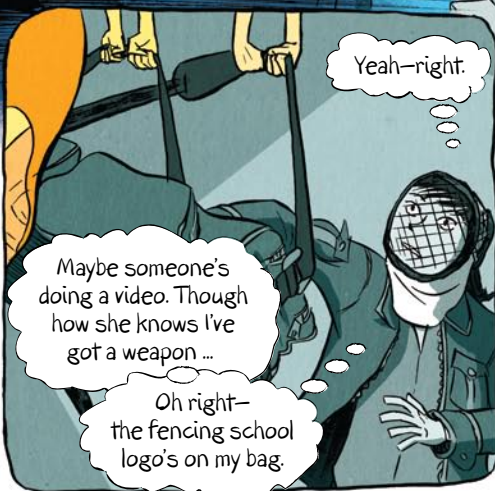




What on earth ...?

Not on your earth, Defender, but mine.

Use thy sword.



Yeah—right.

Maybe someone's doing a video. Though how she knows I've got a weapon ...

Oh right—the fencing school logo's on my bag.



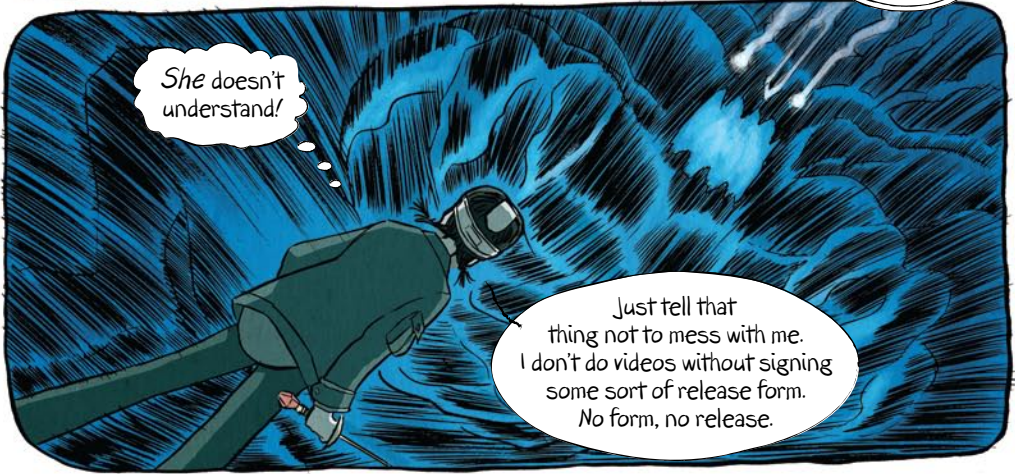
Good—you mean to use that weapon?

The other weapons in the bag are electric.

Ah, you say electric when you mean power.

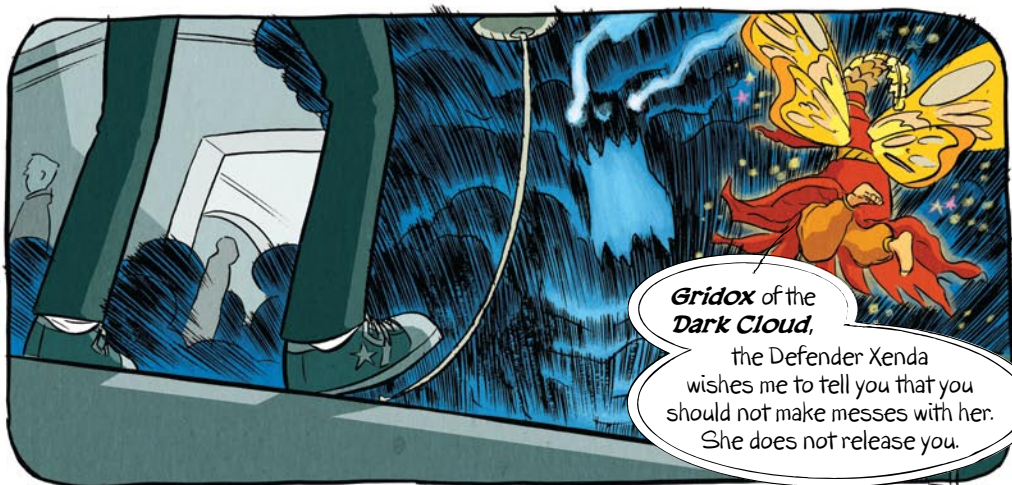
No power to them unless there's somewhere to plug it in.

I do not understand.



She doesn't understand!

Just tell that thing not to mess with me. I don't do videos without signing some sort of release form. No form, no release.



If she knows me as Xenda, she must have been talking to Caroline. Or Aunt Hannah. These video guys are thorough!

So okay—I'll go along with the gag right now. But *boy*, are they going to hear from me next Saturday!

SNAP!

Ready.

Or so I thought.

7. Parry-Riposte




WHOSH!






En garde for real,
you bastard, Gridlock or
whatever your name is.



Of course, this
is all crazy.



And if anyone sees me
waving a sword about in
Grand Central, I'm in deep ...



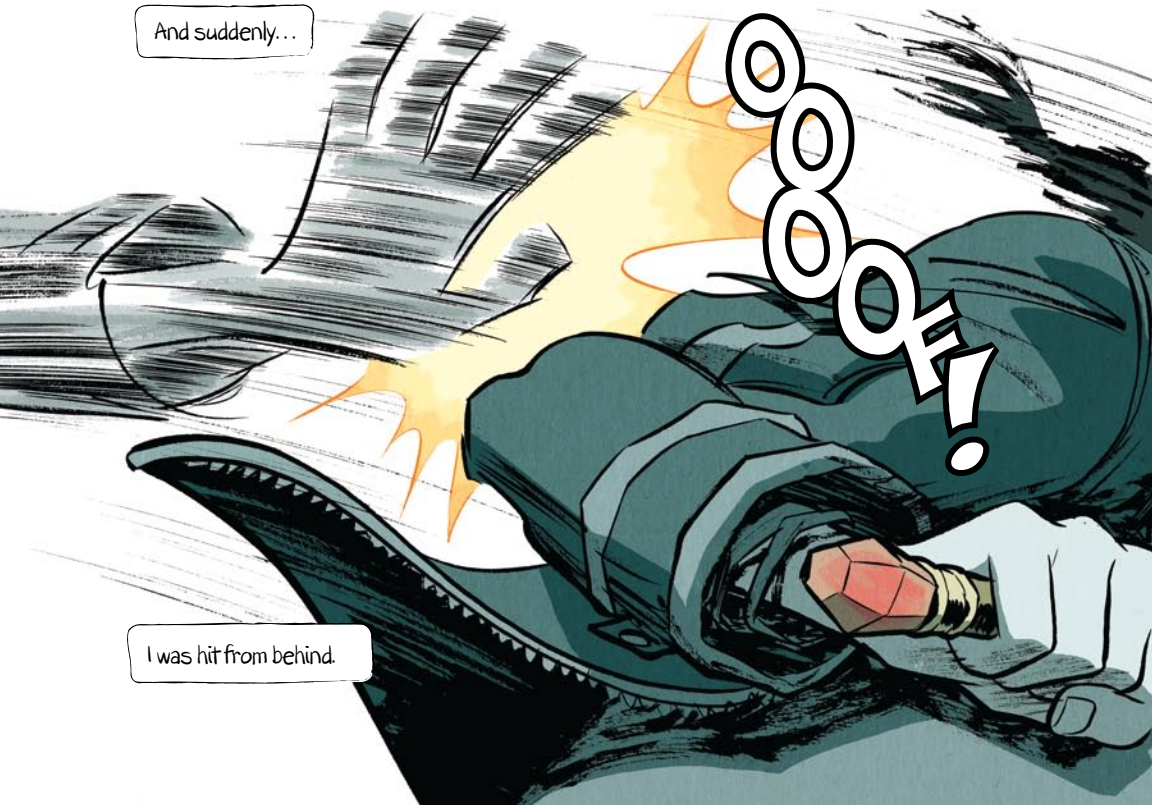
I wish Chris had seen that! I'd be on my way to Nationals right now.

I heard someone clapping, turned, expecting to see the lady in the gold crown.

Or someone else equally bizarre.

But she was gone.

And suddenly...



I was hit from behind.

8. Counter-Riposte

I knew you were *weird*, Aliera. But after the grief you gave me about catching a peek at your sword in school—you draw it out *here* in Grand Central Station?

Weapon, damn it!

And where's it gone?

Not exactly what I expected for a first date—a full body tackle. All I felt was an awful heaviness, much heavier than a boy Avery's size should weigh, and a husky OOOUF in my ear.

Whatever happened to good old-fashioned "May I carry your fencing bag, Aliera?"



I would even have settled for that stomach-falling sensation again. Or the electric shock treatment that happened when we first shook hands.



And what
are you doing
on *top* of me,
anyway?

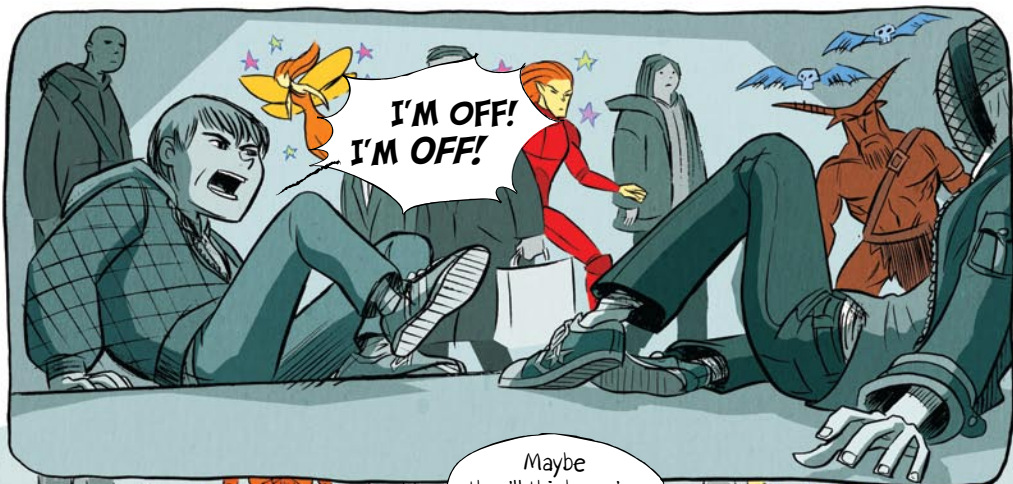


Oh, for
God's sake, Alier,
shut up. Didn't you see
all the cops when you came in?
They probably think you're
a major terrorist. And
me, too, for being
with you.



You're not
with me. You're
on me.

**GET OFF,
GET OFF!**







It smells
of **ME**, you

you ...

creep!







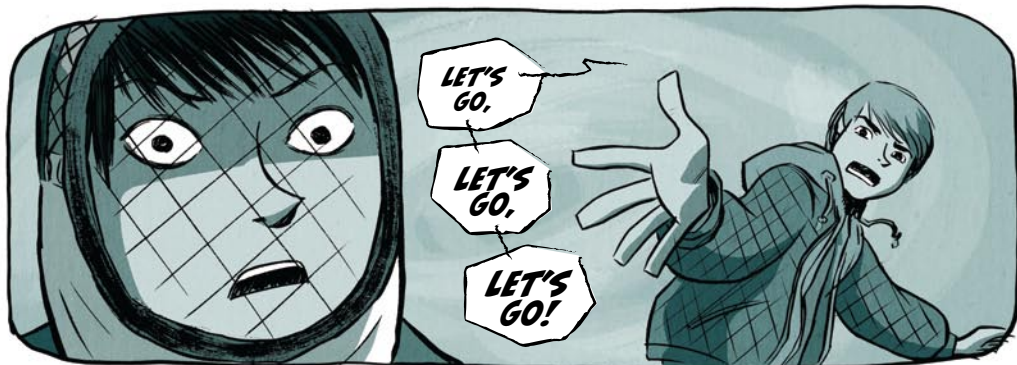












Because of Mom and her need to buy old things,
Aunt Hannah who has spent her life taking care
of her disabled child, Caroline who counts on me,
Chris who teaches me, Dad who applauds me.

"Why not," indeed.
Because I'm the *Defender*,
I guess.











Definitely weird.

Definitely illiterate.




I don't get it. Yes, he's gorgeous. Yes, he's funny. Yes, I feel something when he's around, like electricity. Or as the strange lady said, POWER. But he's mean, unstable, afraid of closed-in spaces, and a complete egoist.




But he's also the only guy who's ever asked me out.



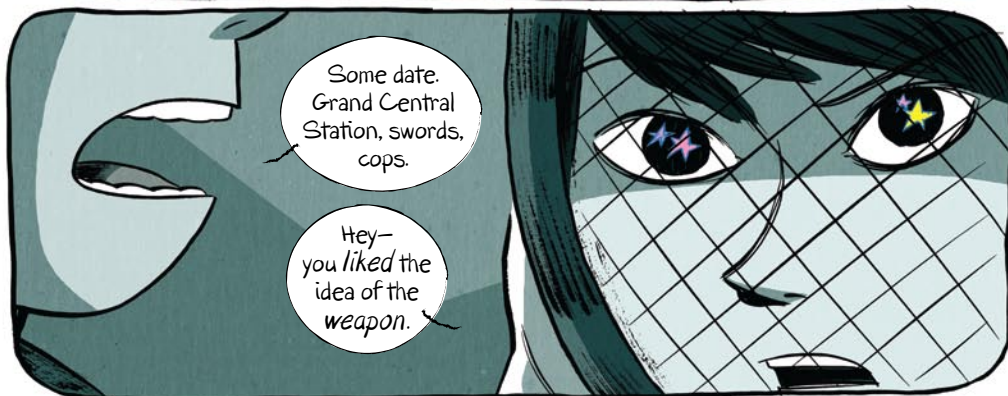
Who needs that?

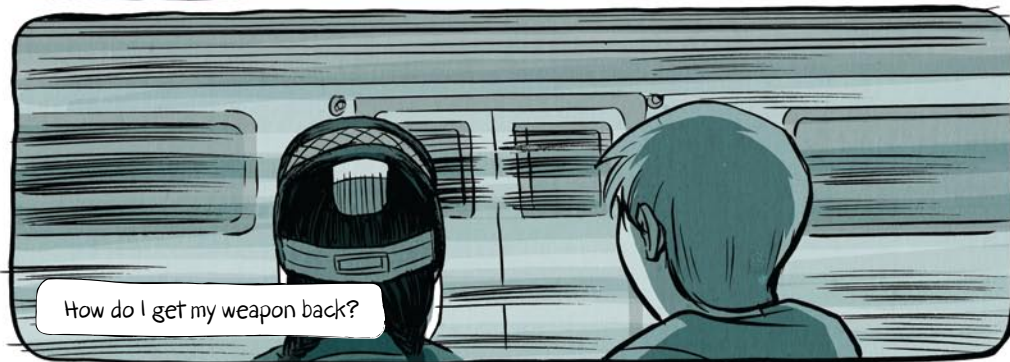


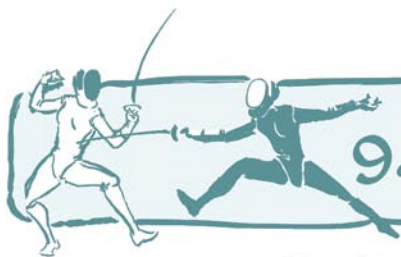
Avery, can you see ...



How can you see anything with that stupid mask on? Take it off! Take it off now!







9. Coupe de Temps



Now see
what you've
done.

I've done?
If you'd moved
faster ...



Help!

Stop!

Oh, my
God!

What
are they
doing?

Kids!



I can't,
Alier. Not a dark
tunnel. At least the
station has
lights.

Yeah—
and cops!



The tunnel
is close and
smelly.

He'll
never make
it alone.

Here—
take my
hand.



Don't
hate me.


How
could I?

You
will.









All around me was now much darker, though perhaps it was just the tunnel. Yet even in the darkness, I think I saw Avery for the first time.

I realized with a start that he was on the track team to outrun the darkness. That he was charming and kissed girls to keep away fear. Only I didn't quite understand then what darkness and what fear were consuming him.

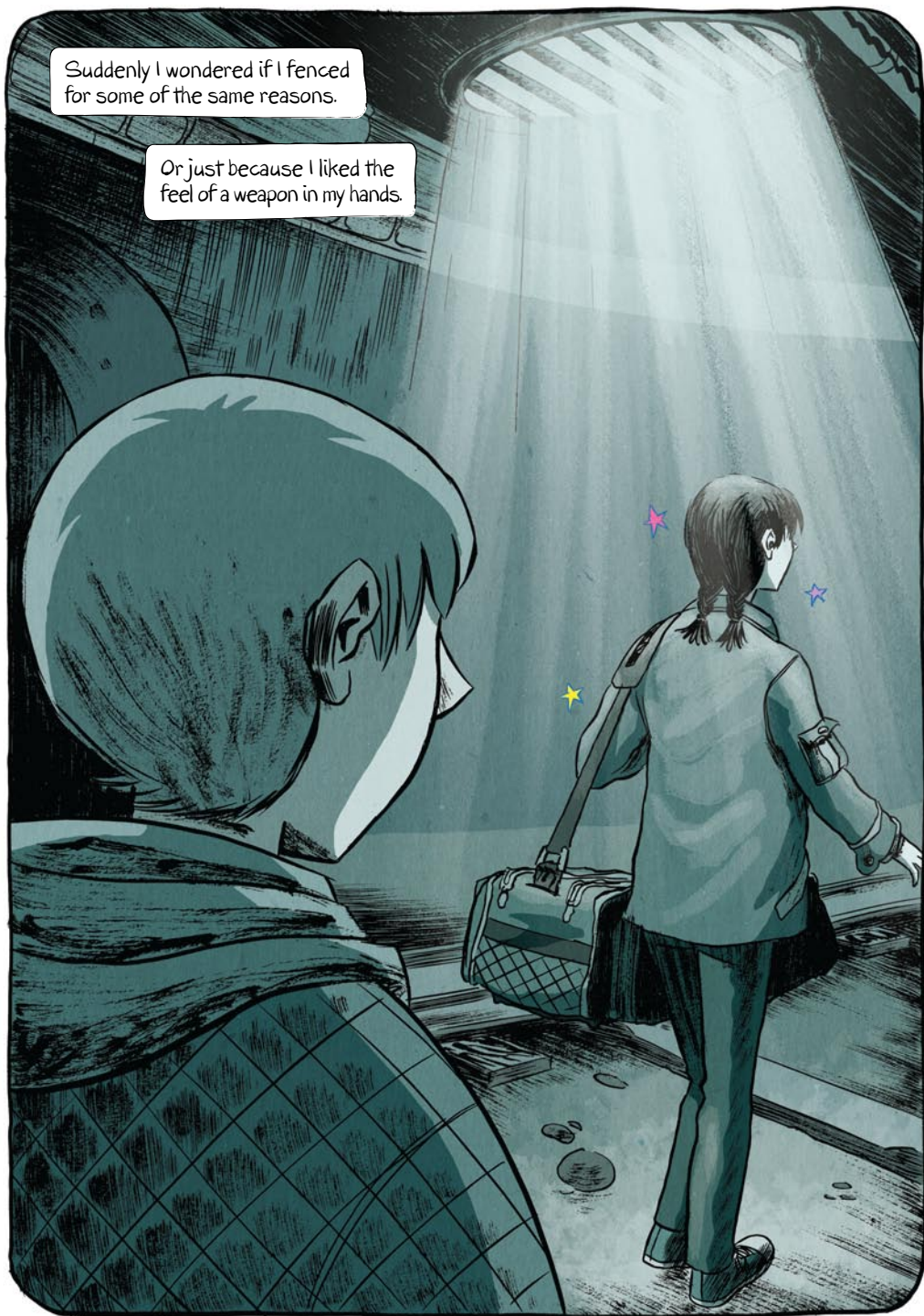
The girls, the cheers, reminded him how alive he was. But they reminded him, too, that he wasn't a hero.

He was ... something else.

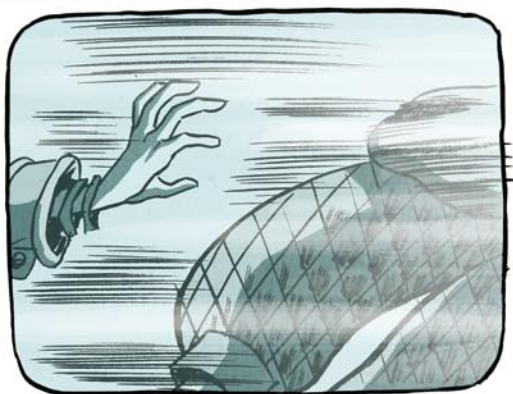
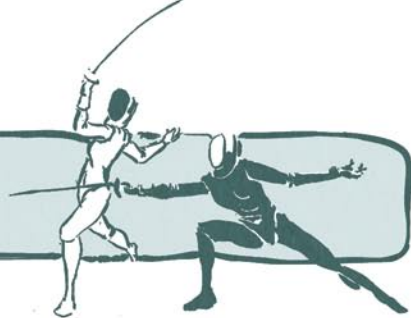
I just didn't know *what* then.

Suddenly I wondered if I fenced
for some of the same reasons.

Or just because I liked the
feel of a weapon in my hands.



10. Esquive



**IT'S A
TRAIN!**



SCREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE



**I
HATE
RATS!**



WAP!

SCREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

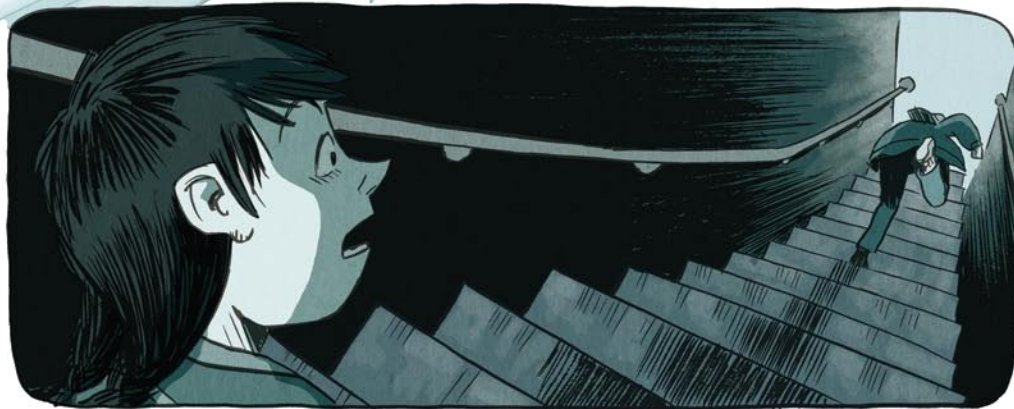


SCREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

YUCK!



SPAK!









I was fully glamour'd, Aliera,
and sent for your sword.
It is a sword of the
Kingdom of Helfdon,
not a foil for
fencing.



The jewel in its hilt keeps the
Seelie Court safe and your
world in balance. My court,
the *Unseelie*, wants to
disturb that balance.

What in
the world is a
Seelie Court?



Not in *your* world but *mine*. The ones
in gold and red. Whose Defender you
are. The Unseelie ...

Are
the bad
guys?

Come on.
How can that
be true?

That's a
real ruby?



Very real.
As I was not. But I loved
being human, being handsome,
being the hero. I do not
want to be what I was
before.



If
I stay
here ...

in the
dark ..

I'll go
back to being
a ...

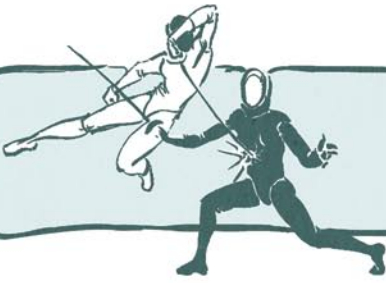
A troll!



Go, Avery. Go!

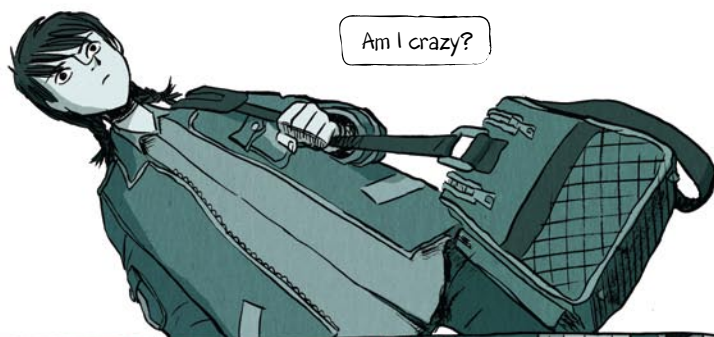
I don't
care about the sword.
Weapon. Whatever.

Just
go, Avery! Stay
beautiful in the
light.



11. Remise





Am I crazy?

Fairies, trolls, kingdoms, a jewel that keeps the world in balance not glued to what looks like a practice foil?



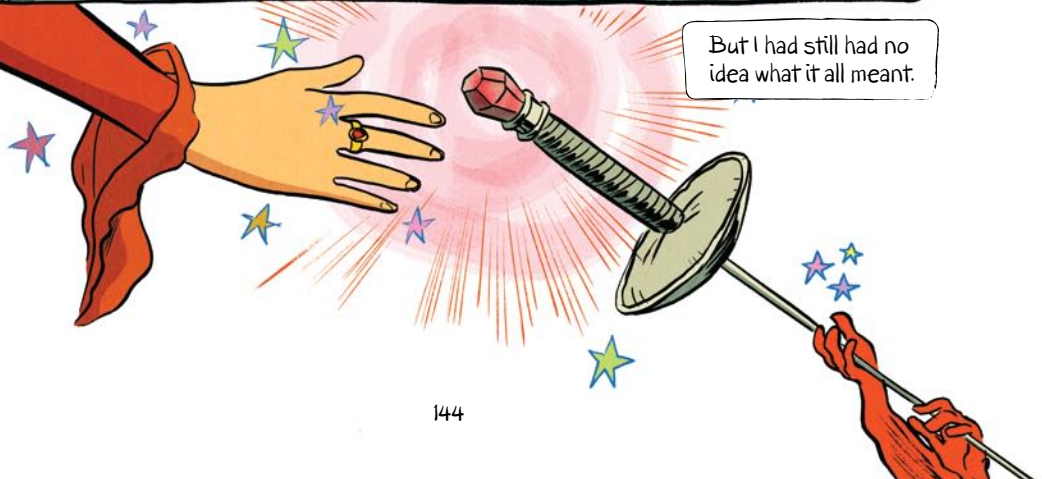
That's for a role-playing game, not real life.

And how did it get into my hands? A *tag sale* my mother just happened on? Surely the world's Defender doesn't rely on a set of coincidences.



I *must* be crazy.







I wondered what I could tell my parents about the missing weapon. Foils aren't cheap, you know, unless you can find them at an awfully convenient tag sale. Also, I bet Aunt Hannah already phoned my parents about my not coming to her house.

Not just weird, Alera, but stupid, too!



No, not *stupid*. Just disappointed. Disappointed more in Avery than in me. After all, who's the hero here?

"Not me."

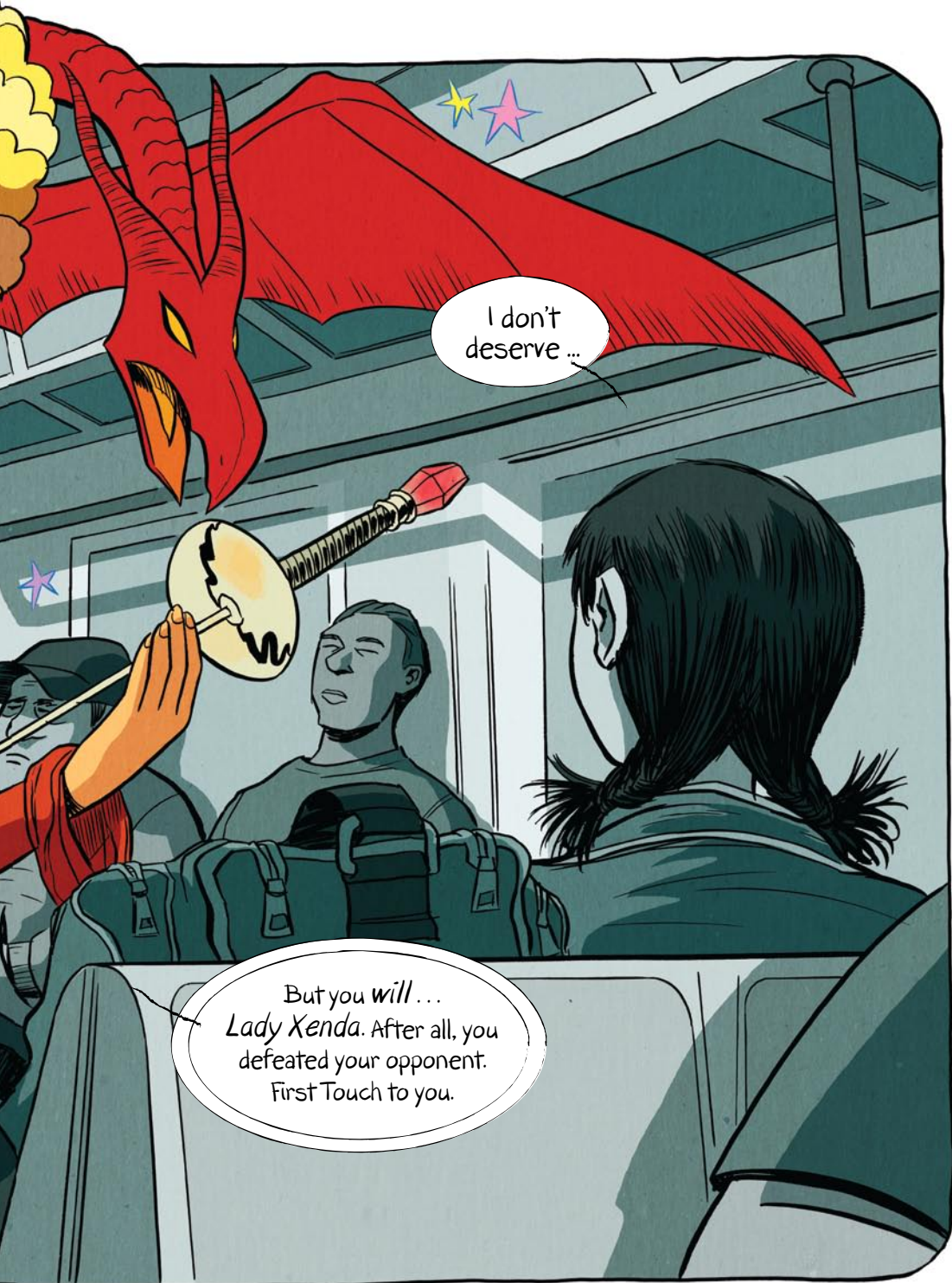


Not me.

I'm not a hero any more than Avery is. All I did was lose my sword and run. *Xenda of Xenon* wouldn't have done that. But Alera of New York City did!

Not a defender of anything except herself.





I don't
deserve ...

But you *will* ...
Lady Xenda. After all, you
defeated your opponent.
First Touch to you.



Opponent?
Do you mean
Avery?

But I
just let him
go.



Any
young woman
would have fallen for
his charms, as you have
seen in your
academy.

You mean
how the girls in school
were all over him?



It was
a powerful
glamour. But we
placed our hopes
on you.

After all,
the *Defender*, an
expert swordswoman,
is made of ... sterner
stuff. As you proved.
And *gracious*, too, so
he is now beholden
to you.



*Beholden
to me?* What does
that mean?

You are
his liege lord
now. You may
command him
at will.

You may
question him
and expect true
answers as long
as you frame
the questions
correctly.



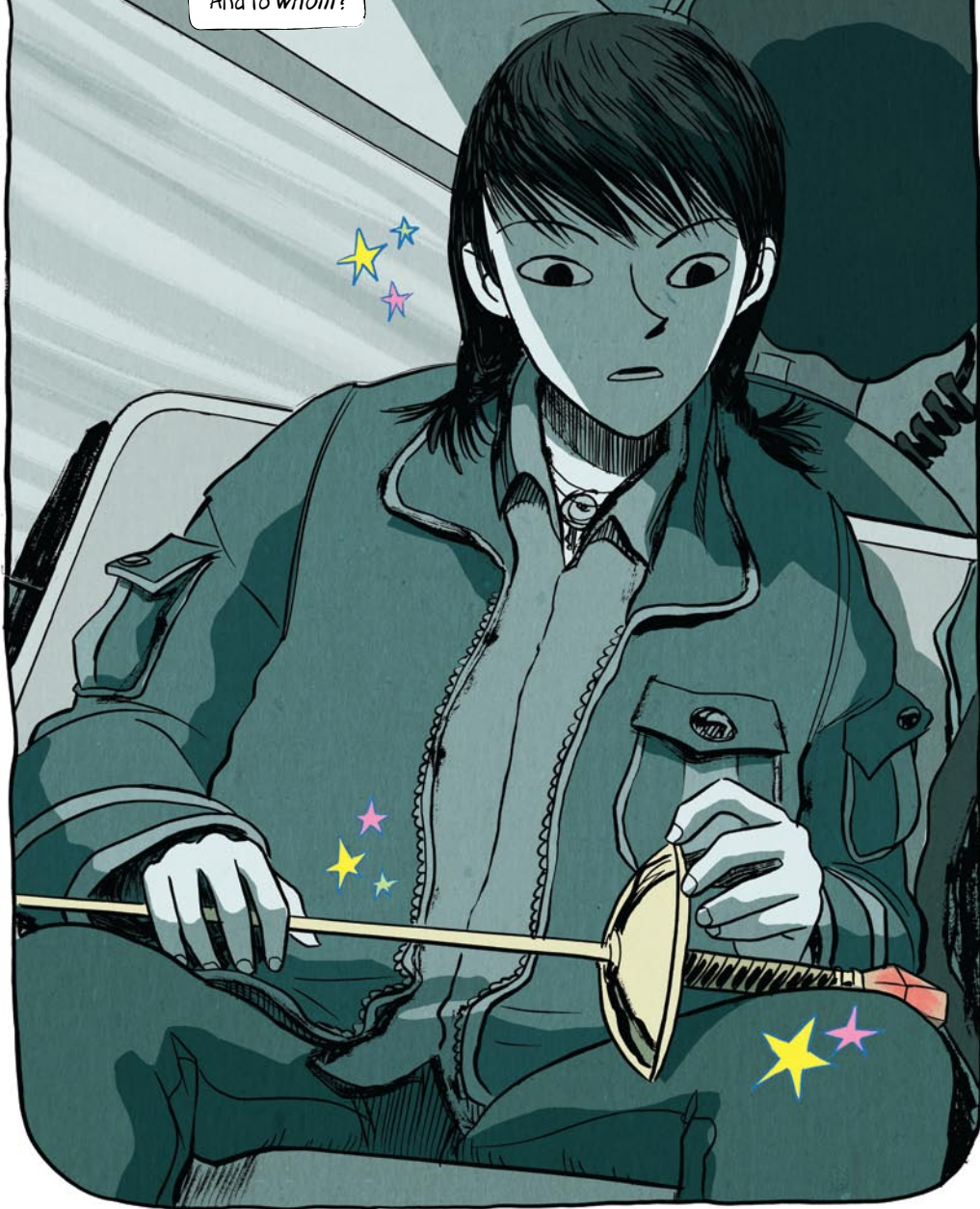
He will hold your
back one time because
he owes you that. More
I cannot say.

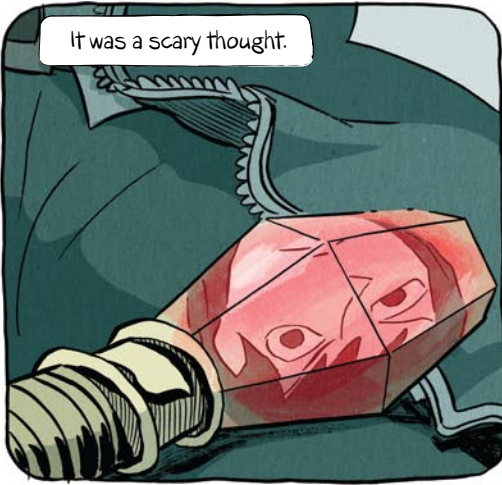
*Can't
say or won't
say?*

There are
rules in our world
that work as surely
as gravity works in
your own.

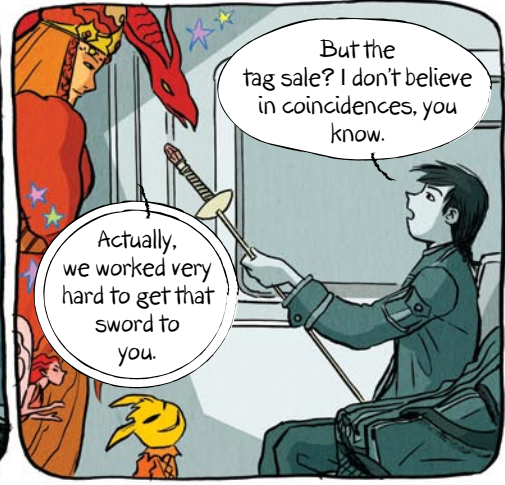
Command Avery to do *what*?

And to *whom*?





It was a scary thought.



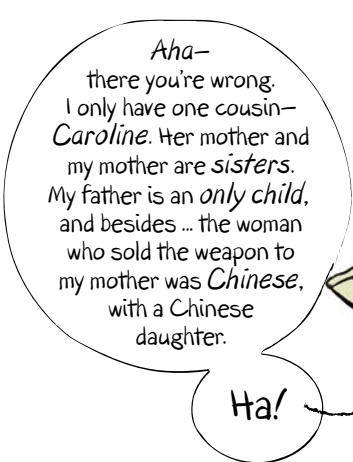
But the tag sale? I don't believe in coincidences, you know.

Actually, we worked very hard to get that sword to you.



The sword and ruby were sold to your mother by a cousin, though she knows it not.


It had to be bought fairly or given freely, otherwise you would not hold it even now.



Aha— there you're wrong. I only have one cousin— *Caroline*. Her mother and my mother are *sisters*. My father is an *only child*, and besides ... the woman who sold the weapon to my mother was *Chinese*, with a Chinese daughter.


Ha!





Though the Chinese girl does not carry your *blood*, you are cousins by *law*. And while blood is all that concerns us in Helfdon, in your world *law* takes precedence.


And by *blood*, you and your cousin are the Defenders. Your grandmother was the last Defender before you with her sister.



You must ask the troll what happened to them. I am not allowed to tell you more. It is the *Slayer* who must tell you.

But think carefully how you ask lest you set him free of all obligation.

I think I prefer the rule of law.



All you need to know is the ruby.

It is yours now, Defender. We mean you to have it and give it freely.

Guard it well. You and your cousin.

12. Disengagement

We will
keep an eye on you.
And yours.

POP!







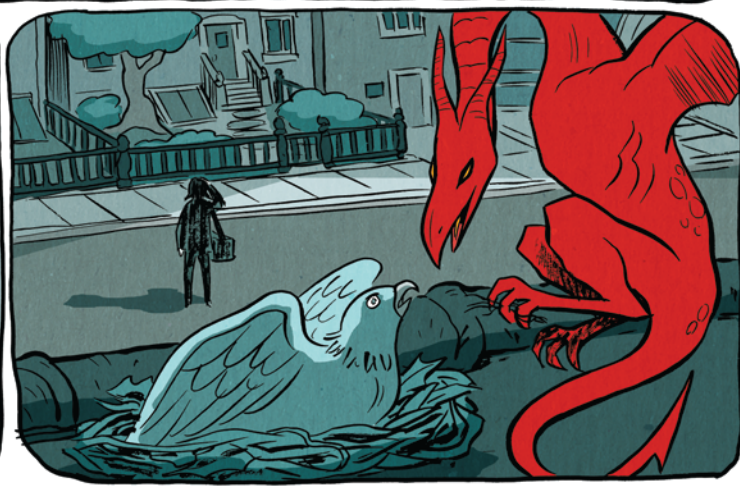
Defender???

Either I'm crazy or ...



OW!









Win
any bouts,
Alera?

Have
a good day,
Alera?



Does
madness run in
our family?



No,
just a bit of ...
weirdness.

On her
side. Mine is
perfectly
normal.



Except
for your Great
Aunt Alice and that
damned Rabbit
Hole.



And
your great aunt who
disappeared.

Maybe
she went into
the Rabbit Hole,
too.

Or
turned into a *Red
Queen*.



"Have a good day, Alera?"
"Win any bouts, Alera?"

No, not really.
Well, maybe.

First Touch on a troll.



Got a magic sword
with a ruby that keeps
the world in balance.

Met a winged woman.

Found out I'm the
world's Defender.



Other than that, it
was an okay day.

Oh, yeah—

I had my
first date.

Ever.

Sort of ...

So I seem to be a *Defender* with my cousin. Though whether it's my Chinese cousin or Caroline, I don't know. But next Saturday, I'll take Caroline out in her wheelchair if it's warm enough, and let her wear the mask. If she's the other Defender, she's going to love what she sees. Better than a role-playing game any day.



Maybe I'll hand her the sword with the jewel, too. Fairly given.

After all, she's already a queen.

end

CAVALIER 09