ROB HARRELL

HOT KEY BOOKS

***For Amber***

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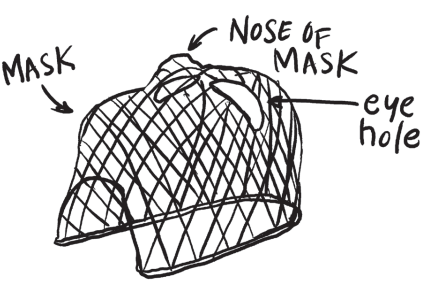
# 1

# LET'S GET RADIOACTIVE!

I'm lying on a steel table, all too aware of the giant ray gun pointed in my direction. It looks like one of those room-sized five-ton laser things supervillains use in movies. The kind they threaten to destroy the planet with.

"What music're you into, Ross?"

I'm pretty sure the radiation tech is just trying to distract me as he bolts me down. A hard-plastic-mesh mask over my neck and head holds me still—they molded it to my face yesterday—and the tech struggles to click it onto the table. He scrunches his nose, pushing.



"Oh . . . anything. Whatever," I mumble through my teeth. The hardened mask doesn't let my chin move much.

The headpiece locks in, and the tech—Frank—gives my shoulder a bump with his fist. "C'mon, man. If you're gonna lie here for half an hour, you need some tunes. I've got all kinds. Name something you like. There are no wrong answers."

I scan my brain. "You could . . . Can you just . . . KZAQ?"

Frank stops and doubles over at the waist like he's been gut-punched. He hangs there, talking to the floor.

"Okay . . . No wrong answers but that one." He straightens up and winces at me. "Seriously? You like that Top Forty garbage?"

"It's . . . what my parents have on all the time . . ."

So dorky. I try to look away casually, but my head won't budge.

Frank stares before letting out an exaggerated sigh.

"*Fine*. But tomorrow, tell me what *you* like. Not what Mom and Dad like." He walks over and fiddles with an old-timey boom box on a high wall shelf, next to a teetering stack of CDs and cassette tapes.

Seriously? There must be a gazillion dollars worth of equipment in here, and they can't afford an MP3 player? I notice a bit of tattoo peeking out from the arm of Frank's scrubs. A lizard tail, maybe? Or a tentacle?

Beyoncé fills the room, and suddenly Frank is all business. "I know we went over this yesterday, but let's review."

He wraps his arms around his clipboard and begins, like he's done this a thousand times.

"The gurney you're on is going to lift you up and move you into place. The treatment takes twenty-five minutes or so. Keep your limbs and naughty bits inside the ride at all times. Do not throw things at the radiation techs. Do not FEED the radiation techs. Do not waggle your legs around like a synchronized swimmer. Do not pass Go. Do not hum the Goo Goo Dolls, as I DESPISE the Goo Goo Dolls."

Frank steps aside to let another tech—Callie, I think—reach in and mold some blue clay over the bridge of my nose. She smiles at me and tells me it's to protect my "good" eye from the beam. Then she pats my chest. I hope I don't look as nervous as I feel, 'cause I feel like a rabbit in a trap. My face is hot.

"Okay. Now for the important part." Frank is back. "When I tell you, you're gonna stare at the red X above you. The one we made over there by the big zapper yesterday. You'll see it when the machine slides you over."

The mask prevents much of a nod, but he seems to catch it. "Don't move your eye off of that X, or your eye'll

explode into a million pieces like the Death Star, m'kay?"

I let out a little grunt.

Frank puts his hand on my arm. "I'm kidding, Ross. I mean . . . kind of. Don't look away from the X. Your eye won't explode, but we're dealing with your vision. Important stuff. So keep your eye on the X, or it could . . . Just keep your eye on the X, and you'll be fine."

Callie steps back in with a U-shaped attachment that looks like part of a kid's car seat. She fits it over my face and helps me slip the molded mouthpiece into my mouth. My teeth lock into it when I bite down, and she snaps the ends of the U to the table. *Ka-chunk.* The table is attached to a huge mechanical arm, like something out of *Star Trek.*

My nose itches. I couldn't move my head if I had to, and something about that makes me all squirmy inside. I feel like a bug on a dissecting table.

Frank and Callie look down at me. "You good?" Callie squeezes one of my sock-covered toes. "Need a blanket?"

"Nuh, I'n goo."

"Okay." She tucks a lock of hair behind her ear and gives me a friendly smile. Everybody smiles a lot here, probably because they can tell I'm freaking out. "We'll be right around the corner. You'll do great."

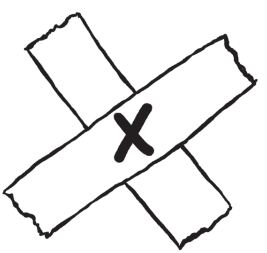
Frank winks. "No sweat. You'll see."

They walk off to my left, but I can't turn my head to follow them. The lights dim slowly as Gwen Stefani starts singing about bananas.

I'll admit it. It's a little freaky being the only one in here with all this machinery. All this . . . *stuff*.

I close my eyes and let out a long breath. It shudders as it slowly comes out, which somehow takes my nerves up another notch.

"All right." Frank's voice squawks through a tinny speaker. "We're gonna get started, Ross. Just relax and keep your eye on the red X. You're about to go for a ride."

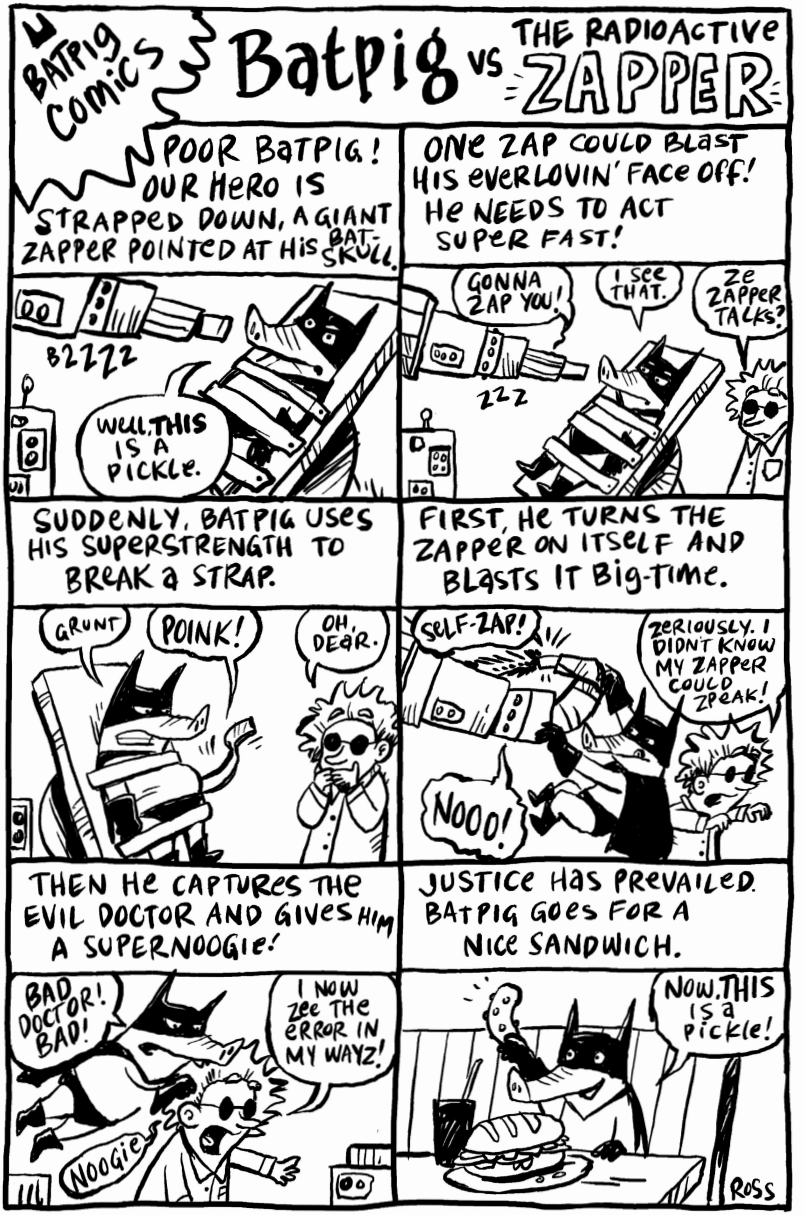


After a few seconds of silence, there are loud bangs and a revving sound. The entire room full of heavy machinery comes to life with beeping and whirring and what might be big fans powering up. Maybe things heat up when the radiation gets going? I have no idea.

Then the gurney shudders, and I begin to rise.

Frank comes through the speaker again.

"Houston, we have liftoff."


BATPIG COMICS
Batpig vs THE RADIOACTIVE ZAPPER
POOR BATPIG! OUR HERO IS STRAPPED DOWN, A GIANT ZAPPER POINTED AT HIS BAT-SKULL.
BZZZZ
WELL, THIS IS A PICKLE.
ONE ZAP COULD BLAST HIS EVERLOVIN' FACE OFF! HE NEEDS TO ACT SUPER FAST!
GONNA ZAP YOU!
ZZZ
I SEE THAT.
ZE ZAPPER TALKS?
SUDDENLY, BATPIG USES HIS SUPERSTRENGTH TO BREAK A STRAP.
GRUNT
POINK!
OH, DEAR.
FIRST, HE TURNS THE ZAPPER ON ITSELF AND BLASTS IT BIG-TIME.
SELF-ZAP!
ZERIOUSLY. I DIDN'T KNOW MY ZAPPER COULD ZPEAK!
NOOO!
THEN HE CAPTURES THE EVIL DOCTOR AND GIVES HIM A SUPERNOOGIE!
BAD DOCTOR! BAD!
I NOW ZEE THE ERROR IN MY WAYZ!
NOOGIE
JUSTICE HAS PREVAILED. BATPIG GOES FOR A NICE SANDWICH.
NOW, THIS IS A PICKLE!
ROSS