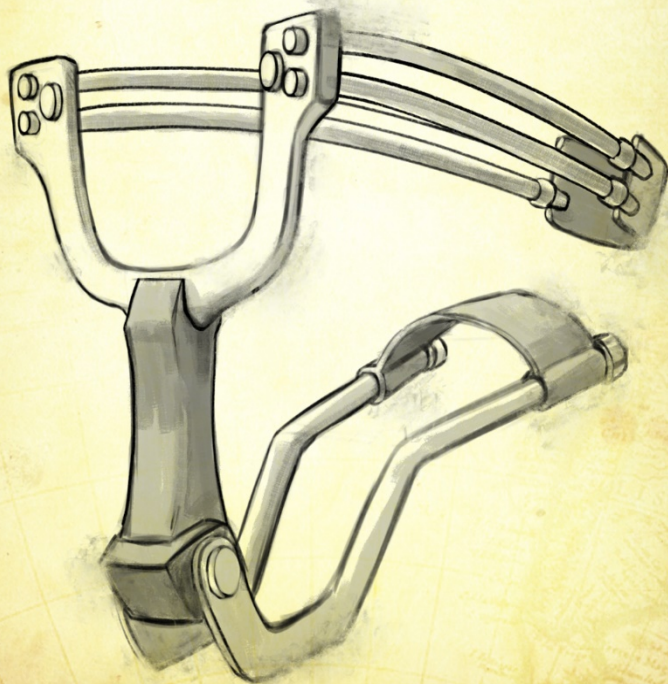


RUIN HUNTERS

Tru Ruins
And The
BULLYSLAYER WAGER



☪ SIDE QUEST ☪
ROB BEARE

Tru Ruins and the Bullyslayer Wager

11 months before Book One

Tru Ruins carefully picked up a seashell from off the beach. It was tiny with purple lines in its swirls. This was another perfect miniature treasure to put inside her marbles. That's right; she made her own marbles with her Marble Maker 2000. They were clear, with shells, or toys, or anything else neat enough and small enough to fit inside them.

Her parents, on the other hand, didn't seem to be doing anything of great importance at all. She could still see them as they walked very slooowly towards the Golden Gate Bridge, only to turn around and walk even slower back. They did this every time they went to this beach, and Tru really didn't get the whole point of it.

In the meantime, Faith was left in charge, but their parents were careful not to use the word “babysitter” because it drove Tru nuts. She was hardly a baby. In fact, she was eight years old! Last time she checked, that was quite a few years older than a baby. Besides, her big sister Faith, wasn’t even *watching* her anyway. Nope, instead, she was busy playing with whatever techy gadget she got from her latest techy gadget conference. Her new piece of real-life science fiction was sort of like a smartwatch thingy that popped up hologram pictures and videos in mid-air, right in front of Faith’s face. *Okay, so that was pretty cool*, Tru admitted.

Cheering caught Tru’s attention, and she looked to the ocean to see a crowd of surfers clapping for her brother, River, as he surfed. He was carving up a big wave with fancy surf moves. He even made a hang loose sign with his hand as he surfed. *What a show-off!* And Faith always said that Tru was the attention suck. *Maybe I’m rubbing off on him*, Tru snickered.

Just then, a pelican dive-bombed into the water and caught a fish. Tru was blown away by the size of the bird and found it amazing that it could even fly at all. Another pelican swooped down when a rock whizzed past, nearly hitting it.

Tru whipped her head over to see two boys laughing. The bigger boy held a slingshot while his scrawny friend searched the beach for another rock to shoot.

Without hesitation, Tru marched over and shoved the larger boy in the back. The boy spun around with fists raised only to laugh when he looked down and saw a little girl scowling at him.

“What's your problem, shorty?”

“Bullies shooting rocks at a defenseless bird, that's my problem!” Tru snapped back.

“Who cares? It's just a stupid bird,” the scrawny boy chimed in.

“And you're just a stupid boy! Because only a stupid boy would think that just because it's a bird that it doesn't feel pain. Or do you think it's perfectly fine to hurt another animal just for fun?” Tru said while shaking her head with disgust.

The larger boy no longer found Tru amusing and stepped right up against her. Glaring down, he said, “You're getting pretty fired up. Maybe I should throw you into the ocean for a little cooldown.”

The boys were startled when they heard Faith's confident voice say, “I think I should throw you two in as well, you know, just for a cool down.”

Tru laughed. She was pulling out the big guns.

The larger boy didn't feel so large anymore as he cowered at the sight of this tall, athletic beauty with eyes so fiery that they made Tru's look like sparks. "Hey, we were minding our own business when she came outta nowhere and started a problem."

Tru knew that her big sister would have her back no matter what, even if she were in the wrong, but she still felt the need to set the record straight. "They were shooting rocks at the birds with their slingshot and—"

The larger boy cut her off, "Well, there's nothing else to shoot at."

Faith looked around and spotted a big boulder sticking out of the water a hundred feet from the shore. Tru watched as her sister pondered the situation for a moment while devising a plan. With a cunning smile, Faith suggested, "How about that boulder over there?"

"What, that tiny thing way out there? I could never hit that," the larger boy said.

"Sure you could," Faith said.

Tru couldn't understand why her sister was acting so friendly. The only time that Faith lost her cool was when someone picked on anyone, or anything, smaller than them, and now here she was encouraging this mean boy. *What the heck, Faith?*

The boy remained reluctant, “There’s no way.”

“Alright, well, maybe you couldn't, but I bet she could,” Faith gestured to Tru.

“Who, me?!” Tru pointed at herself.

The larger boy laughed, holding his belly. “Now that's a bet I'd be willing to make!”

“Good,” Faith smirked.

Tru squinted to get a better look at the boulder and shook her head. “Faith, I really don't know if I could hit that,” she whispered.

Faith gave her sister a comforting pat on the shoulder. “You'll be fine. Trust me.”

“What's the wager?” The scrawny boy asked.

“If she hits it, she keeps his slingshot.”

Tru grinned as she suddenly understood what her sister's plan was; she knew that once they left, these boys would go right back to shooting rocks at the birds again. So the only way to protect them would be to get the slingshot out of their hands for good. A great plan and all, but it still required Tru to make a very tough shot.

The larger boy winced at the thought of losing his slingshot, no matter how much the odds were in his favor.

“And if she misses?” The larger boy asked.

“If she misses, then I’ll eat that rotten fruit over there,” Faith pointed to a mushy strawberry that had been left in the sand. A swarm of flies were already feasting on it and were none too eager to share it with Faith.

The scrawny boy bounced with excitement. “Awesome, Jake! Let’s watch her get sick!”

“Ewww!” Tru gagged at the thought of her sister eating the fly food.

Jake, however, didn’t share his friend’s excitement. “No, we don’t have a deal. Not unless *she’s* the one that eats the rotten berry when she misses,” he pointed at Tru.

Faith crossed her arms. “Then I guess we don’t have a deal.”

As much as the thought of eating the fly food made Tru sick, she knew it was the only chance they had to protect the birds, so she sighed and said, “Let’s do it.”

Jake handed Tru the slingshot. She then snatched the rock out of the scrawny boy’s hand.

“You don’t have to do this, Lil sis’,” Faith assured her.

“Yes, I do.”

Tru aimed the slingshot at the boulder and closed one eye to help her center the target. She was full of anger and determined to win.

Faith stepped beside Tru and softly said, “Relax, take a deep breath. Make sure you have the boulder perfectly in line. And don’t pull the band hard enough to just *hit* the boulder. Instead, pull it so hard that you could almost shoot right through it. Then, as you slowly exhale, let the rock fly.”

Tru listened to her wise sister. She calmed herself, pulled the band further back than she needed to, and while slowly exhaling, she shot the rock. It cut through the air, and to her amazement, it nicked off the edge of the boulder.

“Woo!” Tru jumped with joy.

“Yes!” Faith cheered.

The mean boys couldn't believe their eyes.

“Thanks for the slingshot, Jake!” Tru teased.

Jake's face turned flush with frustration.

Tru continued to taunt, “You look like you're getting a little fired up. Maybe you should throw yourself into the ocean, you know, just for a little cooldown.”

Faith chuckled and pulled her sister away. “Alright, alright, that's enough, Tru.”

“Come on, let's get outta here,” Jake said as he pushed his scrawny friend. While walking away, Jake looked back and said, “Have fun shooting rocks at boulders, you losers. I hope a pelican takes a crap on your head while you’re at it.”

Tru grabbed the rotten strawberry and put it in her slingshot. Before Faith could stop her, she let loose, and the berry exploded on the back of Jake's head, filling his hair with slimy chunks. The smell of it made his scrawny friend gag.

Tru stumbled with laughter which enraged Jake. He was about to say something, but Faith gave him a look that made him think better of it.

Once the boys had left, Faith turned to Tru and said, "You've really gotta hold your tongue sometimes because you're not always going to have your big sis' around to look out for you."

"You're right; I won't. But I will have this," Tru held up her slingshot. She admired the beauty of it. The curved handle seemed to fit perfectly in her hand, as though it had always been meant for her. Now that it was with its rightful owner, Tru figured that it needed a name. But what?

"I'm proud of you, though." Faith nudged Tru, "You definitely slayed those bullies."

"Wait, that's it! Bullyslayer!"

Faith laughed, "Pardon me?"

"The slingshot, I'm going to call it Bullyslayer!"

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