

1 Home?

Casey's voice broke my concentration. "Uh, Simon."

I opened my eyes and looked up. Nothing in the tree. *Good*. So what was Casey staring at? Following her gaze, I found the sky mostly empty—just one bird circling way up high and a few puffy clouds. Oh, and a cat.

Cutting through the park on our walk home from school, my twin sister and I had come across a kitten stuck up in a tree. When Casey pulled out her phone, I said, "Who do we even call? The fire department?"

She snapped a photo and shoved the device back in her pocket. "Why would we call anyone?"

"What? Even you can't climb that high." Actually, she probably could, but it would be pretty stupid.

"That's why *you're* gonna save it, Simon."

"What? No. *I'm* not climbing—"

She reached over and tapped my head.

"Oh."

Ever since we'd gotten back from Geet's universe, Casey had constantly been on me to use the abilities I'd gotten from Dad's machine. The thing is, it didn't always work so well. Learning to make things real with my imagination had been hard enough there, but for some reason it was even tougher here at home.

Take the cat, for example. It'd actually started out okay. I closed my eyes and thought back to the last time I'd held my aunt's cat, Ursula. I remembered the warmth, her heaviness—Ursula was fat—and the soft vibrations of her purring. I imagined my hands way up in that tree, pictured them taking hold of the kitten, feeling my fingers sink into its fur. But did I have the weight right? This one was way smaller than Ursula . . .

And that's when Casey broke in. I probably would've figured it out if she'd left me alone, but once my concentration was broken, I totally lost control. That kitty floated around the park like a helium balloon for a good five minutes. Bobbing along, just out of reach, meowing all confused-like.

When we got home I headed straight downstairs, as I had every day for the last two weeks. Passing Dad's old workroom at the bottom of the stairs, I noticed a tiny bit of tape still stuck to the door from the *DANGER* sign we'd ignored seven months ago.

I stopped. A lot had changed since then. And by *a lot* I mean everything.

It hadn't taken Dad long to figure out that we'd messed with his cellular development accelerator. We'd meant to tell him, but before we worked up the courage, *he* came to us.

I let Casey take the lead—she had more experience talking her way out of trouble. She told him about how I'd been doing my homework on the laptop when I'd accidentally opened the wrong folder. “Then this alarm went off. It was so loud—we didn't know what was going on, like the house was gonna blow up or something—so we had to go into your workroom to shut it off.”

“But the data logs show that the accelerator wand was activated,” Dad said. “Starting that up requires a whole separate process. You'd have to access the computer to—”

“Total accident,” Casey said. “Simon's finger hit the little green button and—”

“Wait, what?” The colour drained from Dad's face. “The green button? Inside the unit? You were *inside* the accelerator when it was *on*?”

We tried to explain what happened next—the blinding light, how we woke up confused, what happened when we watched TV after—but Dad, who never freaked out . . . freaked out. “You were *unconscious*?”

“Just for a little while. But—”

“Are you okay? How do you feel?”

“Fine! We—”

“Any headaches?”

“No . . . Yeah. Sometimes. But—”

And a hundred more questions, rapid fire, until he left the room muttering to himself. He went straight downstairs and destroyed the machine.

I picked the tape off the door of what was now just a junk-filled storage room, then continued down the hall.

We'd meant to tell him everything. How after we'd been zapped, I'd daydreamed, accidentally dropping the two of us into an alternate universe created by my suddenly-supercharged imagination. About the aliens we'd met there, including Lusec—the evil Gannilian who took us prisoner—and of course our friend Geet, who

helped us escape. And about how the cellular development accelerator had made Casey incredibly smart.

But he didn't really give us a chance. I felt bad about it. We'd agreed to tell him, and it didn't seem right to keep such a huge secret. After all, it was his invention. But Casey said that maybe it was for the best. The cellular development accelerator was gone and we were okay. And if he actually knew what really happened—how we could've been killed, and that we'd probably go back someday . . . Well, why worry him?

Entering the family room, I plopped down in a chair at our Lego table. Our grandma had surprised us with an early birthday present, the *Epoch Eagle*, a spaceship from the *Space Fighters* movies. We'd been asking for it for years.

As I picked up a tiny black piece, Casey entered munching on a cookie, crumbs spilling from the corners of her mouth. Plopping down in an armchair on the other side of the room, she raised her eyebrows and said, "Aren't you done that yet?" She took a swig of milk, set her glass down and pulled out her phone.

I'd been down here every day and was almost done, thank you very much, but Casey hadn't touched even one of the fourteen hundred pieces. When Mom asked her about it, she'd said, "Don't you think we're a little old for that stuff?" Which was probably the stupidest thing I'd heard her say in a while.

To be fair, my sister is not stupid. Take what she was doing now for example. Most people would assume that a twelve-year-old girl slumped in a chair with her phone was either on social media, or messaging friends to catch up on the latest middle-school drama. But I didn't have to look at her screen to know that she was actually on the internet, speed-reading ridiculously complicated scientific information. Usually it was aeronautics, physics, thermodynamics or whatever else she thought might help her whenever we finally got back—if we ever got back—to Geet's universe.

"Ha!" she said. "I knew it."

I looked up. "Huh?"

She got up from the chair. "Waverly was wrong today."

"Huh?"

"In Science class. Ms. Waverly said that DNA is basically like a twisted ladder. Nope. It's a chiral right-handed helix. Which I knew, and I tried to tell her, but she was all, 'Casey, if you have something to say, please raise your hand.' Probably because she didn't have a clue what I was talking about."

"Shocking."

Casey flung her arms wide. “She’s a *Science* teacher! And she should know that simplistic models depicting DNA as symmetrical are not only unhelpful, but flat-out wrong. They completely ignore the major and minor grooves that are absolutely critical for the mechanics of DNA replication and gene expression.”

“Major and minor grooves, you say?”

She nodded. “Measuring twenty-two and twelve Ångstroms respectively.”

“Fascinating.” Finally having found the spot for the little black piece—part of the cargo bay doors, I’d decided—I reached over to snap it in place.

“Nope.” She pointed to the other side of the ship. “There. It’s a vertical stabilizer.”

I hesitated.

“There are five more.” She scooped up five identical pieces. “They go here, here, here, here and—”

“Thanks,” I said, snatching them out of her hand. “I can handle it from here.”

She sat down on the other chair at the table. This time she kept quiet, letting me figure out the rest myself. When I’d finally snapped the last one in place, she said, “Sorry.”

“Huh?”

“For not helping.”

I shrugged and looked at the pile of Lego in front of me. “I figured it out.”

“No, not that.” She flicked a cookie crumb off her T-shirt. “Like . . . I mean with any of it. I just . . . *really* didn’t want to.”

I continued to scan the remaining pieces. Eight identical white bricks. “I know. I heard you. ‘We’re too old for Lego.’”

“Yeah, well, that’s what I told Mom. But . . .” She glanced at the *Epoch Eagle* before continuing. “No offense, but . . . I’d rather fly a real one than build a pretend one.”

I stopped and sat up. “Yeah. I get it.”

“We fought aliens! And now, to have to come back here and listen to adults who just have *no* idea . . .”

Like a couple months ago, when I’d gotten a C on the story I’d written in English, even though everyone knows I’m the best writer in the class. “Sorry, Mr. Andrews,” Mr. Dunston had said, “but you have only yourself to blame. You didn’t follow the directions.” To be fair, I think I was zoned out when he’d said that it had to be a true story. And the thing is, mine *was* true, but since I’d written about our trip to another universe, I didn’t bother trying to explain.

I shrugged. "It's not really their fault."

Casey sighed. "Geet *said* we'd be back, right?"

"Yeah. He didn't say when."

She was quiet for a moment, so I grabbed a piece of Lego. Examining the surface of the model, bit by bit, I looked for the perfect spot for this one tiny brick. When I couldn't find one, I wondered whether this might just be an extra piece. Nowhere it fit in, nowhere that was really . . . *home*. Like me—both of us, really. We were from this universe, but now that we were back, it was like we didn't belong here anymore. I—"

"Simon?"

"Huh?" Looking up, I saw Casey staring at me, waiting for me to respond to something she'd said while I was lost in thought. The pile of bricks was gone.

"Oh, I'll just do it." She snatched the piece out of my hand and snapped it into place. "There. Done!"

She picked up the *Epoch Eagle* and admired it. "Wouldn't mind flying this beauty." Setting it down on the table, she said, "*You* could fly it."

"Right. Like the cat?"

"Look, do you wanna go back or not?"

My imagination had taken us to the other universe and home again the first time, so we'd figured I could just do the same thing now. I'd tried, over and over, but . . . well, here we were. Casey figured if I kept trying, I'd get it eventually. I wasn't so sure.

"Do you have any idea how long I worked on that ship? You gonna help me put it back together if I crash it?"

"Simon, you made meteorites out of rock, hurled them through open space and disabled the blaster ports on a Deathfighter 7. You can make a *toy* fly."

I sighed. "Fine." Picking up the *Epoch Eagle*, I raised it so I could see the bottom, then turned it around to get a good look at all sides. Setting it back down, I closed my eyes and replayed what I'd seen. Once I could clearly picture the ship sitting on the table, I was ready. In my mind, I watched it rise.

I opened my eyes. Nothing. *Focus, Simon*. Blowing out a breath, I started over, visualizing, zooming right in on the model, feeling it vibrate with the energy of lift-off. I saw it clearly, in my head, rising from the table. This time, I didn't even have to look. I knew I'd done it.

I kept the ship moving, up, up, until it hovered more than a metre off the table.

It was time to try out some moves. A little dip right. *Nice. And now the other way.* In my imagination, I could see it, feel it, smoother this time, sweeping left and then sliding back into its original position. *Good! Now for some fun.*

The *Epoch Eagle* eased forward, banked to starboard and, looking every bit as majestic as it had in *Space Fighters*, looped around the far end of the family room.

“Yes!”

Casey's shout distracted me and my eyes popped open. The ship wobbled, then dropped to the floor, exploding in a spray of bricks.

For several moments, we just stared at the blast zone.

“Huh,” Casey finally said. “That’s weird.”

I raised my eyebrows.

She looked up from the crash site. “The box says there are 1,407 pieces, right? But I just counted—twice. There are actually 1,408.”

“I hate you,” I replied, then shuffled out of the room.