

Watercolored Different

by Jessie Campbell

Simon Ridley only had one special power. Whenever he walked into a room, an awkward silence would descend. People would stop talking, look at the ground, shuffle their feet, and clear their throats. He was quite good at stopping conversations.

Simon had never been a normal boy. The day he began his year as a First at school, his mother had kissed him on the cheek and told him he had entered Phase v.2 of his life. He had been excited until he arrived at school and saw the other kids. He had noticed the difference right away, but it wasn't until they went to the cafeteria to eat their freeze-dried lunches that he realized no one wore glasses. No one. He clutched his satchel in his fist so hard it was crumpled into a wad as he plodded to the farthest table of the room and ate his meal in solitude, pushing his spectacles up when they slipped down his nose.

The other differences were less noticeable, but they became obvious within the first few weeks of classes. Simon struggled mightily in his schoolwork. Right away, he found he had a fear of arithmetic. His classmates adored math; they made up stupid rhymes about numbers that got stuck in his head even though he didn't understand them.

Five rocket engines roar in the hangar

Five human pilots launch from Cape Anger

Five streaks of light soar over the sea

Five times three is always fifteen

He was also different when it came to the study of language—learning how to transpose thoughts onto the computer screen, how to get the machine to read to you, and how to use the thesaurus software. Although other kids were quicker with the software, Simon enjoyed these studies because he loved learning new words, like *caterwaul*, which meant “to shriek or yowl,” and *taciturn*, which described someone who was quiet... like him.

Perhaps a month after he became a Second, a boy named Xander tripped him at the back of class. There was nothing special about that; kids tripped him all the time, for the glasses and the weird food he brought from home. But Simon spilled his vitamin water on his jeans as he fell. Cheeks burning with embarrassment, he scrambled to his feet and desperately searched for a rag to soak up the mess. He opened a dusty desk drawer and discovered a rectangular plastic box that contained twenty ovals filled with some sort of hardened goo in twenty vibrant colors. When he got water in the goo, it created a fantastic pigment that spread pleasantly on paper when he rasped his wet fingers across the parchment in random spirals and shapes. While other kids used their computer to animate crude cartoons of aliens attacking cities, Simon painted watercolor portraits of landscapes seen only in his mind.

The years passed slowly. He didn't bother making friends, though his teachers seemed to think he should. They wouldn't make friends with the people in his class, so why should he? He didn't need friends, anyway; he had his mother, who was fun and made him laugh. The two of them spent many weekends downloading art museums, and they always smiled at each other as they skipped through the virtual halls of the Louvre or the Museum of Modern Art. Simon achieved decent grades—mostly As for Average and an occasional B for Below Average. He only got one T for Terrible, in math. Every year, his highest grade was in art class: G for Great.

By the time he was a Seventh, Simon was accustomed to being different. It didn't matter so much so long as he could paint. So when he walked into class one morning, his heart barely sank as he saw the day's subject scrawled across the giant monitor at the front of the room.

Special Powers — Selection Day

He groaned internally. Kids had been talking about it all year. Sevenths got to move into different classes at the end of the year, to hone their individual skills and get more career-oriented schooling. Most kids already had a good idea of where they'd go, because they

had long lines of older brothers and sisters who'd all gone to the same classes.

Simon was an only child.

Some kids in his class claimed they'd already begun to experience their special powers. A pretty girl named Trixie boasted that she had moved a pencil for three seconds with her eyes; Xander said he was a flier because, when he concentrated, he fell slowly from jumps off the exercise equipment.

Simon didn't believe either of them.

His mother had never mentioned special powers. He was too afraid that if he asked her about them, she'd tell him he didn't have any. So he'd remained silent, always watching her for some kind of sign. Her special power was making him happy.

He took his seat at the back of the class and listened to the excited murmur of the students. "They're going to put me in kinetics," said one kid. "I'll be working on SmoothPods before you know it!"

"I'll be off to the growing room without you sods," said another. The others rolled their eyes at the pun. "No, really!" he insisted. "My greenhouse was the first one with tomatoes this year!"

Xander saw Simon looking at them and sneered. "I wonder what Simon Ridley's special power is," he said, elbowing the boy sitting next to him.

Trixie trained her pretty blue eyes on Simon; he felt his face go eject-button-red as it always did when she was around. "I suppose he could be a Cleaner," she said. Her laugh was like shards of crystal falling on his ears.

He felt like gnashing his teeth. He felt like screaming, or worse, crying. He did none of these things. "You'll see," he said simply, in what he had hoped to be a self-assured and enigmatic tone. His voice, though, was scratchy from disuse, and he croaked on the word *see*. He turned away as the teacher, Dr. Ross, swept into the room on her bright purple HoverChrome.

"Hush, children," she snapped, her huge, dark eyebrows furrowed in the direction of the giggling group. Always diplomatic, she soon

shared her glare of displeasure to the rest of the class until the whispering ceased. "That's better," she said primly.

"Now." She whipped her laser to the monitor. "Today we will separate into the categories of special powers. We have discussed the numerous categories of talents that make each one of us as unique as all the different prime numbers in the world."

Simon rolled his eyes, careful not to let Dr. Ross see. Prime numbers couldn't possibly be more unique than the colors of the rainbow, or the shapes in people's fingerprints. Prime numbers had too much in common to be called "unique." He frowned. Then again, perhaps that was the point. Everyone in class had a future and a special power. They all had something in common... except Simon. He sank in his chair fractionally.

Dr. Ross used her laser to divide the board into the nine power categories, and she reviewed the identifying attributes of each. In the kinetics category were people who could move or change things using their thoughts. Growers worked on the food supply. Fliers were pretty obvious, though not even they could explain how they did it. Simon phased out, staring at the screen and comparing himself to each of the nine boxes. Nope, no, and nuh-uh.

He realized that the class was suddenly standing. Dr. Ross had turned her baleful eye on him, because he was the only kid still sitting. He leapt to his feet to general tittering. Dr. Ross frowned a moment longer, then shook a little, as if ridding herself of an unpleasant smell. She consulted her PalmScreen. "Right. We shall go alphabetically," she said crisply. "Roxanne Albott."

Rox, who had long brown hair and usually spared a smile for Simon, stepped confidently forward. "Engineer," Dr. Ross announced. Rox jumped and cheered, not even subdued by one of the teacher's dirty looks. Rox was always taking things apart and putting them back together; engineer was a perfect fit for her. Without a single glance in Simon's direction, she walked out of the classroom toward her new future. Her hair swayed right to left and right again with her bouncy gait.

Simon watched with increasing apprehension as others received their Selections and left for their new classes. Each kid received the perfect category, which seamlessly matched hobbies, skills, and interests. Trixie Patton was named to kinetics amid a smattering of applause—she was very popular—and then it was Simon's turn.

Barely missing an outstretched foot meant to trip him, Simon stepped up to the front of the room. He stared at the floor beneath the HoverChrome and waited for the embarrassment. Dr. Ross would sentence him to three years of rudimentary classes, he knew, or worse, she'd simply say he didn't belong because he had no special power, and she'd send him away.

The silence stretched interminably, until he finally looked up and met the teacher's eyes. It seemed she had been waiting for that, because she touched a button on her HoverChrome until it brought her nearly face-to-face with him. "Simon Ridley," she said, rather softly. "Your Selection was particularly difficult to determine. Our software utterly failed to place you." He felt his heart sink to somewhere around his knees. He could feel the cruel stares of his classmates boring into his neck and shoulders, held back only by the presence of Dr. Ross.

"But," she went on, and there was a tiny flutter of hope in his belly, "I consulted with the elder professors on your case, and they advised me to use older software. So I ran you through a program that was abandoned nearly fifty years ago. It has been at least that long, Simon, since we had to use it, but there is a tenth category. I checked three times to be sure, but you are in the other category."

Simon heard the sharp intake of breath behind him even as he stopped breathing himself. There was a category so terrible, they hadn't had to use it in half a century? His ears grew so hot, he feared they'd melt right off his head.

He gathered the last shreds of his courage and whispered, "What is the category? What is my Selection?"

Dr. Ross smiled. "Choice," she said simply. "You have the power to do anything you choose, anything at all."

And with those words, a whole horizon of possibility began to open like a flower in his eyes, like the landscapes he saw only in his head, which became real only when he painted them. He turned to glance at the classmates he was leaving behind, those later in the alphabet than R. The contemptuous stares he'd expected were missing. Instead, many of their expressions were awash with pure admiration. One of the boys mouthed the word, "Wow." Simon grinned to himself, his previously heavy heart now lighter than a microchip.

Choice! He couldn't wait to tell his mother.

