

HUNTER BOLIN

Mashup Maxx



GREAT DANE COMICS
Since 2010

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First edition

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Preface

Thank you for reading *Mashup Maxx*.

This story is currently an active work in progress. Because it has not yet reached its final published form, certain scenes, dialogue, lore, character details, and worldbuilding elements may change over time as the series continues to evolve.

Early readers are a huge part of that journey. Your excitement, feedback, and support help shape this world in ways you may not even realize.

My goal is to create the strongest version of this story possible while staying true to the heart of its characters, adventure, and themes.

So if something changes later—whether it’s a rule, a scene, or even a small detail—know that it was done in service of making the world of Terra and Arenakour even better.

Thank you for being here at the beginning.

— Hunter Bolin

Graphic Novel Version

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Prologue

5 Years Ago...

“And Jackie sidesteps a **DESTRUCTIVE JAB** from newcomer Malcolm the Bold—his diamond Morph extending into a razor-sharp rapier, piercing straight through the barrier! Jackie plants his bamboo Morph and vaults using his signature move **ELEVATED FLOW**, launching himself clean over the final obstacle, snagging the point and sending this match into overtime!”

“Tom, I know you’re new to this, but in all my years covering the Arenakour Champion Series, I have never seen anything like this! Jackie Two Fingers—seven-time world champion—is at the end of his rope!”

“Yeah, but don’t count him out yet. We’ve seen the Champ pull off the impossible before. Who could’ve predicted a man with a pair of bamboo sticks from Marshcove would be standing here, crown on his head, representing the entire sport?”

“Then let me ask you this, Tom. If the Champ falls... who takes the crown?”

“MAXX!”

“I’m coming, Mom!”

Maxx launched from his bed, eyes locked on the flickering Teletube replaying last year’s ACS Championship. He leapt to the next bed, then back again, faster, sloppier, like he was running

the course himself.

“And both contenders clear their dugouts for the overtime round. This is going to come down to pure will!”

“How either of them is still standing after six of the fiercest runs I’ve ever seen, I don’t know. Call it will. Call it madness. But one of them is leaving with everything... and one with nothing.”

Maxx grinned, breath quick, feet pounding.

He watched without blinking.

The lines. The jumps. The moment.

“I see the paths,” he muttered.

Zzztt.

The screen snapped to static.

“No, wait! Mom, we were just about to see the end!”

Maxx dove across the bed toward the control knob. His fingers hit it—

but his foot caught the frame.

He went down hard.

The world cracked.

A splinter from the floor drove into his cheek just beneath his eye.

Pain flashed, sharp and sudden.

But Maxx barely felt it.

As the room spun and his vision darkened...

He was still imagining he was in the arena.

Running. Climbing. Leaping.

I

PART ONE

*“Hundreds have chased the crown in the sport of
Arenakour... yet only two have ever claimed it. Will it
remain upon the head it knows... or fall to one
unproven?”*

—Eric Peck, ACS Founder

1

GIVE ME A SIGN

A scrawny boy lands on the rooftop with a loud *thud*, wobbling to find his balance as the metal creaks beneath his feet. He bends over, hands on his knees, catching his breath. The salty breeze stings his face, his spiky blonde hair sticking to his forehead in the last traces of sunlight. He wipes his face with his wrist and narrows his green eyes at the view.

The island stretches out like a messy painting. The beach—a bright crescent of sand—curves along turquoise water, waves rolling lazily to shore. Beyond that, just sky and sea, making the island feel like its own tiny world. Stacked shacks and patched-together homes sprawl inland, built from whatever scraps the sea and time have offered. Rusted metal sheets gleam with hand-etched designs. Salvaged ship-wood panels still bear faded port names. Bright laundry flutters on sagging clotheslines. Handmade driftwood chimes, painted flags, and tiny Morph carvings give each home its own story.

Beyond the favelas, the dormant volcano looms, with its towering, forested slope spilling toward the sea like a silent titan. Below, the streets pulse with life. Kids race through alleys.

Vendors bark out prices for fresh fish. And skewers of steaming street food, their smoky scent curling through the air.

“MAXX!”

Maxx turns just as—*whoosh*—Nico rockets toward him up a ramp, wheels spinning, arms pumping. A wide grin stretches across his face at the sight of his friend, excitement dancing in his dark eyes. Other kids crowd nearby rooftops, breathing hard but eager for more.

“Next point wins!” Nico shouts, skidding to a stop. His striped tank clings to his skinny frame, cargo shorts crammed with gadgets. “Better hurry, curfew’s coming!”

Maxx’s grin wavers. The curfew bell is no joke. The mayor’s guards are simple to dodge, but don’t mess around once you’re caught. Still...there is no better time to run.

“Yeah, yeah.” He swallows his nerves. “Pick the target.”

The kids join in protest.

“Make it a good one!”

“Not another chimney!”

Nico smirks, spinning dramatically on one wheel. “Our final target iss... the clocktower!”

Silence. Then groans.

“You’re kidding,” a boy mutters. “Nobody climbs that thing!”

“It’s a mile through the busiest part of town!”

“And it’s falling apart!”

Nico just shrugs, smug. “Toughest challenge, right? The clock’s ticking.”

DING. DONG.

The first curfew bell tolls eerily on cue, deep and heavy, rolling over the island like a warning. Shadows freeze, nerves thrum.

“I’m not waiting for you scaredy-chucks,” Leo says, stepping forward.

Confidence drips from his voice. Tall, lean muscle shifts beneath his shirt as he leans over the edge. He looks back to make sure everyone sees.

“I’ll show you how it’s done.”

And just like that, he’s gone.

Leo launches forward, his movements sharp and powerful. He cuts through clotheslines without a glance, fabric snapping in his wake.

The other kids scramble, pounding over rooftops like a startled flock. Tin rattles under their feet. The wild race to the clocktower is on.

Maxx stays still.

He watches.

The mistakes are obvious. Sloppy landings. Wasted steps.

“Come on, Maxx! You’re falling too far behind!” Nico calls, bouncing in his wheelchair.

Maxx crouches, mapping the route in his mind. He threads the course together before moving a muscle.

He exhales. Then smirks.

“Nine Yippiyippis,” Nico drawls. “Ten Yippiyippis—”

Maxx launches.

“Don’t worry,” he yells, voice alive. Confident. Free.

His foot hits the edge. He soars into the air.

“I always find a way to win!”

THE CLOCKTOWER

The rooftops blur beneath Maxx's feet. His movements are fluid, precise; vaulting gaps, skimming past loose shingles, ducking beneath snapping laundry lines. A barrier rises ahead, but he barely hesitates, pushing off the wall in a clean, effortless jump.

Below, the streets churn with sound and movement. Vendors bellow.

"Fresh fish, straight from the docks!"

"Sweet mangoes, just three pence!"

Pedestrians shove through the crowded streets, dodging carts and barrels. Hooves clatter, wheels creak, sandals slap against dirt. The air is thick with roasting nuts, salted fish, sweat, and spilled rum.

Above it all, Maxx runs.

His pulse thrums, but he's not afraid. The others will be behind him soon.

A boy freezes at a rooftop edge, hesitating.

Maxx launches past, sailing over the gap.

Cold air rushes against his skin before he lands in a roll, popping up smooth.

“The bigger the gap, the more speed you need!” he shouts back.

The rooftops tighten. Crumbling. Irregular. Maxx pushes harder, instincts honed by years of practice.

Then he sees it.

The clocktower looms ahead.

Massive and unforgiving. A reminder of a culture long past.

Its weathered stone walls split with deep cracks, ivy vines snaking through its wounds. At the top, the bell; its dull metal gleaming in the dim light.

He isn't the first one to reach it. A figure scrambles up the tower.

Leo.

Maxx's stomach knots.

Leo moves quickly, his strong arms pulling him up with ease. Even from below, Maxx sees the confidence in his climb.

He's ahead. For now.

Maxx slows, eyes scanning the weakened tower. It's worse than last season. Loose stone. Missing sections. One wrong move...

On the ground, a girl watches, arms crossed. Her frown is sharp.

“He's going to fall.”

Her voice is low, but Maxx hears.

He glances at her. “You could help, Gwen.”

She doesn't look at him. “You know I would,” she mutters, brushing off her dress. “But my mother would be very displeased if I ruined my dress.”

She doesn't belong here.

Her white dress flutters in the breeze, unmarked by dust. Delicate florals stitched along the seams. A wide-brimmed sun

hat casts soft shadows over her sharp, composed features. She stands still, watching like an interloper, peering into a world she'll never step into.

Suddenly, Maxx feels like a sweaty, wild-haired mess.

Gwen shifts uncomfortably.

"You'll have to show him how it's done. But be careful."

"I'll be fine."

He moves. Fingers brushing rough brick. He grips the first ledge, stone scraping his skin. Then he pulls, muscles burning in a steady, rhythmic climb.

It's instinct for him now—like breathing, like running.

Below, the market noise fades to a dull hum.

Above. Leo.

Maxx angles up, watching the older boy falter, his movements turning frantic.

He smirks. "Hey, Leo, better watch out! I'm coming for ya!"

Leo looks down. His face darkens as Maxx passes him with ease. His jaw clenches.

"No way I'm letting you beat me!"

He lunges upward. Too fast.

Maxx sees it coming.

"Leo, no!"

Leo grabs a loose brick.

It snaps free from the crumbling tower, still in his grip.

His other hand slips.

For just a second, time hangs still.

He falls backward.

Arms flailing. Eyes wide.

Panic twists his face, a raw cry ripping from his throat as he plummets.

Maxx doesn't think.

He dives.

Air rushes past in a blur. His arms stretch, fingers reaching out.

He collides with Leo midair, wrapping his arms around him. Their weight yanks them away from the wall.

They crash.

A market stall explodes beneath them. Crates burst, sending a cascade of fruit and trinkets, apples and oranges rolling across cobblestones. A banner rips free, tangling around Maxx's arm before he vanishes into the wreckage.

Silence.

"What on Terra have you done to my stall?!"

A thickset merchant storms forward, face red with fury.

Maxx groans, wincing as he begins to stand. He throws his hands up defensively.

"Sir, we're so sorry! Total accident! We'll help clean up."

He nudges Leo. "Right?"

Leo winces, brushing off splinters. "Yeah, yeah. Just don't call the guards."

The merchant scowls, then points away. "Scram! You've done enough, *barnacleheads!*"

They don't wait to be told twice.

Maxx and Leo bolt, weaving through the closing market.

Pink faced, Leo mutters, "I had it under control."

Maxx laughs. "Sure, you did."

Nico rolls up with the other kids, wheezing with laughter. "Leo looked like a flying fopper! Arms and legs everywhere!"

Another boy in the group adds. "Wouldn't want your dad hearing about this. The Mayor's top enforcer... and his son screams as high as a hairpin!"

Leo glares, ready to argue—

DING. DONG.

The second curfew bell rings.

The sound is heavy, final.

Laughter dies. Smiles fade.

The once-lively market hushes, now tinged with something colder, more urgent.

Leo stiffens, fists clenching. He turns and walks away without a word, disappearing into the dim streets.

Maxx watches him go. Guilt flickers, but there's no time to dwell.

He glances at Nico, already adjusting his wheels, ready to move. "We've gotta go."

The other kids scatter like startled seabirds.

Maxx lingers for a beat, just long enough for Nico to roll beside him.

Grinning, Nico pulls something from his pocket. A small bundle, wrapped in a napkin, edges damp from the humid air. "Happy birthday."

Maxx blinks.

Carefully, he peels back the wrapping. Inside, gleaming in the low light, rests a fishhook. Carved from bone, or maybe a creature's tooth. Its surface is polished, with delicate carvings of twisting waves along its curve. Unexpectedly heavy.

Maxx swallows hard. "Nico... how?"

Nico shrugs. "When you're ready, toss it into the Twin Serpents River and make a wish. Maybe you'll wake up tomorrow on Torio Island as an Arenakour Champion." He waves a hand dismissively, but his expression is soft.

Maxx clutches it, smiling.

Without thinking, they fall into their handshake: Fist bump. Jellyfish hands. Swim awayyy. Their fingers wriggle like fish,

darting off into the water.

Laughter bubbles between them.

Maxx grins. "Alright. I'll catch you tomorrow after work!"

He takes off.

The fishhook necklace swings in his hand, glinting in the fading light.

Even as darkness spreads, and the stars flicker awake, Nico's gift stays with him. A silent weight in his palm. A promise and a reminder. As Maxx races toward home, his steps feel just a bit lighter.

3

BIRTHDAY BLESSINGS

DING. DONG.

The final toll of the clocktower bell shudders through the streets, its echo settling into every alley and stone. It's not just sound. It's law.

Curfew is in effect.

Maxx sprints, tattered shoes kicking up dust. His lungs burn, chest heaving. The fishhook jostles in his grip, smooth and grounding.

Then, his home.

Relief floods in, but as his foot lands on the stoop, instinct halts him. The wood creaks.

The door swings open.

WHAM!

A rough hand grabs his shirt, yanking him inside.

Storm-gray eyes lock on his.

Dane.

His father fills the doorway. Broad, worn, and built by labor. Scarred forearms, stiff posture, and a scruffy beard streaked with gray. The weight he carries carved on his face.

“Where have you been?” Dane growls.

Maxx shrugs. “I was only a few seconds late.”

Dane’s grip tightens, then releases.

“You’d be jailed. No matter your age. Then what? Bail’s more than we can afford. You want that on your mother? Your sister?”

The words land hard.

“I...” Maxx falters.

Dane exhales, rubbing his beard. “We’re barely holding on...I can’t do it alone.”

For the first time, Maxx sees it. Real exhaustion, deep as the worry in his father’s eyes.

“I’m sorry, Dad. I won’t let you down.”

Dane studies him, then nods, placing a firm hand on his shoulder.

“Good man. Now wash up and help set the table.”

Maxx ducks inside.

Warm broth and fresh bread scent the small, single-room home. The packed clay walls, rickety wooden table, and cluttered kitchenette are imperfect but familiar.

“Maxx!”

Maeve grins, setting the table with careful precision. Her jade-green eyes, the only trait they share, sparkle. Dark hair spills past her shoulders, an oversized red scarf wrapped around her like a cape.

“You made it just in time!”

Maxx steps forward, ready to tease—

She coughs.

Faint. Barely a sound. But it stops him. His smile falters.

Maeve waves it off. “I’m fine,” she insists, voice too quick. “Go wash up before Dad yells again.”

He hesitates, then lets her win with a soft chuckle.

At the bathroom sink, he meets his reflection: messy, tired, dust streaked. Wild blonde hair sticks up, the scar beneath his eye catching the lamplight. He splashes water on his face.

Finally, still.



Lynn hums as she ladles stew into bowls, her delicate frame moving with quiet strength. Her blonde braid catches the lantern glow as she turns, eyes warm.

“You’re just in time, birthday boy.”

Maxx grins, exhaustion melting into the familiar comfort of dinner.

They bow their heads. Dane’s voice carries steadily and low through prayer; thankful for blessings, family, and the chance to gather.

When they lift their heads, the air feels lighter.

Maeve fiddles with her scarf. Even under layers, she shivers.

Maxx leans in. “What did you do today?”

“I helped Mom in the garden! We picked tomatoes, you should see them! So shiny and perfect!”

Maxx grimaces. *Tomatoes. Gross!* The mushy texture, the sticky seeds... just thinking about them churns his stomach.

But Maeve is beaming.

So, he swallows his disgust, nodding like tomatoes are the best thing in the world.

Lynn smirks. “Speaking of tomatoes, take some to Mrs. Cloudeen’s shop tomorrow. They’re finally ripe to sell.”

Maxx nods absently, dipping bread in his broth.

His mother hums. Maeve coughs again, quieter than before. Dane sits in silence, unreadable, spoon moving with slow patience.

A smile tugs at Maxx's lips.

"So," Lynn prompts, "what mischief did you get into today?"

Maxx launches into a dramatic retelling, arms flailing. Park-our leaps, rooftop scrambles, everything but the market crash.

"And then, boom! I made the biggest leap yet! Even Leo couldn't keep up!"

Maeve giggles, eyes glowing. "I wish I could've been there."

Maxx hesitates. Her words hang in the air.

Then, with a soft grin, he ruffles her hair.

"Next time, Maeve. I'll teach you."



Dinner winds down. Dane clears the bowls, returning with something small, carefully balanced in his hands.

A single cupcake.

The tiny flickering candle casts dancing shadows. The room tightens around it, warm and intimate.

Maxx's eyes widen.

"But where?! Cake?! There's nowhere on the island that has real cake!"

Lynn laughs.

"You didn't think we'd have nothing for your birthday, did you?"

Maxx scratches his head. "I mean I guess but...this is leg-

endary!”

She winks. “Your mother has her secret ways.” Then she nods at Dane. “But you can thank your father for the gift.”

Dane shifts, pulling a thin, unwrapped box from his lap. His calloused hands offer it carefully.

“Twelfth birthday’s a big one,” he says. “I was that age when my family moved here. My chance to build something. I worked hard, so hard, to prove I deserved that chance.”

He glances at Lynn. A rare smile breaks through on his face.

“Then I met your mother. We had you two, and my purpose became clear.”

Maxx flushes. “Dad...”

Dane ruffles his hair, offering the box.

Maxx unwraps it, hands trembling.

A black tracksuit.

Simple. Sturdy.

Dane clears his throat. “Nothing fancy. Men’s sizes were all they had.”

Maxx brushes the fabric, eyes shining.

A grin spreads across his face.

“I love it.” His voice is soft, filled with more emotion than he knows how to say. Then he bursts out, “I LOVE IT! Just like the one Jackie wore!”

He springs up, bouncing with joy, holding it high like a trophy.

Lynn laughs. “Alright, alright! You can try it on later. Time for cake!”

Maxx closes his eyes and blows out the candle. The tiny flame winks out. They share the cupcake, savoring each bite like it’s a delicacy. Laughter fills the room as they pull out dice, rolling into familiar games, a tradition as old as Maxx can remember. When the games wind down, and their eyes

BIRTHDAY BLESSINGS

grow heavy, they huddle into twin beds. The old TeleTube hums quietly. Arenakour reruns flicker across the screen as its light dances over their tired, happy faces.

A NIGHT TO REMEMBER

Maxx can't sleep.

Excitement drums in his chest. He clutches the tracksuit, feeling the promise of motion in its cool fabric. The room is dim, shadows stretching in the candle's dying glow.

Next to him, Dane snores. A rhythm that usually soothes him, but not tonight. Maxx shifts, glancing toward the girls' bed.

Maeve lies curled under the quilt, pale face peeking out, her breath shallow. He frowns. She looks fragile. Then suddenly, she lets out a groggy snore.

A smile stretches across his face. Still Maeve.

His legs itch to move. Pulse wired. He grips the tracksuit tighter.

"I can't wait," he whispers, heart thudding. "I have to try this out."

He rolls out of bed, landing light on his feet. The floor still creaks. He freezes. Dane stirs but doesn't wake. Maxx exhales, inching to the balcony door. The hinges give a soft squeak as he pushes it open.

He winces.

Nothing.

He slips into the night.

The air is crisp, thick with salt and smoke. He climbs up to the communal roof. The island sprawls below. Rooftops. Lanterns. Winding alleyways. Beyond, the ocean stretches endlessly, crashing softly to shore.

And above—

His breath catches.

The sky is a canopy of stars.

“I could never miss this view,” he murmurs.

He kneels, unfolding the tracksuit. Black fabric gleams under the moonlight, white seams glowing faintly. He shivers, wriggling free of his pajamas, bare skin prickling in the cold. Then, just as he pulls up the track pants, a voice cuts through the silence.

“I could DEFINITELY miss this view.”

Maxx freezes.

His heart slams. He yanks up the waistband over his exposed bum and spins, face blazing.

Lily.

Standing on the roof, arms crossed, crimson-splashed ponytail swaying in the breeze. Her denim shorts and tank top are smudged with dirt and oil, evidence of another long day’s work.

But her eyes? Pure mischief.

“Oh no, oh no,” Maxx mutters, scrambling for a response.

Say something cool. Anything!

He flips his hair, throwing on a smug grin. “Beautiful night to catch a glimpse of the moon, am I right?”

His voice cracks.

Lily erupts, doubled over with laughter, tears in her eyes. Maxx wants to melt into the roof.

“Not a beautiful sight if it’s your full moon, GOOF!” she cackles.

He groans, hands over his face. His cheeks burn.

She wipes her eyes, still grinning, and gives him a light punch.

“Thanks for the laugh. What did you do today?”

Maxx shrugs, still trying to look chill. “Oh ya know, just showing Leo and the others how to kour it up.”

She raises an eyebrow. “*Kour* it up?”

“Oh please,” she says. “You only won because I worked a late shift again. If I’d been there, you wouldn’t have stood a chance.”

Maxx claps a hand over his mouth, stifling a laugh.

Lily narrows her eyes. “What’s so funny?”

He smirks. “With your fear of heights, you’d have shrieked louder than Leo on the clocktower.”

Lily’s face flushes. “You’re so dead.”

She lunges, grabbing damp laundry and hurling it.

“Hey!” Maxx ducks. A wet sock whizzes by.

She grabs more—shirts, pants, even a bedsheet—flinging them with deadly accuracy. Maxx dodges, laughing just above a whisper as she chases him across the roof.

Stars above. Town below.

For a moment, it’s just them.

They finally stop, breathless. Lily drifts to the roof’s edge. Her laughter fades.

Maxx watches her carefully. She stares out, knuckles white on the ledge.

“I want to go... but shouldn’t risk it,” she whispers. “If I fall... who takes care of them? My mom, the twins... And what if I get caught? We can’t afford bail.”

Maxx doesn’t speak.

He reaches for her hand.

His fingers wrap around hers, warm and steady.

“I know it’s dangerous,” he says, voice firm.

She looks at him.

“But what kind of life is it if we never take chances?” His grip tightens. “Adventure’s out there, Lily. We just have to be brave enough to chase it.”

For a long second, she watches him. The weight of his words hangs between them.

Then... she squeezes back. A faint smile breaks through her worry.

Maxx grins, confidence surging. “Besides,” he adds, “I won’t let anything happen to you. I promise.”

Her smile deepens. The fear doesn’t vanish, but it shifts.

She nods. Together they lean forward, hands clasped.

A shared breath. A heartbeat of hesitation.

They jump.

The wind roars, lifting them weightless before gravity pulls them down, rooftops rushing up to meet them.

Maxx grins ear to ear, exhilarated.

Lily holds back a scream, and instead lets out a tiny laugh.

And as they fall, the night welcomes them like an old friend.

MAKE A WISH

They slide down the remains of a collapsed rooftop, shingles grinding underfoot as the slope launches them forward.

Maxx lands first; light, fluid, already moving before his feet fully touch down.

Lily hits a second later, measured but fast.

Side by side, they sprint. Vaulting. Leaping. Twisting. They move like shadows, ducking under laundry lines fluttering in the moonlight. Below, the town hums, a soft melody against their quiet laughter.

Maxx grins. "You're slowing us down, tiptoeing like that."

He clears a garden box with ease.

Lily shoots him a sharp glare but doesn't bite back. She drops low, twisting under a clothesline in one smooth move. Her ponytail whips behind her.

He glances back, smirking. "Not bad, but still no match for me."

Lily exhales. "Keep talking, and I'll push you off the next roof."

The next gap looms wide. The street below is empty, lanterns

casting dim halos.

Maxx speeds up, heartbeat syncing with his steps. The wind roars by his ears as he leaps,

and for a second, he's flying.

He lands in a roll, popping up smoothly. "See? Easy."

Lily follows, strong and sure.

But her foot slips.

Maxx's stomach lurches. His body moves before his brain, ready to grab her.

But she catches herself, dust scattering beneath her heels as she steadies.

He exhales, grinning. "Admit it, you were scared."

She brushes off her shirt. "Show-off."

They slow to a crouch behind a rooftop ledge, overlooking the market square.

Below, guards in red and gold stand by wooden barricades. Lanterns flicker across their stiff forms. Gold whistles sway from their necks.

"Finish up preparations for the Fishhook Festival," barks one.

A younger guard fidgets. "Sir, it's two days out. Blocking the market early hurts locals who rely on these stalls."

"Orders are orders, get to it!" the officer snaps.

Maxx clenches his fists. "They don't even have weapons. Just whistles. That's all it takes to keep everyone in line."

Lily nudges him. "Don't even think about it."

Her voice is steady but there's understanding in her eyes.

Maxx doesn't speak.

Then he spots something.

A deserted powerline stretches from their perch to the clock-tower window.

A grin spreads across his face.

Lily follows his gaze. “No. Absolutely not.”

He is already moving.

“That’s too risky!” Lily hisses. “If we fall—”

“We won’t.” He grips the cable and drops to hang.

Lily glares, torn. “Maxx, you overconfident, irresponsible...”

She grabs the cable and follows him into the dark.

It trembles under their weight. Maxx glides, metal burning his palms, wind rushing past.

The clocktower draws near, its old bricks glowing.

He swings, grabs the ledge, and hauls himself up. He turns to watch Lily’s cautious approach.

Her grip tightens. “Don’t look down. Don’t look down,” she mutters.

The wire shudders.

She gasps, panic flashing. “Maxx! It’s shaking! Help me!”

Maxx spots the culprit. A fluffy bird perched on the wire, blinking innocently.

“Relax. It’s just a hairpin.”

Lily glares. Her panic shifts to rage. “I HATE BIRDS!”

With a desperate lunge, she crashes into Maxx.

They tumble, landing in a tangled heap.

Lily grips his sleeves, trembling. Then she pulls away, brushing herself off.

“You okay?” he asks.

“Fine. But if you laugh about this later, I will end you.”

Maxx raises his hands in surrender, grinning. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

They sit on the windowsill, legs dangling. Below, the town sleeps beneath them.

A shooting star streaks across the sky.

Maxx nods toward it. “You know, some say every falling star

is a new Morph arriving on Terra.”

Lily snorts. “That’s just a tale. Morphs only come during an Eclipse Rain.” She pauses. “I’d rather believe what my dad always told me, that someone’s dream came true.”

Maxx stares out.

Then he throws his arms out wide. “Let me be next then! MY DREAM IS TO BE AN ARENAKOUR CHAMPION!”

Lily’s eyes widen in horror. “Be quiet, you goof!” She tackles him.

They roll, laughing.

Maxx lands flat. Lily pins his shoulders, her weight light but firm.

Her smile softens.

His chest pounds. Not like after a big jump, but from something else.

Something new.

Lily’s hair tumbles loose, strands brushing his cheek.

Their eyes lock.

For once, Maxx has no words.

His heart races.

He notices the freckles on her nose, the way her lips part, like she’s about to speak. But she hesitates.

She blinks, breaking the moment, and ties her hair back. “We should go.”

He stays on the floor, staring at the sky. The stars feel brighter. Like they know something.

As they move from rooftop to rooftop, the banter fades but not into silence.

Something lingers.

Maxx sneaks a glance. The moonlight catches her hair as she tucks a strand behind her ear.

He wonders if her heart's racing too.

They reach the communal rooftop.

Maxx hesitates, rubbing the back of his neck. "Thanks," he says. "For making the first hours of my birthday... unforgettable."

Lily smirks. "Oh, it's your birthday?" she muses. "I had no idea."

Maxx rolls his eyes, but his grin won't fade.

She waves over her shoulder, vanishing into the dark.

Maxx watches her go, the cool breeze brushing his face, carrying the faint scent of the sea.

His heart calms.

As he slips into bed, the sound of her laughter lingers.

Looping over and over.

Like a melody he never wants to forget.

ONE FATEFUL MORNING

“MAXX!”

His mother’s voice cuts through the morning stillness.

“MAXX!”

Maxx groans, rolling over. Last night’s rooftop escapade with Lily clings to him like fog. His limbs are heavy, his eyelids bricks.

Just five more minutes...

“Maxx! You’re going to miss your birthday waffles!”

His brain screeches to a halt.

Waffles.

He bolts upright, all exhaustion gone.

“I FORGOT IT’S MY BIRTHDAY!”

Scrambling out of bed, he nearly wipes out on the cool floor. Doesn’t matter. Waffles are waiting.

He skids into the kitchen, and stops cold.

“Legendary.”

At the counter, his mom carefully stacks golden waffles. Crisp edges, glistening honey, sweet pineapple, and a swirl of whipped cream.

Maxx stares, starry-eyed.

Lynn sets the plate down. "There's my birthday boy."

He snaps out of it, dives into his seat, and devours the first bite like he's been shipwrecked.

Lynn laughs. "It's always the little things that bring you such cheer." She adds another helping, eyeing his tracksuit. "Late night testing your new gear?"

Maxx freezes mid-bite.

"Uh... yeah. It's awesome... You aren't going to tell Dad are you?" He shoves another forkful in his mouth, avoiding her gaze.

Her brow lifts, her smile turning sly. "Just be careful. And how's Lily?"

Maxx chokes.

Coughing violently, he nearly sends a piece of waffle flying.

"She's good! Really good!" he blurts, voice cracking. "In fact, I was thinking of helping her and her mom at the market today."

Her expression softens. "That's kind of you. But first, take those tomatoes to Mrs. Cloudeen's. Last delivery before summer ends."

He nods fast. "Of course!"

More sales meant more money.

He'd spent the summer working tirelessly. One pence a month running produce, three pence a month sweating in the fields for stingy Mr. Dotson.

It wasn't much.

But it was enough.

Twelve pence. Just enough to enter the Fishhook Festival.

His chest thumps with excitement. He wipes syrup from his face, rinses the plate in a blur, skips tying his sneakers, and straps the tomato crate to his back.

The weight doesn't feel heavy.

It feels earned.

“See you later!” he calls, racing out as morning sunlight spills over him.

Salt and warm earth fill the air.

Today’s not just any day.

It’s his birthday.

And he’s going to make it count.



The streets are already alive.

Vendors shout over one another, carts creak along uneven roads, and the scent of sizzling meat, salt, and sunbaked stone weaves through the air.

Maxx moves like water, slipping between pedestrians, dodging wagons, barely registering the market’s rhythm.

Because in his head, he’s already at the Fishhook Festival.

He sees it: vibrant stalls, dazzling circus acts, electrifying crowds.

Arenakour.

That’s what makes his pulse race.

He imagines it. The roar of the crowd as he launches into the air, twisting mid-flight, landing clean and capturing the victory point.

A thrill shoots down his spine.

His jog becomes a sprint.

He slides under a moving cart, nearly grazing the axle. Vaults over crates, fingers brushing rough wood, landing easy.

He sidesteps a merchant’s tray of steaming dumplings, just

in time.

His fishhook necklace bounces up in front of him. He catches it.

His thoughts slow.

What would I wish for?

The question settles, heavy.

Maxx's pace eases. The market noise fades as he drifts off the main road, down to the river.

The dirt path is cool, the scent of river water in the air.

He kneels, watching his reflection shift in the stream. "I want to be an Arenakour Champion," he says aloud.

The words feel bolder than they did last night.

Then he second-guesses. "No. That's too selfish."

His thoughts drift. To his father, breaking his back daily to keep them afloat. To his mother, juggling the garden, laundry business, and caring for his sister. Always smiling. Never complaining.

To Maeve.

Her frail frame. Her quiet strength. Her laugh, even when she's hurting.

Watching her struggle makes me so angry.

She doesn't deserve this. Why did she get this illness? Why is there no cure?

The thoughts won't leave.

A sudden clatter jolts him.

He looks up.

A demolition machine rumbles toward the old Toro hiking bridge.

Rusty metal groans. Jagged claws hang like the teeth of some ancient beast.

Maxx's stomach tightens.

“So, the mayor’s finally tearing it down.”

He moves closer to get one last look.

The intricate carvings on its railings. The large, weathered stones that still hold strong. The woven tree roots, an arch that’s stood longer than any soul in Fishhook.

A relic.

Then he sees it. Something glows beneath it.

Nestled under the bridge, where the water runs shallow.

A Morph cocoon.

No bigger than a coconut or clobberball, a soft green hue pulsing within it.

Maxx’s breath stills.

A Morph.

Alive.

The construction crew shouts as the machine’s treads churn up the earth.

The ground shifts.

The driver panics, yanking controls. The machine lurches, its claw swinging wildly—

CRACK!

The arm slams into the bridge, splintering its ancient wood.

Maxx’s heart jumps. “HEY! THERE’S A MORPH COCOON UNDER THE BRIDGE! STOP!”

Workers freeze up, eyes snapping toward him, wide with confusion.

The machine groans.

The ground buckles.

The driver jumps clear.

The entire machine tilts forward, pulling the bridge down with it.

Maxx doesn’t think.

He moves.

The bridge shudders violently.

The cocoon is still there.

He dives forward as the structure collapses around him.

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