

Lee and the Consul Mutants

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Chapter 2

Lee awoke the next morning with a pain in his side.

For once it wasn't his little sister.

He felt really tired, too, the sort of tired you might just about recover from if you slept for a year. He certainly didn't feel like going to school (even more so than usual). So when his mum came in to drag him out of bed he made no effort to hide his discomfort, groaning and wincing when she tried to move him.

Lee's mum eyed him up and put her hand on his forehead. (What would that tell her? It was hardly a scientific method for assessing illnesses. If that was all there was to being a nurse or doctor then how come they required years of training?)

'Hmmm,' she said with a look Lee recognised: she was trying to work out if he was genuinely ill or faking it. 'Well, I guess Dad had better call the doctor and work from home.'

Lee thought about telling her he wasn't *that* ill - that it would probably pass by the end of the day and certainly wasn't worth dragging a doctor out for because surely there were people far more ill than him who needed attention. But he was too tired to argue. So he said nothing and his mum went downstairs.

A minute later she reappeared, Lee's dad at her side.

'Lovely bacon sandwich for breakfast?' his dad asked brightly.

Lee loved bacon rolls, ideally with half a bottle of tomato sauce on them, but said, 'To be honest, Dad, I'm really not very hungry.'

'Hmmm. I guess you really must be ill if you don't even fancy a bacon roll.'

This struck Lee as no more scientific a method of assessing his health than his mother's hand-on-forehead routine. But again he didn't argue the point.

'Do you feel hot?' his mum asked. 'No,' Lee said.

'Do you feel cold?'

'No.'

'Itchy?'

'No.'

'Well how *do* you feel, then?' his dad asked, a little impatiently. 'Give us a clue!'

'My side's sore.'

'Like a stitch?'

'Sort of like one, but not really.'

That got another 'hmmm' from his parents. He deduced he wasn't helping them much.

'Well it's sore like one, only not as sharp.'

'More a dull ache?' his dad enquired.

Lee couldn't think of a better way to describe it, so he nodded.

'That's all, though. You don't have any other aches or pains?'

Rebecca was at the child-minders, so at least that pain had gone.

'No. I'm just tired.'

'Did you go straight to sleep last night or did you sit up reading all night?'

It was a fair question. Lee often sat up reading for ages and ages, but the previous night he hadn't. 'I went straight to sleep.'

'Are you sure?' his dad double-checked.

'Yes.'

Lee's dad sighed, finally convinced. 'Okay, I'll call the office and let them know I'm not coming in.'

Lee was woken by the sound of footsteps approaching his bed. He looked up and saw a tall, middle-aged man.

'Hi there, I'm Doctor Philadopolopolus.'

'Doctor who?'

'No, Doctor Philadopolopolus,' the man said. (It was a joke he used every day.) 'But call me Doctor P - it's easier to pronounce.'

Doctor P produced a large black bag that looked alarmingly like a toolkit. Did it contain saws for performing emergency amputations when they couldn't get patients to hospital in time?

'Eh, what time is it?' Lee asked, rubbing his eyes but making no attempt to sit up.

'Twenty-five past two,' his dad told him.

'Aw.' Lee vaguely realised he'd been asleep for four or five extra hours.

'Right then, young man,' the doctor said, 'let's see if we can work out what's up with you.'

Doctor P placed a freezing hand on Lee's forehead. It made Lee jump, but he soon fell still again; moving so suddenly had hurt his side.

'Still tired?' Doctor P asked.

The very mention of tiredness brought on a yawn from Lee.

'I'll take that as a "yes",' Doctor P said. 'Now, Lee, I need to have a poke around your tummy. That's where it's hurting, isn't it?'

It was, and now that Lee was properly awake he realised it was hurting more than ever. He lifted his top.

'When I press, tell me if it's painful anywhere in particular,' the doctor instructed, and began prodding with his bony fingers.

'Aoooh!' Lee cried, like a dog that's just had its paw trodden on.

'Sore there?' Doctor P asked.

Lee nodded rapidly. Of course it was sore!

The doctor continued prodding and it hurt every time he pressed Lee's stomach on the right-hand side, just above his hip.

'Okay,' Doctor P said, seemingly satisfied. He walked towards the door. 'Can I have a word?' he asked Lee's dad, who followed him out of the room.

A couple of minutes later his dad led the doctor back into the room. Both looked serious. Had they phoned the school and spoken to the dinner ladies? Had those sweet old women told Dr P about all the hot dogs Lee had eaten for lunch over the last three years?

'Lee, you need to go to hospital,' Doctor P announced.

Lee stared up at his dad, suddenly wishing he'd agreed to eat the bacon sandwich at breakfast. 'Hospital! Why, what's wrong with me?'

'Well, I think there might be a problem with your appendix.'

'My appendix?' Lee was confused. 'Isn't that something at the back of a book?'

Doctor P leaned over. 'It's an organ,' he explained, 'just like your heart or your lungs, except that it doesn't actually do anything...so nobody really knows why we have one. However, sometimes your appendix can burst and that can be dangerous, so I'd like you to go to hospital so you can be checked out properly.'

'Aw,' Lee said, thinking that the appendix sounded like a stupid design fault. 'Can I go in on Thursday afternoon? I've got French then...'

'I was thinking of rather sooner,' Doctor P said with a warm smile. 'I'll call an ambulance in a moment.'

'An *ambulance*! No way, José! They're for people who're dying. I've just got a slightly sore stomach.' He pleaded with his dad. 'Listen, Dad, I was only kidding about being ill. I just wanted to be off school because I was really tired. You don't have to send me to *hospital*. I promise I'll go to school tomorrow and I'll even do extra homework...'

Lee's dad bent down beside him.

'Lee, you're tired because you're not well. Sleeping's your body's way of trying to fight infection. I know you like the odd lie in, but you never sleep till *this* late.'

'But Dad, I don't want to go to hospital!'

'I could travel with you in the ambulance,' his dad offered, turning to Doctor P to check that was okay.

'I'm sure that would be fine,' Doctor P said.

Lee's dad turned back to Lee and smiled. 'Maybe they'll turn on the siren!'

Lee suspected his dad was going to make the most of this, his big opportunity to ride in an ambulance. He could imagine him behind the ambulance's mirrored windows, shouting at other drivers, 'Get out of the way, my son's coming through!' It would be humiliating. His dad was supposed to be a grownup, not a kid playing emergencies.

And then a thought occurred to Lee, which he voiced aloud. 'Can I go on a stretcher?'

'Do you want to?' Doctor P asked.

'Well...'

The timing couldn't have been better.

'It's here!' Lee's dad called as the ambulance pulled up outside at precisely three o'clock. A minute later Lee's bedroom was occupied by his dad, Doctor P and two friendly paramedics (who, it turned out, weren't doctors who arrived by parachute, as Lee had always thought).

The paramedics were wearing the same uniforms Lee had seen on Casualty, one of his mum's favourite programmes. Maybe that meant there would be a film crew waiting to capture his arrival at the hospital. And perhaps next week, when his mum watched, she would see *him* being pushed in through the emergency doors on a trolley! Then he'd be able to tell everyone at school he'd been on TV. How cool would that be!

The paramedics rolled him up tightly in a blanket and lifted him gently onto a stretcher.

If it was weird being carried from his bedroom in a horizontal position, it was plain scary being manoeuvred down the steep stairs to the front door. 'Watch out for the loose carpet halfway down!' he warned the paramedics, worried they'd send him flying.

Lee had never paid any attention to the ceilings of his family's home, but now he didn't have any choice. He noted that the one above the stairs could do with a fresh coat of paint, preferably not in the bright banana yellow his mum had chosen last time.

'What time is it?' Lee checked.

'Why are you so bothered about the time?'

'Eh, just curious,' Lee replied as if it didn't matter.

His dad checked his watch. 'Coming up to ten past three.'

Lee allowed himself a pained grin as they reached the bottom step and his dad opened the front door.

Lying on his stretcher, Lee could see a single fluffy cloud temporarily shading the world outside. Soon the gentle breeze would carry it away and the sun would regain its strength...

But who cared about the weather when the world beyond the garden gate was full of schoolchildren *desperate* to know what was going on at Lee's house!

His house was on the escape route from school, so all the pupils had seen the ambulance park outside. And, figuring something exciting was happening, they had flocked to see what that something was.

Now, everyone has a moment of stardom in their life and Lee recognised this as his. When he was gone, everyone would miss him. Kids he lived beside; kids he occasionally walked to school with because they passed his door; kids he liked and kids he normally avoided...all would remember this as **The Day They Took Lee To Hospital**.

Even kids who barely gave him a second glance (and that was most kids) would no longer say, 'Lee who?' or 'Lee...oh, that little squirt.' Instead they'd say, 'You mean *the* Lee, the one they had to take away an ambulance because he was ringing the bell at death's door?' or '*That* Lee - the one who bravely endured the terrible agonies of something going horribly wrong with his appendix? What a kid! What a hero! What I'd give to be like him!'

Yes, surely that was what they'd say. The nation would take him to their heart. He'd be a role model for others. Posters of him would hang on walls across the country. The Queen would write to ask for his autograph... He would be invited onto TV chat shows alongside footballers and pop stars, and sponsorship deals worth millions would follow... Yes, he would be a superstar.

Having convinced *himself* of all this, Lee decided he'd better convince the crowd that had gathered to see him make his momentous journey. He needed to appear worthy of the ambulance and of the siren that would surely sound as he was rushed off to hospital.

So he scrunched up his eyes, trying to make it look as if he was in tortured agony. It helped that the sun came out and blinded him.

Heads appeared above him as the paramedics passed beyond the garden gate.

'What's wrong?' someone asked.

'Why's he going in the ambulance?' asked another, clearly impressed.

Maybe this called for a few words, Lee thought...

Hi, fans. Yes, I know you're sad to see me being carried away like this, but I'll be back shortly, never fear. Oh, and be sure to watch Casualty on Friday night because I'll be on it! What... No, no, I can't sign autographs right now... Not unless you've got a pen handy...

Then again, maybe it would be best to suffer in silence - to show he wasn't making the most of it the way some footballers did when fouled. Maybe that was the way to win *true* respect.

'Is he going to hospital?' asked a young boy he couldn't see.

No, I'm going on my holidays you idiot! Lee wanted to call out. *That's why the big white taxi's here!*

The questions kept on coming as more and more kids tried to get a last look before he left them.

'How fast can the ambulance go?' the paramedics were quizzed.

'Which hospital are you taking him to?'

'Are they going to give him injections with massive sharp needles and then slice him open with a ginormous sword...?'

What! Lee opened his eyes and tried to sit up, but the blankets were too tight.

The young girl's voice continued. '...And then are they going to cut out his insides like they did with William Wallace...?'

The female paramedic put a hand on Lee's shoulder to keep him flat.

In any case it was too late. There was a **BANG** as the doors of the ambulance closed behind him.

END OF CHAPTER 2