

Sebastian
and the
MIGHTY
Token

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Sebastian and the Mighty Token

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ARTISTS GATE
P R E S S

For Julia and Sophia

“Promise me you’ll always remember: You’re
braver than you believe, and stronger than
you seem, and smarter than you think.”

—A. A. Milne

CHAPTER 1

“WHERE IS HE?” my impatient older sister demands as she rollerblades back and forth in front of the snow leopard cage.

We’re at the Central Park Zoo so she can take pictures of the leopard for her tenth-grade science fair project. The cage doesn’t have bars, just thick wire netting. Inside are tall grasses, trees, and lots of rocks, but I’m not sure the big cat likes it as much as he liked the mountains, where he was free.

“I really need a good close-up,” Lilly says, holding her phone so it’s ready to shoot the instant the leopard appears.

“Very unlikely,” I inform her.

“I already know that. We’ve been here an hour, and he hasn’t come out of hiding once.”

“Because he’s sleeping.”

“Is this one of your stories, Sebastian?”

“He has to be tired. He was out late last night.”

“Out late? On a date? He went to a movie with one of the seals?”

I circle around her slowly on my Razor scooter.

“After you went to sleep, I climbed out the bedroom window and came here. All the animals know how to open their cages so they can play and, you know, socialize. The leopard asked if

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I wanted a ride, so I climbed onto his back. He told me to hold on tight, and it was a good thing because he went from standing still to full speed in one stride. He ran so fast my eyes watered from the wind. We sped into Times Square, where the cars and taxis were jammed up, so he leaped and ran on top of them. You should have seen the surprise on the tourists' faces as we flew by.

"We galloped over the water to the Statue of Liberty. He climbed up the outside, and we sat on the statue's head to rest awhile. Then the leopard brought me to our building and went back to the zoo."

"Get real, Sebastian."

"So you can see why he needs a nap." I yawn to show I didn't get enough sleep either.

It's closing time, and I can see the disappointment on my sister's face. She texts Mom that we're on our way home, and in a few quick strides, she's at full speed, as graceful and sleek as an impala. I'm a little wobbly on skates because I'm not as athletic as she is, so my dad bought me a Razor scooter with an electric motor. *Zoom!* I don't catch up with her until the hill near the statue of Balto, the hero husky dog. He led a sled dog team a thousand miles to bring medicine to a remote town in Alaska where there was an epidemic.

I power by my sister going up, and she whips by me on the path down. I often see tourists studying maps of Central Park on their phones, but Lilly and I don't get lost among the winding paths, forested areas, and ponds. It's our backyard.

When we were younger, we climbed on the jungle gyms and swung high on the Diana Ross Playground swings near the Eighty-First Street and Central Park West entrance. Now Lilly and I play soccer on the North Meadow fields. Well, I mostly

sit. She's a star. Once, we pretended to be tourists and rented a rowboat on the boat pond. We've rollerbladed and scooted beside our dad as he jogged through all parts of the park. He taught us to navigate by using familiar landmarks like Belvedere Castle and knowing the sun is at the park's downtown edge most of the day. Our science teacher mom has taken us on "field trips" to study local plants, trees, birds, and animals.

We go by the eight-sided Chess & Checkers House, where our neighbor, Mr. Bernstein, is playing a dude with a mohawk and neck tattoos at one of the outside tables.

"Hi, Mr. B!" I yell, and he waves back.

The building we live in isn't far from the Museum of Natural History on Manhattan's Upper West Side. Our apartment is on the first floor, and we try to be 99 percent quiet in the lobby. Lilly gently eases her key into our lock.

"Go away!" Miss Flannigan yells from behind her locked-locked door across the lobby from ours. "I'm calling nine-one-one!"

"It's just Lilly and Sebastian coming home from school, Miss Flannigan," Lilly says in her smiley voice.

"Stop making all that hullabaloo!"

Mom says Miss Flannigan can hear a butterfly flap its wings, which make no noise at all. Mitch, the actor with the big hat who also lives on our floor, calls her Miss Fear-again.

We close our apartment door oh so softly. My mom is in the kitchen preparing one of her healthy dinners, which could sometimes use a slice of bacon or three for flavor. Lilly squeezes

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in beside her to wash the salad lettuce. They're almost the same height and have the same dark-brown hair pulled back into what Mom calls "sensible" ponytails. They could be twins, except Lilly's eyes are blue and Mom's are brown.

I go into my bedroom next to Lilly's and let Checkmate out of his cage. Most kids have gerbils or guinea pigs or, if they're super lucky, a dog. I would love to have a mutt because they're brighter than the purebreds. What I do have is a one-eared squirrel who almost had only three legs. I named him Checkmate.

A Dalmatian had caught him in the park and was gnawing at him when my mom chased the dog away. I thought the squirrel was dead at first, but I felt a heartbeat when I picked him up. I don't tell this to everyone, but sometimes I like animals better than people.

Lilly, Mom, and I wrapped his leg up and bandaged what was left of his ear. The squirrel was so weak he allowed me to hold him in my lap. I fed him dried cranberries, which are my favorite snack, and he mostly healed in ten days.

The Kemps aren't a boasting family, but I'm pretty good with animals. I can pet any dog on the street, even the vicious-looking pit bulls. I trained Checkmate to perch on my shoulder like he's doing now.

My dinner job is to set the table. Mom showed me how to put the fork on the left side of the placemat and the knife and spoon on the right. I mix it up sometimes and point the utensils in the wrong direction to make a boring job more fun. I only set three places because my dad is traveling around the world, searching for something.

Lilly's laptop is on the table, so I log on to a computer chess program I call Warner, the name of the kid I need to beat at

school. Her dinosaur laptop crashes again. Oh man, what a piece of junk!

Mom dishes out pasta with vegetables and makes an extra plate. "Please take Mr. B his dinner, Seb." He's our neighbor, and since his wife died, he sometimes forgets to eat.

CHAPTER 2

MR. BERNSTEIN'S APARTMENT is next to Miss Flannigan's.

I knock three times and then walk right in. Everyone I know in the city locks their doors, even when they're just going to the basement laundry room ... everyone except Mr. B. He told me most people are good, and locks can't keep out the ones who aren't.

The first time I took food to Mr. Bernstein, I was a little afraid of the old man with stooped shoulders and thin white hair he never combs. Old people can be grumpy, and sometimes their breath smells zero percent good. Old ladies with bluish-white hair sometimes push me out of the way with their carts in the supermarket. Lilly and I stayed with Dad's parents when he and Mom went on vacation. Grandpa constantly criticized how I used my napkin and didn't keep my clothes neatly packed in my suitcase.

Not Mr. B. He treats me more like a friend than a kid who doesn't know anything. So he's my favorite grown-up besides my parents. Tonight, like almost every night, he's sitting in his big chair surrounded by newspapers. Every day he reads three, each in a different language. If he were a dog, he'd be a border collie, the most intelligent breed.

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“Hi, Mr. B. Pasta again. Sorry.”

“Look, Sebastian!” His accent sounds like the foreign actors in the black-and-white films Mom watches on the classic movie channel. He points to a rainbow on the newspaper in his lap. “The sun is shining through those crystals Mrs. B and I brought to America.” He points to the group of clear, spiky crystals, which sort of look like a glass flower arrangement on the windowsill. “The crystals bend the light so it breaks down into its component parts. Isn’t it marvelous how white sunlight is made up of colors?”

Mr. B gets very enthusiastic, so it’s easy to be excited with him. “Great!”

“I’ve just read an article about a chess match in Russia, and the winner used a wonderful plan I think you’ll want to know about. Will you stop by the Chess & Checkers House tomorrow after school?”

I promise I’ll be there.

“And don’t bring Checkmate. Somehow a coyote found its way to Central Park from the wilderness, and your squirrel could be his next meal,” Mr. Bernstein warns as he points to a blurry photo in one of his newspapers. I can’t tell if the animal is really a coyote or just a thin, mangy runaway dog.

Almost every night, we have a family meal.

We talk about what we learned at school or describe something interesting we witnessed or discovered.

I have what Mom calls a “lively imagination.” It’s probably something I was born with. It got livelier when I was seven. I

got very sick and had to spend three and a half months in bed—yuck. To amuse myself and the nurses and my family, I made up stories. The TV chefs Mom watches often make the food they cook tastier by adding spices. Sometimes I add a little spice—or maybe a lot—to make a story better, even if the spice isn't actually true.

Tonight I tell a story about the big-city coyote. “He was living in the wilderness, where he shivered from the cold and his fur was wet and muddy. Noises in the night terrified him. He was miserable.”

This I know personally from going to dreadful sleepaway camp in an untamed forest.

I do my best coyote voice if it has a bad British accent. “Squirrels and chipmunks are too cute, so I had to eat birds. Birds! Do you have any idea how disgusting it is to have feathers stuck in my fangs?” I pause to see if I get even a small laugh. Only smiles. “I heard rumors of a magical city where I wouldn't be scared all the time and could get delicious brick-oven pizza and have my wet fur blow-dried. So I went to the big city, and now I live in Central Park, where humans leave me pizza boxes and cartons of Chinese food, par-tic-u-lar-ly General Tso's chicken. At night, when no humans are there, I enjoy visiting the Museum of Natural History because it's all about ... *moi*.”

I get a smile from Mom, a groan from Ms. Perfect.

After Lilly and I build our character by doing the dishes, it's my turn to take the trash down to the cans in the basement. I'm not sure this is making me a better person.

Mixed in with the garbage and recycling is a pair of large red running shoes. The longer Dad is away, the more of his stuff Mom throws out. I sneak the shoes into the apartment again

and stash them in the back of my closet. For when he does come back.



I quickly finish my homework at the IKEA desk in my room and then train my brain to play sharper chess by doing sudoku puzzles. I have eleven first-place ribbons from chess tournaments pinned to the corkboard above my desk, but I'll never beat Warner unless I improve. He's the school champ who crushes high school seniors even though he's in seventh grade with me.

My computer might look like a pile of junk because it doesn't have a shiny exterior case. Dad and I built it from parts we special ordered, so it has a teraflop of memory, and the central processor has a clock speed of four gigahertz. It's much more powerful than Lilly's and Mom's laptops, and I've downloaded sophisticated chess tutorial programs. Tonight I challenge "Grandmaster."

While my digital opponent is thinking about its next move, I look up from the monitor. One of my favorite photos pinned next to my ribbons is Dad carrying me on his shoulders one Halloween when I was much younger. I'm wearing a helmet and plastic armor and carrying a sword like a Roman soldier from two thousand years ago. On the bottom of the photo, Dad wrote in Latin: *veni. vidi. vici.*

I hear the sound of hard soles on cement. Not many people wear that kind of shoes in my neighborhood. The suit dads of kids at school do, but most grown-ups wear running or walking sneakers with quiet rubber soles. My dad isn't a suit dad, but he mostly wears the short lace-up boots with hard leather soles

that his best friend and business partner, Kyle, had made for him in Italy. Those boots go *thud, thud, thud*.

I peer out the window. The walker has gone by, and I rush into Lilly's bedroom next to mine for a better view. From her window, I see that the man striding along is definitely not my father. "I thought it was his footsteps," I tell her.

My sister doesn't look up from the poster she's making for her science fair project about snow leopards and evolution.

I'm not really envious, but her room is bigger than mine by 8 percent. The photos on her corkboard are more orderly than mine. I like the shot where she's younger and climbing a rock while Dad stands below, ready to catch her if she falls. The one where she pretends to be a doctor using a stethoscope to examine me when I was in a hospital bed looking small and frail is not my favorite.

Mom has explained to me how Lilly's room is an excellent example of how neatness counts. I count perfectly well, even with clothes all over my bed.

"I thought he might have finished climbing that monster mountain in Alaska and come back to the city," I tell her.

"He might never come back because he's on a fool's errand, Seb."

This is what owl-wise Mom calls activities or jobs or searches with zero chance of being successful or rewarding or educational.

"He sends us emails and photos. He'll come home," I say, but even I hear doubt in my voice.

"Wake up, bro. You're dreaming," the sensible sister says.

"I haven't had a dream since he left."

CHAPTER 3

BRIGHT BRASS GEARS AND SPRINGS and pulleys whirl and clink as the minute hand ticks forward.

I imagine this is how the internal parts work in a clock called a marine chronometer. This was the world's most precise clock when it was built 318 years ago, and it's also beautiful as a work of art. Perfect. Dad's friend Kyle was always searching for objects or things in nature he thought were perfect. He and Dad had planned to visit a museum in England to see the famous timepiece in person, but Kyle died from cancer. So Dad went alone and then kept going places to see other perfect objects and sights.

A strong hand pulls me back.

"Seb," is all Lilly says, not scolding, just gently reminding me to pay attention. I must have been thinking too hard about the clock and walked right into traffic.

Lilly, Mom, and I walk to Amsterdam Academy every day unless it's raining really hard or the sidewalks are slippery-slidey with winter ice.

Many kids come by taxi, Lyft, or walk with their parents like we do. Some arrive in big, black, very shiny SUVs or limousines

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Mom calls “movie star cars.” Monica Greene gets out of one of these, and Lilly nods and says, “Hello.” Monica walks right by without nodding or saying anything back.

“Don’t take it personally, Lilly,” Mom says. “She’s jealous because you make everything you do look easy even though you work really hard.”

Yeah, my sister gets straight A’s and is on the varsity soccer team and is class president. Lilly will tell you the only way she got elected is that most kids voted *against* Monica. So my sister is annoyingly modest too.

Mom thinks Monica turned against my sister when Lilly won the Bates Prize. Teachers award it to the tenth grader who’s the best at math. Monica is also an A math student, and her parents protested. The principal encouraged the teachers to reconsider, maybe because Monica’s father donates lots of money to our private school, but the teachers stuck to their decision. Monica has not spoken to Lilly since. This doesn’t bother my sister. She might think Monica is a conceited brat, but she still treats her politely. Mom brought us up that way.

Mom drops us off and heads for the crosstown bus to the all-girls school on the East Side, where she’s a biology teacher and head of the science department.

I’m a little shy, so I often sit by myself in the cafeteria.

When I can, I find a table near Lilly and her friends. They’re friendly, but sometimes they pet my head like I’m a puppy. Most of them are on the honor roll, so it doesn’t make much sense that most of what they talk about is silly, dumb, or both.

Monica sets up her throne at a nearby table with her friends, who are louder and dumber than my sister's. I'd have to put my fingers in my ears not to hear Monica boasting about the summer vacation trip to Europe she has planned with her mother. They'll stay in duh-lux hotels and eat at duh-lux restaurants that probably don't even serve pizza.

Lilly isn't being silly or dumb today as she describes her science fair project on evolution and snow leopards. The big cats have evolved over many generations so their black-and-white fur blends into the rocky Asian mountains. However, they're not invisible to hunters, who kill them for their beautiful fur. The leopards will go extinct unless local governments enforce laws protecting them. Monica stops talking about herself long enough to listen to what Lilly is planning.

On my way out of the cafeteria, I walk by a skinny boy munching on a cheeseburger and playing chess against himself. This is Warner, who's about as friendly as a Siamese cat. Sometimes I hear the word *brilliant* when teachers talk about him. I played him once and got destroyed.

"Come," Warner offers, like a wolf luring a lamb to the slaughter. I hesitate.

"Ah," Warner crows, "*pisciculus* is fearful. He knows he will lose so fast he'll have to humble himself in front of the mighty Warner."

He often speaks of himself like he's talking about another person. Also, he likes to show off that he's in honors Latin.

I walk away and hear the sneer in his laugh. I haven't even played him again, and I still feel humiliated. And even worse, when I look up *pisciculus* later, I learn that it means "little fish."

CHAPTER 4

AFTER SCHOOL, Lilly and her friend Whitney shepherd me to Central Park for my lesson with Mr. Bernstein.

I have protested that other kids my age don't have overprotective mothers who sic their sheepdog sisters on them. Mom doesn't want me to talk along even though she doesn't believe our city neighborhood is any more dangerous than the suburbs, or the country, where wolves and bears rip the flesh off your bones. (I added that last bit of spice.)

I read one of my big sister's English class essays where she had to describe a family member's personality and chose our mother. Lilly wrote that Mom understands there are some bad guys out there. Nasty things can happen on dark, lonely streets, and the world does have some sharp edges, rainy days, and harmful stupidity. Like the time I was walking by myself and turned down the wrong dark street. Tough kids my age surrounded me and took what money I had: eighty-seven cents. I got punched for not having more. Afterward, Mom made me carry a just-in-case twenty-dollar bill. But mostly she tries to see the best in people and be optimistic.

I would have given Lilly a B instead of an A because she used too many metaphors without good concrete examples.

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Today my shepherd and co-shepherd are rollerblading, and I ride my scooter to the park. Lilly steers us across the street to avoid a tidy-looking suit-job man. I'm more scared of an unhoused man in ragged clothes, pushing a three-wheeled shopping cart filled with cans and bottles.

"He's harmless," Lilly assures me.

"He has been around the neighborhood for years, picking through trash cans for the bottles that he recycles," Whitney adds. As we glide by, he's purring like a kitten.

I hear angry shouts and look back over my shoulder. The suit-job man is the one shouting curses and punching the air with angry arms. As Mom will tell you, I don't have "street smarts" like my perfect older sister.

We climb up the steps to the Chess & Checkers House, which is on a small hill. Mr. Bernstein likes to play outside when it's warm. We find him at his usual sunny-day table. Lilly and her friend skate off to the zoo to try to get a photo of the leopard.

Mr. B and I replay a game between two Russian grandmasters who are so skilled few others in the world can beat them. "Think like a champion to become a champion," Mr. B advises.

We follow each player's moves as recorded in the newspaper. Mr. B asks me to explain why one of the players moved a specific piece to a particular square, and my answer isn't convincing.

"You're not really concentrating today, Sebastian. No news from your father? Is he still in Alaska?"

"That's not it."

"Ah, you played Rude Boy again." His perfect nickname for Warner.

Mr. B can be funny and serious at the same time. Nice. "I didn't dare play him, and he still made me feel small."

“You skipped up a grade, Sebastian. You’re smart enough to defeat young and old players who are rude or polite.”

“I can’t beat him, Mr. B.”

He closes his eyes and is quiet for a long time. I wonder if he has gone to sleep. Sometimes when I bring him dinner, he’s napping in the big chair. I look at my Star Wars watch. After five whole minutes, Mr. Bernstein opens his eyes and reaches into the pocket of the brown suit jacket he always wears. He pulls out what looks like a grubby nickel attached to a chain. “Do you know what this is?”

I don’t. In his other suit pocket, Mr. Bernstein finds his MetroCard. I’ve got one to pay for a ride on city buses or enter subway stations. “Before MetroCards, we used these to pay for our rides.”

I recognize it when he hands it to me. “It’s an old subway token. I saw a whole display of them at the Transit Museum in Brooklyn.”

I try to hand it back, but Mr. Bernstein says, “It’s for you, Sebastian.”

An old subway token on a chain? About as exciting as getting a pair of socks for my birthday. He must see my lack of enthusiasm because he says, “It’s not just any token.”

From the tone of Mr. B’s voice, I can tell he’s about to say something important. I cock my head a little to the side to listen.

“It can make you as strong as you can be, but not stronger. And it can make you as smart as you can be, but not smarter.”

It looks pretty ordinary to me. There’s a Y-shaped opening with good for one fare printed around it in the middle, and it says new york city transit authority on the other side. The chain

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connected to the token's edge is long enough that someone can hang it around their neck. "It has magic power?" I ask.

"You already have the power. The token can help you learn how to use it."

"Thanks, Mr. B."

The old man smiles. "Goodspeed."