



THE FORBIDDEN POWER

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SCHOLASTIC INC.

CHAPTER ONE

Fletcher Bowman was nervous.

No, not just nervous. Poison ivy made Fletcher nervous. The dentist made Fletcher nervous.

Right now, Fletcher was more than nervous. Fletcher was anxious, agitated, apprehensive, and straight-up scared.

He was sitting on a cold, cracked seat on the holotrain. The blue-and-gold train car was zipping toward the great city of Knightonia, speeding down the shimmering blue ribbon-rails. Fletcher had been riding the train for three straight days: His bottom was sore, and his neck was stiff. He didn't have the money for one of

the train's fancy sleeping cars, so he'd been in the same not-so-comfy seat for seventy-two straight hours.

He was finally nearing his destination, though that wasn't bringing him much relief . . .

There was a crackling sound. Then a voice came over the speaker: "Next stop: Knights' Academy."

Fletcher pressed his face to the window. Nearly everything was a blur as the train sped into Knightonia, whirring past glowing beam bridges and the state-of-the-art Joustdome. Huge, high-tech brick buildings dotted the horizon. The city seemed endlessly huge.

Fletcher clutched his traveling bag as the holo-rail shuddered, hissed, and slowed. The conductor marched down the aisle. "Knights' Academy! Now arriving!"

Fletcher stood up. Brushing his shaggy brown hair out from over his eyes, he noticed that he was the *only* person to stand up. Apparently, very few students took public transportation to the academy.

The train came to a smooth stop, and the doors slid open. As Fletcher approached the exit, a voice barked, "Hey! Kid!"

Fletcher turned to see the conductor holding his travel bag. "This yours?"

Fletcher was so anxious, agitated, apprehensive, and

straight-up scared that he had nearly left his bag—*every last thing he possessed*—on the holo-rail.

"Oh yes! Thank you!" Fletcher said. "I'm sorry, it's my first time in the city, and I'm just a little—"

Fletcher was interrupted by the conductor heaving the heavy traveling bag. Fletcher's eyes burst wide open, and—

OOOF!

The bag punched Fletcher in the chest. He managed to catch it—*sort of*. Imagine trying to snag a hefty grunting hog, midflight. That's how Fletcher caught his bag. It *plowed* into him, and it knocked him right off the train car. He hit the ground, tumbled over backward twice, and finally came to a stop, one leg in the air, sprawled out, on the grass.

Fletcher managed to squeak out a pained "Thanks . . ."

The holo-rail squealed and glided on down the tracks. Watching it go, Fletcher's stomach felt hollow—like it had been way too long since he'd eaten. It was his nerves. He wanted to jump back on the train. He wanted to slide into his seat, lower his head, and ride the train all the way home.

He was homesick, and he'd only been in Knightonia for, like, 3.8 seconds.

He was homesick—and he didn't even particularly like home!

"Off to a great start . . ." Fletcher mumbled as he picked up his bag and got to his feet.

The first thing Fletcher *really* noticed was this: The city stunk. He didn't mean it figuratively, like "Oh, Knightonia is the *worst*."

No. It literally stinks, Fletcher thought. Like, it smells. It smells like swarms of people and jam-packed streets and grease and crowded malls and hustle and bustle.

Fletcher had never traveled more than a few miles from his home, the orphanage outside the fishing village of Salty Town. Now he was thousands of miles from home, in the biggest city in the realm.

A rising tide of chatter and conversation caused Fletcher to turn. He saw it for the first time: the Knights' Academy.

The Knights' Academy.

It was huge and towering. A brick pathway led to a large gate, with a glowing blue shield in the center. Light from massive pixel torches sparkled and danced.

Fletcher couldn't believe how many students there were: hundreds scattered across the bright green lawn that surrounded the academy walls. Some got hugs and kisses from parents. Others greeted friends.

But not Fletcher Bowman.

Fletcher was alone, on the outside, watching. There was no one to hug him good-bye or give him a pat on the back and say, "Good luck."

Fletcher had lived at the orphanage since he was a baby. It was the only life he knew. The orphanage was on the seaside in the Rocklands, where the land was dry but the smell of the sea hung in the air, always. He was one of twenty-seven orphans there, and he worked at the orphanage every day. Every weekend, he made the forty-five-minute trek into Salty Town and did *more* work, helping out at the salt farmers' market. The town was nothing special, but Fletcher liked it. It was busy—at least, Fletcher had *thought* it was busy. It was nothing like this . . .

There was one old Holovision screen at the orphanage, so Fletcher had learned a little bit about the NEXO KNIGHTS heroes, and he of course knew about Knightonia. But the big city had always felt so far away. Now it was right here, in front of him . . .

He sighed. "Here goes nothing."

But as Fletcher took his first step toward the academy, there was a sudden—

BURRUP-BURRUP-BRA-BROOOOO!

It was the single loudest sound Fletcher had ever heard. So loud, in fact, it startled him.



Startled would be a nice way to put it. In fact, Fletcher was so scared he dropped his bag, jumped, did a goofy half turn, and sort of kicked out his leg.

A few nearby students saw and laughed. Fletcher felt his face turning pink. One boy, with a bronzed face and slick black hair, laughed loudest.

"Never heard a carriage horn before?" the boy called.

Fletcher had promised himself he'd do his best not to be shy or intimidated, so he reluctantly dragged his bag over to the students. There were two boys, both of them in crisp clothes. Fletcher suddenly felt self-conscious. His pants were ripped, and his coat was stained. He had tried to clean his shirt before he left the orphanage—he had spent two days scrubbing—but now it just looked overscrubbed and worn.

"Sure, I've heard a carriage horn," Fletcher said, doing his best to sound cheerful. "But that sounded like a monster-sized trumpet or something."

The boys snickered. "That's 'cause that's the Richmond carriage," the boy with slick black hair said. "It's all gold and pulled by hover horses."

Looking down, Fletcher saw both boys had clean, fancy rolling suitcases. Fletcher glanced at his own bag—covered in tape and patches and stray threads. Ignoring that, he quickly stuck out his hand. "My name's Fletcher Bowman."

The slick-haired boy looked at Fletcher's hand with barely-hidden disgust, but after a moment, he shook it. "I'm Ethan Zilgo. And this is Beak," he said, jerking a thumb at the tall, wiry, redhead boy beside him.

Just then, a chorus of "oohs" and "aahs" spread through the crowd. The carriage door was opening.

"That will be Lance . . ." Beak said.

Fletcher had a habit of blurting things out when he was nervous—and he now blurted, "Who's Lance?"

Zilgo and Beak glared at Fletcher. They were observing him like he was the human embodiment of a skin rash.

"Lance Richmond," Zilgo said.

"The most famous knight in the land . . ." Beak said.

"From the most famous family in the land . . ." Zilgo added.

Fletcher was oblivious—he had zero clue who Lance Richmond was. But there was no way he could let on, so he lied . . .

"Oh right! Of course!" Fletcher said quickly. "Lance Richmond! I thought you said, um . . ."

The boys continued staring at Fletcher. Fletcher hoped they'd stop looking so he could stop talking, but as long as they kept gawking at him, he kept blabbing. "I thought you said, uh, something else."

"Something else?" Zilgo asked.

Fletcher felt big globs of sweat beginning to drip down his forehead. "Yeah. Um. Pants. *Pants* Richmond." "Pants Richmond?" Beak asked.

Fletcher knew this was not the most perfect lie he had ever told.

Zilgo and Beak gawked at Fletcher like his brain was possibly broken. And the longer they stared at him, the worse Fletcher felt. Fletcher had shown up anxious, agitated, apprehensive, and straight-up *scared*. And everything he was afraid of going wrong had gone wrong in, like, seven seconds. Fletcher felt his face turning bright red. He tried to tell his face to *stop* turning red, but that just made it worse.

And before he knew what was happening, Fletcher was running away. Really. Just flat-out *sprinting*.

"Where are you hurrying off to?" Zilgo hollered.

On the *inside*, Fletcher was screaming at himself. *Why are you running? Where are you going?*

Fletcher had done one silly thing—and he was already running for cover! Like, literally *running for cover*.

Fletcher slipped behind a wide oak tree.

"That weird commoner kid just hid behind a tree!" he heard Beak cry out. "Guess you scared him, Zilgo!"

Great start, Fletcher thought as he caught his breath. He knocked his head against the tree. "Stupid, stupid, stupid!" he told himself.

He was here to become a knight—a knight! And he was already so embarrassed that he had to cower behind a tree? Not very knightly!

The truth was, Fletcher wasn't sure he *wanted* to be a knight. One week earlier, the orphanage headmaster had simply said, "Fletcher. You're now old enough to attend Knights' Academy. So now you *will* attend Knights' Academy." And that was that. It came out of nowhere! Fletcher had never heard of the *other* orphans being sent to Knights' Academy. But Fletcher had no say in the matter—they just sent him on his not-so-merry way . . .

From where he stood now, Fletcher could see the holo-rail track. All he had to do was march over there, get on the holo-rail, and it would take him back to the orphanage. It would whisk him away from this embarrassment and all this overwhelming *newness*. He could tell the headmaster that—hmm—they already had too many knights or something. They ran out of swords! Or they were all booked up—no more rooms at the academy!

A voice boomed, interrupting Fletcher's planning. "Fans! My public! It is *so* wonderful to see you all!"

Fletcher peeked around the tree. Fletcher now recognized the knight that now stood in front of the carriage. Fletcher had seen him on Holovision. He was Lance

Richmond. The knight's voice thundered like an actor's onstage.

The well-groomed, blond-haired Lance Richmond was soaking up the attention of the adoring crowd: smiling, flashing big pearly whites, and handing out autographed photos of himself. "It is *lovely* to see you. I wish I could spend *hours* gracing you with my presence. But today I'm only here to drop off Isabella. But please, have a photo—they're signed!"

Who's Isabella? Fletcher wondered.

Students and parents were pushing and shoving to get a glimpse.

"Where's your sister?" one student shouted.

"Probably waiting for the Squireazzi to show up and snap some pics!" a parent responded.

But it was Fletcher who was the first to spot Isabella Richmond. He saw a flash of silver-blond hair, and the girl's resemblance to Lance was instantly apparent. It was Isabella, but she was most definitely *not* waiting for the Squireazzi.

She was on her hands and knees, wriggling through the crowd. When she stood, muck dripped from her hands. She looked at her palms, shrugged, and wiped them on her once-white pants.

Fletcher grinned. She might have arrived in a golden carriage, but this Isabella didn't seem so fancy.

Suddenly, a group of robots spotted her sneaking away.

"Oh boy, the Squireazzi are on her!" someone shouted.

Fletcher saw the blond girl groan and kick her feet. She dragged a large, fancy luggage case behind her as she dashed across the grass. And—*oh man*—she was running toward the tree! Toward his hiding place!

Fletcher whipped his head back around the tree. *Don't come back here, don't come back here, don't come back here, don't come back here.*

She came back there . . .

Isabella burst around the side of the tree, tried to stop, skidded, and splatted on the ground. Fletcher, without even knowing what he was doing, stuck out his hand and helped her to her feet.

"Thanks, kid," Isabella said, smiling warmly. She wore red beam glasses and the high-tech frames were dotted with bits of mud. "So whatcha doing back here? Just hiding behind a tree? That's normal."

"Um . . ." Fletcher started.

"You mind if I hide, too?" Isabella interrupted.

"Um . . ."

"Fantastic, thanks. The Squireazzi are the *worst*."

Fletcher was about to ask what Squireazzi were, when Zilgo and Beak appeared. Their eyes were wide,



and their mouths hung open. They stared at Isabella—both dumbstruck *and* starstruck.

Fletcher hated awkward silence, so he said, “I’m Fletcher. Fletcher Bowman. So, Isabella, you’re, like, ah, *famous* or something?”

Zilgo then roared, “Of course she’s famous! She’s a *Richmond!* What did you come to Knights’ Academy for if you don’t know anything about knights!?”

Fletcher shrugged. “Well, I didn’t really have a choice . . . I’m an orphan. They just sent me on my way.”

Isabella eyeballed Zilgo for a moment, then said, “Slick hair. Beach tan. You must be a Zilgo.”

The boy stuck out his chin, puffed out his chest, and nodded proudly. “That’s right. Ethan Zilgo.”

Isabella stared at Ethan Zilgo a moment longer, then turned to Fletcher. “An orphan, huh? Buddy, sometimes I *wish* I was an orphan. This Richmond last name stiiiiinks. My brother just *had* to drop me off for the first day of school. It’s the *worst*.”

Zilgo and Beak now stared, still dumbfounded, at both Isabella *and* Fletcher. They had confused looks all over their faces. Why was *she* chatting with *him*?

KA-KLANG!

The large front gates were opening—and just in time. A squad of Squireazzi was hurrying toward them, waving cameras and microphones. Isabella tugged on Fletcher’s sleeve. “Come on!” she said, sprinting ahead.

Fletcher grabbed his bag and did his best to carry it with one hand. He didn’t want to look weak. Knights weren’t exactly known for lacking strength.

“Isabella, wait up!” Fletcher called.

She suddenly stopped and spun, her blue eyes *boring* into Fletcher’s. “One thing,” she said. “Do *not* call me Isabella, ‘kay? I *hate* that name. It’s too fancy and formal. And now that I’m at school, away from my parents, I can *finally* ditch it. I go by Izzy. Got it?”

“Izzy,” Fletcher said, nodding. “Got it.”

Izzy grinned. “Goodie. And—hmmm—*Fletcher*. That’s your name, huh?”

Fletcher nodded again. He realized Izzy talked in a way that left him doing a lot of nodding.

"You like that name?" she asked.

"Well, I never really thought about it. It's just a name."

"A name's a big thing," said Izzy. "And here's the *great* thing about Knights' Academy. It's a new beginning! Now's the time for you to make your future and be who you want to be."

Fletcher had never thought about it like that.

"Really, I just think that name is too long" Izzy said, interrupting his holo-train of thought. "*Fletcher. Fletcherrrrr.* What if we get into a battle with a bunch of Monstrox's minions and I need to call on you for backup? I'll waste, like, precious seconds yelling '*Fletcherrrrr.*' How about just . . . Fletch?"

"Fletch?" he asked.

Izzy nodded. "I think you're a Fletch. You want to be a Fletch?"

Fletcher's mind raced. A nickname? No one had ever given him a nickname.

"Yes," he said finally. "I am *Fletch.*"

With that, they made their way through the gates, into the green-grassed courtyard. Fletch saw the academy's large stone doors opening. For the moment, Fletch's generally anxious, agitated, apprehensive, and straight-up *scared* feelings were replaced with excitement.