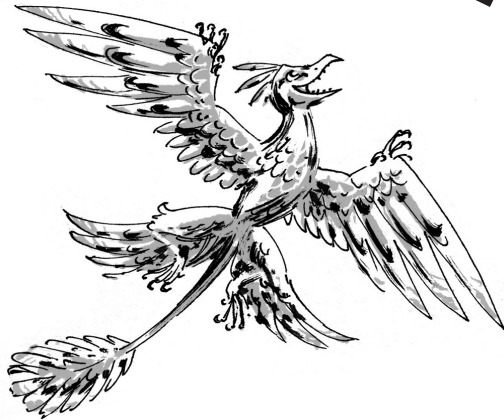


MISSION MICRORAPTOR



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2001 – ∞

For Dad and Popo



CHAPTER

1

Within minutes, I knew this was a big mistake. What was the point? A class trip to the Alps, they had said, to enjoy beautiful views, they had said, to breathe fresh air and watch birds. Well, they could watch all the birds they liked (seriously, who does that?) without me. I had an advantage. I was last. So I could just sit on this rock here and they could pick me up on their way back.

It was a good plan.

No, it was an excellent plan.

If it weren't for Milo.

You know how on school trips everyone pairs up really quickly and you're left alone? Well, I do. And so does Milo, aka the Professor. So, our genius teachers always come up with the same genius solution. They pair us together.

Give those teachers a coffee mug.

He bobbed back down the mountainside, checking his watch, eyes of puzzlement under his thick eyebrows. 'Finn? We don't have a break yet. The first break is at ten a.m., in approximately thirty-four—'

'I don't care.'

He blinked. Then glanced at our group disappearing on ahead, then back at me. 'Erm ...'

'Look, Milo, you've known me since Reception, right?'

'Yes?' he murmured anxiously.

'I don't like hiking. Or walking. Or anything like that. I like three things. Here they are in alphabetical order' - I put up three fingers - 'video games, takeaway food (preferably burgers, although pizza comes a close second) and a large couch.'

‘That’s not alphabetical. It should’ve been—’

‘Whatever, Milo. Also, I’ve just improved my plan. I’m going back to the hotel. There’s a bakery next to it, full of pies.’

I stood up from the ridiculously hard rock and inched down the ridiculously steep and scattered path.

‘Humans are not supposed to exist on mountains,’ I declared, trying hard not to slip. ‘Our species began in Africa, and there are none there.’

Milo staggered behind me. ‘Actually, there are many mountains in Africa, the tallest being Kilimanjaro, of course. Five thousand eight hundred and—’

‘This looks like a shortcut,’ I said, before he wrote an essay. I left the path and cut through some trees.

‘I don’t think it’s a good idea,’ said Milo, still in pursuit.

‘Relax, Prof, it’s gonna be faaaAAA . . .’

You’re probably wondering why ‘fine’ suddenly became a Viking horn. Well, it turned out Milo was right. The shortcut wasn’t a great idea.

Unless you knew how to fly.

Centimetres from my feet, there was a vertical cliff of at least twenty metres. And at the bottom of it a river of ice, coming from high up in the mountains. Later I learnt that this was called a glacier.

‘. . . AAA!’ Eventually I ran out of air. I could barely hear my own voice, anyway, as my heart had decided to leave my ribcage and relocate inside my ears.

Slowly, I calmed down a bit. ‘Right. Change of plan. Let’s take the path.’

But Milo was in no state to go anywhere. Instead, he was hugging a tree. Not just hugging. I mean, he was clinging on to it so hard that the tips of his fingers had paled. And he kept his eyes shut so tightly that all the tendons in his neck were sticking out.

I went closer. ‘Are you OK?’

A trembling voice came. ‘It’s my acrophobia.’

‘You’re afraid of acrobats?’

‘No.’

‘Acronyms?’

He whimpered. 'I'm afraid of heights.'

I paused. My throat burnt, which is what happens when I'm really annoyed at myself. I had done something seriously uncool because, whether he was my friend or not, I couldn't just leave Milo without a trip-buddy.

'Sorry,' I mumbled. 'I'm sorry. Let's go back.'

I put my arm around his shoulder and with my other hand I slowly detached his fingers from the bark. 'Keep your eyes closed, I'll turn you around.'

Milo nodded. 'Thanks.'

After a few steps, he opened his eyes again and exhaled.

I should've kept us going, but I had another idea. Also terrible, as it turned out.

'I'll take a selfie. Just a sec.'

Milo blinked. 'Be careful.'

'Don't worry. See you in a minute.'

I trotted back to the cliff edge, fumbling in my jacket pocket for my phone. But what do they say? Never trot and fumble. Or maybe it's drive and text. Anyway, I tripped on a stone, hobbled forward, flapped my arms to find something to hold on to

but there was nothing, so I kept stumbling, faster and faster, like a box down the stairs.

‘OOOOAAAEEEE!’ I left a trail of vowels behind me until suddenly . . .

There was no ground to stumble upon any more. I was free-falling.

Down the cliff, towards the glacier.

Goodbye, Life, I thought. It’s been good knowing you these past twelve years. We had some great moments, you and I, didn’t we? Friday take-aways, gameathons, cakes for breakfast. I will never forget the Great Barbecue of 2019. It was—
SLOSH!

I must admit, not the sound I expected. What happened to *CRACK* or *THUMP*?

Well, what happened was, they explained later in the hospital, the glacier had been gradually melting for years, so its surface was not rock-hard but in a state of advanced slushiness. Not exactly those words, of course, but you get the idea. It felt like falling on thick foam. Albeit foam that was cold beyond human imagination.

The good news was, I wasn’t injured. The

bad news was, I was thoroughly soaked and thoroughly shaking. Although it was early spring, it was blue-cold up here in the French Alps. In fact, I'd heard that there was a major snowstorm coming tonight.

My survival instinct kicked in. Only, because it had never been called on before, it didn't have a clue what to do. So it stepped aside and gave way to panic. And panic had a straightforward answer. Scream, it said, scream as loud as you can.

I took a deep breath and . . .

'Finn! Finn!'

That wasn't me, of course, because why would I scream my own name? No, it was Milo. He had managed to somehow fight back against his acrylicphobia and had crawled on his tummy to the edge of the cliff. His face stuck out, all blood drained from his face, his hair pasted on his forehead.

'Finn!'

'I'm OK, I'm OK! Didn't break anything.'

'Thank Jupiter.' Whether he meant the planet or the Roman god, I wasn't too sure. Milo studied

a different subject every week (and when I say studied, I mean *studied*) and his phrases followed suit. 'I'm gonna get help.'

'Milo?'

'Yes?'

My teeth clacked like Irish dancers. 'Thanks.'

Milo smiled and some of the colour returned to his cheeks. 'No problem.'

And that would have been the end of the story. Not a great story, I'll admit, definitely not one warranting a book.

But before my class came back, before one of the teachers managed to climb down and pull me out of my ice-cold bath, wrapping me in her jacket, before the rescue crews arrived and took me to the hospital, before all that . . .

There was a gleam from a little cavern, on the rock face right next to me. There was something in there. A curvy something. Most importantly, a sparkly something.

Thinking I'd struck gold - well, some sort of precious stone - I stretched and, with a grunt, pulled it out.

It was an egg.

I mean, it was shaped like an egg, although it was much bigger than your normal eggs and its shell was crystallized, with little sharp-as-diamond bits sticking out. As I turned it in my hands, looking at the light splitting into hundreds of mini rainbows, a strange desire came over me to keep it. Collecting stuff wasn't really my hobby, the only material things I loved were game consoles and game chairs, but there was something about this.

I put it in my backpack.

And *now* we have a story ...

