

Pseudonymous Bosch

★ ★ BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF ★ ★
THE SECRET SERIES

**BAD
LUCK**



Reader, beware! This is a BAD book.

A VERY BAD book that will bring you nothing but BAD
LUCK.

Luckily no one would want to read it as it is extremely
BORING and contains NO ADVENTURE whatsoever.

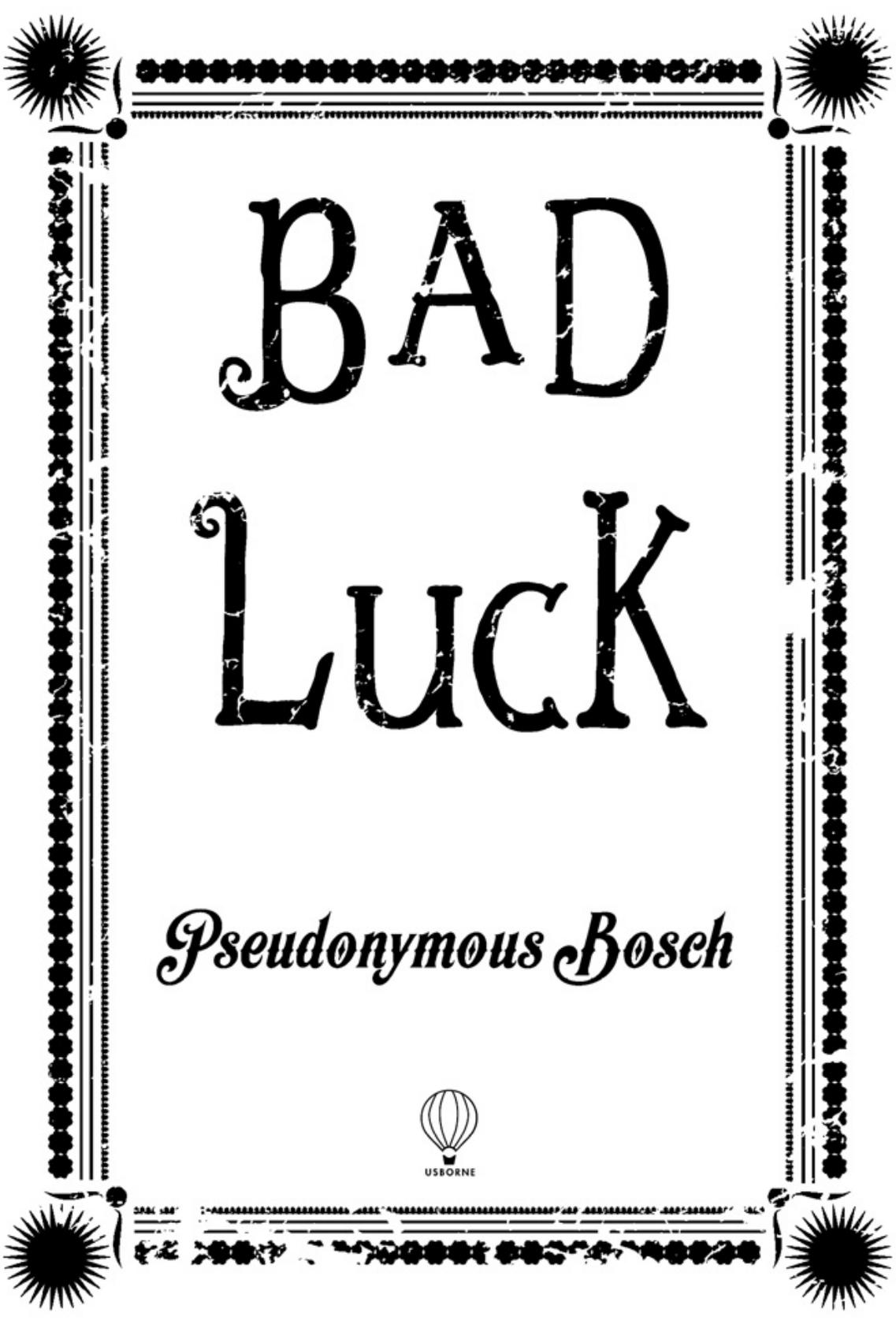
No magic. No betrayal. And NO DRAGONS.

No flying dragons. No fire-breathing dragons. No dragon
hunters.

ABSOLUTELY NO DRAGONS.

The only reason anyone would DARE read this book is if
they are VERY BAD and never do what they're told.

And you always do what you're told. Don't you?



BAD

Luck

Pseudonymous Bosch



USBORNE

For Raphael Simon (whose name I keep forgetting)

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— Chapter 1 —

Muster



The *Imperial Conquest* had five swimming pools, four gyms, a three-storey waterslide, a two-lane bowling alley, an outdoor cinema, a giant climbing wall, a miniature golf course, an ice-cream parlour, a pizza parlour, a sushi bar, a taco stand, a twenty-four-hour arcade, an eighteen-and-under dance club, an eighteen-and-over casino (that was a little lax about its age limit), a full-service spa, and a multi-floor luxury shopping mall, but so far the thing Brett liked best about this gigantic cruise ship was the Jell-O parfait at the Lido Deck Snack Shack.

Jell-O and whipped cream. It was the perfect combination. Sweet and tangy. Rich and soft. He couldn't believe it had taken all twelve long years of his life to discover it.

Eating slowly to make his parfait last, Brett waded through the sea of sunbathers. He was the only person around who was fully clothed, not to mention wearing a bow tie - sometime in the sixth grade, Brett had decided that bow ties would be his "signature accessory" - and as usual he got some funny looks.

A sunburned boy pointed at him. "Hey, penguin, wrong cruise! North Pole is the other way."

"You mean South Pole," Brett replied automatically. "No penguins in the North. Just elves."

And next time, try a higher SPF, he thought. Lobster.

A woman squinted at him from behind her sunglasses. "Are you my waiter? Where's my drink?"

"I don't know," said Brett. "Maybe you drank it?"

By the way, I'm not your waiter; my dad owns this ship, he almost added. But she probably wouldn't have believed him anyway.

Even though it happened to be true.

All he wanted to do was return to his stateroom and eat his parfait in peace. Was that too much to ask? Well, maybe just one more bite before he—

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

He almost choked when the alarm sounded. Three high-pitched beeps so loud they made his head hurt.

Brett looked down in dismay. A dribble of green Jell-O had landed on his bow tie. He could barely see over his chin, but he wiped it away as best he could.

“This is your captain speaking,” said a woman over the ship’s intercom. Her voice had a distinctive accent – Australian, it sounded to Brett. *A good sign*, he thought. (Australia was the home of the Great Barrier Reef, and if she could navigate the world’s biggest coral reef, she could probably navigate anywhere. [**BOSCH:** *IN FACT, AS I’M SURE BRETT WOULD BE THE FIRST TO TELL YOU, THE GREAT BARRIER REEF IS NOT JUST ONE CORAL REEF; IT IS A GROUP OF REEFS THAT TOGETHER MAKE UP THE BIGGEST STRUCTURE IN THE WORLD TO HAVE BEEN BUILT BY LIVING ORGANISMS – SO BIG IT CAN BE SEEN FROM A SPACESHIP, OR SO THEY SAY. I MYSELF HAVE NEVER SEEN IT FROM A SPACESHIP, ONLY FROM A SUBMARINE, AND ONCE, MEMORABLY, FROM THE MAST OF A CATAMARAN.*]) “Please report to your assigned muster room immediately. This is only a drill...”

Brett’s muster room, the Shooting Stars Nightclub and Casino, was five floors down. As Brett entered, still clutching his parfait glass, a uniformed crew member stood onstage, trying to entertain everyone with a less-than-successful rendition of Michael Jackson’s “Beat It”.

The crowd booed happily.

“Oh, so you guys think you can do better, huh?” said the crew member, pretending to be insulted. “Well, our karaoke contest is tomorrow night, right after the magic show!”

He nodded to the poster behind him. It showed a big pair of bunny ears sticking out of a top hat:

NOW YOU SEE HIM . . . NOW YOU DON'T!

An Evening of Magic and Mystery

Another crew member, whose badge read MIGUEL, PHILIPPINES, scanned Brett's cruise ID card, and Brett saw his own image flash across a small video screen, along with the words VIP - ALL ACCESS.

Miguel looked down at the husky, overdressed twelve-year-old in front of him. If he was suspicious of Brett's VIP status, he didn't say anything about it.

"I was wondering, Miguel," said Brett. "Why do they call this a muster room? Is it because you have to muster your courage when the ship is sinking?"

"Sorry, sir. I have no idea."

Miguel didn't look sorry. In fact, he looked irritated. Brett often had this effect on people. He wasn't sure why.

"Well, if I were you, I would look it up," Brett said helpfully. "Mustering is your job, after all." [**BOSCH:** ACTUALLY, THE REASON A MUSTER ROOM IS CALLED A MUSTER ROOM IS NOT TOO MUSTERIOUS. TO MUSTER IS TO ASSEMBLE - AS IN ASSEMBLE TROOPS, OR IN THIS CASE TO ASSEMBLE PEOPLE ON A SHIP. SIMILARLY, A MUSTER IS A GATHERING OR AN ASSEMBLY OF PEOPLE, USUALLY IN THE MILITARY. THUS, TO MUSTER ONE'S COURAGE IS SIMPLY TO GATHER ONE'S COURAGE. TO CUT THE MUSTARD, MEANWHILE, MEANS TO SUCCEED OR QUALIFY, AND LIKELY HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH MUSTERING AT ALL. SO WHY MENTION IT? BECAUSE I WANT TO OFFER THIS INVALUABLE PIECE OF ADVICE FOR ALL WHO FIND THEMSELVES MUSTERING IN A MUSTER ROOM, OR INDEED WHO FIND THEMSELVES SHARING ANY SMALL SPACE WITH OTHER PEOPLE: IF YOU WANT TO CUT THE MUSTARD, PLEASE DON'T CUT THE CHEESE.]

Before Brett could find a place to sit, Brett senior walked over with his smiling young fiancée, Amber, in tow.

“Junior! What took you so long?” he bellowed loudly enough to cause people to turn. “Good thing there isn’t a real emergency!”

Brett cringed in embarrassment. It looked as though his father had come straight from the pool; he was wearing an open shirt and one of his just-a-little-too-small bathing suits. A gold chain hung from his neck, snagging on his hairy chest. At his side, the always-sunny Amber was dressed in sparkly yellow workout clothing. It seemed to Brett that she had an entire rainbow’s worth of yoga pants. Both his father and Amber wore life vests around their necks.

“Where’s your vest? Never mind.” Brett’s father turned to Amber, who was busy applying strawberry lip balm to her already balmy lips. “Can you grab him one, princess?”

“Of course, my knight.”

My knight...? That was even worse than princess, Brett thought. Couldn’t they keep their pet names private?

Amber picked up a vest from a pile and handed it to Brett. “Here, honey.”

“Thanks, orange is my favourite colour,” he said, unable to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. Amber had never been anything but nice to him – almost too nice – and yet he couldn’t bring himself to like her.

Brett’s father eyed the parfait glass in his hand. “Didn’t you already have one of those Jell-O things this morning?”

“So? They’re free.”

“That’s not the point. You haven’t even had lunch yet. No wonder—” His father stopped himself before finishing his sentence.

“No wonder what?” *Go on, thought Brett. Say it.*

“Do you want to be like all the other overweight losers on this ship?” said his father, lowering his voice. He smiled broadly for the benefit of their fellow passengers.

“If that’s how you feel, why did you buy this ship in the first place?” asked Brett, stung.

His father shrugged. "I like big things."

"Yeah, except for me," said Brett under his breath.

Brett senior's scalp reddened underneath his new hair plugs. "It doesn't matter whether *I* like you," he said, struggling to control his anger. "It only matters whether *you* like you."

Amber put one soothing hand on Brett's shoulder and one on his father's. "All your father is saying is that you need to take care of yourself," she cooed to Brett in her unnervingly sweet voice. "There are so many great exercise classes on the ship. Pilates... jazz-aerobics... Why don't you try one? Or at least go for a swim. Your father says you used to be a very strong swimmer."

"Yeah. Emphasis on *used to be*." Brett hadn't voluntarily taken his shirt off in public since he was ten. (Or, to be more exact, since the day Mitch Poll had started making fun of Brett's "boy boobs" at their class swimming party.)

Mercifully, a neighbouring passenger shushed them. A diagram of the ship was being projected onto a screen above the stage. Red circles were drawn around the lifeboats.

"In the unlikely event of an evacuation, you will be escorted to a tender. Do not attempt to board without a crew member." [**BOSCH:** FOR SUCH A SOFT AND DELICATE LITTLE WORD, TENDER HAS MANY MEANINGS. YOU MAY TREAT PEOPLE WITH TENDERNESS BECAUSE YOU FEEL TENDERLY TOWARDS THEM, OR SIMPLY BECAUSE YOU ARE TENDER-HEARTED. IF YOU HAVE DONE A JOB, YOU SHOULD BE PAID IN LEGAL TENDER (I.E., MONEY). IF YOU AREN'T, I SUGGEST YOU TENDER YOUR RESIGNATION (I.E., QUIT). IF A SHIP IS TENDER, IT TIPS EASILY. LARGER SHIPS ARE USUALLY MORE STABLE, BUT THEY ARE LIKELY TO HAVE A TENDER OR TWO ABOARD. A TENDER IS A SMALL BOAT USED TO CONVEY PEOPLE OR THINGS BACK AND FORTH FROM A LARGER SHIP TO THE SHORE. ON CRUISE SHIPS, TENDERS DOUBLE AS LIFEBOATS, AND IF ONE HAPPENS TO SAVE YOUR LIFE, I AM CERTAIN YOU WILL FEEL GREAT TENDERNESS FOR IT.]

The emergency training session had begun.

Brett's father was always buying things: oil rigs, construction companies, sports teams. Still, Brett had been a little surprised when his father announced that he had bought a cruise line. As far as Brett could remember, his father had never expressed much interest in sea vessels or even the sea itself, outside of extracting oil from underneath it.

Why buy an entire fleet of cruise ships?

But what had really surprised Brett was that his father wanted to take *him* on a cruise. In the old days, when his mother was still alive, they'd travelled all the time, but his father rarely took Brett away for a weekend any more, never mind a week-long vacation. Brett now suspected Amber's influence. She might not care much about Brett one way or the other, but at least she had some idea about the way families were supposed to behave.

Unlike his father.

He hates me, Brett thought. *He really hates me.*

His father had practically admitted it to his face.

After quitting the muster room, Brett found himself back on the Lido Deck. Another parfait. It was the only answer to the terrible pit that had opened in his stomach. But when he reached the Snack Shack, it was closed. The dessert case was empty.

Now, this is an emergency, he thought.

As Brett considered his options - pizza? gelato? those twisty croissant-y things in the Tahiti Dining Room? - he noticed an open door next to the cafe. Inside was a gleaming stainless-steel world of counters and refrigerators and ovens and heat lamps. Standing in a corner, beckoning to Brett like a diamond necklace to a jewel thief, was a rolling rack stacked with Jell-O parfaits. Dozens of them. In every colour. Each topped with a bright red maraschino cherry.

Glancing briefly at the STAFF ONLY sign, he walked straight through the door. The parfaits were free anyway,

he reasoned. And if he got caught, well, his father owned the ship. Basically, he was stealing from himself.

He was in the middle of his second parfait – fourth if you counted the two he’d eaten earlier in the day – when a muffled noise caught his attention. It sounded like cars caught in traffic, honking and revving their motors, and it came from behind a steel door at the far end of the kitchen.

Above the door: a blinking red light and the words ACCESS RESTRICTED.

Ordinarily, Brett was a cautious fellow. True, he often spoke without thinking. He was especially bad at holding his tongue when he was being bullied (a twice- or thrice-daily occurrence). But when it came to serious risk taking, let’s just say he preferred the comforts of a couch and a touch-screen device. Today was different. Maybe it was his anger at his father, maybe the Jell-O in his bloodstream, or maybe all that red dye in the cherries; whatever the reason, Brett felt bold and reckless. He inserted his all-access ID card into the slot.

Stepping through the door, he found himself at the top of a stairwell. At the bottom was an enormous storage area – a warehouse space that would have seemed large enough on land, let alone at sea – filled with boxes and crates of all shapes and sizes.

As soon as Brett walked in, he identified the source of the traffic sounds: not cars but animals. *Live* animals. Goats. Sheep. Pigs. Chickens. Even a few cows. All squeezed into pens. It looked as if an entire farmyard had been airlifted onto the ship.

It smelled like that, too.

Why animals on a cruise? For a petting zoo? Maybe a *tableau vivant* of Noah’s Ark? [**BOSCH:** A TABLEAU VIVANT IS A “LIVING PICTURE” WHEREIN HUMAN, OR IN THIS CASE, ANIMAL – ACTORS POSE WITHOUT MOVING, STAGING A SCENE FROM HISTORY OR LITERATURE OR ART. JUST A MOMENT AGO, FOR EXAMPLE, WHEN I WAS SITTING AT MY DESK, STARING INTO SPACE, WITH A PEN IN MY HAND, I

DID NOT HAVE WRITER'S BLOCK; I WAS MERELY CREATING A TABLEAU VIVANT OF L'ÉCRIVAIN AU TRAVAIL. THAT'S "THE WRITER AT WORK" FOR YOU HELPLESS NON-FRANCOPHONES.] Brett didn't know anything about farming, but the animals sure didn't look happy.

Behind them sat a rusted steel shipping container the size of a city bus, with airholes drilled into its sides. Next to the shipping container was a rack of fire extinguishers, as well as a locked glass case filled with weapons – stun guns, spearguns, rifles – enough to take down a blue whale or a herd of elephants.

No, probably not a petting zoo.

Suddenly, he heard people entering the room, arguing.

Trying not to panic, Brett stepped behind the shipping container and listened. A woman was complaining that the ship's crew was unhappy about having live animals in the hold. "They're smelly and only encourage the vermin!" Brett recognized her voice from the intercom.

"Not your business, lady," a man growled. "This space is off-limits to everyone except Mr. Perry and the staff of Operation St. George."

Brett swallowed. Mr. Perry was his father, Brett senior. The man who was speaking sounded like Mack, the ex-boxer who worked as his father's bodyguard and chauffeur. Brett peeked around the corner: sure enough, Mack was there, and Brett's father, too. (Thankfully, his father was now wearing a Hawaiian shirt and tan trousers. Not a great look, but Brett preferred it to the bathing suit.) Walking with them was a tall woman in uniform.

"I'm the captain of this ship, you moron," she said, incensed. "No space is off-limits to me!"

"And I'm the owner of this ship," Brett's father reminded her. "Your employer."

"I am still responsible for two thousand passengers. Never mind a thousand crew members. What is this 'Operation St. George'?"

Brett stepped back out of view. He couldn't risk his father seeing him now. He'd had more than enough parental disapproval for one day. The container door was open. He slipped inside...

What the...?

Bolted to the floor were a half-dozen iron chains attached to an equal number of manacles. The chains looked so heavy and barbaric that at first Brett was sure they were fake. He thought of the magic show that was supposed to take place the following night. Could the chains be props for a Houdini-style escape routine? Perhaps the entire container was a magician's set - a cage for a stage.

Maybe the farm animals were part of the show, too?

Then Brett spied the massive steel muzzle on the floor. Leaning in for a closer look, he accidentally brushed against one of the chains. It clanged loudly against the side of the container.

Oops.

He held his breath. One...two... Silently, he counted to himself, as if he were waiting for a bomb to explode. Three...four... Had he averted discovery?

Then...

"Brett!"

His father stared at him from the doorway, more furious than surprised.

"Um, hello," said Brett numbly.

The captain stepped up from behind Brett's father. "What in the world...?" Horrified, she stared not at Brett but at the contraption in front of his feet.

Brett glanced down again. The muzzle was a brutal piece of hardware, all right, made of steel thick enough to hold the biggest, strongest animal on earth. On the inside were spikes so long and so sharp, they would keep King Kong from opening his jaws.

This cage he'd stumbled into - it wasn't meant for a magician.

It was meant for a monster.

— Chapter 2 —

Capture the Vog



If you've ever climbed a volcano, or even seen a picture of a volcano, you may have noticed the cloudy haze lingering in the nearby air. This haze is called *vog* (as in volcanic smog). Clay had been living under its spell for over six weeks, and still he couldn't get used to it.

Most mornings, and almost every evening, the fog rolled in from the ocean to meet the smoke rising from Mount Forge, Price Island's far-too-active (some might say hyperactive) volcano. Stirred together like ingredients in a mad laboratory experiment, the fog and smoke became the billowing clouds of vog that stung Clay's eyes and seared his throat. Of course, sometimes the vog didn't billow; it just crept around the island, like an invisible predator, and made him feel tired and irritable without his knowing why. And then there were the times, like today, when Mount Forge acted up without warning, and all of a sudden the entire island was covered in a layer of vog so thick it was like someone had not only turned off the lights but turned off the gravity as well, giving him the sense of being suspended in a strange grey void.

Tucked away in a narrow valley, Clay's summer camp, Earth Ranch, usually escaped the worst of the vog, but that morning two cabinfuls of kids had left camp to spend the day at Bamboo Bay - a smallish U-shaped beach that backed up against a bamboo forest on one side and Mount Forge on the other. Unfortunately, as soon as they reached the beach, Mount Forge started belching smoke and vomiting lava as if the earth itself were suffering a terrible case of gastroenteritis. There was little danger of lava making it all the way down to the ocean, but, clearly, there would be no surfing or even any sunning today.

Flint, the junior counsellor who was leading the beach expedition, suggested that the campers make the best of

the bad weather by playing a game of Capture the Flag.

“We can call it Capture the Vog - it’ll be awesome!”

He broke off a stick of bamboo. Then he looked up at the sky and released a tall plume of fire from his mouth, like a fire-breather at a carnival. All around him, the vog glowed orange and yellow, as if there’d been another volcanic eruption. When the fire subsided, a small flame burned at the end of the stick.

It was an impressive performance, made more so by the careless style of the performer. Flint had that cool-guy way of making tough things look easy.

As the campers applauded, he dragged his new torch across the beach, leaving a line of fire flickering in the black volcanic sand. A stranger might have guessed that he’d prepared ahead of time by pouring a line of petrol, but his companions knew better. Flint had a special gift for pyrotechnics. He didn’t need petrol to light a fire; he needed only to snap his fingers.

In fact, many of the campers had talents like his, even if their skills were less advanced and their tricks less spectacular. Disguised as an outdoor survival camp for juvenile delinquents, Earth Ranch was, secretly, a magic camp for young adepts - a camp that depended on its remote location and ever-present vog for protection.

“Okay, Frogs, everything on this side of the line is yours,” Flint declared, the flames turning his blue eyes gold. “Worms, the other side is yours.” The Frogs were the younger girls, who resided in the cabin known as the Pond. The Worms were the younger boys, who resided in Earth Cabin - Clay’s cabin. “Winners get to eat the losers’ s’mores tonight. And don’t forget - camp rules, everybody!”

“Yeah, except for you, right?” Clay scoffed.

Flint glared at him. “What did you say, Worm?”

Clay hid his smile. “Nothing!”

Camp rules meant No Magic.

The kids at Earth Ranch were forbidden from doing magic without adult supervision, but for some reason the rule never seemed to apply to Flint, despite his being only fifteen and not yet a full counsellor. Certainly, it hadn't stopped him from making Clay's bunk smoke as if it were on fire when he passed by the previous night. Nor had it stopped him from making Clay's toothbrush start to melt that morning when he saw Clay brushing his teeth.

Someday, Clay had vowed, he would get Flint back.

Just...maybe not today.

"You have one minute to huddle, and then the game begins," Flint declared. "I'll be back in ten to see the bloodbath!"

He started walking down the beach, alone.

The younger campers exchanged knowing glances. Flint had been disappearing a lot lately. The rumour was that he'd been practising a new type of magic in secret. Nobody knew what this type of magic was, but it was undoubtedly difficult - and dangerous.

I don't know whether you've ever played Capture the Flag, but like most so-called recreational activities, it can quickly become very competitive. [**BOSCH:** TAKE DODGEBALL, FOR EXAMPLE. OR RATHER, DON'T TAKE DODGEBALL. THE POINT OF DODGEBALL IS TO DODGE IT ENTIRELY.] In their pre-game huddle, Clay's cabin-mates, the Worms, strategized like they were plotting the crime of the century. No surprise, perhaps, given that they *were* criminals - or, rather, "struggling youth", as Earth Ranch called them in its glossy brochure. [**BOSCH:** IN IT'S BROCHURE, THE CAMP ADVERTISED ITSELF AS A PLACE WHERE KIDS "GAINED CONFIDENCE THROUGH CONTACT WITH THE NATURAL WORLD", FAILING TO MENTION THAT AT EARTH RANCH THE NATURAL WORLD OFTEN APPEARED SUPERNATURAL.] Also, of course, they were magicians-in-training, but at Earth Ranch the campers tended to confuse crime with magic.

Both things, after all, involved breaking laws - the one the laws of the land, the other the laws of nature.

Kwan, a Worm with a big, slick, swooping hairdo and a big, slick, swooping ego to match, elected himself team captain. He pointed towards a boy with a gold-tipped Afro and started giving orders. "Jonah, you're on recon. Scope out the opposition. When the target is vulnerable, give a sign."

Jonah nodded almost imperceptibly. Among his peers he was known to have a special knack for seeing things that others couldn't, whether in the future or in the dark. (It was an enviable skill because, unlike some other forms of magic, it could be practised without attracting a counsellor's attention.)

Kwan turned to a second colourfully coiffed boy - this one with a green Mohawk. "Pablo, *mi amigo*, your job is to create a diversion."

Pablo furrowed his brow, considering. "Explosives?"

"Tempting," admitted Kwan. "But I'm thinking robotics. We could use another player on the team, even if it's not human."

"An automaton? But Flint said camp rules..." Pablo protested half-heartedly, even though his friends could see the gleam in his eye.

"Do you see any counsellors?" said Kwan.

Pablo grinned. "How much time do I have?"

"About three minutes. Plenty for a man of your genius."

Kwan sounded sarcastic, but it was true: Pablo had a fantastic ability to make robotic creatures - automatons - from unlikely materials, in record time. Indeed, Pablo was already picking up stray bamboo sticks and strings of seaweed and manipulating them as if they were steel rods and copper wires.

"So here's the plan, my brother Worms," Kwan continued. "While Pablo's robo-man is distracting the enemy, I will