

# ADVENTURES IN A VIDEO GAME

DON'T CLIMB  
THIS MOUNTAIN



DUSTIN BRADY

# CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: A NOTE FROM AVARICE	vii
CHAPTER ONE: HYYYYPE!	01
CHAPTER TWO: HIPE	09
CHAPTER THREE: ROBOT YANNIS	17
CHAPTER FOUR: NOT HERE TO MAKE FRIENDS	25
CHAPTER FIVE: DANCE WITH DANGER	33
CHAPTER SIX: WAHOO	41
CHAPTER SEVEN: THE ULTIMATE HOOK	51
CHAPTER EIGHT: MISTAKES AND STORIES	57
CHAPTER NINE: ONE-TWO-OOF	65
CHAPTER TEN: LET'S A-GO!	75
CHAPTER ELEVEN: CHESTNUT	81
CHAPTER TWELVE: SUDDEN DEATH	91
CHAPTER THIRTEEN: GORDO THE GORILLA	97
CHAPTER FOURTEEN: LAW OF COOL	105
CHAPTER FIFTEEN: THE STORYTELLER	113
CHAPTER SIXTEEN: THE HACKER	121
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: LOTS OF LEGOS	127
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: THE TOP	131
CHAPTER NINETEEN: JUNK MOUNTAIN	137
CHAPTER TWENTY: MR. WHOOSH-WHOOSH	143
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: I WAS WRONG	149
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: HOT SPOT	153
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: KABOOM	161
CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: SUPERHERO	167
CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: HYPELIGHTS	173
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	179

**DEAR ADVENTURER,**

Did you know that one dollar of lemons can produce nearly thirteen dollars of lemonade? That's what we call an inspiring statistic!

Several years ago, the Bionosoft Corporation trapped a bunch of kids inside of video games. That was a bummer. A true lemon of a story. Fortunately, the U.S. government stepped in to create lemonade out of that lemon—delicious, refreshing, expensive lemonade.

The brand-new Agency of Virtual Adventure Regulation, Inspection, and Compliance Enforcement (a.k.a. AVARICE) is dedicated to making Bionosoft “trapped in a video game” technology safe and fun for all. AVARICE is forming partnerships with entertainment brands worldwide to bring regular, everyday people like yourself into video games.

“Wait,” you might be saying. “Isn't that dangerous?”  
Don't be such a lemon.

To ensure that every adventure is as safe, fun, and profitable as possible, we at AVARICE have asked our partners to please not trap anyone inside of video games. Actually, our exact words were “pretty please,” which is about as strong of a “please” as you can get. Also, it has recently come to our attention that Bionosoft technology may allow characters from video games to enter the real world and cause minor mayhem. To prevent this, we've asked our partners to “pretty please with sugar on top” not let that happen. We are proud to report that is the English language's strongest possible “please.”

So pretty please with sugar on top, enjoy your adventure in a video game. Take comfort in the AVARICE motto: “Nothing could possibly go wrong now!”™

**SINCERELY,  
YOUR FRIENDS AT AVARICE**



## CHAPTER ONE

# HYYYPE!

“Three. Two. One. Go.”

Archie smiled at the camera, took a deep breath, then started his video the same way his hero started every video: by screaming the word “hype” as long as his lungs would allow.

“Hyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyype! What up, hypeheads, this is Archie Maroney, a.k.a. the Archmaster General, a.k.a. the Golden Arch, a.k.a. . . .”

“Stop, stop, stop,” Archie’s camerawoman said. “It’s not recording.”

Archie closed his eyes. “Is it because you forgot to hit record again?”

“Nope! Wait. OK, maybe. But I got it now!”

Archie kept his eyes closed for a few seconds longer and reminded himself that Mae was seven years old. When he became a famous YouTuber, he could afford to hire a professional, but until then, he’d have to be thankful for the free labor his little cousin provided as well as the complicated camera her dad let her borrow. “The light turns red when it’s recording.”

“That’s how I knew it wasn’t recording!” Mae replied.

“So don’t say ‘go’ until you see the red light.”

“Great tip, Arch! Three, two, one, go.”

“Hyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy . . .”

“Stop, stop, stop. OK, now go.”

Archie wondered what Sir Hype would do in this situation. He found himself wondering that often. When most people watched Sir Hype, they saw the Lamborghini. They saw the mansion with the waterslides and shark tank. They saw that video where he dives into a tower full of gold coins. When Archie watched Sir Hype, he saw inspiration. He saw a rags-to-riches story. He saw Roy Ferguson.

As any real hypehead knows, “Roy Ferguson” was Sir Hype’s real name. Roy grew up in an average house, went to an average school, and had average friends. In many ways, Roy Ferguson was the most average Roy who’d ever Royed. That is, until he dropped out of community college to become a famous YouTuber.

Fame didn’t happen immediately for Roy. At first, he tried trick-shot videos. Then, he moved on to pranks. He streamed video games, reviewed fast food, and opened baseball cards. Nothing earned more than a hundred views. Becoming famous on YouTube is hard.

But here’s the thing that made Roy Ferguson different from all those other Roys: YouTube fame wasn’t just a goal

for him. It was his whole life. He studied video titles for an hour a day. He spent another hour every day bugging famous YouTubers to collaborate with him. When they didn't respond, he changed his email address to trick them into thinking he was important. He kept at it week after week, month after month until he finally climbed the mountain. Literally.

As fate would have it, Roy's climb to superstardom began on a literal mountain. Onacona Mountain was a hill near his house that had somehow squeaked by with the designation of "mountain" even though it was only three hundred feet high. Roy recruited his oldest buddy Ike to help him build an obstacle course up Onacona Mountain, then gathered guys from the neighborhood to race to the top. The guys ran up Slip 'N Slides, crawled through slime, and hurdled barbed wire all for a taco on top of the hill. Roy used the aforementioned email trick to convince a local taco truck to pay for the whole thing. Roy called the video, "Sir Hype's Mountain Challenge." The video earned twelve million views in its first week, and the legend of Sir Hype was born.

In the years that followed, the guys from that video became Sir Hype's best friends. They created many more challenge videos, including such masterpieces as "We Played Laser Tag in a Haunted Castle," "I Gave Away a House in a Game of Musical Chairs," and "Last One Upside Down Wins \$50,000."

But Sir Hype's most popular videos were always the Mountain Challenges. Mountain Challenge Two featured trampolines up the side of a cliff. Mountain Challenge Three introduced the glitter blizzard, viper vat, and raccoon rodeo.

Mountain Challenge Four was broadcast live on ESPN and earned more viewers than the World Series and NBA Finals combined. How could Sir Hype possibly top that?

Well, Archie would find out if Mae could ever figure out how to press “record” on the camera. Sir Hype had just released a video entitled “My Next Mountain Challenge Is the Biggest Yet” twelve minutes ago, and time was ticking for Archie to upload his reaction to YouTube.

Archie aspired to one day create massive, original videos like Sir Hype, but today was not that day. Now, most of Archie’s videos consisted of him filming himself watching Sir Hype’s latest and greatest. Sir Hype was so popular that his fans would watch not just his videos, but also other fans watching his videos. Archie knew that if he didn’t get this up soon, he’d be the last Sir Hype fan account to upload a reaction, which would be far more embarrassing than not uploading one at all. He’d be worse than those goons over at the HYPElights channel.

“You know what? Give me that.” Archie snatched the camera from Mae, stacked a few books to create a homemade tripod, then pressed “record” himself. He decided to save time by skipping the usual introduction.

“What up, hypeheads?! This is Archie coming at you from Charlotte, North Carolina. The biggest video of the year just dropped. Let’s get into it.”

Archie clicked “play” on his mom’s laptop.

“HYYYYYYYYYYYYYPE!” Sir Hype started the video with his trademark greeting.

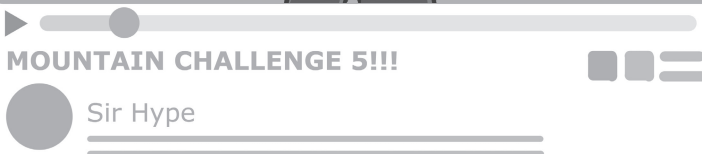
“HYYYYYYYYYYYYYPE!” Archie harmonized at home.

On the video, Sir Hype spread his arms in front of his mansion’s massive swimming pool. “It’s the moment you’ve all been waiting for! Mountain Challenge Five! This one’s big.”

“He’s going to do Everest,” Archie predicted to the camera.

“Bigger than Big Time Bryce?!” Sir Hype’s friend Big Time Bryce jumped into the frame. Big Time Bryce was the tallest of Sir Hype’s friends at six-foot-four, making him the default enforcer of the group. Sir Hype looked Big Time Bryce up and down, smirked at the camera, then pushed Bryce into the pool.

“Hahaha!” Archie laughed a little louder than normal to play to the camera.





“I’ve read the comments,” Sir Hype continued. Fifty YouTube comments appeared on the screen. “Everest, Everest, Everest!” “We want Everest!” “Do Mount Everest, cowards!”

Archie squealed. “He’s going to do it!”

“I’m going bigger than Everest,” Sir Hype said. “This mountain isn’t on Earth.”

Archie squealed again.

“Space! It’s space!” Sir Hype’s buddy Yannis zoomed onto the screen. Yannis was the most divisive member of the Hype squad since he was so hyper and yappy. Sir Hype pushed Yannis into the pool too.

“Woohoo!” Archie pumped his fist for the camera. He personally had a soft spot for Yannis, but cheered to give the people what they want.

“This mountain is inside of a video game.”

“HYYYYYYYYYPE!” Bryce and Yannis jumped out of the pool and joined the remaining members of the Hype Squad (three entirely interchangeable dudes named Robbie, Ronnie, and Rhodie) mobbing their leader.

While they mobbed, Archie got closer to his camera. “Guys, I’m freaking out right now. FREAKING out! I’ve been asking for a Sir Hype video game for years! Can you imagine how insane a Mountain Challenge video game is going to be? It’s going to . . .”

“SCREEEEEECH!”

Archie stopped talking when a dragon appeared on screen. Not a guy in a dragon costume. Not a special effect. Not a robot. A real-life dragon.

*Whoosh!*

The dragon belched a fireball at Bryce . . .

*Chomp!*

. . . Swallowed Yannis whole . . .

*Swoop!*

. . . And flew away with the rest of the Hype Squad in its claws.

Sir Hype looked unsurprised by this development. “Oh, did I mention I’m inside the video game *right now?*” Sir Hype walked toward the camera and took it off its tripod. He then pointed it up at the sky.

The dragon was flying toward a mountain that could only exist inside of a video game. Its base formed a massive skull with a mouth that gaped open to reveal the entrance to a fiery cave. Tubes twisted around and through the mountain in what appeared to be the world’s biggest waterslide. Toward the mountain’s peak, gears and blades jutted from the snow at strange angles.

“Ike outdid himself with this one,” Sir Hype continued. “For the first time ever, we are using Bionosoft technology

to bring people inside a video game. This is the biggest Mountain Challenge yet. One hundred of my biggest fans will make it to this mountain. Only one will win the prize on top of it. Will it be you?”

The screen went black. Then, a website appeared.

**MOUNTAINCHALLENGEFIVE.COM**

## CHAPTER TWO

# HIPE

“OK, so there’s a—it’s a—what do you call it when there’s a ticktock, and it’s ticking . . .” Archie was so overwhelmed by what he’d just seen that his brain could barely form a sentence.

“A countdown clock?” Mae offered.

“There’s a countdown clock on the website!” Archie explained to the camera. “And it’s at twenty-three hours and forty-six minutes, which means—which means I’ve got to go! Golden Arch out!”

Archie stopped the recording and turned to Mae. “I’ve gotta get in there.”

Mae looked excited. “You can do it, Arch!”

“I’ve been waiting my whole life for this chance.” Archie started hopping in place like a boxer preparing to step into the ring. “This is it. Whatever it takes. It’s my turn now.”

“Oh, actually, it’s my turn.” Mae hugged a tub of beads to her belly and grinned. “But after that, you’ll definitely get in there!”

Archie stopped hopping. Please. Not today.

Every Tuesday afternoon, Mae would come over to help him film his Sir Hype reaction video. In return, he'd film "Arts and Crafts and Jewelry and Fun with Mae." Mae's videos were supposed to be cute little tutorials where she'd share her wealth of arts and crafts knowledge with the world. In reality, they were thirty-plus minutes of Mae stringing beads while chatting mindlessly with her big cousin. To date, Archie had filmed 247 minutes of "Arts and Crafts and Jewelry and Fun with Mae." He had yet to upload a single second to YouTube. Mae had yet to notice.

"This setup works great." Archie swiveled around the camera that was sitting on the stack of books.

"No, Arch! I need you to do it."

Archie hit record. "I'll be right back."



“Arrrrrrrch!” Mae called.

“Don’t whine on camera!” Archie yelled as he ran out of his mom’s office.

Archie’s mind raced as he sprinted to his room. By the time that countdown clock hit zero, tens of millions of people would have viewed the video. Maybe hundreds of millions. If Archie wanted to be anywhere near the front of the line at that point, he’d need more than luck. He’d need a plan—a Roy Ferguson plan.

*What would Sir Hype do?*

In his room, Archie locked the door, grabbed his tablet, and pulled up his email. Archie checked this email address every day, although he’d never once received anything from it. When he started his channel, he’d bugged his mom to set up an email and website for him. He’d said that an email address would make his channel feel official. The actual purpose was a little more sneaky.

Sir Hype’s email address was roy@hypestreetproductions.com. The email Archie had asked his mom to set up was roy@hipestreetproductions.com. Archie had hoped he’d get a scoop on an upcoming video from someone misspelling “hype” as “hipe” in Sir Hype’s email address. That felt like something Sir Hype would have done in the early days. That plan hadn’t quite worked out, but now Archie had a different use for the email.

He opened up a new message and typed “ike@hypestreetproductions.com.” Maybe if Archie could trick Ike into thinking that he was messaging Roy, he could squeeze some inside information that would help him get inside the video game first.

“Dear Ike,” Archie typed before stopping. Do people start emails with “dear”? Would Sir Hype do that? He erased the greeting and started over. “Yooooooooo!” He immediately erased that too. Finally, Archie settled for the simplest message possible. “What’s up with the game?”

He hit send, then started shaking. What was he thinking? Ike was a professional. He’d not only immediately see through Archie’s scheme, but he’d also probably block Archie from contacting Sir Hype ever again. In one moment, Archie had ruined his relationship with his hero before it’d even begun. He’d ruined his entire future. He’d probably even ruined . . .

*Ding!*

One new message. Ike had already replied.

“Told you it’s not a big deal. Hopping in the game right now to patch it.”

Archie started shaking even more. It’d worked. It’d actually worked. He’d tricked Ike. Now what? He thought for a second, then typed “Let me see.”

Send.

Archie held his breath. Every inch of his body trembled as he waited for the ding that would change his life. But instead of a ding, he got a knock.

*Knock, knock, knock.*

“Arch?” his mom called. “Why is Mae crying?”

“I don’t know,” Archie yelled back. “Ask her.”

“She says you left her.”

*Ding!*

New message from Ike. “Thought you guys were already in there? Stage site is open. Hop in.” The words “Stage site” were blue. When Archie tapped the link, a new window opened.

Username: Roy

Password:

“Arch!”

“Busy, Mom! I showed her how to film herself.”

“You know she doesn’t care about the video,” Archie’s mom said. “She just wants to hang out with you.”

With shaky fingers, Archie typed Sir Hype’s phone password. A few years ago, the guys over at HYPElights had figured out how Sir Hype unlocks his phone by studying footage of him checking a text on camera. His password was 35006—the license plate number on his Lamborghini. Like any good hypehead, Archie had adopted the password as his own.



“ARCH!”

“Be right there, Mom.”

35006

**WELCOME, GAME MASTER**

“Does ‘right there’ mean now or does it mean ten minutes?”

Archie started shaking again. “THIS IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING THAT HAS EVER HAPPENED TO ME, MOM!” he blurted. His screen filled with all sorts of commands and graphs and gobbledygook. One large, green button at the bottom of the page caught his eye.

**START GAME**

Archie tapped it immediately. A large text box appeared.

**OVERRIDE COUNTDOWN? THIS ACTION CANNOT BE UNDONE.**

Archie tapped “YES.”

**REENTER PASSWORD**

35006

*Knock, knock, knock.*

“Mom, please!”

*KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK.*

But the knocking wasn’t coming from the door. It was coming from the basement.

“What’s that?!” Archie’s mom asked. “Mae?! Mae, are you OK?” Footsteps sprinted through the house.

The knocking got louder and louder until . . .

*ZZZZzzzzzzzzzwoooooo.*

The power went out.

Then, the world disappeared.

## CHAPTER THREE

# ROBOT YANNIS

WHOOOOSH!

Archie's whole body got sucked into something that felt like one of those cartoon tubes that twist and wind all over the place. He flipped and flopped around tight turns, long spirals, and roller-coaster hills. Finally, he *thoonked* out the other side.

Everything was black for a moment before the world slowly came into focus. Archie found himself in a house that was much different from his own. The ceiling was high. Super high. And a chandelier hung from it. Was this a foyer? Archie had never been in a house with a foyer before. Suddenly, a face appeared inches from Archie's. A face framed by pointy hair that jutted in every direction.

“YOOOOOOO!”

“Yannis?” Archie croaked.

Yannis grabbed Archie's hand and yanked him off the ground. “Yo, so I'm not really Yannis. I'm like a robot. Or like artificial intelligence. Or, like, I don't know—they just put all of Yannis's words in a computer blender and then I came out. It's my job to welcome people. So . . .” Yannis looked like he lost his train of thought for a second, which

didn't seem like something computers should do. Then his eyes lit up. "So, like, yoooo! You made it! How does it feel?"

Archie felt dizzy. Like he was going to throw up. He stumbled to a long glass table and squinted at Robot Yannis. Was this the video game? Or some sort of in-between place? And how long before someone found out he didn't belong? "So . . . this is it?"

"This is it!"

"I made it to the mountain challenge?"

Robot Yannis grinned. "Dope, right?"

It felt almost too good to be true. "Where's everyone else?"

"Every contestant gets their own house. This is where you'll fill out paperwork. *Thbtttt*." Robot Yannis made a farting sound with his mouth to clarify his opinion of paperwork. "First, I need to ask if you're over eighteen."

"Oh. Uh, no, but . . ."

"Don't worry," Robot Yannis said. "We can have someone in the real world get a parent to sign off. It'll only take a few minutes. Just know that a minute of real time equals a day of video game time, so you might be here for a while. Or . . ."

Archie could see where Robot Yannis was going with this. He puffed out his chest to make himself look five years older than he was, then replied, "Yes, I am eighteen," in his deepest voice.

Robot Yannis grinned and nodded. “Dope.” He gestured to the table, and piles of papers appeared. “Then you can sign these yourself.”

Archie took the top paper and studied it like he imagined an adult would. The paper was a single-space jumble of “hereinafters” and “notwithstandings” that Archie couldn’t possibly decipher. Robot Yannis must have noticed Archie’s struggle because he took it upon himself to explain everything in the most Yannis way possible.

“Yo, don’t worry, it just says, like, you might die in here, but, like, this is a video game, so obviously you won’t get hurt in real life, but, like, for some reason if you did get hurt in real life, you won’t sue us.”

“Oh.”

“Even if you die. Which—*pffff*—would never happen. But, you know, even if you did, you wouldn’t sue. Or, I guess, your family wouldn’t sue us. Because you’d be dead.”

“Um.”

“No big deal. Normal stuff.”

That didn’t sound like normal stuff, but Archie signed anyway. Outside of the week his class practiced signatures in third grade, he hadn’t had many opportunities to sign his name, so he did his best to scribble “Archibald James Maroney” like a real professional. It looked like a kid forging his parent’s signature.

Yannis slid another paper toward Archie. “This says we can record you all the time. Even when you don’t want us to. Like if you’re crying alone. But don’t worry—you won’t cry because this is going to be super fun.”

“There are cameras everywhere? Like even in the bathroom?”

“DUDE! NO! You don’t have to go to the bathroom in a video game.”

“Really?”

“Dope, right? Also, video games don’t have cameras. We can record everything from every angle at all times. Basically, you have no privacy.”

Archie felt like this version of Yannis was probably not the best fit for the welcome job, but he signed anyway.

*Ding!*

“That sound means we’re recording now.” Yannis gave a cheesy grin, then pulled out more papers. “This says you can’t say anything bad about Sir Hype. Ever. Because if you do, he can sue you. But don’t worry—he won’t because he’s totally cool.”

Archie quickly signed. “I would never say anything bad about Sir Hype.”

Yannis slid another paper in front of Archie. “Or Hype Street Productions, LLC.”

“Or Hype Street Productions, LLC,” Archie confirmed as he signed.

“Or the sponsor of this video, Nabisco.”

Archie signed. This was starting to feel significantly less fun than he imagined it would. “Are we done yet?”

“Yes! Wait. No.” Yannis reached into his pocket and pulled out something that looked like a slap bracelet. “Wear this.” He thwacked it around Archie’s wrist.

“Ow!”

“You can use that to get out of the video game any time you want.”

“OK.”

“It’s a safety thing. *Thbbbbt.*” Yannis repeated his farting sound to clarify his opinion of safety. “The government makes us do it so nobody gets trapped in a video game. Laaaaaaame.”

The bracelet was completely smooth except for a clear plastic shield covering a small red button. “If I want to get home, I press this button?” Archie asked.

“Yes. It’s a little bomb.”

“Excuse me?”

“It blows you up into a million pieces.”

“Why would I do that?!”



“To go home.”

“OK, I’m not going to do that.”

“Right.”

*Whoosh!*

With that, the floor opened underneath Archie, sending him tumbling down into a dark room.

*Click. Click. Click.*

Lights clicked on to light up a long closet full of costumes. There were cowboy boots and astronaut helmets



and baking aprons and one extra-poofy green costume that looked sort of like an avocado.

Yannis appeared in front of Archie. “Pick one that fits your personality.”

Archie strolled past racks and racks of hangers. What was his personality? Certainly not an avocado. He liked Sir Hype. Maybe that was his personality? He touched a plain T-shirt with the word “HYPER” written across the chest. It disappeared off the hanger and appeared on his body.

“Dope.” Yannis said. “One more step.”

The ground opened again.

“WHOA!”

The bottom level of the house was a giant garage filled with every vehicle imaginable. There were Ferraris, Porsches and Lamborghinis next to buses, snowplows, and ice cream trucks. “You’ll drive to the foot of the mountain where you’ll meet Sir Hype,” Yannis explained. “Pick your vehicle.”

Archie strolled past a row of the most expensive cars in the world. He passed a taxi, tank, and limo before stopping in front of a dented 2008 Kia Rio. “This one.”

The vehicle wasn’t cool by any measure. It looked like it may not even turn on. But Archie recognized it as an exact replica of Sir Hype’s first car. Today wasn’t about looking cool or driving fast. It was about making an impression on Sir Hype.

“Ooooohkay.” Yannis tossed Archie the keys.

Archie hopped in and struggled to fit the key into the ignition while desperately trying to appear like he’d driven a car before. After a *putz* and a *puff*, the engine turned over. A garage door opened in the distance.

Yannis stuck his head through Archie’s window. “Oh, one more thing. Five hundred people are starting their engines right now. Only the first hundred to the mountain get to climb. Good luck!”

## CHAPTER FOUR

**NOT HERE TO MAKE FRIENDS**

“I didn’t know this was a race!” Archie screeched as he slammed the gas pedal. The car revved, but nothing happened.

“Drive, dude!” Yannis said.

Archie shifted into drive, and the Kia lurched forward. With Yannis in the rearview mirror, Archie felt free to scream as loud and squeaky as necessary.

“AHHHHHHH!”

He weaved through the vehicles in the garage at what felt like 200 miles per hour. A quick glance at the speedometer told Archie his actual speed was only 22 mph, which had to be a mistake. He screamed through the open garage door and skidded onto an empty street. A city skyline loomed up ahead, and beyond that, the mountain. Archie gunned the engine, and the Kia responded with a whine and a gradual climb to 30 mph, then 40, then 50. Archie gripped the wheel as hard as he could. It felt like he’d just shifted into hyperdrive.

As the Kia climbed to its max speed (82 mph), Archie started loosening up. The road was wide, straight, and empty, which helped him build confidence in his driving. It also got him thinking that maybe Yannis was wrong.

Maybe there weren't 499 other racers. Maybe he'd entered the game alone after all! He leaned forward in his driver's seat and allowed himself a little smirk.

*Whoosh!*

Just then, a Lamborghini driven by a little girl wearing a unicorn headband passed Archie.

**WHOOSH!**

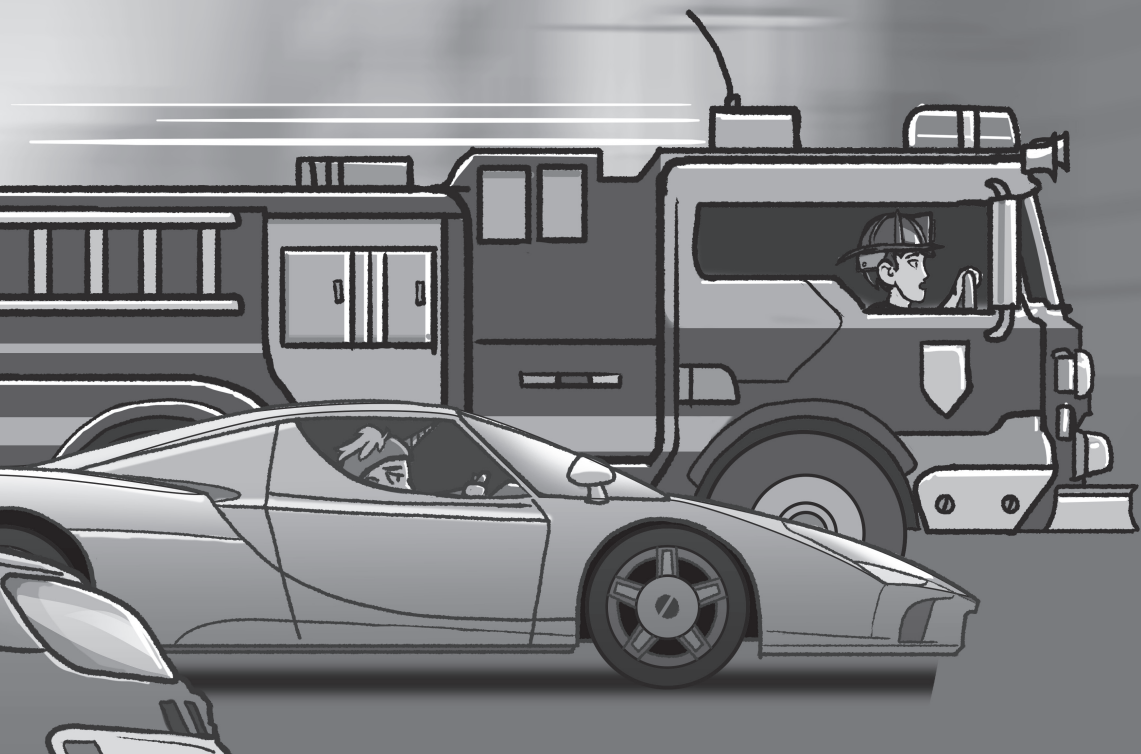
A tank that might belong to Batman zoomed by on the left. Then, the road merged into a superhighway, and Archie's heart sank. It felt like the entire world was headed to the mountain.



*HONK-HONK, HOOOOOOONK!*

Archie glanced right to see a little kid wearing one of those inflatable T. rex costumes driving a garbage truck. The kid honked again, then yanked the steering wheel to run Archie off the road. Archie tapped his brakes, causing the kid to crash through the guardrail and fly off the road.

Up ahead, the road narrowed into a tunnel. To make it into the tunnel, Archie would have to merge into one of the center lanes. He waved at the driver to his right—a girl with a flower in her hair steering a float from the Rose Parade. “Can I get in?”



The girl hunched over her steering wheel and ignored Archie.

The tunnel was approaching quickly. A semitruck bore down on Archie's bumper. Archie rolled down the window. "I NEED TO GET IN!"

The girl glanced his way, then gave her steering wheel a little wiggle, causing her float to shed rose petals all over Archie's windshield.

"SERIOUSLY?!" Archie yelled.

"Not here to make friends!" the girl replied.

Archie wanted to argue—wanted to ram her off the road—but he'd run out of time. At the last second, he swerved left and crashed down an embankment on the side of the road. He tumbled down the embankment all the way down to a service tunnel. When he finally rolled to a stop, Archie took a second to breathe. Then, he tried to flip on his headlights.

"Ba-doo-bee-doo, my baaaaabyyyy!"

Unfortunately, Archie did not turn on the headlights. Instead, he turned on the radio that happened to be playing a peppy old-time song that very much did not match his current mood.

"We cruised down the coast in my Chevrolet . . ."

Archie was running out of time, so he decided to ease onto the gas and hope for the best. He splashed through raw sewage on his way into the dark tunnel.

“ . . . On that endless, sun-kissed hiiiiighway . . . ”

He used his left hand to drive and his right to search for the lights. Unfortunately, he only managed to turn the song louder.

“ . . . THE RADIO PLAYING OUR FAVORITE SONG . . . ”

It was pitch black now.

“ . . . WITH YOU BY MY SIDE, I CAN'T GO WRONG!  
MY BAAAA— ”

*SLAM!*

Archie silenced the radio by punching it. His punch also happened to turn on emergency flashing lights. Those lights illuminated the slimy tunnel walls, green trickle on the ground, and rats. Not one or two or three rats, but jillions of them, crawling all over his car. Archie tried switching on the windshield wipers, but unfortunately . . .

“MY BAAAAAAABYYYYY!”

“AHHHHHH!”

This was the moment Archie's brain decided to shut down. In a fit of madness, he decided his best course of action would be to punch the gas pedal, drive blindly, and sing along with the radio as loudly as he could.

“BA-DOO-BEE-DOO, MY BAAAAAAABYYYYY!”  
Archie sang while his rat-covered car sped through the video game sewer. His loud singing helped mask his nerves,

but it also masked something else—the rumble of sewage behind him. Because Archie was singing about his baby, he was unprepared for the flood of yuck that was about to overtake him.

*Whooooosh!*

The sewer water propelled Archie through the sewers, up a ramp, and—

*SPLASH!*

—into the main tunnel, which also happened to be crumbling. Vehicles behind Archie swerved to avoid sewage. Vehicles in front of Archie rammed each other to avoid falling debris.

*CRASH!*

A chunk of rubble fell in front of Archie, blocking his path.

“This way!” a voice called over a bullhorn.

To Archie’s left was a fire truck holding up a section of the tunnel. A kid in a firefighter hat waved racers through.

“Go, go, go!”

Archie sped through the gap and navigated several more pieces of debris before finally emerging from the tunnel onto a forest road. The difference between the chaos of the tunnel and the tranquility of the forest was jarring. Up here, the birds sang. The leaves were turning. Little



squirrels scampered everywhere. And, at the moment, only one other vehicle was on the road.

Archie slowed as he approached a mangled parade float on the side of the road with four flat tires. The flower girl waved at him. “Help!” she yelled.

When Archie rolled down his window, the girl lit up. “Thank you!”

Archie waited until she reached for the passenger door handle before scrunching up his face. “Oh! So sorry. I’m not here to make friends.” Then, he hit the gas.

Archie cackled to himself as he peeled away. That wasn’t normally something he’d do, but the flower girl absolutely deserved it. He felt so great that he sang along to the song that was somehow still playing on the radio. “My baaaaaaa—YOW!”

Something pinched Archie’s neck. He slapped at it and got a fistful of fur. His eyes widened.

Rat.

Somehow, one lone rat had survived the mayhem in the tunnel. That rat had clung to the car through the whole race, awaiting his invitation to enter the lavish cloth interior of the 2008 Kia Rio. That invitation came when Archie rolled open the window to taunt the flower girl.

The rat scampered across the steering wheel. Archie swatted at it.

The rat fell onto the driver's seat. Archie flailed.

The rat crawled up Archie's shirt. Archie drove straight into an oak tree.

## CHAPTER FIVE

**DANCE WITH DANGER**

Archie stumbled out of the car. His ears rang, and his head hurt. Even though this was a video game, that crash felt very real. He tried flagging down a hot-pink Corvette. The driver—a teenage girl wearing a teddy bear costume—didn’t even see him, as she was too busy fixing her makeup in the mirror. The next driver—a man wearing devil horns—went out of his way to try hitting Archie with his Nissan Altima.

Archie decided he’d have a better chance completing the race by foot. Just a few steps into his trek, he heard a familiar, squeaky voice.

“ARCH!”

No way. Archie looked back. Sure enough, there was his cousin Mae, driving a bedazzled Jeep and wearing butterfly wings. “Arch! I love this!”

Archie had two dozen questions running through his mind at that moment, but he asked the most pressing one first. “Can I have a ride?!”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah! Oh, guess what?! I made a friend! This is Naila!”



The flower girl from earlier leaned around Mae to glare at Archie from the passenger seat. Archie gulped and hopped into the backseat.

“WHEEEEEEE!” Mae screamed as she took off. Mae drove exactly like every little kid drives their first Power Wheels vehicle—by jamming the pedal to the metal and twisting the steering wheel back and forth at random. Also, she wasn’t quite tall enough to see over the dashboard.

Naila reached for the wheel, but Mae whacked her hand. “MY TURN!”

“We’re gonna die,” Naila groaned.

Archie leaned toward his cousin’s ear. “How did you get here?”

“AUNT STEPH’S COMPUTER! I WAS TRYING TO DO BEADS, BUT I WAS CRYING BECAUSE YOU LEFT

ME, AND THEN AUNT STEPH'S COMPUTER MADE A FUNNY SOUND, SO I LOOKED UP, AND IT JUST WENT *THWOOOO!*" She made a vacuum sound with her mouth. "THEN I MET ROBOT YANNIS AND FOUND THIS JEEP AND . . ." Mae turned around. "YOU DID IT, ARCH! YOU REALLY DID IT!"

Archie grabbed his cousin's head and turned it back to the road.

"What did you do?" Naila asked.

"Nothing!" Archie replied. Mae turned around again to smile at him. "Watch the road!" Archie screamed.

Mae's eyes almost made it back to the road, but they stopped on Naila. "ARCH SAID HE'D DO WHATEVER IT TAKES, AND HE DID! AND I'M SO PROUD . . ."

"WATCH THE ROAD!" Both Archie and Naila shouted at the same time.

*Thwoonk!*

Too late. Mae ran straight into a thicket of blackberry bushes.

"Ahhhh!" Archie peeled thorns away from his face.

"Reverse!" Naila said.

"I am! It's not doing anything!" Mae replied.

Archie peeked up front. "Your foot's on the brake."

“This is how you reverse in *Mario Kart!*”

“That’s it,” Naila said. She ducked under a branch full of prickles and squirmed over to the driver’s seat. “I’ve got this, thanks.” Naila backed out of the bush, moved Mae to the passenger seat, squealed onto the road, then slammed the Jeep into drive.

With all Mae’s fooling around, she’d lost a lot of ground in the race. Fortunately, this section of the course took place on a rough trail with gnarled roots growing across the road, which gave the Jeep a distinct advantage over all the sleek, high-performance race cars. Naila swerved around stuck vehicles and maneuvered off-road like she’d been driving this Jeep her whole life.

“Weeheehee!” Mae cheered. “You’re such a good driver!” Then, she turned to Archie. “She’s such a good driver!”

Archie didn’t want to admit Naila was good at anything. He leaned forward and said, “Careful, you’ve got a seven-year-old in here.”

“I’m trying to win,” Naila replied. “Whatever it takes, right?” Then she laid on her horn and screamed at someone dressed in a full-body inflatable coffee mug costume. “GET OUTTA HERE, CUP!” The mug looked absolutely terrified despite the cute, little smile painted on its face.

Archie shrank back in his seat. The trees were thinning out now, revealing the mountain up ahead. Only one

obstacle remained—a narrow canyon with towering walls on either side.

Naila gunned the engine and caught up to a big, long hot dog on wheels driven by a kid wearing a *Cat in the Hat* top hat. Naila sped up to pass the hot dog, but he sped up too. Naila slowed down, and he also slowed down.

“GO AHEAD!” Naila yelled.

The kid shook his head.

“WHY NOT?!”

“I DANCE WITH DANGER!”

The canyon walls were getting closer.

“WHAT DOES THAT EVEN MEAN?!”

“I DANCE WITH DANGER!” the kid repeated.

Mae leaned out the window. “I’M MAE!”

“BENNY.”

“I LIKE YOUR HAT, BENNY!”

“WHAT?!”

“I LIKE YOUR . . .”

*WHAM!*

Naila took advantage of this small distraction to try ramming Benny. Unfortunately, his vehicle was so hefty that it held its ground while the Jeep spun out. Naila, Mae,

and Archie all screamed while they entered the canyon backward. Then—

*SMASH-CRASH!*

Both the hot dog vehicle and the Jeep smashed into a thirty-seven-vehicle pileup. At the front of the crash, Devil Horn Guy exited his Nissan Altima and waltzed toward the finish line on foot, looking quite pleased with himself for ruining everyone else's day.

*Rumble-rumble-rumble.*

The earth started shaking, then ground began crumbling near the canyon's entrance. The crumbling quickly advanced toward the Jeep.

"RUN!" Archie cried.

Naila took off by herself while Archie pushed Mae out of the Jeep and on top of the hot dog. The kids joined the shrieking crowd scrambling over vehicles toward the finish line. Archie shouted coaching tips back to his cousin while he ran ahead. "Stay to the left! Now, climb up the back of the fire truck! We've got a straight shot down the fire ladder while . . . Hey, Mae? MAE?!"

"Come here, buddy boy!" Mae yelled as she dangled inside the cabin of the fire truck.

Archie pulled his cousin up. "Go!"

"He needs help!"



Archie turned to run, but Mae grabbed his sleeve. “Arch!”

Archie stuck his head inside the cab of the truck. The firefighter kid who’d helped everyone earlier was trapped underneath a toolbox. Archie grabbed his hand. “One, two, three, pull!”

The kid flopped on top of the fire truck, then leapt to the next vehicle. He turned and held out his arms to Mae. “Jump!”

By working together, Archie, Mae, and Firefighter Kid stayed one step ahead of the crumbling ground. Finally, they dove across the finish line just as the last of the canyon floor collapsed. Archie lay on the ground panting. He’d made it. He’d actually made it.

Up close, the mountain loomed so tall that it was impossible to look at it without feeling both intimidated and dizzy. From here, Archie could see that the mouth of the skull at the base of the mountain opened wide enough to swallow a skyscraper. A fiery, orange glow radiated from the skull’s eyes. That was as far as Archie could see from the ground, and yet he knew from the announcement video that this was just a small fraction of the mountain.

Archie, Mae, and Firefighter Kid stood up and joined the ninety-seven other contestants who’d arrived before them marveling at the mountain. Then, a very special celebrity joined the group.

“Hyyyyyyyyyyyyype!” Sir Hype yelled from a nearby rock.

“Hyyyyyyyyyyyyype!” The crowd joined.

“Woo!” Sir Hype raised his arms above his head along with the crowd. “Now, you all have to go home.”

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