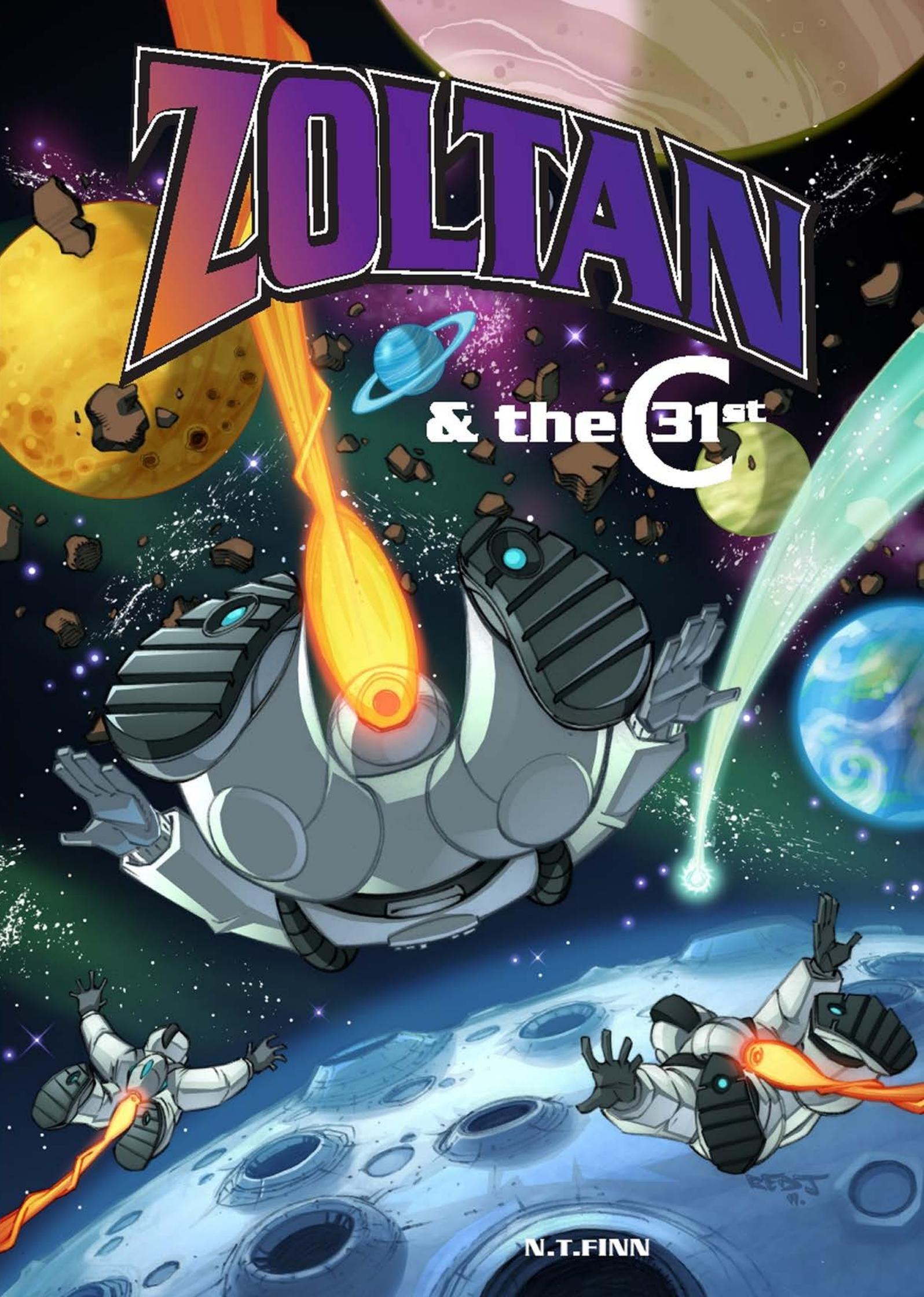


ZOLTAN

& the 31st



N.T.FINN

Zoltan & the 31st Century

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*This book is dedicated to my children,
David, Josephine & Pierce,
who are preparing me for the future.*

- Chapter 6 -

It was lunchtime, so they made their way back to the dining room. When they got there, Cue was waving madly to them from a booth at the back of the room. Sensing her urgency, they hurried over.

“We’re going on an excursion - to the moon!” Cue’s excitement was written all over her face. “Can you believe it - the moon - without our parents!”

Michael was easily as excited as Cue, but David felt a bit scared. He didn’t want to say anything, though, especially if he was the only one who felt that way.

“Didn’t you hear me, Zolt?” Cue had noticed David’s lack of enthusiasm. “A class excursion to the moon - ten kids, two teachers, no gravity - think about it!”

Michael quickly covered for David. “Well, remember, Cue - Zoltan and his family only just got back from a week at the Armstrong Observatory, and -”

“Yes, but that was with his family! This is with us! And that was to the observatory. This is to the crater!”

“Really?” Said Michael, once again drawn into the excitement. “Are we allowed to go zooming?”

“That’s why we’re going!” bubbled Cue.

“Oh boy,” thought David. “That’s just what I need. More stuff I’ve never done before. Maybe I can be hopeless at that, too! I can hardly wait.” But aloud, he asked, “When are we going?”

“This weekend,” answered Cue, “so get all your homework done before we go. It’s going to be two heavenly days on the moon!”

“How long will it take us to get there?” asked Michael.

“I don’t know - a few hours, I guess,” answered Cue.

“Are we travelling by city transport or jet?” asked Sean.

“I don’t know,” said Cue impatiently. “Who cares how we get there?”

“Well, I do,” said Sean. “City transporters are slower and land further away from the hotel, while a jet will take us right to where we are going in half the time. And for some reason, transporter food always tastes stale, while the food boxes they have on board the jets are delicious.”

“Sean -” interrupted Cue impatiently, “I really don’t care about any of that. Your stomach will survive no matter how we travel.”

“All the same, if we go by transporter, I’m bringing my own provisions, and I suggest that you all do the same, because I’ll only be

able to pack enough for myself, and I'd hate to see you all drooling at the mouth, watching me eat." Sean was quite serious.

"Sean, you are such a pain," groaned Cue. "Here we are, presented with a fabulous opportunity - a trip to the moon with our friends and NO PARENTS," here Cue looked meaningfully at David, Michael and Sean, "and all you can do is stress out about whether or not they'll have your favourite cookies on the in-flight menu!" She shook her head and sighed.

By this time, the four of them were seated around the booth table. "What you should be thinking about," she continued, leaning conspiratorially across the table, towards David and Michael on the other side, "is how we can get the teachers to take us to the Moon Mall."

"She's right!" agreed Michael. "The Moon Mall has all kinds of gear you can't get here, and there's no sales tax, so it's less expensive even if you could get it here!"

"Will we get to go to the Dark Side Diner?" asked Sean.

"*Sean!* Will you stop?" wailed Cue.

"No - really - I've read about it. The whole diner is designed so that you feel as though you are sitting in a bowl that is orbiting the moon, and when you are on the dark side, the surface of the moon becomes luminous. You can see every crater and mountain - even the moon

planes are illuminated. And the food!” Sean slid back in his chair, apparently overcome with gastronomic ecstasy.

“I hate to interrupt the planning,” said Michael facetiously, “but why are we being taken on such a cool excursion all of a sudden?” His question brought silence to the group. “I mean, it’s not as though our class has gotten good grades this term - or even earned Best Behaviour Badge. And you don’t normally get a moon excursion till 10th grade. Why are they suddenly taking 6th graders?”

Cue nudged Michael and ‘sshhed’ him to be quiet. She then surreptitiously indicated the ‘large child’, Vladco, who was sitting with his friends at a table not far from their booth. “That’s why.” Cue whispered.

“Oh, I get it, the governor pulled strings to send his kid to the moon,” said David in a low voice. “Well, who can blame him? If I had to look at that ugly dial across the breakfast table first thing every morning, I’d try to put it as far away as I could, too. The moon’s a long way, right?” He was playing dumb, and the others tried to smother their laughter so that they wouldn’t attract Vladco’s attention.

Vladco took this opportunity to stroll over, and he leaned his enormous hands on the ends of their table, and peered at them. “Heard about the moon trip?” he asked. He then stood up straight, and hitched up his trousers. “You know who you have to thank for

that, don't you?" When no one answered, he said "Me. So look out, or you're off the trip," and he rapped his great big fist twice on the table, and sauntered off, like a big hero.

Unfortunately, the people in the next booth had just dropped a big, buttery bread roll on the floor, and Vladco didn't see it until he had stepped on it. His foot flew from under him, and he slid - all buttered up - on his back, right past his own table and into the next one.

Being such a large child, the force of a buttered Vladco sliding into the lightweight table was such that the whole thing upended, and food and drinks flew in all directions - some of it landing on the human projectile himself. By now the children who could see what had happened were laughing hysterically. David was gasping for breath, and could barely speak, but managed to say to Michael "I think I'm going to wet my pants!"

Michael had just enough control of his limbs to punch David weakly in the arm, while Cue and Sean were in bad shape. Cue was collapsing on the seat, while Sean had the hiccups, and was consequently having a fair bit of trouble breathing.

At last Vladco righted himself, and brushed the edible debris from his clothing. One of his friends began to wipe the back of Vladco's fat neck with a towel, but was pushed roughly away. Vladco's whole head was as red as a tomato, and he looked as if he was going to

explode. He looked savagely around him, and for an instant seemed intent on David and his friends, but checked himself in the knowledge that the entire dining room was watching him. He strode from the room, his temper pent up within.

“I don’t believe it,” said Sean. “I’ve laughed so much, I’m not even hungry!”

“I don’t believe it, either,” said Cue.

“Well, that kind of puts a damper on the moon trip,” said Michael.

“Who else is going?”

“Well,” answered Cue officiously, “there will be ten students in total. That’s Michael, Sean, David, Vladco, his three goons - Len, Ben and Harry, and Margie, Adrian and I.”

“Well, at least we’ll have someone along who knows something about where we’re going - in case we have any questions.”

“You mean, intelligent questions,” said Cue.

“In my case, yes,” answered Michael, ducking just in time to miss the slap Cue aimed at him. “And with Margie and Adrian along, we know someone will have taken notes, rock samples and photos, just in case there is a test when we get back.”

“But can they zoom?” Asked Sean.

“Margie and Adrian can do everything and anything. They work hard and play hard. Adrian is quite good at it. He’s better than I am, anyway!”

“He?” said David. “I thought ‘Adrian’ was a girl’s name!”

“Definitely not in this case!” laughed Michael. “Adrian’s about a foot and a half taller than any girl I’ve ever come across! Anyway, the important thing is that the ‘fun’ people outnumber the ‘goons!’”

Michael was helping himself to the lunch cart, which had just appeared. “I vote that we go and find them before Learning Lab, and discuss our upcoming field trip. I presume Dr. Fowler and Dr. Pentony are the accompanying teachers?”

“Oh, yes,” said Sean, raising his eyebrows and grimacing. “You presume correctly.”

“It could be worse. Although they are strict, neither of them is particularly suspicious, so if we behave ourselves when they are around, we will be OK.”

They finished eating, and made their way to a tiny cupboard-like room, underneath the stairs. “This is where I usually find them, in between classes,” he explained. After knocking gently on the door, he slowly opened it and peeked inside.

Voices could be heard as soon as he opened the door, along with a bubbling, gurgling sound. They could hear a girl speaking:

“- wasn’t enough. The surface tension dissipates the alkaline before we - oh, hello Michael.”

They had all trooped into the tiny room by this stage. The only light was a naked bulb that dangled precariously from the ‘stair ceiling’. It cast a dull light over a series of shelves and trestle tables, each stacked with racks of test tubes, Petri dishes and beakers. The room had a salty, soapy odour, which seemed to emanate mainly from the shallow dish over which both Margie and Adrian now stood.

It was Margie who had greeted them. “You’re just in time to watch Adrian totally destroy another experiment,” she announced in a matter-of-fact tone. “Go ahead,” she said to him. “Get it over with.”

Adrian leaned over the odoriferous potion, poured in some green crystals, and watched as the concoction fizzed and spat.

All of a sudden, there was a loud explosion, and the light bulb was the first casualty. The room was thrown into blackness, and a putrid smoke forced everyone out of the tiny room. They emerged coughing and wiping moist, sooty grime from their eyes.

“Oh - yuk!” exclaimed Cue.

“I’m sorry,” said Adrian. “It didn’t do that last time,” he said indignantly to Margie. “Perhaps you were right about the pH balance-”

“I don’t even want to discuss it,” said Margie piously. Then she turned to the others, and said, “Well - aren’t you glad that you paid us a visit?”

“No, not really,” answered Cue pathetically, and everyone began to see the funny side of it, and tried to clean themselves up. “But we did want to tell you about the moon trip.”

“Oh, that,” said Margie. “I don’t think we’ll go. I know Adrian would hate to miss the math quiz, you know how he -”

“Margie! You can’t be serious!” Adrian protested loudly. “Since when-” but then he saw Margie laughing at him, and calmed down. “Oh - ha ha, very funny - now we’re even.” Adrian brightened up, and turned to Sean. “Do you think they’ll let us go zooming?” The six of them headed off, discussing the Moon trip and their plans for an adventurous time.

Listening to the others, David soon realized that only a few of his friends had actually been to the moon, and none of them were expert zoomers. Their excitement was contagious, and before long he was looking forward to the trip as much as they were.

David had discovered that everyone was now going to Learning Lab, whatever that was. He decided to stick close by Michael, and see what happened.

Michael may have had the same idea, because he made sure that he had a reason to go to David's house. When they got there, they went straight to David's room, and Michael showed David how to operate the Lab.

First, he picked up a small, soft ball, and squeezed it. When a tiny green light showed in the surface of the ball, Michael set it on the floor, and stood back. Within seconds, the room disappeared, to be replaced by an enormous green plant that was growing in a large field beside other plants.

"Biology," explained Michael.

"Wow!" said David. "It's a kind of interactive, three-dimensional, audio-visual, virtual-reality classroom, with me as the only student!"

"Call me if you need me," were Michael's parting words.

The learning lab was narrated, and responded to David's questions, provided they were relevant to the subject matter. He asked the lab what the temperature was on the moon that day, and the lab simply responded with a 'next question' request, and then resumed the lesson.

The 'plant' was enormous, and David was being transported into every physical aspect of it. He found the subject fascinating, and remembered all he'd learned in such detail that when the lab presented him with a test at the end, he got full marks without even feeling as though he had been studying at all. He called Michael, eager to share his first success.

"Glad to hear from you," said Michael. "Actually, I've been thinking of a few background subjects you should check out as soon as you can - to bring you up to speed. General topic: second millennium. Specific subjects: short history, transport, communications. That should keep you out of trouble!"

"Yeah - thanks, I think!" David was daunted by the prospect of so much information, than realized that all he had to do was look, listen and ask questions, and he felt quite relieved.

David spent the afternoon learning more about the Erasure of 2703. The lab was extremely detailed, and two hours later, David felt well informed on this critical topic. He'd just finished when he heard Josephine, Pierce and Mum entering the house, and he went out to see them.

He immediately sensed the relatively demure atmosphere that pervaded the living room. Closer inspection told him Josephine and Pierce looked scared. They slowly wandered off to Pierce's room.

David felt a bit scared too, as he approached Mum and asked her gently “What’s wrong?”

She looked at him without trying to hide her feelings, then stood up straight and seemed to pull herself together.

“Gee, David, I’m being so selfish.” She embraced him warmly.

“You poor kid. What you must be going through.”

David felt prickly hot tears spring to his eyes, and was absolutely terrified that he might cry, right here, right now. He coughed, to control himself. He longed to hug his own mother, and have her tickle him right in the middle of the cuddle, when he was most defenseless. And anytime she hugged him, she said how proud of him she was, and how much she loved him, and had he flossed his teeth? It made David laugh to remember how she would go on about the importance of flossing, as though dental floss was the very foundation of personal hygiene.

But Mum was speaking now, and patting his ear. “Here I am, upset over Zachary and Zoltan, forgetting that you’ve lost your entire world, too. It just goes to show that you have to experience something in order to understand it.”

“What’s happened?” Now he felt like one adult talking to another.

“We’re not really sure,” answered Mum. “All we know is that Zac has gone.” She cleared her throat, and studied her hands.

“Let’s call Dr. Dempsey,” suggested David. “He may know something.”

Mum sighed. “No, we can’t do that, honey. You see, Declan’s gone, too.”

Remembering that Pierce and Josephine did not know that he wasn’t Zoltan, David was aware that Mum had spoken to him with care that they were out of earshot. Now, however, both of them were gathering closer in, apparently seeking comfort. David and Mum realized this, and put an arm around each of them, drawing all four of them into a group hug.

“We are all going to help each other to be strong until Dad gets back. We know he will be trying very hard to get in touch with us, and he wouldn’t want us to be upset.”

“Do you think he is OK?” asked Josephine. David noticed that Pierce’s eyelashes were wet.

“Yes, I’m sure he’s fine,” said Mum. “He’s missing us the same way we are missing him, that’s all.” She rubbed Josephine’s cheek and ruffled Pierce’s hair. “Let’s get ready for dinner, shall we?”

David could feel his wristband vibrating, and he looked at the screen and saw Helene’s face. As David brought the tiny screen closer to his face, Helene began to speak.

“Hi, Zoltan. Would you walk me to dinner tonight?”

“Sure,” answered David. “I’ll meet you out front.”

“OK,” said Helene, and then disappeared.

“I’ll never get used to this cool gadget,” thought David. Then he had a thought. He sought out Mum, who was brushing her hair in her bedroom, and asked her “I was wondering. Do you think Dad’s disappearance has any connection with my being here?”

Mum smiled at him. “Your mother must be so proud of you, David. You are a very thoughtful boy.”

David was embarrassed. “Actually, I’m just as worried for myself as I am for him,” he confessed.

“Well, it’s lovely that you can consider anyone else at all. Is your mother -”

David quickly realized that Mum - Zoltan’s Mum - wanted to know how her boy was being treated by his, David’s, mother. He smiled sympathetically, and answered her unasked question.

“My mother is tough and terrific. She’ll be looking after Zoltan, and I know she will protect him”

“Thank you, David,” whispered Mum.

David hurried outside to find Helene waiting for him.

“What took you so long?” she asked. “No, I can imagine. Mrs. X is pretty upset, right?”

“Right. How is your Mum? And you? Are you OK?”

“If my Dad is not here, it is because he chooses not to be,” said Helene. “It seems likely that Dr. X is where ever Dad is, since they were together last time anyone saw them, and now they are both missing. Agreed?”

David was taken aback by Helene’s cool logic. It was nice to be with someone who was so unemotional at this worrying time.

“Er - yes, I guess,” he muttered in agreement.

“And knowing Dad as I do,” continued Helene, “and the fact that they disappeared without a sound, leads me to believe that they slipped off, into hiding perhaps, for reasons of their own. That being the case, I think they’ll contact us before too long.” Helene sounded like a lawyer who was presenting her evidence.

“I hope you’re right,” said David. He thought Helene’s interpretation of events sounded reasonable, and he felt relieved.

“So - let’s eat!”