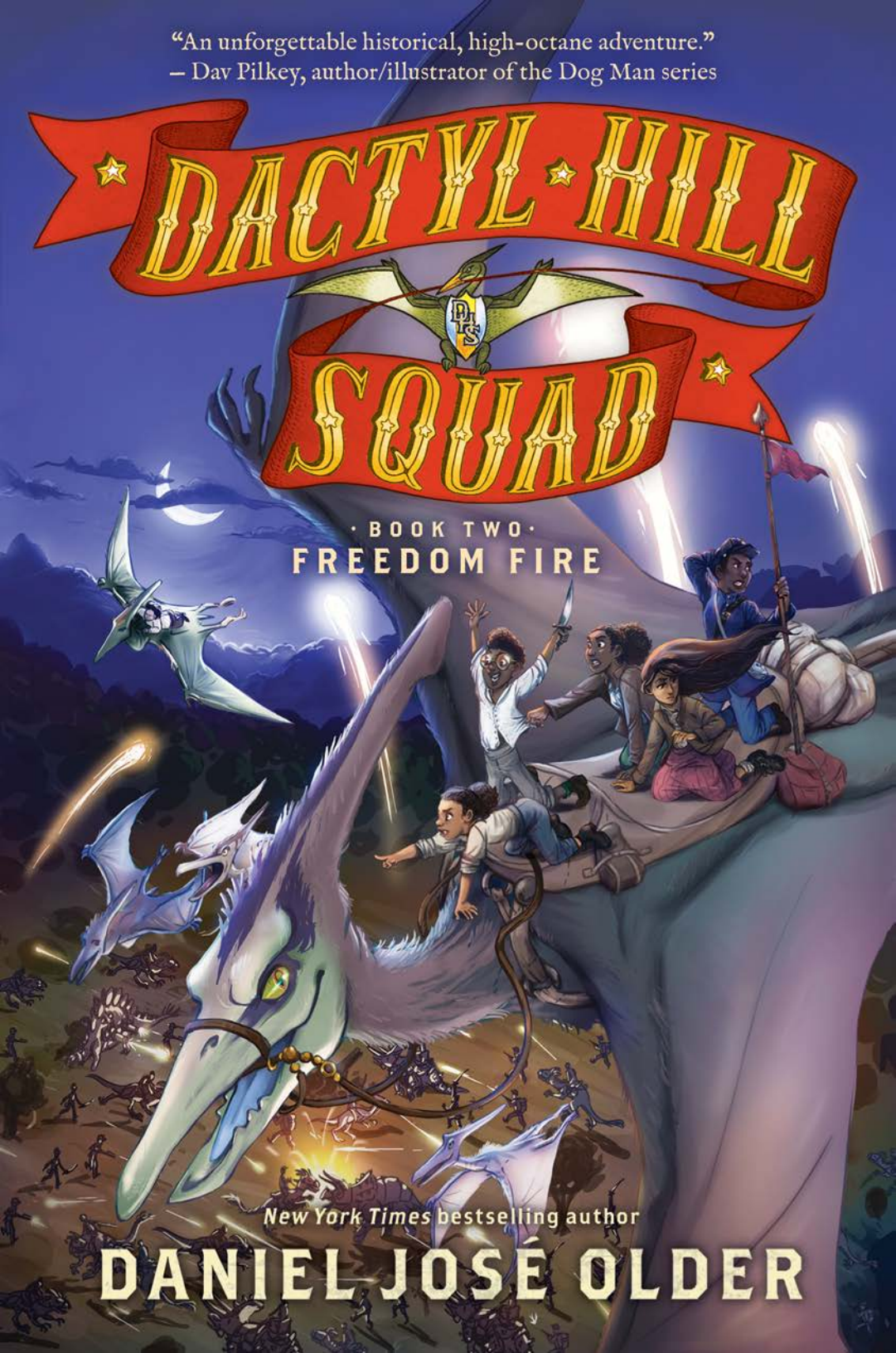


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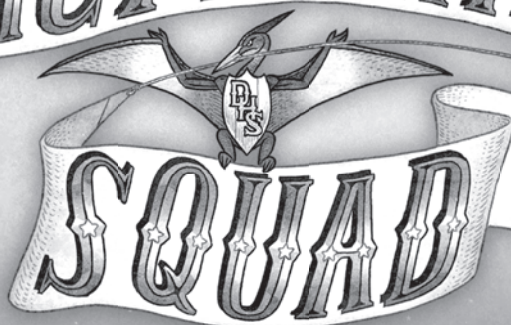
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— BOOK TWO —
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FOR KIRA, GABRIEL, AND KAI



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• PART ONE •



TENNESSEE



A GLINT OF LIGHT flickered in the darkness below. It was late — the sun had sunk behind the trees hours ago, and it seemed to extinguish the whole world of mountains and sky when it went. Magdalys Roca had lost track of how long she and her friends had been flying southward on the back of Stella, the giant pteranodon, but she was pretty sure she'd never get used to that sense of emptiness that closed in whenever night fell across the vast American wilds.

But what was that light?

It had disappeared almost as soon as she'd seen it. A bonfire maybe? A Confederate battle camp? Her heartbeat tha-thumped just a little harder in her ears at the thought. They'd passed the sparkling lights of Washington, DC, a few nights ago, then veered west, and according to Mapper, had

passed into Tennessee yesterday. There were Union outposts throughout the state, but it was still enemy territory.

Stella swooped lower just as Magdalys was craning her neck to see over the huge ptero's wing. Magdalys smiled. She'd started to get used to the fact that dinos and other huge reptiles could understand her inner thoughts and wishes, but with most of them she had to make explicit requests. *Charge*, she'd think, and those hundreds of pounds of scale and muscle would lurch and lumber into action. But Stella seemed to have connected to her on an even deeper level. The ptero knew when Magdalys was tired or afraid, knew, apparently, when she needed to get a better look at something.

There it was — that same sparkle of light in the darkness below. Stella tilted eastward just so as Magdalys grabbed the reins and stood in the saddle, squinting through the night at the dancing splash of brightness.

"Ha," Magdalys said out loud. She looked up, directly above the shimmer to where the almost full moon sat perched on a cloud bank like a queen on her throne.

"The river." Cymbeline Crunk scooped up beside Magdalys with tin cups of cold coffee in her hands. She took a sip from one and passed the other over.

"It's beautiful. Like the moon is keeping an eye on us from above and below. The Mississippi?"

Cymbeline shook her head. "Mm-mm, we're not that far west yet. Probably the Ocoee, an offshoot of the Tennessee River."

Magdalys had never met anyone like Cymbeline before. At just eighteen, she had become a renowned Shakespearean actress along with her brother, Halsey. Plus, she seemed to know everything there was to know about the war and all the messy politics surrounding it. And she was a crack shot with a carbine.

Magdalys had gotten so used to seeing the actress dressed up as princesses and fairies (or sometimes kings and demons), it was still strange to see her in a plain button-down shirt and slacks. Her big wonderful hair was pulled tight against her head, like Magdalys's, and, also like Magdalys's, it then exploded into a big terrific bun just above her neck.

It was Cymbeline who'd insisted they veer west after DC. Tennessee had been the last state to secede, she'd explained, and whole swaths of pro-Union communities still resisted the Confederates in every way they could. And anyway, all the battle lines in Virginia were liable to explode into action at any moment, and the last thing they needed was to get caught up in a major engagement.

Mapper's eyes had gone wide at that — the idea somehow exciting to him — but Two Step, Little Sabeen, and Amaya had all shivered at the thought. Magdalys didn't really care which way they went, as long as it got them to wherever her brother, Montez, was faster. Montez had been wounded in a shoot-out at Milliken's Bend during General Grant's Siege of Vicksburg. One of the other soldiers in his battalion, Private Summers, had sent a letter to Magdalys saying Montez was

still unconscious and they were on their way to New Orleans. All Magdalys knew was that she had to get to him, had to make sure he was okay, be there when he woke up if he hadn't yet, whatever it took.

Montez was the only family Magdalys knew, really. She'd been dropped off at the Colored Orphan Asylum when she was just a baby along with Montez and their two sisters, Celia and Julissa, neither of whom she could remember very well. They'd been whisked off back to Cuba a few years later and then Montez had joined the Union Army, and the Colored Orphan Asylum had been burned down in the Draft Riots right when Magdalys had found out he was wounded.

"I was worried at first," Magdalys said. "When I saw that light below . . ."

Cymbeline nodded, a grim smile crossing her face. "I know. These are the Great Smoky Mountains beneath us. An encampment could be anyone at this point."

"You think they'd have pterosaurs?"

"If they do they're probably not going to be friendly. The only pterosaur raiders I've heard of are on the Rebel side, unfortunately."

Magdalys glanced back, found the series of dark splotches in the sky behind them. Exhaled.

"The Rearguard still with us?" Cymbeline asked with a hint of laughter in her voice.

Magdalys tilted her head, glanced back at the moonlight dancing in the river below. "Guess they in it for the long haul."

About a dozen dactyls had shown up in the sky behind them just as they'd crossed out of New York City. Magdalys and the squad had been scared at first, but the dactyls were riderless, just a friendly escort out of town, apparently. And then they'd stayed along all through the journey across Pennsylvania and Maryland, heading off on little hunting expeditions and returning with small mammals to cook and for Stella to munch on along the way. Cymbeline had dubbed them the Rearguard and they'd become a source of comfort to Magdalys as they journeyed further and further from home.

The mountain forests opened up suddenly to a long swath of moonlit open fields. At the far end, a pillared mansion with well-trimmed hedges seemed to preside over the clearing.

Magdalys shuddered. She knew exactly who'd been forced to trim those hedges and clear that land. Something churned deep inside her. She wanted to summon all the giant reptiles of the forest around her and smash those mansions into splintered wreckages. Then she'd set fire to the whole thing and those flames would leap from plantation to plantation, reaping devastation and catastrophe like a burning tornado, with a hundred thousand dinos stampeding in its wake to finish the job.

"You alright?" Cymbeline asked.

Magdalys started to nod, knew she must look anything but, and finally shook her head.

"It's okay," Cymbeline said. "Me neither."

"I want to burn it all to the ground," Magdalys said.

Cymbeline nodded. “Same. Maybe one day we will. But not tonight.”

Magdalys nodded. She fought to shove that fiery destruction somewhere deep inside herself, realized she was shaking. Blinked a few times, trying to calm herself. She couldn’t concentrate through that blinding rage.

Away, she whispered to her own fury. Not now.

The forests rose again and the plantation disappeared into the night behind them but that fire kept rising inside Magdalys. Fire and fear. They were in the South now. The slaver states. Any misstep . . .

Magdalys concentrated harder, fought away the flames inside herself.

Not now. What good did it do her — all that rage?

“Let’s bring her down for the night,” Cymbeline said, startling Magdalys from her reverie.

The fires seemed to extinguish on their own, washed away by a sudden flash of uncertainty. “What? It’s only a little past midnight I think. We still have a ways to go before dawn.”

“I know but . . . this is new territory, we have to move cautiously now.” A crispness singed the edges of Cymbeline’s words. It was that faraway voice she used every now and again since they’d left New York, a sudden sadness that seemed to swallow her whole for a few moments at a time; then she’d recover and act like nothing had happened.

Magdalys wasn’t sure how much more cautiously they could move than flying under the cover of darkness and making

camp during the day. And anyway, that plantation wasn't as far enough behind them as she would've liked. But she didn't want to go back and forth about it. "The others asleep?" she asked as Stella glided toward the dark treetops below.

"Cept Amaya. She's keeping watch. There. That'll work."

Magdalys followed the imaginary line from Cymbeline's finger to a moonlit field amidst the dark maple trees.

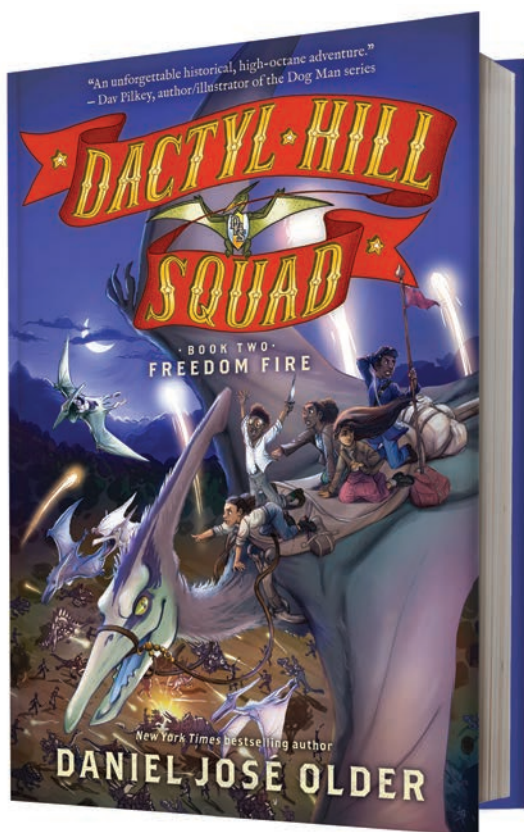
"Out in the open? Are you sure that's —"

"Just to land, Magdalys," Cymbeline cut her off. "We can hike in a little to make camp. I'll wake the others." She got up carefully and made her way to the far end of the saddle.

Cymbeline had never interrupted her before. Sure, Magdalys had only really known her a few days, but she'd come to view the older girl as a kind of sister, especially after all they'd been through together.

Stella spun a smooth arc over the treetops, the Rearguard falling into formation behind her, and then launched into a sharp dive as the open field spread long beneath them.

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