

CHAPTER 1: EMBARKING ON EARTH SCIENCE

Entering the Territory of the Guardian Beast

Somehow, they had made it without being detected.

They had taken quiet steps. They had uttered no words.

They had executed the journey with utmost caution. Their mission had been a success.

They had made it to their destination without being seen, heard, or smelled by the guardian beast, despite the scent of their bacon-laden breakfast still lingering on their clothing.

The three were all now standing in front of the target location: The Left Handed Turtle Neighborhood Market.



Cecil, Blaine, and Tracey Sassafras stood victoriously in front of the automated glass doors. Cecil was quite a bit more elated than the twins were, probably because he had been terrified about making the journey. Blaine and Tracey, on the other hand, had not been scared at all. They didn't see what the big deal was

about walking the few blocks from their uncle's house to the neighborhood supermarket. Yes, on the way you had to walk past Old Man Grusher's house. And on the porch of that house there was usually a dog, but the dog was just a miniature poodle for goodness sake. It wasn't the "guardian beast" that Uncle Cecil liked to call it.

Blaine and Tracey were visiting their uncle for the summer due to their failing grades in science. They had gotten fantastic grades in every other subject, but not in science, which they despised in school. When their parents had found out about Blaine and Tracey's 'F's', they formulated a plan to send their twelve-year-olds away for the summer to work on "their science problem," as they had said. Uncle Cecil, who was their dad's brother, happened to be a pseudo-famous research scientist. So Blaine and Tracey's parents figured if anybody could help their children turn their science grades around, it would be Cecil. And, so far, their parents' plan was working splendidly.

Over the course of the last few weeks or so that they had spent with their uncle, Blaine and Tracey had gone from despising science to actually loving it! As the weeks went by, the twins were beginning to consider themselves as defenders of science. Uncle Cecil was absent-minded and more than a little wacky, but Blaine and Tracey had truly grown to love and appreciate him along the way.

Their uncle's way of enabling them to learn about science was absolutely out of this world! Cecil, along with a prairie dog lab assistant named President Lincoln, had invented invisible zip-lines. And not only were the lines invisible, but they were global and fast—real fast. These unbelievably amazing lines could zip the twins to any location on the planet at the speed of light!

All they needed to ride the zip-lines was a harness and a specially designed three-ringed carabiner. One ring on the carabiner was for longitude coordinates, one ring was for latitude

coordinates, and the last ring was to secure the harness to the invisible lines. When they first heard about the mode of travel it sounded too good to be true, but it wasn't—Blaine and Tracey had been experiencing this phenomenon for weeks now.

At each location they zipped to, the twins met a local expert who would help them study several scientific topics. It was this hands-on, face-to-face, experiential way of learning that had won over the Sassafras twins' hearts.

So far, they had zipped through the subjects of zoology, anatomy, and botany. Now, this very morning, they were anticipating the start of another zip-riffic science subject. But first, Uncle Cecil said that they needed to pick up some groceries. So here they were now, standing in front of the Left-Handed Turtle.

The three Sassafrases stepped through the market's automatic front doors and were immediately greeted by a squeaky, cracking, teen-age voice, "Welcome to Left-Handed Turtle! Welcome to the Left-Handed Turtle! Welcome to the Left-Handed Turtle!"

"Good morning, Preston!" Cecil joyfully shot back to the young store clerk who had squeaked out salutations to the three on behalf of the store. The eldest Sassafras grabbed a shopping cart and skipped down the first aisle to commence shopping. The twins followed close behind.

"Why did he say, 'Welcome to the Left-Handed Turtle three times?'" Blaine wondered out loud.

"Who, Preston?" Cecil asked. "The front clerk is supposed to greet every individual that comes in with a warm Left-Handed salutation."

Both twins nodded and smiled at the same time. All the while they were thinking how this trip to the supermarket just highlighted the fact that so many of the quirks about Uncle Cecil's neighborhood were as delightfully strange as he was.

Cecil began whistling as skipped and zigzagged down the

market's aisles, haphazardly grabbing items and throwing them into his cart. The twins had a hard time keeping up with him as he speedily wound around the supermarket. Eventually, all three Sassafraes ended up back at the check-out stand with a huge, overflowing mound of mismatched groceries.

Preston, the squeaky and skinny teenaged clerk, painstakingly rang up all of Cecil's items and then sacked them in a big pile of blue plastic bags. "That will be three hundred seventy-six dollars and forty-two cents, Mr. Sassafra," the young man informed, his voice cracking twice during the sentence.

Cecil, who was wearing his usual white science lab coat, reached into the coat's side pocket for some cash with which to pay, but his hand came out empty. A look of slight panic formed on the scientist's face as he now began searching all the other pockets on his person. The pockets on his coat, his pants, and his shirt all came up empty.

"Did you forget your money again, Mr. Sassafra?" Preston asked, evidently not surprised at Cecil's current lack of funds.

"Oh, slippety slappety geeze little weeze. I sure did, Preston," Cecil sighed. "I left my bills and cents in my left shoe."

"Your left shoe?" Preston questioned. "Why don't you just take your shoe off now and pay for your groceries, then, sir?"

"Because I'm not wearing my left shoe."

"You're not wearing your left shoe?"

"No."

"Are you wearing your right shoe?"

"No, Preston, I'm wearing neither my right shoe nor my left shoe. I am wearing my house slippers that look like fuzzy bunnies because they are as soft and comfortable as cotton candy."

"Then where is your left shoe, sir?"

"My left shoe is in a fishbowl."

“In a fishbowl, sir?”

“Yes, a fishbowl. My left shoe is in the fishbowl, which is in the banana box in the parachute bag inside the zebra-striped dresser, which is in the mop closet under the stairs next to the living room.”

Preston’s acne spotted face now held a blank stare.

“I figure that’s the safest place to keep cash,” Cecil said plainly. He then switched to an apologetic tone. “Preston, I am so sorry, but can I leave my groceries here, go home, get my left shoe, and then return to settle the debt?”

“Sure, Mr. Sassafras, no problem.” Preston chuckled kindly.

“Thank you, thank you, thankity thank you!” Cecil responded, as he rushed out of the Left-Handed Turtle, accompanied by his niece and nephew. He began making a beeline down the neighborhood sidewalk back toward his house, which was three blocks away at 1104 N Pecan Street. But after only a couple of dozen strides, he stopped abruptly and became as frozen as an ice sculpture.

“What’s wrong, Uncle Cecil?” Tracey asked, concerned.

Cecil remained silent for a few more minutes and then finally managed to speak. “If we have to go home and get my left shoe, we will have to come all the way back here to the Left-Handed Turtle, which means we will have to pass . . . the guardian beast . . . two . . . more . . . times.”

“Uncle Cecil, why are you so afraid—” Blaine started to say but was interrupted by a sharp elbow in the ribs from his sister.

“Don’t worry, Uncle Cecil,” Tracey comforted. “We will get by Old Man Grusher’s dog—I mean, the guardian beast—with no problems. Blaine and I will be walking by your side the whole time.”

Cecil nodded. He summoned up the courage, and then

started again toward home. The first two blocks were easy enough, and the pace was rather quick, but the third block required a left turn onto Pecan Street. Cecil's heartbeat quickened as his pace slowed to a tiptoe. They passed 1112 on the left and 1111 on the right—no sight of Old Man Grusher's miniature poodle yet.

Silently, cautiously, and slowly, they now passed 1110. Still, no sound of barking reached their ears. They moved forward slowly as they entered into what Uncle Cecil called “the guardian beast's territory.” Old Man Grusher's house stood directly to their right. They could see the plastic golden house numbers—one, one, zero, and seven—glimmering in the morning sunlight. They had a clear view of the old man's porch—the throne room of the beast—but the dog was not there! The miniature poodle must have been in the backyard digging holes or maybe inside watching TV with Old Man Grusher.

The three kept their eyes trained to the right and continued on safely to Cecil's house.



He snickered to himself as they passed. Blaine, Tracey, and Cecil had been so fixated on Old Man Grusher's porch that they hadn't seen him standing silently in his front yard at 1108. He had stared at the three as they passed. And if they had looked his way, they would have seen a man wearing a wide-brimmed sun hat, holding a pair of shears that he was planning to use vigorously to cut small branches off one of the three sassafras trees in his front yard.

The wide-brimmed hat was there to conceal the fact that he had no eyebrows. And had they looked, they would not have known that he wanted to do much more than cut off the small

branches off the sassafras tree. His real desire was to vigorously cut away the hopes and dreams of the three people walking past the front of his house.

He had first met Blaine and Tracy in Kenya on a safari tour with Nicholas Mzuri. He had watched them learn about lions and cheetahs. He had acted like he was a part of their tour group, but then he stole the group's jeep and left them marooned overnight out among the wild African animals! Unfortunately, with the help of Mzuri, the twins had survived Kenya. Then, they continued to move forward through many more science learning locations.

But he had also kept moving forward. He had found a way to access the same invisible zip-lines the twins did. He had been spotted by them multiple times since that first location.

The twins had no idea why he was so bent on their failure. They didn't really even have any idea who he was. Despite that, he had not stopped them from learning science. In fact, it seemed he had only enhanced their summer of learning by providing a battle for them to fight.

He guessed that knowing there was a malicious eyebrow-less man trying to thwart their efforts only made Blaine and Tracey want to learn all the more. Again and again, he had failed to stop them. Now they felt victorious over him. Any fear they had felt was replaced with confidence in their role as defenders of science. He grimaced at the thought, but straightened up as a wicked sneer curled up his lips.

That confidence would definitely take a hit if the Sassafras twins knew of everything he was up to. There was so much they were still in the dark about. They didn't know that he lived only two doors down from their uncle. They didn't know that he had hidden tiny cameras all over Cecil's house, which enabled him to watch all their moves and hear all their conversations. They didn't know that he had a machine in his basement that could wipe away an individual's memory. They didn't know that he was planning

to kidnap both of them, put them in this machine, and erase all the knowledge they had gained. They didn't know that he was motivated by revenge and that he despised their uncle more than anyone on earth.

He was bound and determined to destroy anything that Cecil Sassafras loved. And right now, at the top of that list, was this zip-lining, science-learning, summer project that Cecil had planned for his niece and nephew. Yes, the man the three had unknowingly passed at 1108 North Pecan Street was up to a lot more than the Sassafrases knew about. His heart was darker and more devious than they might dare to imagine. And in the end, he was sure that he would be victorious!



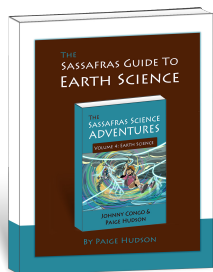
A Photosyntastic Program

The three Sassafrases reached Cecil's front porch safely, and before they knew it, they were all careening down into darkness. For most people, careening down into darkness would not seem safe, but it was pretty normal for the Sassafrases. They knew they were on a slide that started at a trap door located on Uncle Cecil's front porch and ended in his basement, where something wacky and science-y was always happening.

The twins had entered the lab through the trap door slide before, and now it was just plain fun for them. At the end of the slide, the three landed with soft thuds on a pile of old pillows. Cecil quickly performed three somersaults and a crashing cartwheel, picked himself up, and bounded across the cluttered basement. The twins followed, thinking Cecil would take a turn for the stairs, where he would go up and get his left shoe. But instead, he ran straight for his computer desk, where a happy looking prairie dog

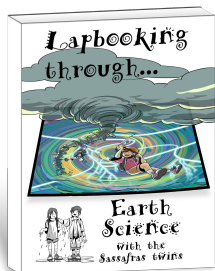
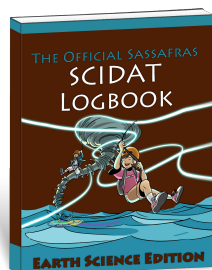
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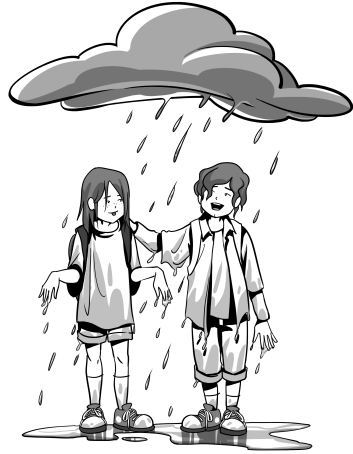
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