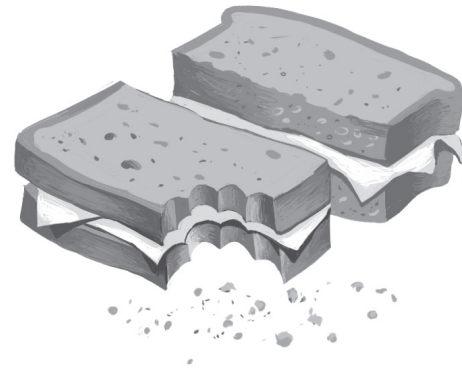


Chapter 1



“I claim this adequately rated secondary school in the name of the Galactic League!”

Puzzled to hear such an odd declaration, Gavin looked up to see a tall girl with long black hair standing on the top step outside the main entrance of Middling High, hands on her hips, chin jutting out, addressing the milling playground like some junior dictator. The morning sun gleamed off the buttons on her uniform blazer, her dark eyes shone and her hair streamed in the breeze. A discarded crisp packet blew by, briefly catching on her foot. Gavin didn’t recognise her and, despite the impressive display, no one was paying her the slightest



attention. No one except for him. The girl turned on one heel and marched over.

It was just before the bell went for the start of classes and he was sitting on the far side of the steps reading a book, on his own as usual. The girl seemed to have some difficulty focusing on him at first, but eventually her gaze landed and suddenly he felt like a specimen under a microscope.

“Your skin,” she remarked. “It’s so ... pale.” She rolled up one sleeve and stuck her arm next to his. The contrast between her sandy complexion and his pasty skin was striking. “Remarkable. You’re almost translucent. Not a friend to the ultraviolet end of the spectrum, I’m guessing. Good job this planet only has one sun.”

Assuming that this was her awkward attempt at saying hello, Gavin ignored the general weirdness of the comment. He hadn’t seen her at school before and since he had plenty of experience of being the new kid, he decided to give her a break.

He lowered his book. “So, do you always go around claiming schools for – what was it again?”

“The Galactic League,” she repeated in a tone of voice that suggested she was disgusted he hadn’t heard of it.

Her accent marked her out as not from around here, so

he figured it must be some foreign football league. Still, an odd comment to make, even for an ardent fan. “I’m Gavin, by the way.”

“Gavin?” she said, intoning his name like she’d just discovered a new species of frog. “*The* Gavin?”

He was the only one in Year 8. There was another in Year 12, but everyone called him Shed, because once he’d got locked in his dad’s garden shed over a bank holiday weekend and had to survive on birdseed and spring water from a four-pack of canned tuna. He hadn’t eaten the tuna because he couldn’t find any mayo. So, yes, Gavin supposed that made him *the* Gavin, whatever that meant.

The girl put a hand over her right eye and squinted at him with her left, her eyeball circling wildly. “So it’s true. It’s like you’re barely here.”

“Fine,” he said, losing interest and burying his head in his book. His plan was to ignore her until she went away. But then he noticed a boy tearing across the playground with a stiff, upright running style, arms pumping, knees somewhere around his ears. The boy carved a path through clumps of kids, heading towards the main entrance.

“There you are,” he said to the girl, trotting up the steps. He was slightly shorter than she was, an athletic



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body topped by a disproportionately big head. “You wandered off,” he continued. “Sam – I mean, *Dad* – told you not to leave my side, at least for our first day.”

So they’re brother and sister, thought Gavin. Maybe twins.

She glowered and he shrank from her. “No one orders me about. Especially not some hairy warrior.”

“Some what?” said Gavin.

The boy let out a startled cry, evidently just noticing him sitting there. He sent Gavin a nervous glance and began to honk like a goose. “*Worrier*. Dad’s such a worrier.” The boy paused for a moment. “And he is hairy.” He raised a hand in greeting. “I’m Bart,” he mumbled, and then added, “I come in peace.”

Oh no, not another one. “Good for you,” said Gavin. “I came on my bike.”

The boy frowned. “That is an example of comedic wordplay, correct?”

Gavin was coming to the surprising conclusion that the boy might be even weirder than his sister. “Sure. You a big fan of comedic wordplay, Bart?”

The boy and girl exchanged a puzzled glance. “Ye-e-s,” he said slowly, “I am *Bart*. That is correct. Because ‘Bart’ is a statistically commonplace designation.”

“Nice to meet you,” he said, even more keen to get

back to his book and far away from these two. “I’m Gavin.”

“*Gavin?*” The boy’s eyes widened. “Is he the one?”

The girl ignored him. “What’s that?” she asked, referring to Gavin’s Spork of the Dead-themed lunchbox.

Unsure if she hadn’t recognised the greatest video game in the world, or a basic packed lunch box, he didn’t answer at first. She took it as an invitation to investigate further.

“Hey!” he objected as she removed his sandwiches and took a large bite.

“Oh, mmm,” she gushed. “It’s so utterly, incredibly ... *bland*. I don’t think I’ve ever tasted anything so wholly *unremarkable* in my whole life. What is it?”

“Uh ... cheese and ham,” said Gavin, looking around the playground for the telltale smirks on the faces of his schoolmates that would signal this was a prank.

“*Uh-Cheesinam*,” she repeated in wonder, staring at the sandwich as if it was the Crown Jewels, before tearing off another chunk.

Gavin found his tongue. “That’s my lunch you’re eating.”

She waved away his concern. “I’ll have one of the servants prepare you a fresh Uh-Cheesinam. Or perhaps you’d prefer something more interesting – how about





a slice of Tilorthian Phlan? Your taste buds will think you've died and gone to Alpha Centauri."

Bart began to honk again, as if his sister had cracked the funniest joke. "Isn't she a hoot? *Phlan? Servants? Earth's closest planetary system?* I ask you, as if a perfectly normal human schoolgirl would have *staff* and an intergalactic packed lunch."

"So." She gave a long sigh and flicked her hair. "What is there to do here?"

"At school?"

"No. In this habitat."

Strange word to use. "You mean Middling?"

"If that's how its inhabitants refer to their environment."

If she was hoping for bright lights and a world-class aquarium, she'd come to the wrong *habitat*. Gavin had lived in Middling since he was nine years old, which made a running total of three years, four months, two weeks, and five days. He'd had a lot of different homes over the years, so he liked to keep count. He muttered something about it being a nice spot to live, if a little quiet.

"Apple," she said.

"No, it's grapes today." He pulled out a bunch of seedless South Africans from his lunchbox.



"I refer to my personal designation," she said. Gavin gave her a blank look and she curled her lip in frustration before clicking her fingers. "Name!" She said it like she'd produced a rabbit from a hat. "My name is Apple." She paused. "Niki Apple."

"Cheesely," he said. "Gavin Cheesely."

"You have my condolences," said Niki.

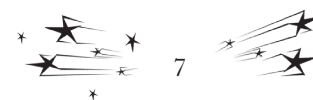
The bell went for the start of school. The kids in the playground lumbered zombie-like up the steps and in through the main entrance. When the crowd thinned, Niki and Bart had gone. For a moment, Gavin wondered if he'd imagined the two of them, but then they strolled back through the open doors on to the steps. Even his imagination wasn't strange enough to conjure up these two.

"What are you waiting for?" said Niki. "As I understand from my briefing, the repetitive sound of the directly struck idiophone percussion instrument—"

"She means the bell," Bart added hurriedly.

Niki pursed her lips, swatting him away like a persistent fly. "The *bell* signifies the commencement of training. Oh, I do hope the first class is hand-to-hand combat. I have sharpened my nails especially."

She disappeared inside with an eager bounce and what Gavin judged to be a frankly disturbing look in her eye.



Bart paused. “I know what you’re thinking,” he said. “That she’s cruel and uncaring and only interested in herself.”

Gavin waited for the next half of the sentence, the bit where Bart went on to explain that really she’s not like that at all, and how once you got to know her she was kind and gentle and actually a great big softy.

It didn’t come.

“Bart, attend me this instant!” Niki’s piercing tone blasted out of the entrance like a high-explosive round.

Bart winced and, with one final apologetic look towards Gavin, trotted after her. “Coming, Your High—” He broke off. “I mean ... coming, regular biological sister.”

Closing the book, Gavin stuffed it and the remains of his lunch into his bag and prepared to head to his first class. If he’d known then what he would later learn, what he should’ve done was drop everything, hightail it in the opposite direction, change his name to Jose Silva and immediately relocate to Brazil. But at that precise moment he had no idea that though Niki Apple had only just appeared in his life, she was about to make quite an impact.

Like that asteroid did on the dinosaurs.

