

Simon the Chess player

Awful Arnold



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SIMON

Hi, my name is Simon. I am ten years old and I am in year 6 of Tower Primary School. I think spelling is boring and maths is fun. My favourite subject is art. I've got a birthmark on my cheek and brown hair, that always looks the way my mother wants it to, but not how I want it. When I grow up I want to be a professional athlete. My father hopes that I become a striker on the Ajax team, but I don't want to. I dream about winning the game of the wooden board with black squares. I want to become a master chess player, just like my uncle Arnold. Uncle Arnold is much older and less normal than my father. He is the chess champion of The Netherlands.



UNCLE ARNOLD

The biggest fan of uncle Arnold is me, by far. There is no one who knows as much about my uncle as I do. I know which matches he played and which opponents he defeated. I can tell exactly from which day on uncle Arnold suddenly won all his matches. For three years, my uncle has been the best chess player of the Netherlands and I think it's super cool that I'm his cousin. Uncle Arnold is the smartest man on earth. Not only because he's so clever. He also still looks like Cristiano Ronaldo. He always has the latest smart watch and the largest and flattest phone. Uncle Arnold sees so much sun, he is nearly always super tanned. When he isn't playing chess he goes on holidays. His hair never looks messed up.



He rarely visits us at home and when he does, it is short, never longer than half an hour. He is usually late for a very important meeting. But today will be the best day ever. My famous uncle has made time for a family visit and I am going to have a serious conversation with him. I'm so excited, I can barely sit still.

I want to ask him to teach me chess. He doesn't have to spend any time on these lessons. I'll just take the train to his apartment in Amsterdam, which is on the twentieth floor of the tallest building in the city. It's like a soccer field in size and has got about twenty windows.

Then the bell rings. The sound wakes me up from my day-dream. I hear my mother's heels click-clacking on the tiles in the hall. I can feel my head starting to overheat. I quickly adjust my bishop. The door of the living room flies open and uncle Arnold steps in. To make a good impression, I try to look as sweet and eager to learn as I can at the same time.

There's a woman holding my uncle's hand.

"Hello, I'm Maxkara," she says.

Maxkara has got blond hair that looks like she's cycled through wind for a long time. Her cheeks are pink and she has green stripes above her eyes. She and my uncle drop themselves on our brown sofa. Yes! Uncle Arnold looks at the chess set. This is my moment. I deeply breathe in.

"Uncle!"

But he doesn't hear me. He pushes the chess board aside with his foot. He puts his legs on the table. My scrapbook falls on the floor. He doesn't even notice! I bite my lip hard, so I don't feel the disappointment. I feel like my uncle doesn't even see me. Uncle Arnold turns his face towards Maxkara and bends over. Gross, they're kissing. I'm going to be sick.

This takes forever. Maybe there's glue in her lipstick? It looks like Maxkara's lips are stuck to uncle Arnold's. I think I have to throw up. What about my chess lessons? There's a sweet taste in my mouth. Yuk, I've bitten through my lower lip.

I want to run away. Out of the room, into the garden. But I can't. My legs weigh over 20 kilograms. Each.

Then, I hear a loud 'tock'. My mother loudly puts down a bowl of biscuits on the table. Uncle Arnold and Maxkara look up. What a relief.

I feel a tickle in my stomach. That's because of the look that my mother gives me. She nods at me. It's her "come on, you can do it" -nod. She's right. It's now or never. I clear a giant frog from my throat.

"Uncle Arnold, do you want to teach me chess?"

There's a long silence, it's like lying in a bath with your ears under water. I'm afraid to breathe. I feel like my head will explode. Then suddenly Maxkara blows her nose with a loud trumpet sound. I breathe out. Actually, I'm afraid to look my uncle in the eyes. But I do it anyway. Uncle Arnold looks like I've just asked him to sing the national anthem naked. His jaw is positioned in a weird way, a little bit on the lower left side of his face. For a moment he shows his teeth. Then he says in a loud voice, as if I'm in the back of the garden instead of across from him in the living room:

"I cannot occupy myself with insignificant things like teaching chess to toddlers."

He laughs short and loud. His upper lip goes up but his eyes don't laugh. He actually looks strikingly like an ugly, growling hyena. He's got a lurking look in his eyes, just like the neighbours' cat when it's spying on a robin bird.

I would like to smack the cookie bowl on his head in a thousand pieces. Instead I swallow the lump in my throat down to a knot in my stomach.

“Whatever,” I mumble.

I walk out the room as tough as possible. A good loser walks off the field in a calm and upright way. Jaap, my soccer trainer, explained that to me.

I take a tissue from the kitchen drawer and pat my bloody lip clean. Then I step outside. How could I have thought that uncle Arnold would ever want to teach me anything? I take my ball. I imagine the ball is my uncle’s head. I shoot.

When I kick the ball towards the garage door for the three hundred and seventy fifth time my mother stands next to me. She takes my hand and draws me close to her. I let her go ahead.

“Arnold rather spends his time bragging than on children,” she sighs.

My mother sighs the way only mothers can, with rolling eyes. We sit down on the wobbly bench near the yellow rose bush. The bench is old and the left behind leg is crooked. It creaks dangerously. My eyes get teary. Of course that’s because of the autumn wind. My mother holds out the bowl with cookies.

“No, thanks mum.” There is no room for cookies next to the knot in my stomach.

GRANDMA

Sadly, I walk down the garden path to grandmother's garden house. My grandma is very old. A lot older than the grandmothers of my classmates. My grandma gave birth to my father when uncle Arnold went to college. She's got worn-out hips and walks with a stick. My grandma is almost blind, but not entirely. The last few years she can only hear with her special horn. That horn she inherited from her mother and she says the enormous thing works splendidly. My grandma is 'too good' for a nursing home and 'too bad' for a retirement home. My parents say grandma really can't live on her own in her house on Blueberry street anymore. That's why she's living with us now, in our garden house. I think it's very cozy, although I seem to be the only one. My father always starts sighing dramatically when grandma walks in. My mother talks to her as if she's a three-year-old child. Like this: "now you drink another cup of coffee." It's really very embarrassing. Fortunately, I can tell from the twinkle in her eyes that inside she actually laughs about that. It seems like she doesn't miss much, even without her horn. My parents don't see that. They are always busy. Especially with their jobs.

My mother is a pilot on the air force. Sometimes she is away from home for weeks. She finds that really hard herself. To make it up she spoils us when she gets home. My father is home a lot. His desk is in the guest room. But it

seems like he's always working. He helps businesses buy and sell other businesses. My father says that's very difficult. Afke, my sister, is six years old and she hasn't got time for grandma either. When Afke isn't roller-skating, she is playing with her barbies. Kind of annoying.

"Hello boy," grandma calls when I come in.

"Hello grandma," I talkshout back.

"You are just in time. I've made some tea."

Grandma pulls the old-fashioned tea-cozy with little pink flowers off the glass teapot. There are all kinds of little leaves floating in the teapot. It smells odd.

"Erm, no thanks, grandma. I just drank something."

"You are such a bad liar," grandma chuckles.

She points at the refrigerator.

"There's lemonade.

I pour myself a big glass of strawberry lemonade. Worrying makes you thirsty.

Bob, grandma's service dog comes sniffing towards us. Bob has got short paws and a long upper body. He was the only teckel in his service dog class. He's much smarter than those blonde giants. At least, that's grandma's opinion. Bob can do fantastic things, like opening doors, and he understands traffic lights. But in his spare time Bob is the sweetest dog in the world. He has a nose for sad kids. Bob jumps in my lap. He pushes his face against my hand. I scratch him behind his right ear. Grandma looks at me sharply. Well, actually she looks sharply at the large green

vase with some tall feather reed grass I'm sitting next to.

"What is going on?"

"Oh, nothing really," I lie.

"So that son of mine doesn't want to teach you anything," grandma says when I'm done complaining about the most utterly stupid uncle on the planet.

Oma understandingly nods. She taps her nose with her finger. She always does that when she is thinking. Suddenly, I go wild.

"And my parents don't let me do anything. Everyone at school is playing chess on some chess app, but I don't have a tablet or a telephone. My parents don't care that I'm almost eleven."

There, I've said it all. I feel very sad. Bob puts his front paws on my shoulders.

"I will never become good at chess like this," I whisper.

"Do you think the chess masters of today are that good because of an app?" Grandma frowns excessively with her bushy eyebrows.

"You don't know half of what you can do with an app, grandma. Nearly no one can win..."

No! Once again, grandma isn't paying any attention at all. She took the horn out of her ear.

"There, I turned the sound off," she shouts cheerily.

Grandma always does this when she's eager to tell something. Right now that is really very annoying. However, I see her eyes twinkling behind her double spectacle glasses.

"I am so happy for you that you've got a grandma who can help you."

Grandma indeed looks very pleased with herself. Would she...

"Can you help me get a tablet, grandma?"

Grandma screams with laughter.

"A chocolate tablet, I can help you to that. Furthermore, I don't know anything about that stuff and I would like to keep it that way. I have got something much better. Would you kneel down before the sofa?"

Grandma points her walking stick towards the underside of the sofa.

"Go on, nothing there that will bite you."

I do what she says.

"There's a box underneath the sofa, why don't you pull it out."

Indeed, there's a box. An old one by the feel of it. The cardboard is a little watery, as if the box has been in the drizzle for a while. Very carefully I draw it towards me.

"This, my dear grandson, is a secret weapon," grandma says happily.

"I've always thought you would be the next one to use it." Grandma smiles secretively. I stare at the box. It's as big as the Monopoly box. Grandma is not joking, this is not a tablet. What luck that grandma can't see how disappointed I am.

"This is your grandma's favourite game. And also grandpa's

by the way.”

Grandma swallows her tears. My grandfather passed away when I was three months old, but grandma still misses him every day. Oh no, I hope she won't cry.

“Christmas Day nineteen hundred eighty four,” grandma reminisces.

“What?” I ask.

“It was my Christmas gift.”

I'm relieved to see her smile again.

“And now it's yours.”

Grandma hands over the box solemnly. While Bob is nosily sniffing the box, I lift the lid. I feel a sneeze coming up. Then I wave away the dust and look. A chess game with batteries.

“What is this?”

Grandma grins.

“That, my sweet boy, is a chess computer. It's one of the first models and was terribly expensive to buy. I believe your grandfather has paid about seven hundred florins.”

Grandma still likes to talk about florins. Those coins were used in the past century.

My sad mood is back again. Bob also feels it. He's in my lap again.

“New-fashioned things always seem better than they are, my boy. Now you go and play against this chess computer. It will help you, trust me.” Grandma looks at me so seriously that I almost believe her.



MY FATHER

Back at home, I trip over a big black bag.

“Hey dad.”

“Hi son!”

“Dad, you’re right. Grandma is really starting to get old.”

I climb on the tall bar stool in the kitchen. I push my foot against the kitchen bar. My legs float through the air. In the meanwhile I talk with my father about his mother. From man to man.

“Grandma has got a secret weapon, she says. Yes, really. It’s a chess computer from prehistoric times.”

Suddenly I’m roaring with laughter about it.

“She always thought I would be the next one to use it. She said. Seriously.”

I take a moment to catch my breath and for my father to answer. But he doesn’t say anything. Isn’t he listening? I hold the bar to stop spinning. Too fast. My right foot bangs against the counter. Ouch.”

“Dad!”

I look straight at him. Oh no! The whole time I have been talking to the extractor. Once again my father’s phone is more important than me. This is exactly the reason why I don’t have a mobile phone. Because he’s so addicted. My mother doesn’t want another zombie in the house.



“Hey dad, I’m going to get some chips and an ice cream with six scoops. So I’ll just take fifty euros from your wallet, OK?”

“Yeah, yeah,” my dad says.

He is really out of it. Then he looks up for one moment from the screen that seems permanently fixed to his right hand. His face changes. His lower lip starts to tremble and his head turns into a red-purple colour.

“Don’t forget to breathe, dad,” I shout.

My father looks past me with big, balloon fish eyes. He nearly drops his phone next to the kitchen counter. This is very weird.

“It’s just a joke, dad,” I say quickly.

“I’m not really going to buy chips and...”

I can’t say anything else. My father pushes me aside and walks with giant giraffe steps to the box with the chess computer.

“What is this thing doing here?” he’s yelling very loudly.

He’s actually almost roaring. I immediately stick my fingers in my ears. My dad never screams.

“Erm, that is grandma’s old chess computer,” I say.

Why is he acting so strange?

“I know that,” my father says, still with the volume of a howler monkey.

“I didn’t know she still had that stupid thing. I thought my sweet brother had taken it.”

He doesn’t pronounce “my sweet brother” the way you would expect. He says it in a way that’s better suited with an

unbelievably annoying bully, or worse. The eyes of my father gaze past the carrots, lettuce and strawberries in the kitchen garden to the garden house in which grandma lives. He can't see her. Grandma is taking her afternoon nap and for that she always closes her flower curtains tightly.

My father is just standing there. It seems as if there's no blood running through his lips anymore. Why is my father acting this way? He rarely gets angry. The last time he yelled was when Afke drew bunny ears on the kitchen wall. Now he's worrying about an old chess computer. I want to know why. My father doesn't even like chess. Another strange thing. It seems as if he doesn't like uncle Arnold that much. I didn't know that.

"Throw it out," my father says quietly.

His voice is back to normal and his face back to skin colour. But his eyes are still spitting fire. He can't be serious? I'm not doing that. I decide to buy time.

"What do you want me to throw away?"

"The chess computer."

"Why dad?"

"Because I say so."

"That's not kind of you, dad, it's grandma's."

I'm starting to shiver, but I'm not cold. No one touches my grandma or her stuff. My dad doesn't either. His face is turning red again. He opens his mouth to say something and then looks at the clock. His mouth remains open but there's

no sound coming out. I also look at the clock. No! Soccer practice! If I don't get there in 5 minutes, I'll be on the bench the next match. I don't want that. And my father definitely doesn't want that. Nothing comes between my father and my soccer practice. He doesn't look angry anymore. He's got his competitive soccer look in his eyes.

"Hurry, get your clothes. You can change in the car. I'll take you there," he says. My father runs out of the kitchen to look for Afke. She's too young to be home alone. The toddler. It's like I'm running over hot lava, that's how fast I get to the hallway to fetch my soccer bag. When I'm there I slow down and wait till I hear a bomb go off. The sound of our kitchen door that's being slammed shut. Then I spurt back into the kitchen like a hunted leopard and I snatch the chess computer off the table. I race upstairs, to my attic room. No matter how much I want to join my soccer team on Saturday, that chess computer is not going anywhere. Grandma gave it to me. It might be an old-fashioned thing, grandma is attached to it. Suddenly I can't wait any longer. I have to play chess against this device. Quickly I open the hatch in the slanted attic wall behind my bed. I hide the box with the computer under my old Playmobil pirate ship. After that I scatter my entire collection of Lego bricks over it. I scramble my soccer clothes from the pile of clothes next to my bed. They smell like wet dog. I should have thrown them in the laundry bas-

ket. Well, I'll do that this afternoon. Downstairs now. My father already started the car.

In the car I change clothes. I'm tying my right soccer shoe with a double knot, while my dad races around the corner at 80 kilometers per hour. He stops right in front of the entrance of the club. I run onto the field just when the trainer says my name. Yeah, I'm just on time.

When I look over my shoulder, I expect to see my dad and Afke down the line. They aren't there. I also check the little playground with the swing and seesaw. They aren't there either. That's strange. My father never misses any of my soccer-seconds. Even boring run practices. Ever since I'm part of the all-stars team my father is extremely proud of me. I think that's because he himself injured his knee during his first national match. His knee never really returned to normal after that. Instead of becoming a professional soccer player, he became a salesman. I think that's pretty sad.

"Hey Simon, where is your father?" Koen shouts.

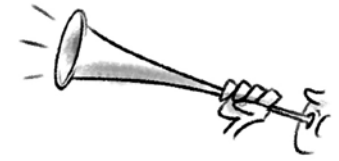
Koen is my friend. He's got a highway between his two front teeth and a big head of curls. He's the fastest dribbler of our team.

"I have no idea," I gesture by pulling up my shoulders and pushing the corners of my mouth down."

"Pity," says Koen, with a fat smirk.

"He always honks his horn in such a lovely way."

That's what I like less about Koen, those jokes about my

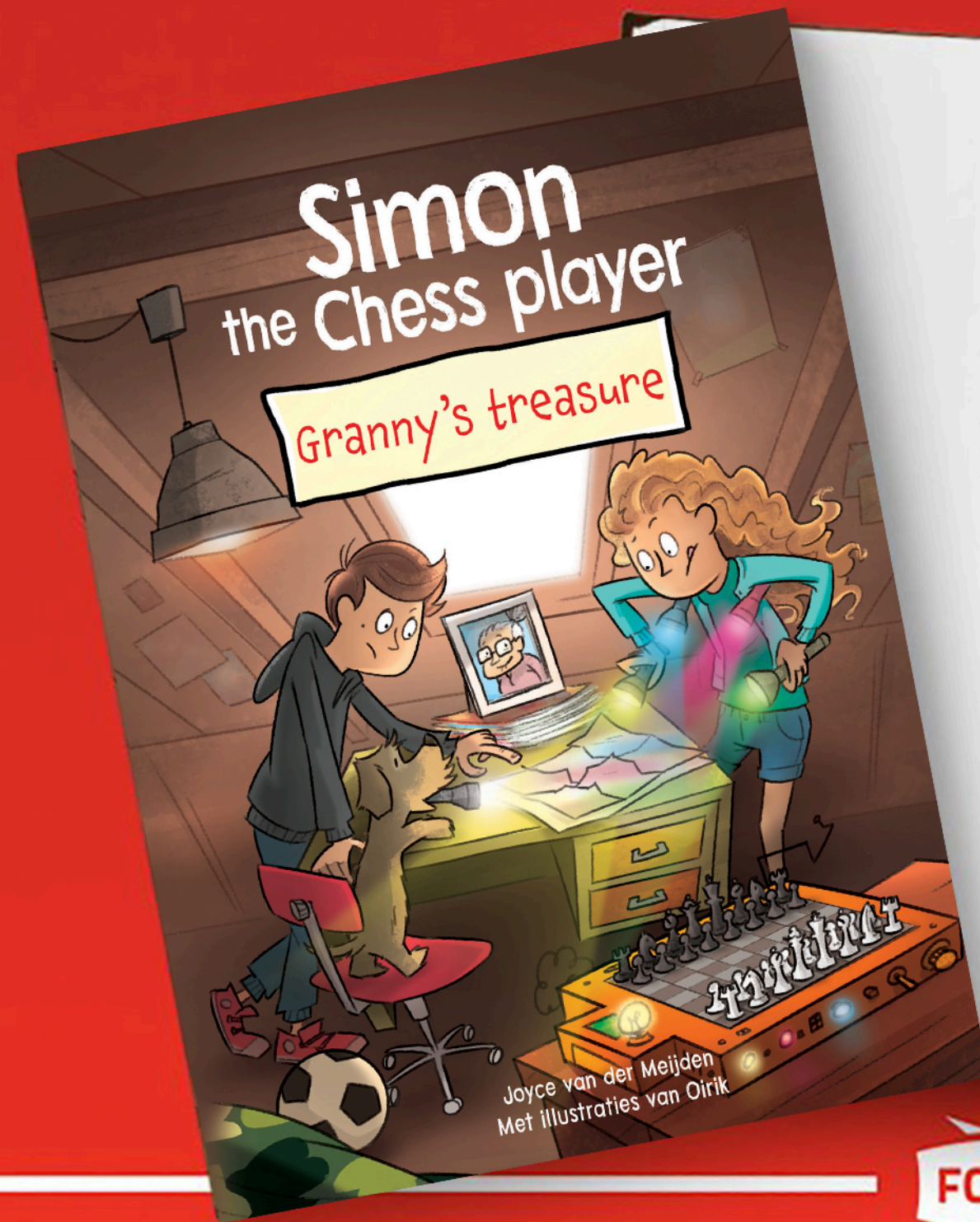


father. My father has got a horn that's bigger than a vuvuzela, an African elephant's tusk. It makes an unbelievable amount of noise. He wears a green and red club T-shirt with my name on it. So I cannot pretend he isn't my father. My mother says it's his 'outlet'. By that she means he should also goof off sometimes, because he's rather boring at home. She doesn't say that he's boring. That is my opinion. She doesn't ask what I think.

Usually I'm embarrassed to death by my father. But today I'd give half of my piggy bank for his honking. I'm seriously worried about the chess computer. Shall I pretend like I threw it out? I would have to make up a good story and practice it. I always practice lying in front of the mirror.

"Hey Simon, you can nap when you're with your mummy!"

I jump in position. That's what my trainer Jaap's voice does to you. Jaap is only 5 feet tall but you cannot miss him! When he's not wearing us out, he sells crumbled syrup waffles on the street market. That's where he has trained his vocal chords. He wants to make men out of us, not wimps. Oh, no! The boys are already on the other side of the field. I try to run as fast as possible and at the same time to track the surroundings. Where is my dad? Then I hear a loud honking sound and screeching tyres. My father's car is trying to take over a giant truck, via the cycle path. He just managed to do that and he now races around the corner.



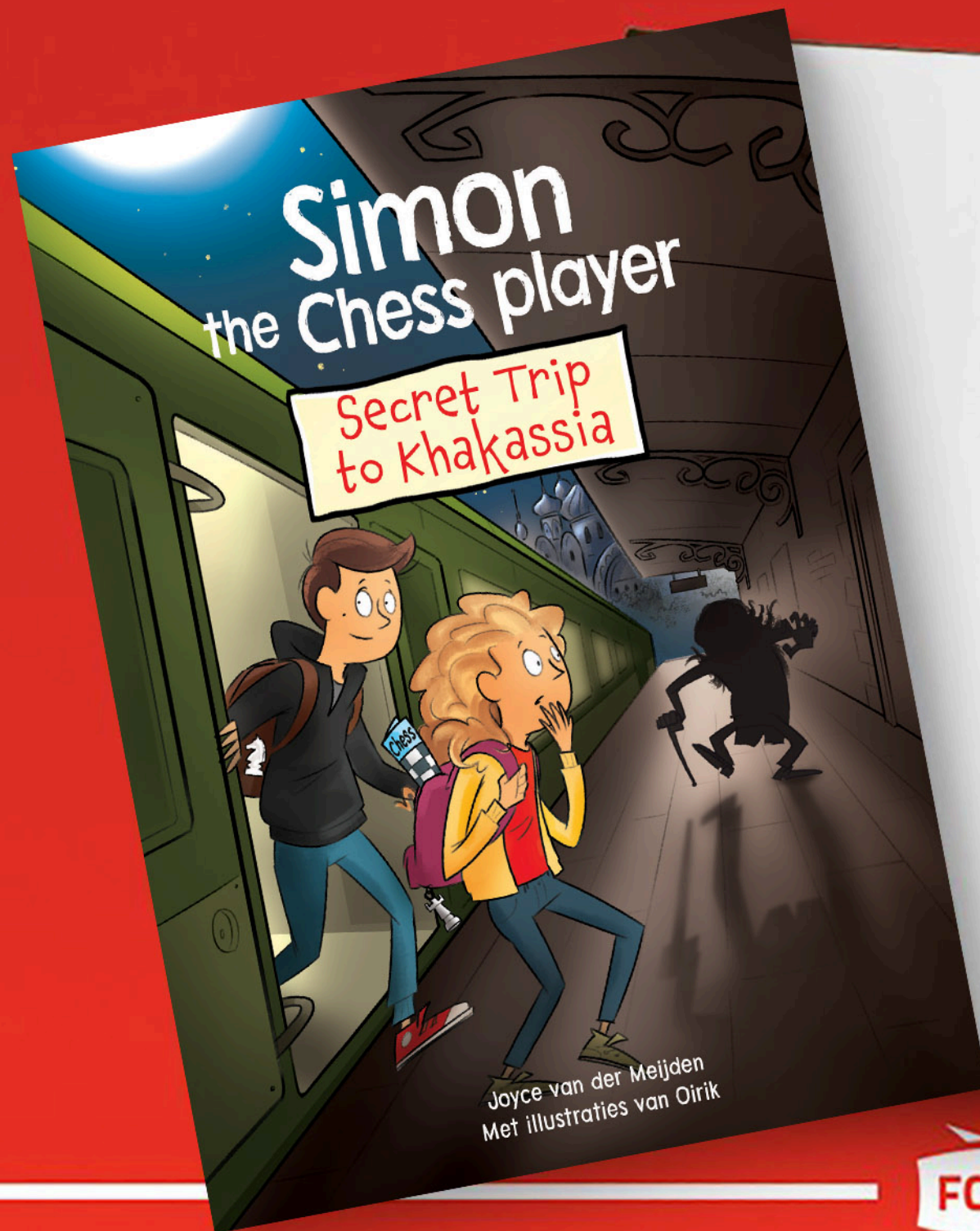
PREFACE

Playing chess is an extremely efficient tool for improving both emotional and cognitive skills in problem-solving, decision-making and logical thinking. Chess is also great fun! Simon's story is full of inspiration, revealing the everlasting magical power of this ancient game. Simon encourages young readers to take on challenges and bravely pursue their dreams.

Just like great stories - chess connects us all.

Judit Polgar
Grandmaster and Founder of Chess Palace Education

FC KLAP



Preface: Secret Trip to Khakassia

The fact that there's a thrilling and funny child book series with a leading role for chess sport, I find, as a chess grandmaster, of course very exciting. I've seen them, the children who were in line to get a copy of Simon de Chess Player during the finale of the National Schools Chess Championships. They already read part 1 and wanted more.

Simon the Chess Player books apparently do the same for kids as playing chess does for me: they are immediately hooked.

I secretly hope that by reading this third book more children become curious about the game of chess and that they will discover how fun it is to play chess with their friends or family. Or like Simon with their grandmother. Maybe there are some kids who will play chess because of the Simon-series and who will like it so much that they want to become a chess master as well.

In that case we might meet one day!
I wish you a lot of fun with this book,

Anish Giri, chess grand master
(The best chess player of The Netherlands
and fourth in the world ranking.)

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