

AMARI

AND THE

GREAT GAME



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First published in the USA in 2022  
by Balzer + Bray, an imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*

First published in Great Britain in 2022 by Farshore,  
an imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*  
1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF

farshore.co.uk

HarperCollins*Publishers*  
Macken House, 39/40 Mayor Street Upper,  
Dublin 1, D01 C9W8

Text copyright © 2022 B.B. Alston  
Illustrations © 2022 Godwin Apkan

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A CIP catalogue record of this title is available from the British Library

HB ISBN 978 1 4052 9864 3  
signed edition HB ISBN 978 0 0085 2370 1  
TPB ISBN 978 0 0085 5435 4  
PB ISBN 978 1 4052 9865 0

Printed and bound in the UK using 100% renewable electricity  
at CPI Group (UK) Ltd

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Typeset by Avon DataSet Ltd, Alcester, Warwickshire

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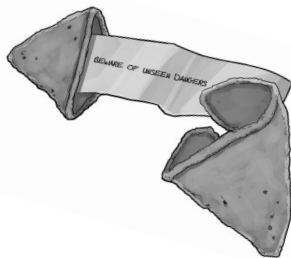
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*For my mom, Songa,  
who taught me I could do anything*



## ⚡ CHAPTER ONE ⚡



I sprint down the sidewalk, flying past designer boutiques, luxury shops, and a fancy art gallery. A few blocks ahead lies the sprawling downtown campus of Whitman Preparatory Academy. The main building's all-glass exterior sparkles in the morning light, and a line of cars circles the large fountain out front, dropping off kids who – unlike me – might actually get to homeroom before the eight fifteen tardy bell.

Late or not, school is where I should be headed too.

Instead I stop in front of a run-down little shack that looks like it's been crammed between two larger, much nicer buildings. The faded sign out front reads *Marco's Mini-Mart*.

Taking a few seconds to catch my breath, I pull out my phone to listen to the voicemail again.

*Voicemail from Elsie*

*'Come to Marco's before school. Emergency!'*

If there's one thing I've learned about Elsie Rodriguez during our first year as classmates, it's that the girl can exaggerate.



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When I say there's an emergency, then best believe something major has happened. But Elsie is another story – when she uses the word 'emergency,' it could just mean the delivery guy is late with the robot parts for her latest science project.

Either way, being best friends means showing up for each other no matter what – even if that requires blowing my perfect attendance record. Which I should've earned on Friday, I might add, but we've got to make up for that random snow day back in January.

I head into the store. If the outside of the building is sketchy, inside's even worse. The place is dimly lit, just bright enough to reveal sections of paint missing from the walls. This is *supposed* to be a convenience store selling drinks and snacks, but every time I've picked anything up, it's already expired. I don't think that soda cooler has ever worked.

And did I mention the store always has the faint smell of rotten eggs? Like, *always*.

I scrunch up my nose and cut through the candy aisle. Up ahead, some poor guy looks completely unimpressed by the chip selection. *Same here, mister*. I scoot past him and head for the register.

A big, bald bodybuilder guy in a *Muscles Win Tussles* T-shirt stands behind the counter. His eyes narrow at my approach.

I squint right back at him. Suddenly tufts of bright red fur appear on his head and neck, and two curved tusks jut from his jaw.

But then I blink, and he looks human again. That's the benefit of the more expensive glammers – even my TrueSight eye drops only work for a few seconds before the disguising



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enchantment kicks back in. This one is definitely something from Vivi LaBoom's City-Camouflage Casual Collection.

I clear my throat and politely ask, 'May I use your restroom?'

He crosses his thick arms and looks me over before grumbling, 'And why should I let you?'

I grin and roll my eyes. 'C'mon, Tiny. I'm already late for school.'

A slow smile splits Tiny's face and he lets out a bellowing laugh. 'No "Hello" . . . No "How is your day?" . . . Just "Give me key."'

'Pretty please?' I ask.

'Fine, fine. Anything for a fellow human.'

I lean in, lowering my voice to a whisper. 'Just so you know, we don't usually call each other humans.'

Tiny scratches his bald head, his confused eyes flashing bright yellow before changing back. 'But why? You are human, yes?'

I nod. 'It's just . . . we assume everyone we meet is human, so there isn't any reason to mention it.'

His shoulders droop dramatically. 'So many things to remember to fit into human world.'

I give him a reassuring pat on the arm. 'You'll get the hang of it.'

Tiny nods and reaches under the counter. I hold out my hand, and he drops the restroom key into my palm.

'Um, excuse me?' That guy from before pops out from behind the chips rack. 'I asked about the bathroom a few minutes ago and you said it was out of order.'

Tiny frowns. 'Out of order for *you*. Perfectly fine for her.'

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Any questions?’

The guy looks ready to protest, but an inhuman growl from Tiny seems to change his mind.

‘Be careful,’ Tiny says to me in a low voice. ‘That one has look of a Watcher.’

I bite my lip. Watchers are folks who are convinced there’s more to the world than meets the eye. According to them, there’s this huge global conspiracy to hide the fact that supernatural creatures from myths and legends are real and secretly live among us.

These guys have websites and chat rooms and members all over. They try to find evidence that will prove to the world that they’re right. Which is probably why Mr Watcher guy is hanging around a convenience store that’s clearly not *really* a convenience store.

Most people just think Watchers are conspiracy theorists and don’t pay them any attention. But I kinda have to take them seriously – because not only are they right, but I’m part of an organisation, the Bureau of Supernatural Affairs, that’s committed to making sure the proof they’re so desperate to find never ever gets out.

Sure enough, when I glance back over my shoulder I find the Watcher guy’s eyes on me. He fumbles through his pockets for a phone – then has the nerve to start recording us!

‘Can you give me a distraction?’ I whisper to Tiny.

He grins and steps from behind the counter. ‘This I *can* do well.’ He throws his arms open and shouts, ‘Congratulations, sir! You are big winner!’

The man furrows his brow as Tiny puts a thick arm around

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his shoulders and guides him towards the counter. ‘B-but I didn’t enter any contest . . .’ The poor guy whips his head around frantically, trying to find me, but I’ve already ducked down the candy aisle towards the restroom at the back of the store.

I ignore the giant *Out of Order* sign plastered across the door and stick the key in the lock. Then I take one more glance behind me to make sure the coast is clear.

The Watcher guy frowns up at Tiny. ‘You’re saying I won . . . a mop bucket?’

‘Quality mop bucket,’ Tiny answers. ‘Used many times and never leak.’

I grin and twist the doorknob.

The real Marco’s, the one behind this door, isn’t just a different kind of store; it’s practically a different world. Marco’s Fine Desserts is only open to the city’s supernatural community – meaning no disguises or glamours necessary – and it’s got the best magical treats in Atlanta. Midas Milkshakes that stain your teeth bright gold, Stardusted Scones to give your skin a faint glow, and even the World’s Best Bad Coffee, which tastes so awful it shocks you into perfect wide-awakeness. The moment I step inside, sweet smells fill my nose and I’m instantly in a great mood.

I squeeze between a couple of harpies, careful to duck beneath their wings. A tall yeti in a chef’s hat literally barks a hello from behind the counter, and I wave back. ‘Hi, Marco!’ But the distraction nearly causes me to trip over a boggart, which thumbs its hooked nose at me and mumbles something about ‘rude humans’ before waddling off.

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I spot Elsie at a table with another Bureau kid, Julia Farsight, whose heavy eyelids always make her look sleepy. I rush over.

‘Okay,’ I say, slipping into the seat across from them. ‘What’s so important that we needed to meet here before school?’

Elsie frowns. ‘I don’t think I used the word *important*.’

‘You literally said it was an emergency.’

‘No,’ she says. ‘I said “emerge and see.”’ She grins mischievously. ‘As in “emerge and see” what I’ve got for you!’

Julia giggles.

‘Els . . . this is going to cost me a perfect attendance certificate. And you know how much Mama cares about stuff like that. The lady has already got a spot picked out on her wall.’

‘Don’t worry,’ she says. ‘Bear’s bringing his dad’s spare transporter so we can be at school in an instant. As long as we’re on the bus when it leaves for the Georgia Aquarium, Mr Ames will count us as present.’

‘Teleporting to school is allowed?’ I ask. ‘Because I’ve been taking the city bus all year.’

‘*Allowed* might be a strong word,’ says Elsie.

‘As far as I know, it’s not *not* allowed . . .’ Julia adds in her singsong voice.

I wince. ‘I’m really looking forward to starting summer camp tomorrow, so maybe let’s not get kicked out of the Bureau before then?’

Elsie just smiles and starts tapping on her cell phone. ‘Would they really kick out somebody who’s getting headlines like this?’ She flips the phone around and shows me all the search results for my name she’s found on the othernet – the

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protected portion of the internet reserved for the supernatural world. ‘They’re all *nice* articles.’

‘Even *Better Gnomes & Gardens* wrote about you,’ says Julia. ‘We’ve got a colony of gnomes on our property and it’s a real pain to get them to talk about anything other than flowers, so that’s a real accomplishment. You’re practically a celebrity.’

‘Yeah,’ says Elsie. ‘Look around.’

I don’t have to, because I know she’s right. Supernaturals around the dessert shop have been pointing and staring ever since I sat down. A few, I’ve noticed, even take pictures that I’m sure will end up on Eurghmthilthmsphlthm – Eurg for short – the supernatural world’s leading social media site.

Still, I pick up Elsie’s phone and tap on the first link.

### **AMARI PETERS: THE GOOD MAGICIAN?**

The controversial teenager returns to the Bureau this summer

Magicians are known for two things: off-the-charts magic levels and a long history as our world’s greatest villains. Despite this, a thirteen-year-old girl seems poised to prove that magicians don’t have to be bad. She’s already saved the world once and gained fans across the globe in the process. But even that hasn’t stopped critics from questioning her true motives. What else could the Girl Wonder accomplish as a force for good? One thing’s for sure, the entire supernatural world is watching!

I frown at the word ‘villains.’ The Night Brothers – Vladimir



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and Moreau – are still who the supernatural world thinks of first whenever magicians are mentioned, and for good reason. Not only did those two start the Ancient War, but Moreau survived to commit horrible crimes for seven hundred years – until last summer, when he was betrayed by his magician protégé, Dylan Van Helsing. Someone I *thought* was my friend. Dylan managed to steal a powerful spell book for Moreau, only to turn on his mentor and keep it for himself. He offered to make me his new partner instead, but I refused. Our magic clashed and I won. Barely.

Even though the whole thing was considered classified, somehow word got out and the supernatural media started asking questions. So the Bureau finally released the footage of our fight, and the supernatural world got to see a magician choose *not* to become a villain. The video instantly went viral across the othenet. There’s even memes of me clad in armour, reaching up to call down lightning.

I hand Elsie back her phone. ‘One viral video doesn’t make you a celebrity.’

Elsie raises an eyebrow. ‘Have you checked your follower count recently?’

I pull out my phone, open Instagram, and point to my twenty-three followers – two of whom are sitting at this table. ‘Not that impressive.’

Elsie just rolls her eyes and lays her own phone on to the table. ‘You know what I mean.’ She pulls up my Eurg profile.

@Amari\_Peters 

1.73 million followers



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‘I didn’t know you had *that* many,’ says Julia. ‘You’re even verified.’

‘The Ban All Magicians page has twice that many followers,’ says a grumpy voice over my shoulder.

Ugh. Bear.

This kid got his nickname because he’s the tallest student at our middle school and an even bigger bully. He’s also the fourth member, and only eighth grader, in our school’s Soup Club – short for SUPERNatural club. It’s for Bureau kids who know about the supernatural world. Lots of middle schools and high schools have them – sometimes they’re even listed in the student handbook. Lucky for us, non-Bureau kids have zero interest in giving up their free period for a club named after soup . . . where you don’t actually eat any.

‘Bear . . .’ Julia wags a finger. ‘Be nice.’

Bear drops into the seat beside me, making sure to lean as far away from me as possible. As much as the supernatural world has started to accept magicians over the past year, there are still folks who will always hate me for being a magician like the Night Brothers. No matter what I do.

‘We’re all here,’ Bear grumbles. ‘What’s this stupid meeting even about?’

Elsie shoots Bear a look before sitting up straighter. ‘*Well* . . . I just wanted to say that I’ve really enjoyed being president of Whitman’s Soup Club. And I thought I’d gather the four of us together one last time before we’re off to camp. I got you each a gift!’

Julia claps. ‘I love gifts!’

Even Bear perks up a bit.

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But I recognise the look in Elsie's eyes – she's up to something. 'What did you do?'

Elsie waves to Marco, and four plates come floating towards our table. 'I ordered fortune cookies. *Real* ones.'

I gape at the plates landing softly on the table before each of us. 'But these things don't just reveal your fortune – they *cost* a fortune too.'

Elsie nods. 'Only because they're so difficult to make. You have to infuse the dough with used tea leaves from a successful prediction, a Magic 8-Ball has to be present in the room, the stars have to be in the proper alignment, the fire pit you bake it in has to have yielded at least three visions in the past year . . . and those are just the requirements I can remember. This totally drained my science fair winnings, but I happen to think you guys are worth it.'

Julia grins and cracks hers open, pulling out the tiny slip of paper and setting it down. It's blank. But then she closes her eyes, whispering to herself before placing a piece of cookie in her mouth.

Suddenly red letters appear on the paper.

'What's it say?' asks Elsie.

Julia holds it up for us to see.

*The grass isn't always greener on the other side.*

'I asked the cookie if I should switch departments this summer,' Julia says. 'Guess I should stay in the Department of the Dead. Being a medium *does* make me a good fit.'

I remember Julia going onstage at the Welcome Ceremony



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last summer to touch the Crystal Ball – gaining the ability to talk to ghosts seemed like the last thing she expected. But the Crystal Ball is funny like that; you never know which talent of yours will be upgraded to a supernatural ability. It could be something totally obvious, like turning my super-creative best friend into a mastermind inventor, or something you never imagined.

In my case, the Crystal Ball woke up the magic that had been dormant inside me my entire life. Except humans aren't supposed to have magic until *after* they get to the Bureau. Every member is given a small 10 per cent dose at the welcome ceremony, just enough to give us each a supernatural ability. But since I already had magic (and a lot – as in 100 per cent magicality), I was labelled a magician. And magicians can use their magic to perform seemingly impossible feats.

That didn't exactly go over very well, and the higher-ups at the Bureau freaked out – some of them even suggested erasing my memories or sticking me in a lab to be studied. Luckily I was given the chance to prove I belonged.

Bear tries his cookie next. He frowns when his fortune comes back as:

*Sometimes the real enemy is in the mirror.*

He crosses his arms and turns away from us. No chance he's gonna tell us what he asked.

Elsie is up next, and I already know what her question will be. Elsie's a weredragon – only she's never been able to fully shift. The closest she's come is blowing fire a few times.



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Between her books and her dragon expert adoptive mom, all she knows is that shifting for the first time requires a great act of courage. As the last of her kind, I know it's something that really bothers her.

My best friend closes her eyes and places the cookie into her mouth. She holds her breath as the letters begin to appear on the paper.

*Your hard work will pay off.*

That girl hollers so loud the whole place jumps.

'Does that mean -' I begin.

'I think so!' She beams. 'I might actually shift into a full dragon this summer! *Finally*. Of course, the cookies are only right about seventy per cent of the time, but I feel so much better now.'

'That's amazing!' I say. 'I'm really happy for you.'

My turn! I break my own cookie. There's really only one answer I'm looking for.

The whole reason I joined the Bureau last summer was to find out what happened to my missing brother, Quinton, who'd been working there as an agent fighting supernatural crime for years. I eventually found him, but not before Moreau had already put a curse so terrible on Quinton that he still hasn't woken up from it.

At first it was easy to believe that he'd get better. That any day now he'd come home to me and Mama, and everything would go back to how it used to be. But that never happened, and now every day it's a little harder to keep my hopes up.

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Quinton's spent the last two months getting experimental treatments from cursebreakers in Sydney, Australia, but even they couldn't help.

I go back and forth in my head about whether I should ask. Because what if the answer is no? Would I be okay with that?

I blurt it out before I lose my nerve. 'Will my brother ever wake up?'

Elsie grabs my wrist before I can eat the cookie. 'Sorry – two things. You can't ask your question out loud. Also, um . . . it has to be about yourself for it to work.'

'Oh,' I say, deflated. I'm not sure what else to ask. So I place the cookie in my mouth and think. After a few seconds I shrug and ask, *Is there anything important I should know?*

Gasps sound around the table and I look down at my fortune.

*Beware of unseen dangers.*