

ALLIANCE OF THE BRAVE

ESTER STARÁ

JIRÍ FRANTA

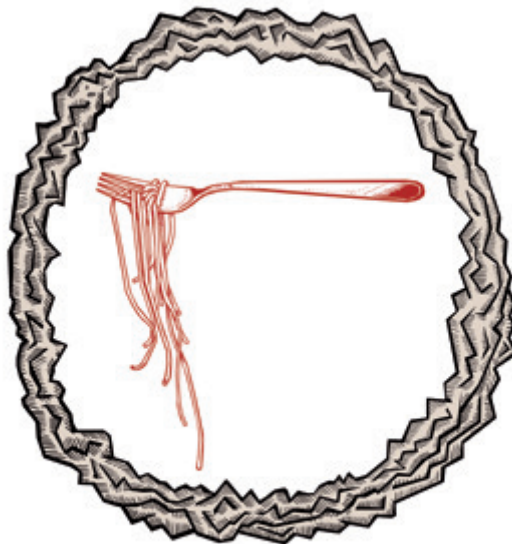
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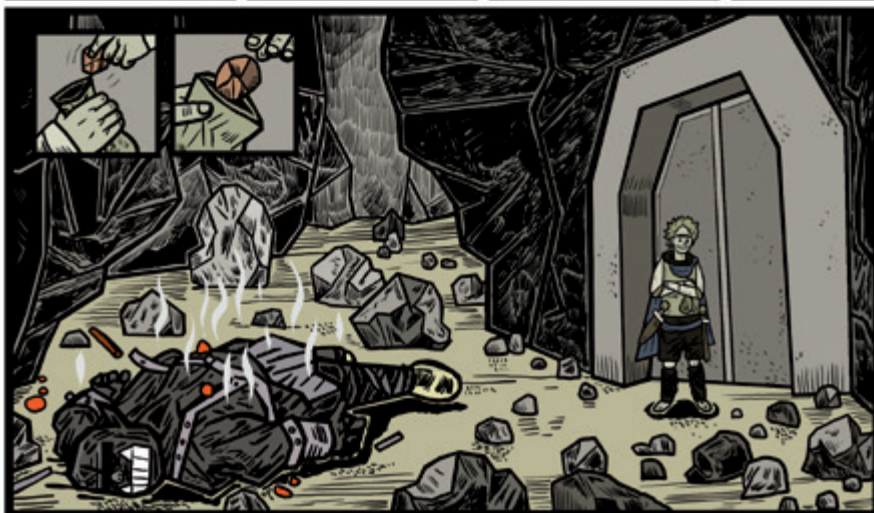
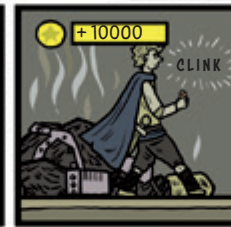
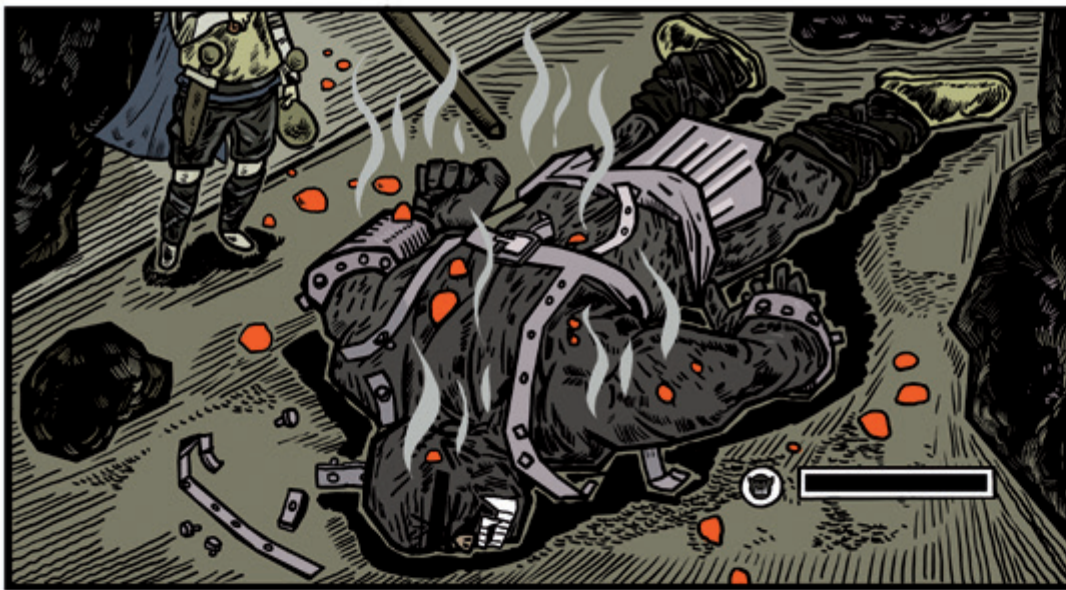
# What is there to look forward to?



‘This place is killing me!’ Thomas threw himself down on the bed and pulled a pillow over his head, hoping that when he pushed it off, he would find himself not in this hole, but back home. He and his mum had had to move here four months ago. ‘Damn Sheddington!’ he added, finding himself still there.

Fortunately, he wasn’t in the habit of wallowing in sorrow. He knew how to raise his spirits and set his problems behind him. He had *Alliance of the Brave*!







Reluctantly, Thomas moved from his bedroom to the kitchen. He sat down to a full plate of spaghetti and plunged his fork into it, his mind elsewhere. The spaghetti refused to cooperate, sliding from the prongs before it reached his mouth, spattering red sauce about the plate and beyond. At last he succeeded in catching a strand and lifted it above his head in triumph. Titch was swinging from its end, deftly holding on with one hand, short sword in the other.

‘Stop fiddling with your food. Aren’t you hungry?’ Thomas’s mum was trying to return his attention to the table.

‘I am. It’s very good.’

‘Spaghetti al pomodoro fresco,’ she explained, though he was plainly no more interested in the meal than their next-door neighbour’s new haircut. What was the matter with the lad? Why had all the life gone out of him? Although suspecting that more questions was the last thing he wanted, she couldn’t stop herself asking, ‘How was school?’

‘Fine.’

‘Got any homework?’

‘No.’

‘What have you been doing this afternoon?’

‘Playing.’

‘You’ve been holed up at home ever since we moved here.’

‘I don’t mind.’

‘But I do! You should make some friends.’

*Here we go again,* sighed Thomas. He carried his empty plate to the dishwasher and prepared to return to his room.

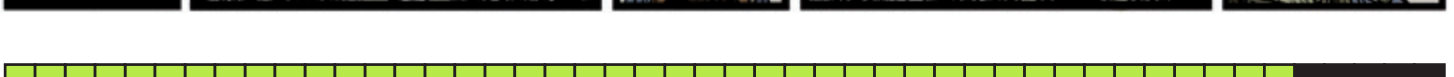
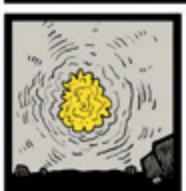
‘Are you even listening to me? Where are you going?’ his mother called after him. She knew the answer.

‘I’ll just finish the quest. Please. I need half an hour.’ He took his mum’s sigh as a sign of consent.













# Crossbow or Granny?

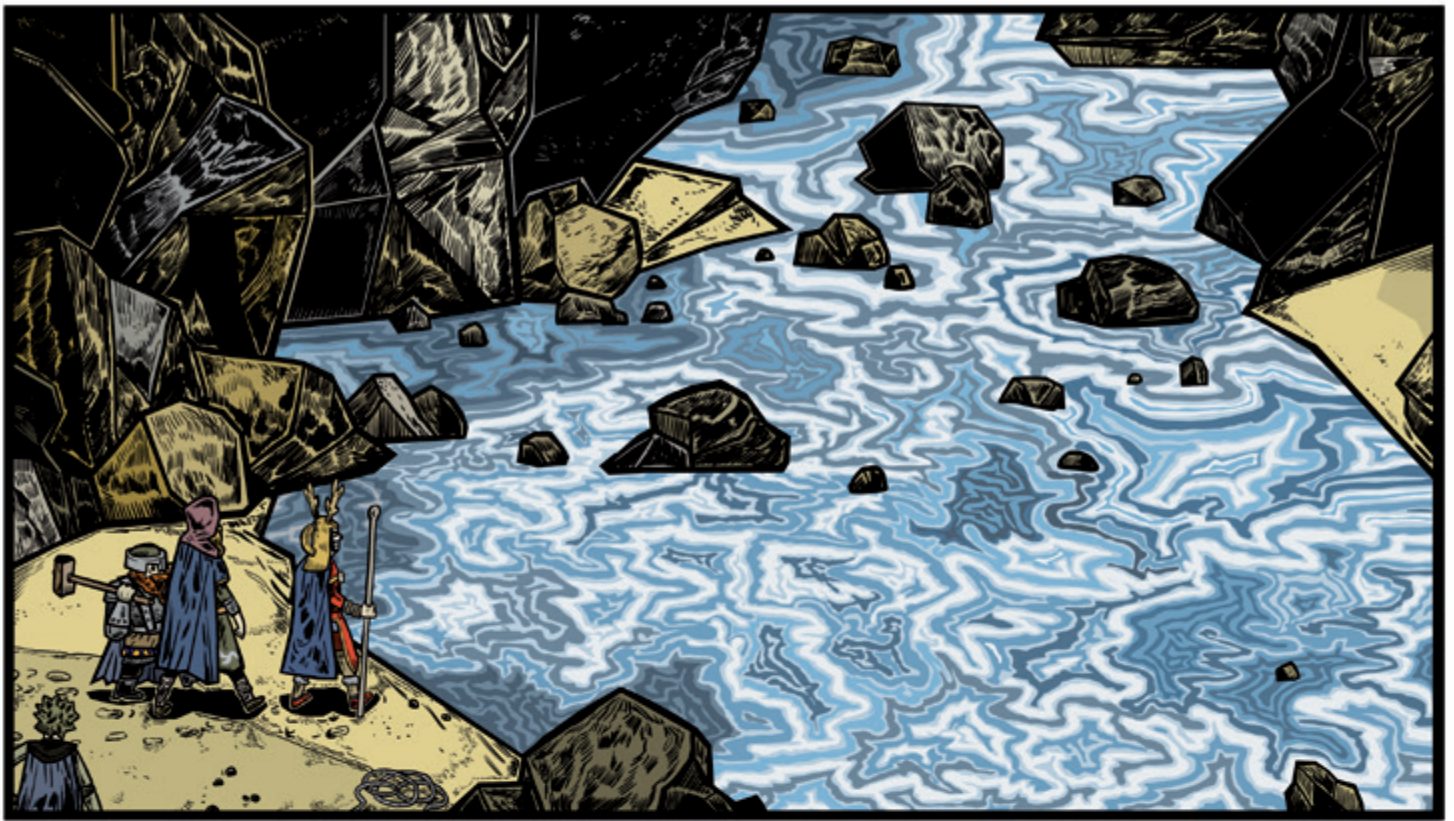


In the bowels of the building the elevator shaft began its hum, which gradually got louder. *Mum is on her way*, thought Thomas. He danced through the hall to open the flat door for her before she could start rummaging in her bag for her keys.

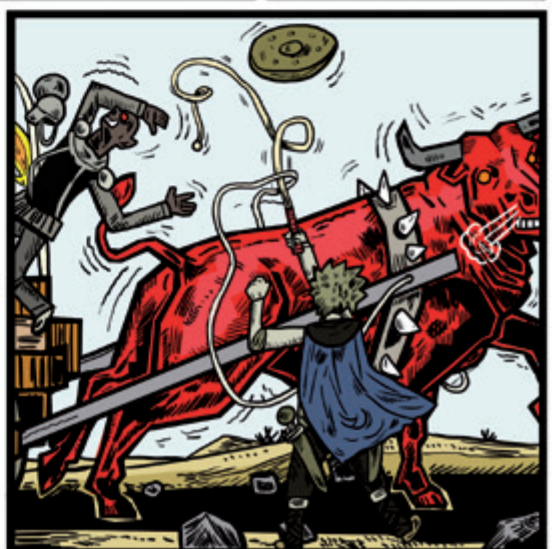
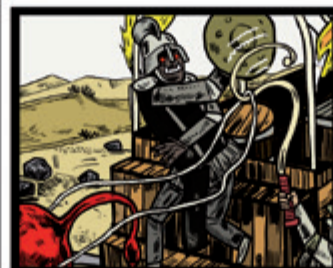
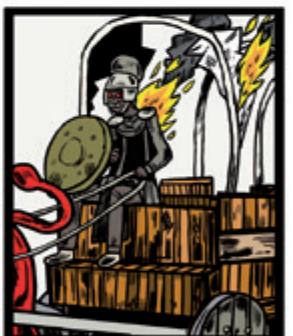
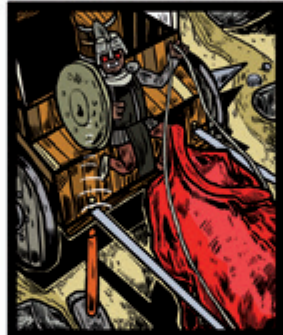
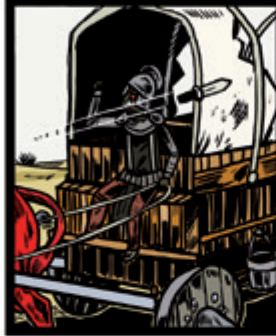
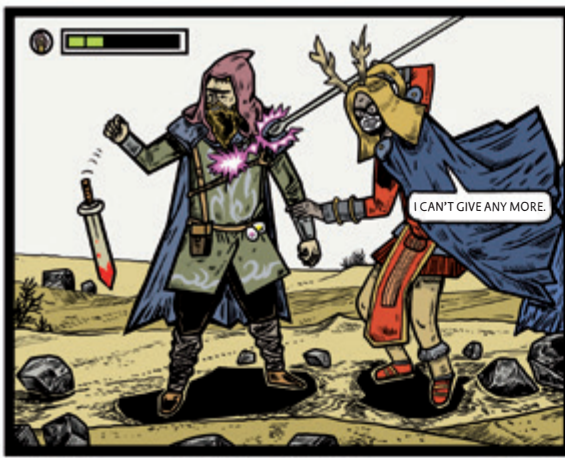
‘Hi Mum!’ he said, grinning. He took the groceries from her to the beat of a song going around in his head. He kept the beat as he moved smoothly to the kitchen and put everything in its place.

‘You’re in a good mood,’ said Mum, pleased. ‘What’s happened?’













# We'll go along with you



‘That was a lovely weekend,’ said Mum to Thomas. ‘I knew it would be.’ She changed down into third gear as they entered the village. As always on a Sunday evening, Sheddington was deserted early, in anticipation of the working week. They were keen to hold on to their good mood.

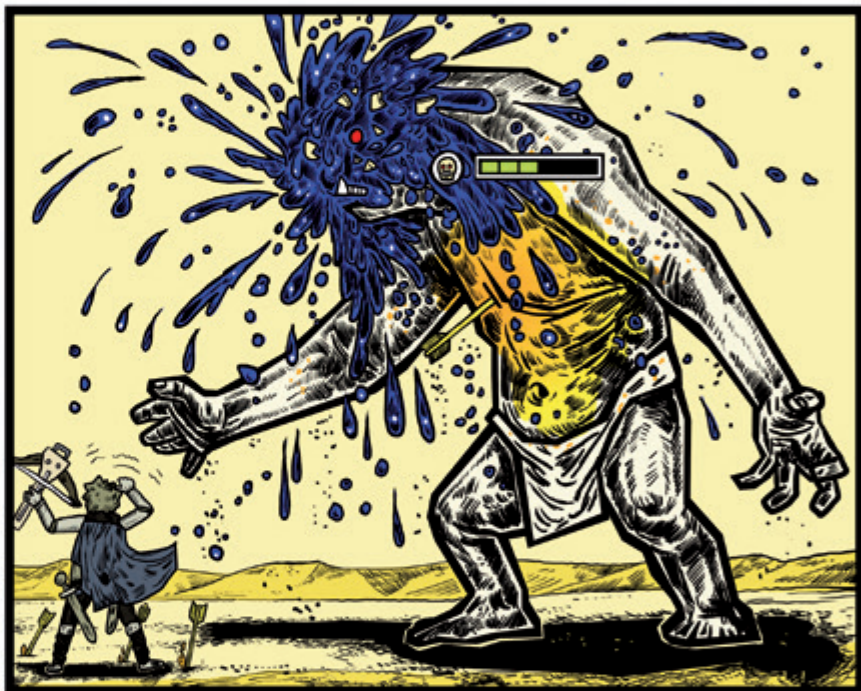
‘Yeah,’ Thomas conceded, thinking back on the past forty-eight hours. ‘Granny bakes the best cakes in the world!’

‘I might have known that cakes would lift your spirits!’ laughed Mum. ‘You made Granny happy. You were like a changed person – sweet and full of fun. I knew the change of air would do you good.’















# Mystery illness



Thomas was convinced that life had lost its meaning. For three days now, he had been lying in bed, staring at the ceiling. His mobile phone was turned off. He hadn't eaten. He hadn't even touched his computer, which scared his mother most of all. This was more than just puberty. What was wrong with him? His temperature was normal. His nose wasn't running. Mum made him tea and beef broth, to no avail.

'Jane Malcolm speaking.' Through his closed door, Thomas heard his mother talking on the phone. 'This afternoon? Yes, that's great. See you later, then.'



About an hour later, the smell of carrot cake wafted in from the kitchen. Thomas's very favourite. He shuffled from his room towards the source of the smell. 'Are we celebrating something?'

'Yes,' replied his mother with apparent casualness. 'The fact that you've got out of bed.'

'Then I'm going to lie down again,' snapped Thomas the teenager.

'As you wish. But Lucy and Michael will be here in an hour. You haven't washed for two days, and those pyjamas make you look about five.'

Thomas returned to his room, flopped down on the bed, and stayed there. He needed to think. The clock was ticking so loudly, it was enough to drive him mad!

*Oh, very well! I'm coming!*

Lucy and Michael entered in a great rush.

'Hey, sick man!'

'You got chickenpox or what?' they teased. 'Those spots of yours look like your normal ones.'

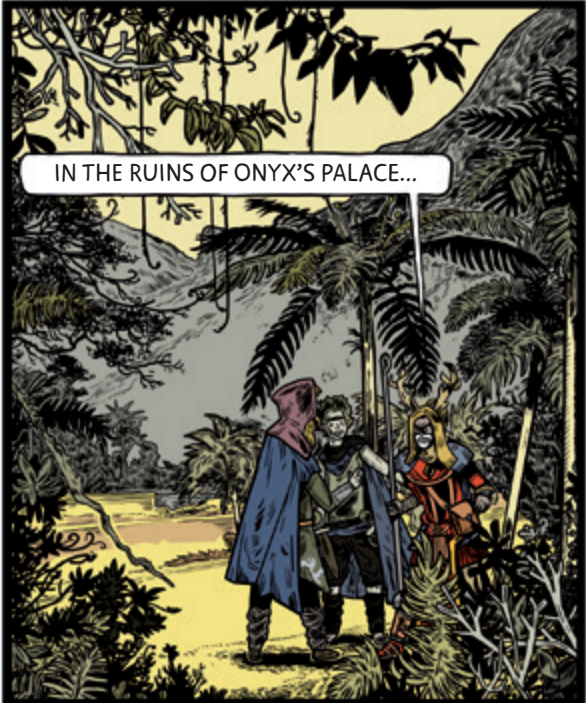
*How can they be so cool?* Thomas found them quite annoying, and then he didn't. They knew how to bring him around.

They ate plenty of the cake, exchanging a few words with Mrs Malcolm as they did so. Then they moved to Thomas's room, where they watched videos on YouTube before going through the posts in the class group and competing with each other to add the funniest comments. They weren't in the mood for board games. Lucy gave Michael a knowing nod. 'You bring your laptop?'

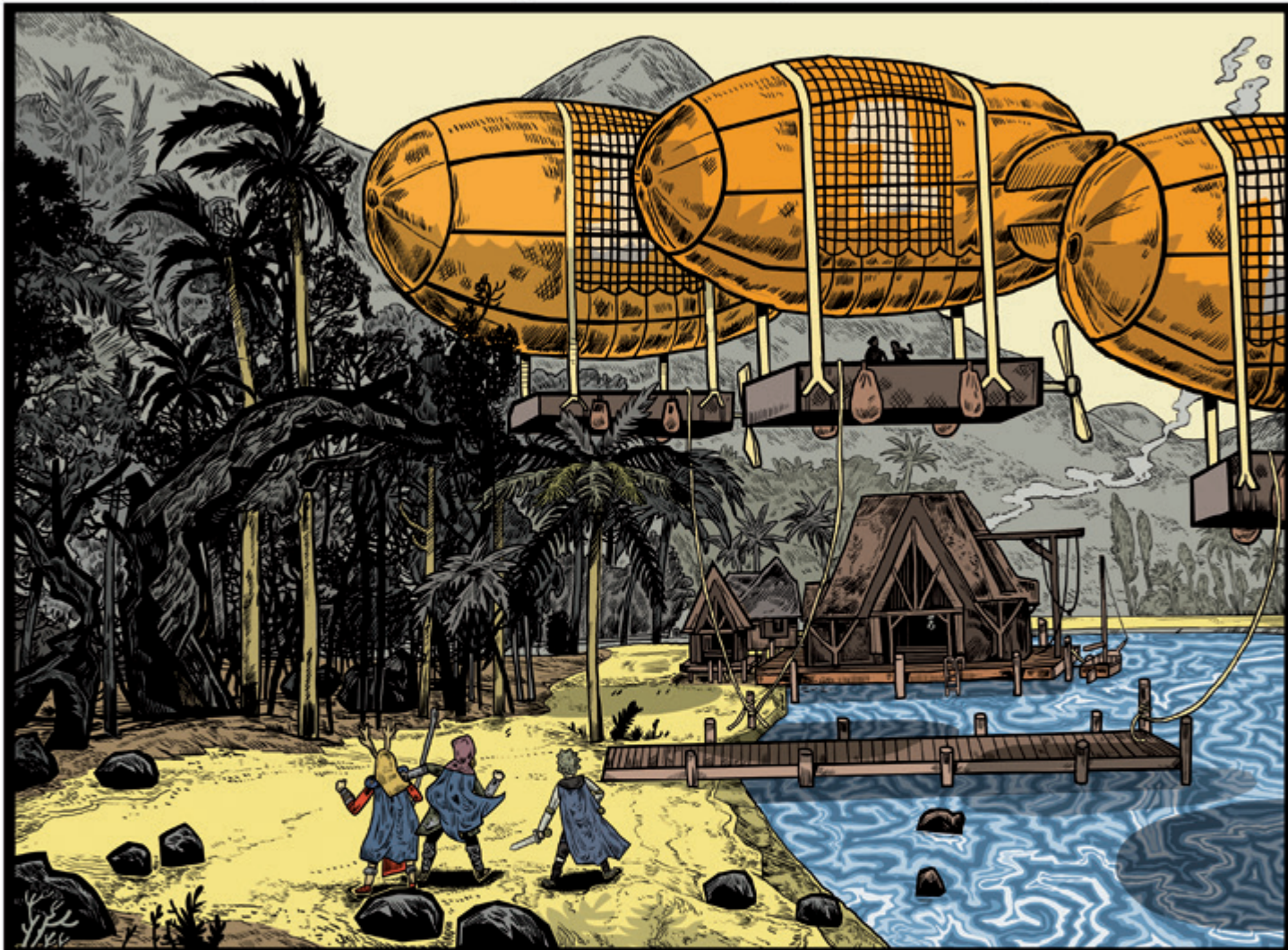
'Of course.' As he rummaged in his backpack, Thomas's interest was piqued. 'How about the three of us try a little raid? I'm reckoning you haven't checked out *Alliance* yet. It's fixed at last!'

Lucy was already sitting at attention with her laptop open. Michael sat down next to her. Thomas gave up all mournful thoughts and pressed the ON button on his computer. Titch, Hurricane and Barachel were back!











*Alliance of the Brave* is a computer game in which seventh grader Thomas Malcolm (alias Titch) does battle with ruthless creatures and explores dark landscapes. He is often more confident in the virtual world than in the real one, especially as two class bullies stick to him like glue and try to make his life a misery.

When the real and gaming worlds merge, Thomas's life is turned upside down. Will he win through? Will he find the mysterious Creator? And what else will he discover about himself and the world he lives in?

The book *Alliance of the Brave* tells its story in two ways. Ester Stará's **narrative** describes episodes in Thomas's real life, while Jiří Franta's **comics** take the reader into cyberspace.

For girls and boys aged 10 and over

A THRILLING  
QUEST  
THAT MOVES  
BETWEEN  
THE REAL  
AND GAME  
WORLDS

