



Space Opera in Space

by

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Chapter 1

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This completely imperfect piece is
dedicated to some truly perfect people.

To those who encouraged me to push my
writing, those who reviewed, and
Catherine who set this up.

But most of all to my Love, Zsolt.
This adventure is for you.

“The thing you have to remember is what?”

“Customers first.”

“Right, customers always first. Okay, pop quiz:
Imagine the dinner rush has just ended—”

“The dinner rush ended two hours ago.”

I pull off my Wurgers cap and rub deep into my temples. It was a busy night. The restaurant is a mess of food wrappings, condiment packets, and fries. All I really want is to go into the back office and kick up my legs. That corn in the side of my foot is killing me. But a night manager has responsibilities. The newbie needs his training.

“This is a hypothetical scenario, Leon. Imagine it: the dinner rush just ended and the restaurant is a mess. Yes, like it is now, okay. But in this situation, there are no tomatoes left to put on the burgers, and a customer has just come in.”

The new guy watches me with large, unwavering eyes. Each time they blink, pools of tears gathered in their creases then just as quickly disappeared. He’s gonna be a good one, I know it. Responsive, I’ll bet.

I lean in, right up close to his face. Whispering, I ask, "What do you do, newbie?"

I may only be the night manager at Wurgers, but I know a thing or two about leadership. This chain is as strong as its weakest link. James "The Day Manager" Marshall might do the hiring, but *I'm* the one on the floor pacifying the drunks that come in from the bar after last call. Where is James at three AM when some punk projectile vomits his Wurger milkshake to the cheer of his buddies? At home sleeping in his king-sized bed, that's where!

"Chop, chop, newbie! What do you do?"

"Serve the customer?" he replies.

"Then?"

"Tidy the restaurant?"

"And then?"

"Cut more tomatoes, I guess."

"Exactly right. But next time, give it to me with certainty."

"Yes sir."

"What's that?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Okay. Go count your cash."

There's some kind of storm brewing outside. Our Wurgers restaurant (first ever to open in Talakapa) is in the middle of a massive parking lot with a Mallmart on the other side. There's about an acre of parking lot between us and the store, and all throughout the lamp posts are shaking like twigs in this wind. There's this strong *whoosh, whoosh* sound against the building. Looks like there could be hail any second, which means the weather channel is crap because it was predicting a clear night.

In these cases, some people might let their team go home early. But we have a contract with the plaza stating Wurgers stays open till four AM on Saturday nights. I'm not the kind of man who makes exceptions. We stay open. The storm can bugger off.

"Dorothy?"

"Yeah?"

"Quit sitting on the counter, and can you help Newbie with his cashing out?"

"Yeah."

"Dorothy?"

"Yes?"

"Quit sitting on the counter."

“Sorry.” She slowly slides off the counter.

She’s a good girl, just a little bit spacey. Sometimes I think she’s not quite with us, but then she snaps right to it when a customer pulls up to the drive through. I’ve never seen a worker take an order so fast and have it turned around with cash in hand and the car pulling away. She’s set the record for most burgers sold in one hour, and that was at the drive through where people drop their money and stop four feet from the window.

“Dorothy?”

“Yeah?”

“I need someone to cover an extra shift next Wedn—”

“Augh!” screams the Newbie. “My car! It’s just been lifted and flung off the ground!”

We all move to the drive-through window to look at the Newbie’s car flying in circles through the air, except for Mike by the grill, who hasn’t noticed a thing yet. The Newbie is whimpering.

“There go the lamp posts,” says Dorothy.

Lamp posts are now shooting from the ground up into the air, disappearing from view.

“What’s going on?” asks Mike, taking off his ear buds. Finally he notices us. That kid smokes so much weed, it’s a wonder he can focus on flipping burgers at all.

“What the hell is going on out there?” I ask.

“It’s a tornado,” replies Dorothy, as though this happens every night shift.

Suddenly the lights go out. We’re in the darkness for a moment, and then there’s flashing. It’s strobe lights and disco dancing, except we haven’t got a clue where it’s coming from. “What the hell is going on?” I ask again. “Is this Candid Camera? Are we on Candid Camera?” I fix my hair.

“That show hasn’t run in years!” shouts the Newbie.

The Whoosh Whoosh is now a **WHOOSH WHOOSH** as the wind just starts to rip everywhere—it’s banging against the windows and pounding on our ceiling.

“Do something Tim, man!” yells Mike.

“What do you want me to do?” I yell back. Emergency Wurger protocol stipulates first and foremost the evacuation of customers in a dangerous situation. But they’re not here, so, “**EVERYONE GET OUT!**”

“I’m not going out there,” replies Dorothy. She doesn’t yell.

“EVERYONE STAY HERE!” I correct.

Suddenly the whole restaurant is shaking, takeout containers are falling and the fries are jumping out of the warmer. The cash registers all burst open and there’s money floating into the air. Packets of salt and pepper are exploding like confetti bombs.

“EVERYONE GET ON THE GROUND!” is the last thing I remember shouting as we all duck down into the drive-through alcove and the chip boxes keep falling on top of us like cardboard rain as the wind begins blowing inside the restaurant. The shaking of the building becomes stronger and stronger till the place is vibrating, and those mystery strobe lights go faster and faster.

At some point, I must have had a seizure, because the next thing I remember is waking up with everything quiet and all of us strewn across the restaurant. What the hell just happened? I can’t even tell you. All I can really say, is that looking out the windows of our restaurant . . . we are not in the parking lot of Outer East Talakapa anymore. I don’t know where we are. All I know is that it is glowing neon pink through the wall of windows, and I need to unwrap a pair of sunglasses from the kiddie meal box to see anything.

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We’ve locked the doors. I know that the customer is always meant to come first, but in this case I have two reasons for keeping them out.

One, the restaurant is a disaster. Dorothy is mopping up streaks of special sauce that were flung all over the chairs and tables. Mike is in the kitchen doing much of the same, only it’s worse in there – hamburger patties, limp lettuce, buns, fries and grease everywhere. I’ve been filling the trash bags. There are sixteen bags and counting waiting to go to the dump . . . wherever the dump may have gone.

And two.

Two I can’t really explain. Like I said, the customer comes first—but what the hell am I supposed to do when the customer is a gang of cuddly teddy bears? Yeah, maybe that sounds adorable, but you’ve never seen a living teddy bear screaming at the top of its fluffy lungs.

“Just keep ignoring them,” I repeat. It’s pretty much all I’ve been saying for the past hour.

“Tim, let’s see what they want,” says Dorothy. She’s been pushing that mop around for the last twenty minutes, but her heart isn’t in it. She wants to go

outside, that's all she has wanted to do since we woke up. "They might have the new guy with them."

"Oh right, and we're supposed to do something about that?" I ask. "Be logical, Dorothy. If they have the newbie, they'll grab us the second we unlock those doors."

"I think they're cute," she replies. Walking up the window, she pulls out her phone and takes a picture of the watching teddy bears.

"We're not opening the doors."

"Hello!" says Dorothy as she waves to the dolls. "They were only screaming for like ten minutes, Tim. They've been perfectly quiet since then. Hello you!"

The teddy bears are waving back, more of them are crowding closer to the window where Dorothy is standing. She's fiddling with her phone, which, by the way, she's not even meant to have on her person during a shift.

"Who could you possibly be texting?" I ask.

"I'm not texting anyone. I'm Instagramming a picture," she replies.

I pull my phone out from my pocket. "We're in the middle of a neon pink world with teddy bears. How can you "Insta" anything? There's no mobile

connection. Oh and my battery is down to five percent. Crap!"

"I have really good reception," replies Dorothy.

"Dorothy is right," says Mike, poking up his head, ear bud hanging from his ear. "There's no point in cleaning this mess. We don't know where we are, Wurgers is surrounded by freaky dolls, and Leon's gone missing."

"Teddy bears," corrects Dorothy, still typing into her phone and smiling at something.

"I think they want to eat us," says a voice over the intercom.

"Hello?" I ask. "Who's using the intercom without my permission?"

No one answers. Mike, Dorothy and I stop what we're doing. "Do you think one of them got in here?" I whisper to my team.

"I sure hope not," whispers the voice over the intercom.

"New guy, is that you?" asks Dorothy.

"Of course it's me."

"Where are you?" asks Mike.

"I'm right here."

“Where’s that?” I ask.

“Here.”

“New guy—” starts Dorothy.

“Actually, it *is* Leon. I mean, it says Leon on my name tag which none of you ever read.”

“In tape and black marker!” I say aloud to wherever the hell he is hiding. “You’re Newbie till I say different . . . or till you get a proper badge.”

“Yes, sir,” replies Leon, the newbie.

“Leon,” continues Dorothy, “We can’t actually see you. Are you hiding or something, because we’re just hearing you over the intercom right now.”

“I’m right here, right where I was just before all that crazy stuff happened.”

This is weird. He’s nowhere I can see.

“Leon?” I ask.

“I can use my name now?”

“Just this time. Leon, what do you see right now?”

“I see you three standing there looking up toward the ceiling.”

“Okay,” I reply.

“And I see the back door with what looks like a big crowd of teddy bears.”

The back door is at the very back of the restaurant, behind the kitchen and the office . . . can’t see it from where I’m standing.

“And, then I can see the basement too with the boxes. And the eating area. And the cash registers. And the entrance doors.”

“Anything else?”

“I can see what used to be the parking lot, but that’s just more bears and bright pink sunshine now.”

Taking off my seal-shaped kiddie sunglasses (Dorothy is wearing the red parrot ones, and Mike went for the green alligator glasses, which goes to show you never know people till you see them in action), I head through the kitchen, stepping over the piles of frozen patties and fries and fat, and into the back office. There’s the tiny CCTV screen switching between the different camera views of the restaurant: front of shop, back of shop, outside, exits, basement. But Leon isn’t here.

“He’s not back here!” I shout to the others, returning to the counter. “Leon, where the hell are you?”

“I’m right here.”

Dorothy looks at her phone. “My friend Millie thinks the teddy bears are adorable too.”

Leon laughs. “Starburst, that’s my favourite filter – works for everything.”

“How do you know what filter I used, Leon?” asks Dorothy.

Leon doesn’t answer. For a moment, all we can hear is the soft compression of teddy bear flesh against the windows and doors.

“Leon?” she asks again.

“I don’t know,” replies the newbie.

“I think he’s *in* the restaurant,” says Mike.

“We’re all in the restaurant,” I reply.

“Leon?” asks Dorothy.

“Yes?”

“Are your nails dirty?”

Another long pause. More compression of teddy bears. They are piling up on top of one another now, piling higher and higher against the door and blocking out the bright neon light. Every single one of them is smiling at us, which is better than the screaming, I guess. Leon hasn’t said anything yet.

“Newbie, tell her if your nails are dirty!” I shout.

“I can’t see my nails,” replies the Newbie.

“Are your shoelaces tied?” asks Dorothy.

“I can’t see my shoes.”

“Pinch the tip of your nose,” she instructs.

“Can’t find my nose.”

“Dude, you’re not in *Wurgers*, you *are Wurgers*,” says Mike. “You’re the restaurant!”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” I reply.

“None of this makes sense,” replies Mike.

“Whoops!” cries Leon.

And that’s when the locks on the doors flip open, and in floods a wave of fluffy, plush teddy bears. Suddenly, we’re neck deep in the cuddly creatures, and then we’re crowd surfing, tiny fuzzy arm by tiny fuzzy arm, out of the *Wurgers* and into their bright pink world.

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It looks like a story book, wherever the hell we are. The trees are swirly, and the hills are like pencil

colour landscapes. Everything is pink, pink, pink, except for the teddy bears, which are more like every single bear that was ever made and ever discarded collected in one place. This place. Wherever that is.

The bears are everywhere you look. They're surrounding us and piling on top of one another. And, to add to the horror, they are giggling. It's a tingle-inducing succession of tittering.

"I think we're about to die," I whisper to Mike.

He shrugs and puts his ear buds back into his ears.

"Hey," I say to him.

He takes one out. "Yeah?"

"Here I am here sharing my last moments with you, and you shrug?"

"Mike feels things deeply," says Dorothy. "His music helps him."

"I feel things deeply," I reply. "I often feel things deeply. Like, you know, when we miss our month-end sales target, or a customer complains, or I'm *about to die.*"

Dorothy gives me a look. It's *knowing* and I don't like it.

"Watch this," she says. "Hello little fellow," she says to the nearest, largest teddy bear. "You want a hug?" As the large teddy bear raises its arms, she scoops it up and gives it a massive hug.

Suddenly the whole group of them are cheering and clapping their stuffed paws together. The teddy begins to speak in teddy-bear jibberish, waving its arms into the air.

Dorothy nods along, as if she's actually understanding everything.

"Ask the bear if it wants to eat us," says a voice that emanates from Dorothy's phone.

"Newbie?"

"Yeah?"

"You're in her phone too?"

"I'm everywhere, I think."

"Where are we?" asks Dorothy to the Teddy Bear in her arms.

What a stupid question. Where are we? We're in the middle of some strange bright pink world that nearly burns my retinas, and all I can manage to see are teddy bears. We're in someone's acid trip, that's where we are.

The teddy bear continues with its gibberish, but now something is happening. The crowd is moving aside and making a trail back to the Wurgers. That's when we see the legs sticking out from under the restaurant. Very flat legs, and boots.

"Holy shit, we *killed* someone!" says Newbie from the phone. "We're going to be arrested. I'm going to go to jail. It wasn't my fault!" The alarm goes off in Wurgers.

Newbie is having a panic attack. It's time for the manager to step in. "Calm down, Leon. You are not the cause of this incident. Clearly this isn't our fault."

The Wurger alarm misses a beat, then pauses.

"How do you figure that, Sir?"

"The person was in our blind spot," I reply. Now is the time to make a case with so many impressionable witnesses looking for answers. "'Apparently' (*I do a dramatic quotation sign with my fingers – just so whoever is watching knows we're onto this game of 'weirdo worlds' and 'living teddy bears' and 'dead bodies'*) the restaurant was sucked up by some kind of gravity twisting wormhole, and then we crashed down in this place with neon pink skies and teddy bears that are alive. Or so they'd have us believe, at least. Clearly, in a case like this, there wasn't any

aspect of control. Ergo, those flattened legs are not our fault."

Somehow, the restaurant seems to blush. "Right. No control at all. Nope. They can't prove anything," Leon mumbles through the phone.

"Besides," adds Mike, "These bears don't seem upset."

Dorothy, still holding onto her massive fluffy companion, walks over to the legs and bends down over it.

"Don't *look at it*, Dorothy."

"I think it's a she of some kind," replies Dorothy.

"Wait till the police get here," I add, because Dorothy is not Night Manager. Of course, it doesn't look good that she's the one over there handling the problem and I'm the one over here waiting for the police. That's not leadership, is it? No, that's passive management, and that doesn't get anyone advanced out of the grease pit and into head office in downtown Toronto where the floor shines from turtle wax and there's not a whiff of fried *anything* in the air.

"On second thought," I walk through the clearing of teddy bears with Mike trailing behind, "Let's see if we can help, somehow."

“She’s way beyond help,” mutters Mike.

“She’s a blow up doll,” replies Dorothy.

“Come on, let’s not disrespect the dead.”

But as I walk up, it seems Dorothy is right. This woman isn’t a woman at all. She’s deflated. Like, literally deflated. The only thing that’s real here are her boots.

“Why would a fake blow up doll want to wear thousand plus dollars, emerald green boots?” asks Dorothy?

“How do you know how much they cost?” I ask.

She takes a picture with her phone, and types in a message. “I’ve got to tweet this out. Hashtag FancyFetishBoots.”

Mike laughs.

“Hey!” I bark.

The three of them (Leon included) stop their commiserating giggles and look up from Dorothy’s phone.

“A woman is dead here, blow up doll or not.”

Dorothy’s face drops. “Oh yes, I forgot.” She puts down the teddy bear.

“Forgot what?” asks Mike.

“That they’re real,” says Leon from the phone. “They may not exhibit typical life signs, but there’s definite evidence of conscious thought. Ah . . . which appears to be my case, as well. So I’m not dead, either, right? Right?”

Suddenly I find the pink grass extra fascinating. Mike is staring at nothing and Dorothy seems frozen on her Instagram feed.

“Can someone agree with me on this? I’m the Newbie named Leon, and I’m not dead. That sounds right. Right?”

“You’re probably right,” replied Dorothy.

“But where did his body go?” asks Mike.

Suddenly it hits me! I didn’t write an incident report on the events. Wurgers is definitely at risk of some kind of liability – even if this wasn’t our fault and no court could convict us, it’s a manager’s duty to chronicle all notable events in the incident report folder. James the Day Manager would have *never* slipped up so badly in face of litigation.

“Right, I’m going inside to file an incident report. You two—”

“Three!” says the Newbie.

“You *three* (?) wait here for the police.”

“But what police?” asks Mike.

“The police,” I reply, sweeping past the teddy bears who are finally not blocking our doorway. Seriously, I am grateful for my job as a manager, but sometimes the stupid questions that come from these overbaked burger flippers are just too much. “*The Police!*” I repeat, opening the door and heading into the restaurant and stepping around what’s left of the mess. The back office is a disaster zone, but the incident report logbook is intact as I fish it out from under the toppled over yucca.

Manager’s Log: Following a lightning storm, our restaurant seems to have been transported to an unknown location with neon pink skies, trees and grass, along with living teddy bears. Suspect this is Candid Camera, even if some of the staff say that show was long-ago cancelled. New employee Leon (fill in last name when I remember it) is conducting an elaborate scheme of taking over Wurger monitoring systems and another employee’s phone. He claims to have lost his body. We have not yet found it, but will reprimand accordingly once it is finally located.

Teddy bears appear non-threatening and cuddly.

The Wurgers restaurant appears to have landed upon a blown-up woman, now deflated. We had zero

knowledge of this woman’s plight while cleaning the restaurant, and heard no call for help after landing. She appears irreversibly flattened . . . however, I haven’t checked yet for one of those blow-up nozzle things that we may and may not have in the storage cupboard.

Staff are in good spirits considering the situation, which leads me to suspect they may be in on the elaborate farce of the Candid Camera production. If this is the case, I retract all statements in the Manager’s Log and would like an extra personal day for dealing with this promotional stunt, no doubt orchestrated by you, James – and don’t think I’m being fooled one bit. I’ve got a few tricks up my sleeve, too, so if you find all the cooking utensils frozen one morning when you get to work, don’t think you didn’t have it coming.

Suddenly I hear a shout coming from outside. It’s Dorothy!

Throwing the log book onto the table, I’m back out in the neon pink world in a flash. We’re not alone anymore. Apparently the police have arrived. . . but since when do police officers wear sparkling green capes over their uniforms?

“Hello, Tim. I am Arrogon, of Southern Space – Emperor of this region and charmer of all I purvey.”

“How do you know my name?” I ask.

Mr. ASS waves his arm in a grand gesture toward the field of watching teddy bears. “I know *everything*.”

“What he *doesn’t know*,” says Dorothy, “is that it’s not cool to steal the boots off of a dead woman, even if she was a blow up doll.”

“Pardon?” I ask, because that’s confusing.

“He wants me to put on the boots.”

“They’re yours, Dorothy,” says green cape dude, waving his hand far too dramatically over the body. “No one else can wear them but you, now.”

Suddenly I realize that this fellow is *not* ugly. Everyone is kind of ugly, in their own way, but not this guy. I’m looking at him, and the only ugly thing I can think of is that he’s not ugly at all - if that makes any sense. He’s taller than any of us, and seems to fill the spaces and corners with broad shoulders and chin clefts. Holy shit, I think I saw him on the cover of GQ the other day at the dentist. And I don’t know how he does this, but his eyes kinda sparkle whenever he flashes that white-toothed grin. Those teeth have got to be caps. No one’s teeth are so perfect.

“I rinse my mouth with coconut oil every morning,” replies the Emperor. “It works miracles.”

He winks at me, or maybe at all of us, I can’t quite tell. Either way, I’m uncomfortable.

“Cut it out!” Dorothy snaps, breaking this weird mind-reading-spell that is happening here. She’s blushing, I’m blushing, and hey – Mike is blushing too, and I think even the restaurant might be blushing.

“I just have that effect on people,” says Sparkling Green Cape and Teeth Caps Man. “You’ll get used to it.”

“Anyhow,” she continues. “I’m not putting on those damn boots. So you just go on and take them for yourself if they’re so exciting to you.”

“But Dorothy, it’s your destiny.”

“I don’t think so.”

“I know so.”

“Nope,” she replies.

“Of course,” he counters.

“No.”

“Yes.”

“I’m not feeling it.”

I've never seen Dorothy get into an argument with a customer before. People just kinda bend to her will. I have a feeling this guy is used to the same sort of bending.

"Maybe it's like second hand shopping – vintage like," I contribute.

"Good will, kinda," adds Mike.

"I'd wear them if I could," adds Leon. "I'd wear just about anything right now, if I had a body to wear them with."

In a strange way, I think we *all* want those boots.

"Look," says the stranger, bending down over the flattened, plastic legs and sliding off the boots, holding them in his hands. He's waving them around with each word. "Someone needs to take these boots. They're important. This woman here – she was important too. Scary, terrible and important. She was incredible in that way, actually. But never mind. She terrorized the Teddies for kicks and forced them to act in very uncute ways. Her power was in her boots. Okay? Magic boots. There you go, now you've made me spoil this whole thing. You were supposed to put on the damn boots, and then I'd say, "They will protect you on your journey," and you'd have no clue how powerful they really were for ages until you were finally tested and blah, blah, blah. Do you want

the damn boots or not, because if you don't then I'll just go and throw them into the nearest sun since The Big Lord knows the Teddies can't be trusted with this kind of power, and I'm already fully charged as it is."

"Well if you put it that way," I begin, "I'll wear the boots if they don't pinch too much. After all, I'm the manager here."

"Night manager," adds Mike.

"Says the burger flipper," I return.

"Pilsbury dough man."

"Overbaked to-the-point-of-being-totally-burnt pie guy."

"Annoying pain in the ass."

"Drop out."

"Fine!" cuts in Dorothy. She kicks off her shoes, and puts on the boots. "If it means that much to you, I'll wear the boots," she says as she turns to the window and looks at her pink reflection in the glass.

Suddenly, all of the teddy bears drop to their knees, kissing the ground (the ones that can kneel, others just face-plant onto the ground).

"Are they worshiping me?" asks Dorothy.

“A little bit,” replies Arrogon of Southern Space, Emperor of this region – like he knows everything.

Dorothy snaps a picture with her phone and sends it off to who knows where.

“Hashtag TeddyGroupies,” she says, looking up from her phone.

Now the four of us are standing there, not really sure what comes next. If this *is* a trick, it’s going on far too long. I’m just about to ask how long this production is going to keep taking, when a volcano seems to erupt beneath us.

Whoosh!

Screams!

Height!

We’re shot into the air on a stream of red lava, restaurant and all, propelling higher and higher into the sky.

“Get in the ship!” yells the Emperor guy as he runs *over the lava* and into our restaurant.

We all follow his lead and jump into the restaurant. Riding on the tide of red molten non-burning lava, we’re shooting up, up, until we’ve burned a hole through the atmosphere and suddenly the restaurant is floating in the middle of space, and the lava is fast

becoming a piece of long yellow rock that detaches from us and floats away.

“I don’t think we’re in Talakapa anymore,” whispers Dorothy.

As a group, we stare out the wall of windows, into the black void of space, space and more space.

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“I wonder where the big dipper is?” asks Dorothy as she looks out the massive windows of our restaurant.

I cup my eyes against the window. It’s just about impossible to see out into that big bunch of blackness. “Newbie, kill the lights!” I shout.

Leon sighs. “Fine.”

I’m about to remind him that I’m in charge here, not his mood swings, when the disembodied restaurant-haunting newbie switches off the lights.

And what shines onto us it is the most incredible thing I’ve ever, *ever* seen.

Dorothy lifts her phone to take a picture, but instead puts it back down. “This is incredible,” she whispers.

In the blackness there are galaxies – swirls of pink, blue, green, purple. So many colours in patches of light here and there. Stars all over, and showers of comets. Planets. Rings. Moons. It feels as though everything is near and yet far all at once.

“So this is what heaven looks like,” whispers Dorothy.

“It’s not half bad.” The green cape guy steps up to Dorothy, draping a thick arm over her shoulder. She shakes it off.

“No touching my employees, alright there big man.” I say, giving him a firm poke with my finger.

He flashes me a brilliant grin. Jerk.

“I suppose you’ve seen better?” asks Dorothy. “Big man that you are in this place?”

“That’s right,”

She points her phone at Arrogon and snaps a photo. “Hashtag no thanks.” With a shake of her head, she moves off. I stay next to the big galaxy green cape guy. If anyone is in on this ridiculously elaborate scheme knows what’s really happening, it’s this guy. His teeth are too white to *not* make him a television prank show host.

“Seriously Tim,” he says. “I can hear everything you are thinking, and you need to turn up the IQ a few notches. Here, swallow this.”

“What’s that?”

“Dr Palagrino’s Stupendously Stupid Cure All Tablets, better known as Brilliant Bites.”

“Look buddy, I’m not taking tha—”

And bam! Right into my mouth he slams a pill. I choke it back because somehow it’s hurtling over my tongue and down my thorax before I can do much of anything.

“What—*cough*—the hell—*cough*—was that?”

“A highly addictive and highly dangerous cure for thick-headedness. Don’t worry, the effects of the pill fade soon. Too soon in your case. But I have an appointment to make on a certain rock planet, and since you are captain of this spaceship—

“I’m the captain?!” I shout to myself.

“—you need to get up to speed.”

Then still shouting: “He’s roofied me! Mike, Leon, Dorothy – someone give me the Heimlich maneuver. Mike!”

“Yeah?” he asks, coming out from the kitchen. “Holy crap. We’re really in space?”

“You know CPR right?” I shout. Something is happening to me. Everything is getting BIGGER.

“I’m a giant manager!” I shout. “MIKE you are so huge right now.”

Mike waves me off and walks over to Dorothy, her BIG face is pressed against the MASSIVE window, and he joins her in the window-face-pressing-universe-watching business.

“Leon?!” I cry. The room is beginning to spin *rather* quickly.

“Yes?”

“I’ve been drugged! Do something!”

“What? Against the space man?”

“Yes!”

“I can’t do that. He’d be way too angry with me.”

Now the room isn’t just spinning, but I’m spinning too. The entire world is going round and round and I’m going round and round, and my arms fly outward.

Somewhere in the slosh that is my brain, I hear a tweeting bird sing aloud: “What did you do to him?”

And then a giant whale shoots a stream of water into the air, which bursts into beautiful rainbow droplets that whisper as they fall: “He’ll be better in ten seconds.”

As the rainbow water slips across my eyeballs there is another voice counting what may be numbers, or possibly donut holes: “six, five, plain, glazed...”

“Frosted coconuts!” I scream to the sugar covered voices.

“three, two,”

“Eagle’s son is EAGLE!” I express to the numbers.

“One.”

Which is when a giant hand face palms me, and I’m flying backward into the darkness of the kitchen and landing in a pile of collected garbage bags.

*

Next thing I know, I am awake. The lights are back on in the restaurant. We’re still, as far as I can see, following that yellow trail of rock that’s outside the window. Except Leon is screaming over the take-out speaker. And there seems to be fireballs coming in our direction.

I jump up from the floor and run back to my team.

“Quick, someone explain our circumstances!” I demand. “Dorothy, explain.”

“This girl just showed up and started hurling massive fireballs at the restaurant.”

Instead of asking “who is she? And what do you mean by fireballs.” I look out into space where the flames are passing by and spot a woman jumping rock to rock. She looks pissed. Also worth noting: her hands are on fire.

“Can we communicate with her?”

“Don’t bother,” replies Arrogon. “She’s totally over-emotional right now. Doesn’t listen to *anyone* when she gets worked up like that.”

“But what did we do to upset her?” asks Dorothy.

“Well, you flattened her sister for starters,” he replies.

And at this point, I’d *definitely* be contesting that point. Because killing sisters is not the Wurgers way. But for some reason, instead of doing that, I say to Leon: “Leon, aim some fountain drink in her direction and give that lady a cooling down.”

“Yes sir!” replies Leon. We hear the screeching of twisting metal, and suddenly we’re shooting

carbonated water! And before you can say “poof” she’s drenched to the core and steaming.

How did I know Leon could do that? I don’t know. Why didn’t the water freeze in space? It’s alternative world physics!

This is the pill thinking for you, I suddenly realize. *It’s made you extremely efficient.*

“Leon,” I say again. “Release the garbage!”

“Releasing, sir!”

“Hold on everyone – grab something steady.”

Mike, Dorothy, and Arrogon hold onto one of the tables that are anchored into the floor. I grab onto the counter railing. “Make it snappy, Leon.”

“Yes, sir!”

And with a whoosh of air, the front doors open and out sucks all the bags of garbage, packets, napkins, drink cups and grease puddles – right into the very angry, steaming, wet woman in space whose sister we may or may not have killed.

Leon shuts the door. He adjusts the environmental settings and suddenly, we can breathe easily once again.

“That was incredible!” exclaims Dorothy, patting back down her hair.

“Well, it was no-” begins Leon.

“We’re on a spaceship!” I cry. “We’re in space! This is *real!*”

“Finally, the pill is kicking in,” says Arrogon. “I told you that it would work.”

Mike pulls out his wallet and gives Arrogon five bucks. “Yeah, yeah,” he replies.

Suddenly there is a hard knocking on the door. The lady is still outside our restaurant, floating there like the absolute zero temperature doesn’t bother her at all. She’s covered in garbage, and there’s still a small fire happening behind her eyes.

“I do believe,” I say, “that the blow up doll on the Pink Planet was this lady’s sister.”

“And now she’s gonna kill us,” whimpers Leon.

“Can you help us?” asks Dorothy to Arrogon.

“Ah, yes, well... I’d love to of course, but as I had mentioned earlier, I have an appointment to be running off too.”

And just like that, he pushes the face of his wrist watch, and the man *disappears!*

“He’s gone! He left us!” Dorothy storms away from the window to the spot where Arrogon was standing. “He just up and disappeared!”

Bang! Bang!

The enraged sister is trying to get in.

“We will be fine,” I say, reassuring my crew. “Leon, open up the dop—”

Before I can finish the word dopple jumper – which I somehow know exists within our space restaurant – my mouth freezes. In fact, all of me is frozen. Mike and Dorothy, standing next to me are frozen too.

“Unlocking the door, sir!” answers Leon.

Weak protests come from the three of us despite our unmoving mouths, but it’s too late, Leon has unlocked the door with a ‘click’ of the knob.

I can’t turn my head to look. But I see it reflected in Dorothy and Mike’s eyes. There’s a sudden sense of heat behind me, and my employees turn a bright, flame reflecting orange. Suddenly, my face becomes my own again, I can move my head even if not my body. I can speak. I can *scream*.

“Don’t bother with the screaming,” replies a voice that’s sweet as sugar. It’s a very, very bad voice for the circumstances.

“At least, don’t bother screaming *yet*,” she continues.

The heat grows even stronger, and then she passes by me and stands before Dorothy. This tiny not-still-a-girl, not-yet-a-woman is steaming through the garbage and soda. It’s warming up the restaurant and it’s *definitely* warming up Dorothy, who – if I didn’t know any better, appears to be sweating.

“Nice emerald boots,” says the newcomer.

“Thanks,” replies Dorothy. “They’re magic.”

“So you know that already?”

“The cape guy told us,” replies Mike.

The crazy lady gives Mike one of those horribly bright smiles, then turns back to Dorothy.

“I have a set of boots almost exactly the same. You like?”

She lifts the hem of her long dress and flashes some really, really bright red boots. They’re not just red– but more like flowing blood and water colours. Like a handful of rubies held under a bright light.

“You like them?” she asks me, with a wink.

Normal me would have responded. Post-Brilliant Bite me keeps his mouth shut.

“You see, your boots are almost exactly like mine, because they were made at the same time as my boots. There are only two pairs in the entire universe. One for me, and one for my sister.”

And then suddenly the fire from this woman is wrapping all around us.

“Sprinklers!” I shout.

And Leon turns them on. Once again, the woman’s flames are doused as the water keeps pouring down from the ceiling.

“Enough!” she screams.

Then she strides away from us, and hops over the service counter, disappearing into the kitchen. Suddenly, I feel an invisible push against my body, and I fall to the floor. I’m dragged by some force across the ground, and pushed up against Dorothy and Mike who also collapse. It feels like there is an invisible rope tightening around us, crushing our lungs.

The young lady comes back. She’s dry again, and her hair is suddenly very bouncy. If she wasn’t so terrifying, I’d say she was pretty. Except, you know, terrifyingly pretty.

I watch as she walks over and stops right in front of my face. The red scales of her sparking boots are inches from my nose. The heat of her is overwhelming.

“If I can’t burn you bunch to death, that’s fine. Have it your way.”

I hear the sound of metal scraping against metal. “I like knives too. They’re shiny and fun.”

Something is being dripped over us. It falls on my face and tastes sweet. It’s . . . ketchup.

“Anyhow, I like my meat raw.” She says with a bit of a laugh. Bending down, she looks me in the eye.

“Though maybe I’ll save *you* for dessert,” she whispers, with a wink, pinching my nose.

Holy shit. The crazy lady likes me.

I need to solve this. My mind begins to race, faster and faster and faster – except wait a second, it’s racing way too fast. Oh no. The room is spinning again. Then the whole world begins spinning. And now I’m spinning too. Faster and faster. I’m coming down from the pill. And here come the rainbows and whale streams. There go the donuts dripping backwards through lemon custard with scoops of vanilla ice cream.

“Whaaaaaa!” someone is screaming. Maybe it’s me.

“Three, two...” someone is counting.

“One.”

Bam!

Face palm to the forehead, and I’m thrown backwards from the crazy woman, with Dorothy and Mike still attached to my body by the invisible rope. And we go flying, landing in the kiddie zone ball pen. And everything is nearly darkness, just shades of blue and green and yellow – circular shapes and primary colours. My mind slips further from the crash. Into the darkness, more darkness . . . and the growing heat of the stranger as she walks on toward us.

*

After a hard night of managing fast-food chaos, the greatest pleasure has got to be that morning cup of joe, and my fuzzy bathrobe . . . oh yes, and slippers. Slippers are a must. Preferably my Homer Simpson ones.

I take a sip of the coffee and stare its depths.

Why can’t everything be this wonderful?

And yet.

But, but.

Something is nagging at me. There was a dream, maybe? There was something . . . to do . . . with work?

Well, no surprise there. The pressures of Wurgers have this way of following you home.

This coffee should be darker, I think. I swirl it in my cup. It's good, but it isn't *black* enough. Really, all it seems to be is *brown*. But what about that vast never-ending blackness ... maybe with a few galaxies-

-

Yes, that was it! There were galaxies in my coffee last night. That's what's nagging on my brain.

What a bizarre dream!

And Dorothy was there. And Mike was there. And Leon was there . . . kind of.

Now the nagging is really bugging me. "Come on," I moan, rubbing my temples. "This is my me-cuddles time of day."

Everything feels hot. Too hot. Like I'm wearing twenty puffy bathrobes instead of one. My head is starting to pound. Everything is suddenly feeling, more and more like a—

"Candid Camera!" I scream, waking up in the ball pit face down.

"Leon, help us!" shouts Dorothy.

"I-I-I don't know what to do!" replies Leon. Sounds like he's crying. The water streaming over my face suddenly tastes slightly salty.

"Do *something*," shouts Mike.

I can't see anything, but those two are still pressed against me.

Click-Click-Click-Click. The boots are walking towards us.

"Wake up!" I shout to myself. "Wake up and drink that brown coffee. WAKE UP!"

"Shut up, Tim!" yells Mike.

"Shut up?" I reply, shaking in the balls. "Did you seriously just tell me to shut up? I'm your *manager*." Mike would never tell James-the-Day-Manager to shut up.

Or would he?

Hmm, he probably would. I find myself respecting Mike just a little more. A very little.

The boot clicking stops. Suddenly, our bodies break away from one another, and our bodies are forcefully

unfolded into a standing position within the ball pen. The scary woman seems to have an invisible umbrella over her head as the rest of us are getting soaked. Her eyes are glowing even more brightly.

“Do something, Tim. She *likes* you,” whispers Dorothy.

“Ah. . . what’s your name?” I ask the mysterious superpower woman.

She blinks at me a moment, and almost seems to blush. The flames go down, just slightly. “I’m the Witch of the Wrest.”

“The west? West of space?” asks Mike.

“The *wrest*, w-r-e-s-t” she spits at him. “Not that I should expect anyone of you to know what that means. I’m the Witch of the Wrest. Whatever is not taken, is mine. Whatever is forgotten is mine. Whatever is overlooked, or undercut, or put out of sight, is mine. The *wrest*.”

“You mean the ‘rest’ r-e-s-t” says Leon, helpfully.

“I didn’t say, ‘rest’ now did I? You think I don’t know the difference? God, it’s so like – what species are you?” she whispers to me.

“Human,” I whisper back to her.

“It’s so like humans to think you know everything. And here you are, flying through the air in this grease filled spaceship—”

“Restaurant” corrects Leon.

“I said that!” she corrects back. “Here you come flying through in your grease filled spaceship, The Restaurant, and crush *my* sister on the Pink Planet.”

“We are sorry about your sister,” says Dorothy.

“None of knew she was anywhere nearby when we crashed. None of us were even conscious when it happened.”

“Yes, exactly. All of us were unconscious and totally blameless” adds Leon. “Don’t kill us!”

The witch leans into Dorothy.

“Have we met before?” she asks Dorothy. “I swear I know you, like *know* you somehow. You almost look like... but that’s impossible.”

Dorothy shrugs. “Like who?”

“It’s impossible.”

“Ouch!” yelps Mike, looking down now at his legs.

“What’s your name?” I ask her. The play pen balls seem to be melting with her heat. “Should we call you Wrest, or Witch, or . . .”

"You can call me Wendy," the angry wizard woman says to me. She leans into me and whispers, "And my sister and I, though technically I loved her, of course, we never really clicked. Actually, she was pretty vacant most of the time, just floated around and didn't say much. She was a blow up doll after all."

"How can a plastic blow up doll be your sister? You're flesh and blood," asks Dorothy.

"You don't pick your family, do you?" snaps Wendy, turning to Dorothy. "Anyhow, she wouldn't have wanted such a lesser and stupid species like you "humans" to be roasted at her expense. She was soft hearted that way, never actually *killed* when we went out. She'd just float around mostly while I took care of all the terrorizing. It was actually a bit pathetic. And yet she's Daddy's favourite."

"So we did you a favour?" I carefully reply.

Sparks fly from her fingers. "No! She might have just been hot air, but she was still my sister!"

"So what are you going to do to us?" asks Mike.

"Mike!" I whisper, "Don't ask those kinds of questions."

"I'm going to watch as your bodies explode after throwing you all into the vacuum of space."

The three of us give a somehow audible 'gulp'.

"Or, this one could give me her boots." Dorothy's body breaks free from its hold, and she falls back into the pen of balls.

"Fine!" Dorothy shouts. "I've had way too much of this already. Take the damn boots and see if I care. I don't want them anyhow."

Struggling in the balls, Dorothy tries to take off one of the emerald green boots. It won't budge.

"Damn it, my foot's stuck." She tries the other boot. "This one's stuck too."

"Here," says Wendy. And bending over the pen, she grabs the end of one of the boots and begins to pull. Steam issues from her ears as yank after yank, the boots won't budge.

"You two," she snaps her fingers at Mike and I. "Get those boots off of this one."

"Her name is Dorothy, Witch," says Mike.

Wendy snaps her fingers, and suddenly Mike has turned into a scarecrow! Even as an inanimate object, he is still listening to his damn music with those ear phones.

“What did you do to him?” yells Dorothy. That’s the most animated she’s been since Snapchat was invented.

“You, the good looking one,” says Wendy.

She’s talking to *me*!

“Get the boots off of her.”

“I’m on it,” I reply.

“You don’t need to be quite so happy about it, Tim.” Dorothy says to me.

I give her a shrug, and then start tugging on the boots, slipping into the soaking play pen. Tug after tug, I try. But they won’t come off.

“I can’t get them off.”

“You’re doing this on purpose!” shouts Wendy to Dorothy.

“I’m *not*.”

“Damn it. That idiot Arrogon told you all about their powers, and now you’re using them against me.”

“I am not.”

“Yes you are.”

“I am not.”

“Yes, you, are.”

The temperature is going up again. The entire restaurant is filling up with thick hot clouds of steam as the sprinklers keep raining down. Soon, I can’t even see my own hands.

“Leon,” I gasp. “Stop your crying. It’s too much.”

“Stopping, sir!” replies Leon.

“Vent the steam.”

“Venting, sir!”

Some of the windows open just a fraction, and within seconds the steam is sucked out of the restaurant. What I see next is basically the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen in my entire life.

Wendy is wrestling with Dorothy’s legs, trying to get off the boots through any means her hands and flames can conceive. Dorothy is flipping and squirming in the ball pen, shouting out more obscenities than I’ve ever heard *anyone* use.

All of a sudden, Dorothy points her finger at Wendy. “Get her!” she shouts.

And out from the pile of balls springs an angry pink teddy bear!

It flies past Dorothy and lands square on Wendy's face. Then, in one massive bite – bigger than I could have ever imagined a cute Teddy Bear could ever bite – the little guy *eats* the flaming, angry, pretty good looking too, witch!

As she fights and screams from inside his bulging fuzzy belly, the little pink teddy bear hobbles over to our entrance, opens the door, sticks out his head, and belches the witch out!

And there she goes, hurtling through space, screaming her head off and kicking her feet. But she's leaving. She is actually leaving! And within the blink of an eye, she has finally disappeared.

"What just happened?!" Attacking witches and bears are not covered in my managerial training.

"Processing," replies Leon.

"Wonderfully done!" cheers Dorothy. She pulls out the phone from her back pocket and snaps a picture. "Hashtag #dontfuckwithhim"

"Is this a live animal Dorothy? Or just a teddy bear? Because we have a strict Wurgers policy against animals in the restaurant."

The bear stares into me. It burps.

"Fair point," I reply.

Dorothy gets up from the ball pen, and steps out beside the little pink bear-of-insanity. Bending down, she lets the teddy crawl up into her arms. "And do you have a name?" she asks the bear.

It speaks some incomprehensible teddy bear language. Again, Dorothy nods as if she understands. "His name is Toto," she announces.

"How can you possibly–"

"You just gotta roll with it," she replies.

Turning around, she looks at Mike, pausing just enough for my instincts to recognize a moment for leadership. Though in all honesty, he's more charming as a scarecrow.

"We need to fix Mike," I say in my captain-of-a-spaceship voice.

"We need to fix Mike?" cries the newbie over the speakers. "What about me? How come no one has been worried about fixing me? He only *just* became a scarecrow. I've been a floating restaurant with no body this entire time. This is not normal!"

"Maybe I can try a spell for you both?" replies Dorothy. She is licking the remains of ketchup off the end of her hair. That is 100% gross. Wendy might have been a maniac, but at least she wasn't gross.

“Fine,” replies Leon.

Dorothy closes her eyes and says, “Fiddle de dee, fiddle deed dum, turn them back, as I bite my thumb!”

And she bites her thumb.

Nothing seems to change.

“Hmm, okay. Abracadabra!” She waves an arm.

Nothing.

“Alright then . . .” she mumbles.

“How did the Teddy bear get here anyhow? Did you magic him along?”

“I don’t know,” replied Dorothy. “I’m supposed to be magical, right?”

“I don’t know,” I reply. These are *not* the sort of FAQs in a Wurgers manager training manual. Maybe there is a space captain manual I can read?

“Okay, I’ll try another spell.”

Suddenly there’s this loud ticking sound, as if something is counting down. And we’re compelled to follow along.

“Eight, Seven, Six,”

We all say aloud.

I’m having some kind of reverse déjà vu.

“Five, Four, Three,”

I want to shout, ‘not again!’ but instead, all I can do is count those final numbers.

“Two, One!”

And with the sound of a mighty palm smacking against a massive forehead – Mike the Scare Crow gets thrown back deep into the ball pen with a puff of steam.

I look at Dorothy.

She looks at me.

“Did you do that?” I ask her.

“I don’t think so,” she replies.

“What the hell happened?” asks a voice from the ball pen. And then, with a bit of shuffling, up comes Mike in one whole, human piece. Holding his head and pulling out his headphone buds. He looks around, then looks over to me. “Is everything okay?”

What can you do in that kind of situation? I just nod.

Leon barks over the speakers: “I am still missing my body!”

I stand up tall and pat my belly.

“Who knows where we are, and who knows where we are going. But one thing is for sure, we aren’t on Earth anymore. And if we ever want to get home, we’re just going to have to keep going forward.” I declare.

“Why do none of you seem to notice that my body is missing?” whimpers Leon.

Looking out the window, the trail of yellow rock has moved off far ahead of us. It seems to be going *somewhere*, and when you have no clue where you are, it somehow feels more comforting to be following a sign – any sign.

“Seriously, we need to find my body, okay? This isn’t funny anymore.”

Walking to the front of the restaurant, I straighten my Wurgers uniform and adjust the name tag – ensuring it’s secure in its place. Grabbing the Wurgers microphone, I give my first official I-am-the-captain-not-day-manager-James-so-he-can-suck-it order.

“Newbie? Open the dopple jumper and prepare to leap.”

“Fine, ignore me,” he mutters.

“Newbie!”

“Okay, okay, preparing to jump, sir.”

“On my mark. Get set. Annnnd, jump!”

Forward we go, through this big black bunch of space to who knows where, and who knows whatever comes next.

“And if anyone needs me, I’ll be in the back, writing up the *captain’s* report.”

Overall, it’s been a good kind of day.

Chapter 2

“Captain, what do we do now?” shouts a voice somewhere in the far off distance. “Someone give him a shake.”

“Mike, wake up,” a hand shakes me.

“Wha?” I ask.

“Wake up,” says the hand that shakes me.

Opening my eyes I look up into the pretty face of – “Oh my god, not you!” I shout, now tipping backwards in my chair, trying to get away. Apparently I’ve been in a chair this whole time. It’s big and cushy and breaks my fall as chair and I crash into the ground. I try to get away: “You’re *not* turning me into a scarecrow again. Not this time, lady.”

“What’s wrong with him?” asks Tim.

“I don’t know,” replies the witch. “He looked at me and just started screaming.”

“We’ll all be screaming any second if someone doesn’t do *something*,” says the Newbie. *And* his face appears over me, concerned. I’m on the ground,

looking up at the Witch and Leon. Did we find his body or something? And what about Dorothy?

“Where’s Dorothy?” I ask.

“Who’s Dorothy?” answers the witch.

“Captain, I’m going to need an answer now. You wanted to be in charge. You were all ‘I’m the daytime manager and therefore more senior’ so you fix this problem *now*, Mr. Too Good for the rest of us.”

“Tim?” I ask to the room in general.

“What?”

“Where are you?”

There’s a blast of energy off to the right of the restaurant, barely missing us as we swerve sharp right.

“Torpedoes on the starboard bow,” says Wendy, pulling me off the ground with Leon’s help as the restaurant dodges here and there.

Shooting at us from space is what looks like a perfectly preserved ancient pirate ship – complete with the jolly roger and naked mermaid on the front.

“Oh my God, there really are pirates.” I whisper.

“That’s what I said, sir,” replies the witch.

I jump away again. She could explode any moment into crazy-person flames. “Turn on the sprinklers!” I shout.

“Are you out of your—”

“Don’t second guess in a crisis, dear,” says the little witch.

“Yes, honey,” replies Tim. “Yes, sir. Sprinklers, sir,” he mumbles.

The sprinkler system turns on. We stand there looking at one another, drenched from the downpour.

“Is this supposed to help, sir?” asks Leon . . . or Leon and his apparently not missing body. It’s confusing.

Another volley of torpedoes erupt from the pirate ship and comes flying straight toward us. The restaurant spins to the side, then somersaults away from the firing path. We’re still getting wet. All of us, even the witch.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“That’s it! We’re going into hyper jump!” announces Tim over the speakers.

“What’s hyperjum—”

Suddenly I’m flung back onto the floor alongside with the Witch and Leon and skidding across the ground, landing against and being sucked back against the front counter. The space we’re speeding through takes on a long streaky quality, and I think I see a butterfly somewhere out in the distance.

Just as suddenly as we took off, the Wurgers comes to a stop.

The two of them are looking at me *very* strangely. The sprinklers are still spilling their water.

“Okay,” I say. “Let’s turn ‘em off.”

The water stops. The rest is silence.

I stand up and edge away from whoever these people really are, bit by bit, and then make a break for the staff room below. Maybe if I can just lock myself in there and close my eyes really tight, all of this will go away.

With a click of the lock, I’m in the room and stripping off my wet clothes.

Where did Dorothy go? And why are they calling me captain? When did that psychotic witch join our restaurant? And *where* did Leon find his body? Walking over to my locker I pull out a shirt and some dry pants. All we have on board are Wurgers uniforms. Normally I throw on my apron too, but it

seems to be missing. Great, that'll be 20 bucks off my pay cheque.

"What the hell is going on?" I ask myself.

And that's when my eyes fall on it. The incident book. It's in my locker. It's got my favourite pen resting upon it. I open it up. Yep, there's my handwriting all over it!

"Still lost in space. After escaping the Pink Planet have been on a mission to find our way back home. Wendy is adamant that this Wizard the bears spoke about might be willing to help us. Leon keeps trying to hide in the closet. And Tim is as heartless as ever, even in his spaceship-computer form. We've been struggling over who is in charge, but really? He still thinks this is Candid Camera for God's Sake, and he doesn't even know where his body is!"

Following our encounter with the meteorite planet, it's been my proposal to launch a recon mission in an effort to accumulate enough info so that the wizard will trade with us the coordinates of Earth. But somehow word has gotten out about our presence and pirates are after us. One named The Lady Dorothona proves a very trying challenge. She has doggedly been chasing us galaxy to galaxy, with some bizarre notion that my brain holds the biggest untapped wealth of knowledge yet to be known in

our lifetimes. Or that's what she said to me last night over the intercom between torpedo rounds."

I shut the log book. This is ridiculous. Tim might be right about his Candid Camera theory.

"Knock knock," says the witch in what could be mistaken for an innocent voice.

"I'm not letting you in," I reply through the door.

"You're not the only one who needs a change of clothes, Mike. We're soaked, too."

"Why are you talking to me like we're friends?" I ask her.

"We're not friends?" she asks back. "I mean, I know there was that thing with you being promoted over Tim, but that's between the two of you," she goes on. "So come on, Mike. Just let me in."

"Is Leon with you?"

"He's making an order for some green aliens with three heads who stopped by the drive through. But he'll be down soon and wanting to get in too."

"How do I know you won't burn me alive. Or worse, turn me into a scarecrow again?"

"Ah, Mikey, I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure you don't."

“Okay, I promise not to burn you alive or turn you into a scarecrow and then burn you alive.”

Moments like these, all I want to do is turn on my music and turn off the world. My fingers reach into my pockets and find nothing. I look in my locker. Not there either.

Somehow my twitchy fingers get a life of their own and let in the Witch of the Wreath.

“Finally!” she says, stomping in with a trail of water behind her. “I don’t know *why* you wanted those sprinklers on Mike. But with a mind like yours, I’m sure there was a reason. You’re always three steps ahead of us, aren’t you?”

“Am I?” I ask.

She’s pulling off her uniform and I look away.

“Done,” she says.

She leans against a locker before flinging it open and grabbing a new shirt. That’s supposed to be Dorothy’s locker. And hey, those are Dorothy’s boots only red ruby.

“What happened to Dorothy?” I ask her.

“Who is Dorothy?” she asks.

“You know, long brown hair, big eyes, lips like jelly worms?”

“That’s weird.”

“It’s a thing,” I reply.

“Sounds like that crazy pirate woman to me. Did you get on a first name basis with her between all those torpedos?” she asks.

“What happened to your fire?” I ask. Surely there’s got to be some kind of power in those boots.

“Fire?” she asks. “Why do you keep asking about fire?”

“What’s your name . . .”

“Wendy,” she replies.

“And where is Tim?”

“He’s everywhere.”

“He’s the Wurger Ship?”

“Of course,” she replies. “What the heck is wrong with you, Mike? I’m Wendy, Tim’s body has disappeared, Leon started yesterday but he seems okay, terrified but okay, and you are in charge because you’re day manager and were popping in when we got sucked into space.”

I'm in charge? I can't remember ever being in charge my entire life. Maybe that one time when I was forced into being a team captain for that obstacle course challenge in gym class – but since then, no. Ever since the tire hopping incident during that course, no one has trusted me to make any kind of decisions...

"This might sound really stupid, but I think I'm in the wrong reality," I say.

She smiles. When not crazed with flames, she's kind of pretty in a porcelain doll way.

"Wrong reality?" she laughs.

"Wrong dimension, maybe? In my reality, you are a really angry woman who spouts fire and wants retribution for killing your blow-up doll sister – and you want to steal Dorothy's boots."

"These boots?" she asks, pointing to her red footwear. "That green cape guy said they were important, but I can't figure out what they do for the life of me."

"Not those boots. You want to steal Dorothy's boots. They're green."

"So you *are* talking about The Lady. She has bright green boots. She's suddenly become a friend of yours? I thought she wanted to dissect your brain?"

I shrug and plop down onto a chair next to our small staffroom table. "I don't know what is going on. But whatever Mike you are used to, I'm not him. I flip burgers in the back and keep my mouth shut all the time. My phone doesn't get reception, but it has over 1,000 songs on it and every single one is gold. Where I come from, Tim is in charge during nights, I work in the kitchen, and Leon is the guy with the missing body. And, it's Dorothy whose on our side – you are the flaming maniac who is trying to kill us."

"I wouldn't do that."

"You would too."

"Would I, really?"

"A hundred percent."

"Even Tim?"

"Is Tim special?"

"He's only my fiancée."

"Yeah, I'm definitely in the wrong reality," I reply.

"None of this is right."

"Maybe you were just having a bad dream or something."

I lean back and close my eyes, willing this all to go back to normal. But nothing comes. Maybe if I can

just fall asleep again, then things will flip back. Wendy will be gone, Dorothy will be here. She has a way of helping things feel normal even when they're totally abnormal.

So what is this? A different dimension, a new reality, the rewrite of a script? This is the exact sort of thing that happened to the crew on Start Trek Next Generation all the time. They'd wake up and be in a different reality. I've just got to keep my head and look for an opening to switch back.

Wendy is humming Frère Jacques, poking through her locker. Shouldn't she be up on the deck discussing with Tim about how to keep avoiding the space pirates? Or maybe I'm the one who should be up there?

There's a clear crackle of static, and Tim clears his voice.

"No surprise, they've caught up to us again. I've been playing hide and seek with them through this meteor field, but it's only a matter of time till they blast us out of the sky. So, if you're done with your meltdown, Mike, we could use you up here."

I look over at Wendy, her eyes have this look in them that says "Come on, Mikey, you can do it!"

"Fine," I reply. "I'm coming up."

"Wonderful!" exclaims Wendy, slamming the locker door shut. "I knew you'd be fine."

"Right, totally fine," I reply. My hand twitches again, reaching for headphones that aren't there.

I head up to the main floor with Wendy behind me. There are rumbles and flashes coming from outside the restaurant. Out there in space it's meteors as far as the eye can see. Wurgers is moving back and forth between them. Streams of lights are shooting in volleys, spraying against the massive rocks.

"Maintain evasive maneuvers," I say as my first command.

"Obviously," replies Tim.

Wendy gives one of the cameras a stern look.

"I mean 'Yes Sir,'" says Tim, with a sigh.

She gives him a smile and a wink. For just a moment, the climate in the restaurant shoots up a few noticeable degrees before it calms back down. I wonder how things are working between them now that Tim is a spaceship? Or actually, no, I don't wonder. I'd rather not know.

"Do we have any kind of weapons in our restaurant?"

"We're a peaceful restaurant," says Wendy.

“Right, but we must have weapons. We’re floating around in space,” I reply.

“I’m five steps ahead of you,” replies Tim. “So far, I’ve analyzed the device detonating the energy torpedoes on the pirate ship. It looks easy enough to replicate, but . . . we don’t have enough power on the ship to issue the needed blasts of pure energy.”

“What do you need?”

“More fuel. And we don’t have much of that.”

“We’re a peaceful restaurant,” replies Wendy. “Why would we have torpedo fuel on board? We don’t fight. We cook. We make burgers and fries and chicken nuggets. I don’t like the precedence for violence being set here today.”

“That’s it!” I say, and my fingers snap with surprise enthusiasm. “We’ll cook for them!”

“Sir?” asks Tim.

“Tim, you keep us dodging. Leon, fire up the burners. We’re going to stuff them silly with number sixes – double decker cheeseburgers with a super large fry, double plus sodas and hot apple pie! Let’s get cooking, Leon!”

I jump over the counter, and there’s Leon on the floor collapsed into a heap.

“What the hell happened to him?” I ask, crouching down beside him.

Wendy looks over the counter, shaking her head. “Poor guy, that’s the sixth time he’s passed out in two days.”

“What is he, sick?” I ask.

“Panic attacks,” replies Tim. “Over and over and over. I just let him rest now. Every time something happens on this ship, the kid panics to the point of hyperventilating. Then he passes out, and we get on with things.”

“Ah, Wendy, help Leon wake up and give him something strong to drink. Okay?”

“One energy drink coming up!” she replies, pouring from the soda fountain.

“I’m going to get cooking. Tim you—”

“I know, keep dodging. But whatever this plan is, I think it’s stupid. Just for the record, you have a stupid plan.”

“Noted, Tim. Now, one more thing.”

“Yeah.”

"I need some music. Access my player, and crank up my AC/DC album. And when I say crank up, I mean play it so loud I can't hear myself think."

"Not again."

"Tim . . ." warns Wendy.

"Alright," he replies. "Here we go"

And on comes *Thunderstruck* and off I go, into the kitchen, the world I like best.

*

"Thirty two orders of Number sixes packed and ready to go!" shouts Wendy over Brian Johnson's signing. "Can we stop the music now?" she asks.

"Tim, cut the music," I yell.

I add our makeshift white flag, a napkin glued to a straw, on top of the massive take away order.

"You think the white flag is a universal symbol of surrender out here too?" I ask Leon, who is still in the corner of the kitchen nursing his third energy drink.

"I hope so," he replies.

"We're not *really* giving up, are we? You know they want to cut open your brain or something."

"No, we're not really giving up," I reply. "We're just thinking differently."

Opening the takeout window, we squeeze the massive package of food, drink and ketchup packets through and pass it out into space. It floats there with a bubble of atmosphere around it that Tim has somehow engineered.

"Okay Tim, take us away from the package and I'll need a channel through to the pirate ship."

"Fine," he replies. We move further and further away from the delivery. Once it's just a small speck amongst the giant rocks, I grab the takeout microphone and begin speaking.

"Attention Space Pirates! We are tired of running from you. Please accept a gift of our goods, so that you can get a taste of what we can offer if you choose to be merciful. We could be your cooks! We'd need to take the kitchen with us, and the freezer, and the packing supplies . . . so we might as well take the entire restaurant with us, but we can have it tag along behind your ship, or you can put a leash on it if you like."

"Hey," says Tim.

I wave him off.

“Anyhow,” I continue. “Give it a try and let us know what you think. Maybe you *don’t* need to cut open my head, and we can just be your kitchen guys instead? Ah. . . okay, that’s all. Over and Out.”

“What next?” asks Wendy.

“Now we wait.”

Floating between meteors, we watch the package. It floats there slowly turning as if it’s on one of those display cases in the department store windows. A massive light switches on from behind one of the meteors as a beam shines onto the package. The pirate ship sails into view.

Honestly, I never thought there’d be pirate ships in space, but then there’s been a load of things lately that I never thought possible.

It stays a fair distance away from the package, and then, leaping over the side of the railing is a tiny pink spot that begins moving toward the food. It stops. It circles the package a few times. And then, it begins to drag the package back to the ship.

“Did they take it?” asks Leon from his back corner.

“They took it,” says Wendy.

“That’s good?” he asks.

“I hope so,” I reply.

The pink dot drags the package back and then both the dot and the package are gone onto the ship.

“What do we do now?” asks Tim.

“Now we wait,” I reply.

*

“Incoming holo message,” announces Tim.

“What’s that?” I ask.

“What does it sound like?” he replies.

There’s a few blinks of light in the foyer of the restaurant, and then she appears in front of us.

“Dorothy? I thought I’d never see you again!”

I want to run over and hug her, but I can’t. She’s just an image – a translucent 2D thing.

She pauses for a moment, as if an “um?” is playing on her lips. But it passes as fast as it happens. Something about her changes. “How did you do it, Wurgers Man? How did you manage to disguise the poison so thoroughly that not even our scanners could detect the contamination?”

“What?” I ask.

“The food. How did you do it? What did you lace it with? I demand to have the antidote, or there will be no more cat and mouse games, I’m gonna blast you from the sky point blank.”

“Sir, she’s insinuating that we served sub-par quality food. Can you please tell The Lady that we at Wurgers would *never* knowingly serve a customer bad food. It’s against every rule in the book.” Tim is warming up the restaurant again.

“Calm down, Tim. I’m sure that’s not what she is saying.”

“Actually, that’s exactly what I’m saying,” replies Dorothy.

“Blasphemy!” shouts Tim.

“Honey, get a hold on yourself or you’ll bake us alive,” says Wendy, wiping her brow. “Really sweetheart, please calm down.”

“I need a minute of Tim time,” replies Tim. Suddenly he’s gone. I don’t know how he is gone, but there is a definite ‘goneness’ in the restaurant.

“Seriously, give me the antidote now or you will all die,” says Dorothy again.

There’s a sound of a chair skidding in the back. Leon has passed out.

“Wendy, can you please go help Leon?” I ask.

“Fine,” she replies – but gives one hell of a dirty look to Dorothy before she heads back into the kitchen.

“Did you eat the food?” I ask Dorothy, or The Lady . . .

“Of course I did. We’ve been chasing your ship for three days, that’s three days without stopping for groceries.”

“And how do you feel?”

“I’m okay.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“My crew are totally incapacitated. They can barely move, and their bodies have nearly doubled in size with gas. You can picture that in your head? Their rat bodies are full of *gas*. I’ve had to pack them all in the brig and air lock them in, this place is toxic right now.”

“They’ll be fine. It’s been happening to most of the aliens we’ve been servicing. Love the food, hate the way it makes them feel. But for some reason, they keep coming back. But you’re okay?”

“Of course I am.”

“It’s because you’re human, I think.”

“The nerve!”

“What did I say?”

“Look Wurgers, all I need is your brain *not* your attitude. For starters, you keep calling my Dorothy. It’s Dorothina, which is my first name - and *nobody* is allowed to use my first name. And then you say I’m human, which is the most ridiculous accusation I’ve ever heard! It’d be hilarious if it wasn’t so offensive. God, you should have the words “Rude Fool” tattooed to your forehead.”

“Well what about you?” I shoot back. “Who is the one trying to hunt down who? And for what? To cut open my head!”

“It’s for the greater good.”

“It makes no sense!”

Dorothy – or Dorothina — or the Lady – shrugs. There’s definitely something about her that is far more Lady and much less Dorothy. She is standing taller, and her hair is pulled back in a way that can only be called severe yet dramatic. And the ways she speaks, she’s not disconnected like I’ve seen her before. She’s not on her phone or thinking of something else. She’s here, even if in projected form, and she seems to be stronger for it.

I can’t help but wonder how I look to her. Am I the same old unremarkable Mike she always sees? Well, if she wants my brain then maybe not. Suddenly, I have an idea.

“Right, “Lady,” so you—”

“Don’t you air quote me.”

“I didn’t.”

“I heard it in your voice.”

“So you are saying your whole crew is incapacitated,” I continue.

“That’s right,” she replies.

“Thank you very much.”

“For what?”

“For the information. Wendy and Leon, put on your jackets we’re going on an outing.”

“Where to?” asks Wendy from the back.

“We’re boarding the pirate ship!”

“What?!” shouts Leon, rising from the floor.

“You can’t be serious,” replies The Lady.

“I’ve never been more serious in my entire life,” I reply.

With a flicker, the hologram disappears.

*

The ship is eerily quiet as our grease bubble of air bursts against the pirate ship, and we step onto the deck. It's deserted and dark, except for a few swinging lanterns and strings of white fairy lights. The ship is swaying on an unseen current, and there's a definite creak to its movement that suggests it's been sailing the stars for many, many years. Unlike the fluorescent lights of the Wurgers, this place is positively moody.

"She goes in for atmosphere, doesn't she?" says Wendy, poking a lantern from its shelf and kicking it across the ship as the flame goes out within. "If this were my space pirate ship, I'd have something more impressive than tea lights."

Leon is clutching a supersized cup of black coffee that is spiked with about ten packs of sugar. If this doesn't get his blood pressure up there, nothing will.

"Leon, you doing that breathing we agreed is so important?" I ask him.

Leon nods.

"Why did you bring him anyhow?" asks Tim from my phone. "He's only going to pass out and then what? We leave him here for the pirates to claim?"

"No!" squeaks Leon. "I won't pass out. I won't pass out. I won't pass out."

"We brought him because he's one of the team," I reply.

A two headed rat peers out from behind the pile of sails and scurries past us, grabbing an abandoned fry and disappearing between two floor boards.

"Did you see that - two heads!" whispers Leon.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," hums Wendy, picking up one of the lanterns and swings it right and left. "We need more light than this. She could be hiding anywhere."

"Should we fan out?" asks Tim.

"Tim, you're in the phone. You can't fan out," I reply.

"I know that."

"Okay then. Just let me think for a minute and I'll come up with a plan," I say.

"You brought us out here without a *plan*?" whispers Leon.

“Here Lady, Lady,” coos Wendy. “Come out and play. Think you can chase us across the galaxy do you? I’ll show you how to chase across the galaxy!”

“What ever happened to us being a peaceful restaurant?” I ask her.

“That chick is a bully. And now, she’s an undefended bully.”

“With magical boots and torpedoes,” I remind her.

“Hey, she’s not the only one with magic boots!” replies Wendy. The flame in her lantern flares as she says ‘boots’ and turns into a large ball of light. Wendy drops the lantern and the flame spills out of the holder, onto her legs.

“Put it out!” shouts Leon, jumping away.

“Drop and roll, Wendy!” I shout.

But Wendy starts giggling and waving her hand through the flames on her body.

Suddenly, she’s reminding me of a very different Wendy from a very different world. My world.

“What so funny, hunh Wendy?” I carefully ask her, watching the flame go down to her feet and back into the lantern.

“It tickled,” she replies. “The flame tickled me.”

“Who is tickling Wendy?” demands Tim. “Only one person is allowed to tickle my fiancée, and that’s me!”

I hold up my phone so Tim can get a look at Wendy playing with the fire. She’s poking her hand into the lantern light, and the flame is running up her fingers and along her arms like tiny kittens, lighting up her face and making her blond hair seem white. The flames suit her, unfortunately.

“Oh Tim,” she says. The flames disappear as she stands up again. “I love it when you’re defensive.”

“Ah, well. You know me.”

Wendy makes a mushy face at my phone and I have to look away. That’s when I see the two headed rat once more. It’s watching us. Our eyes meet (in the rat’s case, many, many eyes), and it scampers away.

“Follow that rat!” I say, chasing it across the floor of the ship – around piles of rope and cloth and scattered Wurgers napkins, along the railing, under the mast, past the massive wheel. It slips through a large doorway and disappears into a dark interior. I slide through as well, just as Wendy shouts “Wait,” in the distance. The door slams shut behind me. Spinning around in the pitch blackness, I try to open the knob. I pull and twist but somehow it’s locked itself shut.

“Don’t waste your strength,” says a voice behind me.
“We’re going to need you in good shape for what comes next. . .”

With that, a hand claps over my mouth and I’m dragged across the dark room. With the burst of a match, a soft glow fills the room and there she is, Dorothy, lighting one candle, then another, and another and another till the room is filled with candles and she’s there standing by a large mirror that’s resting upon a mantle of an unlit fireplace.

“Yugoframpshr” I say through the hand.

“What’s that?” says the owner of the hand lifting it away.

“You do go in for atmosphere,” I repeat.

“Don’t let him speak until I say it’s okay, okay?”
Dorothy says.

From behind, something damp and fuzzy clamps across my mouth.

“Tie him up so he can’t move,” says Dorothy.

Suddenly two headed rats are running all over my body. I’d scream, but it’s impossible. So instead I thrash until I can’t thrash anymore. I’m tied to the chair with many, many threads.

“Comfy?” asks The Lady . . . or Dorothy—or no, Dorothona...

In one world, she’s my friend. In this world, she’s not. But it still somehow feels like she should be. It’s all really confusing.

“Yhifn,” I reply.

“Okay, let him go and check on the others, please.”

My mouth is uncovered.

I spit out some lint. “Yeah, I’m fine,” I say again.

“Good to know,” she replies.

The floor creeks and the door opens, then closes behind me as her helper goes away.

Dorothy – I’m going to think of her as Dorothy otherwise it’s too weird. Some part of her is the Dorothy I know. Dorothy sits down in front of me and pulls a set of rubber gloves out from her pocket.

“As we speak, my crew is rounding up your little ragtag band of misfits,” she replies, carefully putting on the gloves. “I think your crew will find it difficult to fight a swarm of rats.”

I think of Leon. Poor, poor Leon. Hopefully he’s already passed out by now. A rat runs in and jumps upon Dorothy’s shoulder, squeaking into her ear and

looking at me with one of its heads . . . making what I can only guess is a mean rat face. Dorothy nods. “Good, keep them comfortably confined. Give the little one a drink to help him perk up.” The rat runs off.

“I mean, I’m a pirate but I’m not cruel. The young thin male you have on your team has apparently been unconscious since you stepped into my cabin. He spilled his brown liquid everywhere.”

“Yeah, he’s a bit of a coward, but I think this experience will be good for him.”

Dorothy nods and smiles. She snaps the glove on with a final tug. “It will be good for everyone,” she replies. “Now, do you prefer I cut into the front part of your brain, or the back?”

“I prefer you don’t cut at all!”

Dorothy stands up and picks up a long, sharp knife. She sighs. “It’s a shame, you know. You do have a nice head. Maybe we can save you some of it?”

“I thought your crew were supposed to be incapacitated?”

“Oh, that.”

“Yeah, that. You *lied* to me.”

“Of course I lied to you. My crew are rats. Rats can eat anything. We’ve heard about your food from all over this corner of the galaxy already. People are raving about the ‘pleasure pain’ dining your Wurgers is offering. Don’t think I wasn’t onto you when you put out that package of take away.” She puts down the knife and sits back in front of me. “I don’t make a habit of lying, Mike, but it is quite useful at times.”

“So you do know my name.”

“I know *many* of your names.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“You know what it means.”

“Humour me. I mean, you’re about to cut open my brain. It’s the least you could do.”

“Not really. This is the least I could do.”

She tips my head back against the chair. “I think I’ll go right for the middle and get the best part.”

“But you’re my friend!” I shout. “We’re friends. We’ve been friends for over a year! Back on Earth, we’re buddies.”

And this stops her cold. Putting down the knife, she paces across the room toward the door. Kicking it, she storms back, the candle flames are whipping up behind her.

Standing next to the mantle and mirror again, she stares at her reflection silently. The room is filled with nothing but the occasional creak of the ship's bones. The knife is resting on the small table just in front of me. And she's just staring at herself still. After a while, she lets out a long sigh, and kicks off her boots.

"I didn't know you could take those off," I reply.

"Of course I can. They're just boots," she replies.

"Magic boots."

"They're my boots, so I can take them off all that I want. And besides, they kill my feet as heels. You try wearing pirate-style emerald boots all day and see how it makes your feet feel."

"Give them to me and I'll try it."

She almost smiles, still staring at herself. "I don't need to wear them. They're mine, that's all that matters. The magic is mine."

"Hmm," I reply, because what do you say when someone is confessing the secrets of their footwear to you while you're tied up waiting to have your head cut open? Well, you might say this:

"Did I say something to upset you?"

Breaking away from the mirror, she plunks herself down in front of me again, picking up the knife and looking at herself once more in the reflection. She smacks down the knife and comes in close, pointing her finger into my chest. "I know you have the mind of a genius buried within your brain, but how the hell did you know I'm part Human? Who told you? Can you smell it off of me? Is there a rumour going around?"

"No," I reply.

"Then what is it?"

"I know, because I'm from Earth, and we've been working together for the past year at Wurgers, and all that time you came off as mostly human."

"How can you even say that? It's so insulting! Humans are the bottom of the gene pool, my brain-blocked friend. They are stuck. While the rest of us are whirling around the universe, your kind are fixed in one spot arguing over whose stick is bigger. No way would I spend time there, not even in your Wurgers."

"Oh," I reply.

"No one out here ever thought it was worthwhile to bother with your planet. You folks are too human for your own good."

“But you’re human too.”

“*Half* human. And if you tell anyone . . .”

“You’ll cut off my head?”

She waves the knife around like it was nothing.

“Don’t be ridiculous, I’m not going to cut off your entire head. I just need a teeny tiny piece of your brain. Really, it’s no big deal.”

“And why do you need my brain?” I say. “It’s not like there’s anything in it, anyhow.”

She laughs and sits back in the chair again, lowering the knife.

“Can you put down the knife while we’re talking. It’s distracting.”

She puts it down and pulls her boots back on. “I’ve been talking to the Wizard of Foz, and he told me about your arriving to our part of space. He does standard past life traces on everyone whose DNA he can collect, and somehow, he got yours. Well it’s been big news, believe you me. According to him, *your* brain contains the past-life imprint of one of the most important researchers who has ever existed, Supreme Thinker Itt Van Otthom.”

“It van what?”

“Otthom. And you are him. Not your body exactly, but your mind. He is you, you are him – he was you in your past life.”

“I don’t think so. I’m 100% unremarkable. Heck, it’s remarkable how unremarkable I am. I make unremarkable choices. I choose unremarkable options. And I’ve certainly never been pinpointed as a genius, ever.”

Just for one second, she gives me a look that Dorothy, my reality Dorothy, has given me so many times before. But only for a second. “It’s in you,” she says. “And I’m going to extract it – you can keep the rest, I only need a little for what I’m doing.”

“And that is?”

“Finding the key to unlock the greatest booty that has ever existed: Over The Rainbow. Otthom spent his entire life calculating and researching this place that most people assumed doesn’t exist. But he found it, oh yeah, and then he went and died without telling anyone where it was! But now, I’m going to find it too.”

“How do you know he found it?”

“Because, idiot, I ransacked his home after the guy passed on and found his journals. You don’t go into pirating because it’s nice to cruise amongst the stars

on a fine, clear night. You go into it for the thrill of the chase.”

“But if he was so smart, why am I so . . . me?”

She shrugs. “Maybe it skips a life.”

“I’m not even from this dimension. And maybe in that other dimension, I’m not actually the reincarnation of this Ott Home Guy.”

“Even if you are jumping dimensions, you can’t change who you are. Whatever you are here, is whatever you are there. Circumstances differ, but you are the same.”

“Hmm.”

“Okay! Time for a quick incision. This won’t hurt one bit.”

Grabbing the knife, she pushes my head back and scratches the top of my scalp with the blade. But in the very next moment, the entire room erupts with white hot burning light. The candle lights suddenly became pillars of fire, and the door to the cabin bursts back.

“I like these powers!” shouts Wendy through the door frame, flames parting before her, and flames dancing behind her.

Dorothina throws the knife towards Wendy in the doorway. Before it can reach her heart, Wendy melts it with her heat and the molten metal drops to the floor.

“Fire!” shouts The Lady – she’s far more pirate lady and far less my Dorothy now. “*You* have the power of fire?”

“Apparently I do!”

Dorothy waves a hand and I glide across the room away from the path between them.

The flames streak toward me and begin creeping up my legs. Not burning me, but working on the fibres that have me tied to the seat. It’s still really damn hot. This approach is going to leave me cooked.

Dorothy twists her finger in the air, and with the whirl of a mini cyclone, the flames all across me are extinguished. I don’t know if I should thank her or curse her.

“Thank me, honey,” says Dorothy, looking back with a wink.

Dorothy jumps to the side as a bolt of fire streaks toward her, shattering the mirror upon the mantle.

“Holy hell, you can read my mind?” I tell The Lady as Wendy sends another streak, giggling uproariously to

herself with each blow. Smoke is filling the cabin, I don't know which thing will kill me first: The Pirate, the smoke or the flames.

"I'm baking, Wendy!" I shout.

Wendy's giggling stops.

The flames die down, but they don't disappear.

Dorothina seizes the moment and lifts up the bookcase, whipping out each book and shooting them rapidly toward Wendy, who jumps back as the pages go flying by.

There's too much smoke. I've got to get down. Rocking my seat back and forth, it and I topple over together and smash onto the floor. It's warm down here, but not quite burning. Not yet.

"Wendy, the fire!" I shout.

"I can't stop it. It's too much!" she shouts back over the escalating noise of the fight on the deck.

"Dorothy, blow it out!"

"It's Dorothina!" she shouts back to me.

Dorothina twists her finger again, and several room destroying tornadoes fill the space, pulling at the flames but not extinguishing.

"You have more power than you can control, "Wendy", if that is your real name," says Dorothy to Wendy as she peeks through the doorway. "Why don't you give me those boots, and let me fix things?"

"Don't do it, Wendy!" I shout.

Wendy tries to stop the fire again. But it's no good. The diminished flames are gaining speed and growing despite her efforts. We're all going to die in here if I don't get these ropes off.

With the flick of her finger, Dorothina blows Wendy out of the room entirely and I hear her scream go far, far away. This pirate woman has blown Wendy right off the ship. She's thrown Wendy into space!

"Don't be an idiot," says Dorothina. "I wouldn't do that to one of my own."

In the next moment, the rats are back on top of me, running over and over my binds, biting them off – some of the buggers biting me at the same time – and then they are gone.

I'm free.

Coughing, I get up on my knees to crawl, but the place is going dark. My head is so heavy, it's hard to coordinate my limbs. Does this arm go here? And then what?

A strong arm scoops me up. Everything feels numb except for the heat on the bottom of my feet as they are dragged along the ground. The floor is hot.

I'm pulled out of the cabin and back onto the deck of the ship. There's a gentle swirling of air around my face, and then – with a hard push, it dives into me and fills up my lungs. I push back with a whooping cough, and so we do this back and forth till the dizziness stops, and the black spots go away.

Dorothisa is crouching above me and she leans in close. "I really wouldn't have taken much of your brain. Just a pinch," she says. "It wouldn't have hurt, and you wouldn't have missed it."

All around her the fire is growing larger and hotter. There's the scratching sound of many tiny claws running all at once, someone pale and small is swinging from the huge central mast – it's Leon. Leon has become a human monkey-animal thing. He roars.

"If you wanted to know some big secret about booty, you could have just asked," I reply.

"It doesn't work that way. You don't even know what you carry inside of your mind."

"Don't you mean soul? Past life. How can you be so sure my soul is in my brain?"

"Educated guess," she replies. Then she gives a sigh. "The rats are abandoning ship, jumping over the railing."

A pink teddy bear with an eye patch taps her on the shoulder. It's Toto! He's singing.

"I'm coming Toto, just one more minute." The teddy bear squeaks then runs off.

With a high pitched creak of wood, the mast with its burning sails sways to the side and comes crashing down above us – smothering the ship with a blanket of fire and kindling.

"You and your friends won't survive here. You need to get off, now," says Dorothisa.

She's right. It's hot as hell and promising to become worse. The breathable air of the ship is fast filling with smoke and smoke alone.

"I want to make this clear," I say, stifling my cough. I can sit up now, just enough to get onto my elbows. "What I'm about to do isn't for you the pirate, Dorothisa. It's for Dorothy, my Dorothy."

I lean into her and take her face in my hand, there's a lot less Lady in her now, and a lot more Dorothy. Bringing myself forward, we kiss. For one long, quiet, perfect moment, we kiss.

And then she gently pulls away. “That was nice. Even if it was only meant for a part of me, it was nice. Maybe one day you’ll want to kiss all of me – the pirate, the lady and the girl.”

“Maybe one day you won’t want a piece of my brain.”

She holds up a tiny glass vile, and inside is the smallest yellow sliver of something. It looks golden like a piece of straw, but alive somehow. “Oh that?” she asks, waving the vile. “I already got that.”

“That’s my brain?” I ask. Because that doesn’t look like brain to me.

“It’s your brain,” she replies with a wink. “Well, it’s one form of your brain. You gave me an idea with that different dimension thing. So, I just helped myself to a little piece of you in another reality, another story, another life, a piece of straw. It was an amicable exchange, and without blood or knives or anything. Quite brilliant really.”

“When the hell did you have a chance to do any of that?”

She shrugs, then coughs. “Just one of my tricks, Mike,” she replies.

Then she leans in and kisses me – all of her, the pirate, the lady, the witch and the girl. It’s strong and firm and decisive.

“See you next time,” she says with a wink. “I’m off to see the Wizard.” Then she stands, runs and jumps off the edge of the pirate ship. Just as I think she’s gone and flung herself into the void of space, a small space dingy rises above the railing and putters away, then leaps out of sight.

The next thing I know, Leon has scooped me up in his arms, and I hear Tim’s voice, “Well done, buddy. I knew you had it in you.” The phone has been tied onto Leon’s shoulder.

Leon isn’t himself. He’s got crazy eyes and is carrying me in one arm, while the other hand is clutching a large bottle of something white and sloshy inside. We are running across the collapsing ship deck, and none of the massive pillars of fire or splintering wood seems to phase him.

“Leon, are you okay, man?”

“AHHHH!” he screams.

“Don’t worry, that’s all he can say at the moment,” says Tim. “Leon, put Mike down next to the mermaid.”

“AHHHHH!” replies Leon.

We reach the front of the ship, the last place that doesn't seem to be covered in raging fire, and there's Wendy stuck between a pile of nets, swearing a streak that I won't repeat. I jump down from Leon and begin pulling her out of the net, carefully, layer by layer.

"We need to get out of here now," I say.

"Obviously," replies Tim. "We've been waiting for you this entire time."

Coming from around the nearest meteor, Wurgers appears and the fluorescent lights and massive windows have never looked more beautiful. The restaurant pulls up to the burning pirate ship, docking itself on top of the only stable structure, the wooden mermaid herself.

With the last layer of netting, I pull Wendy up from the mess.

"That bitch!" she shouts. "I just want to get my hands on her and pull out every-single-hair on her stupid head!"

"Yes, dear. We'll get her next time," says Tim. And I swear to goodness he gets the phone to wink.

Wendy lifts two arms above her head, forming a fire ball in the air – no, not a fire ball, a MASSIVE fireball. Holy hell it's huge!

"Onto the ship!" I order, and jump over the railing, onto the mermaid's back and into the Wurgers.

Screaming at the top of her lungs, Wendy flings her arms forward as the fireball follows.

"Leon!" I shout.

Leon grabs Wendy with his free hand, and carries her screaming back onto the Wurgers as the fireball roars into the center of the ship with an enormous burst of light.

"Closing doors," says Tim as they shut behind us and the Wurgers leaps away.

As we cruise back into the cool blackness of space, the receding pirate ship breaks and burns and eventually, there is nothing left. Somehow space feels more empty than ever before.

*

An hour later I call a team meeting. Wendy has cooled down, quite literally. Tim is navigating us out of the meteor field, and Leon is nursing another massive cup of coffee. We had to hide his bottle of white stuff when he wasn't looking – because the

kids was out of control. I guess what he's experiencing now could be called withdrawal.

"Everyone feeling themselves again?" I ask.

"Unfortunately," says Leon.

"Barely," replies Wendy.

"I'm still a machine," says Tim.

"Lucky for us, I know a guy who can fix everything."

"Whose that?" asks Tim.

"The wizard," I reply.

"Who is the wizard?" asks Wendy.

"Yeah, and how come we don't know about him, but you do?" says Tim.

"I've been telling you all this time. I'm not the Mike you know. I'm a different Mike. I'm Mike who flips burgers in the back of the restaurant and doesn't bother anyone."

"You bother me all the time," says Tim.

"You're a special case, Tim," I reply. "What I mean is, I've done things and seen stuff that in this dimension we haven't done or seen. And the wizard is the guy."

The all shrug. Well, Leon and Wendy shrug.

"Come on guys, we're on an adventure of a lifetime. Sure we were almost blown to bits. Sure someone was trying to kill us for a while. Sure we haven't got a clue how to find Earth again. But these are incredible times.

"Wendy? What about those boots? Those are some boots, aren't they?"

She looks down at her bright red boots. They don't have a burn mark on them. "I like them," she concedes.

"And Leon. You were an animal on that ship! I didn't know you had it in you to be so wild!"

"All I really remember is waking up and them giving me a drink. The rest is a blur of rats and some really pink teddy bear."

"You were actually really impressive," says Wendy.

"They had me surrounded and pretty much trapped. It wasn't till Leon went berserk that my panic brought on the powers even stronger."

"See, Leon? You saved us – have you ever saved people before?"

"No, I haven't" he replies with the trace of a smile hiding behind the coffee cup from which he's drinking.

“And Tim!”

“Yes?”

“Tim, you . . . you . . . you are in love with Wendy, and actually rather sweet to her. And that shows a lot more heart than I thought you had.”

“Let’s not get emotional, alright,” he replies.

“All I’m saying, is that we are doing okay. Leon might feel like garbage from his hangover, Tim might be a machine, and Wendy might be some powerful pyromaniac – but we’re doing okay.”

“You’re doing a pretty good job yourself,” says Wendy. “I don’t know how you got away from The Lady, but I can tell you this – you’ve come up with some really good plans for tight escapes so far.”

“I have, haven’t it?”

“Not bad,” says Tim.

“So, set a course for the Wizard, Tim.”

“And the wizard is where?” he asks.

“Right, well. I have no idea.”

We stop for a moment to think. And then it happens, out there in space I see the long yellow strip of lava floating out beyond us. It looks a bit like a road in the

distance, curved and smooth and promising. I know that strip. That’s *my* bit of lava.

“Follow that yellow lava road!” I say.

“What?”

“Just do it. I have a hunch.”

“Fair enough,” say Tim.

And off we go.

“Mike, what’s this?” asks Wendy. She leans over behind me and pulls out a long yellow piece of straw from my shirt collar.

The scratch of the straw gives me some kind off flash back, or maybe flash sideways. “It’s straw. It reminds me of that time you. . .”

“That time I?”

But I can’t finish my sentence because the room is spinning and everything is dripping into each other. The colours on the ceiling are pouring down onto me and swirling in circles of light. There’s a loud ticking in the distance, and suddenly it feels like everyone is counting down backwards, six, five four, three, two

I brace myself.

One.

With the force of a jet plane throwing me back, I go flying through time and space and then land hard against something soft.

“What the hell happened?” I ask. There are colourful balls all around. It looks like the play pen.

My hand instinctively raises to my headphones - they're there! I pull them out. “Everything okay?” I ask.

Leon barks over the speakers: “I am still missing my body!”

I gaze around as Tim begins to make some kind of speech. My eyes lock onto Dorothisa—no, Dorothy. She's normal. She's my Dorothy, I think. And Tim has his body. And Wendy is ... not here?

The ship jumps forward into hyper space. Still feeling dazed, I look around. “Wendy?”

“The witch? Haven't seen her in a while,” replies Tim.

“I had the strangest dream,” I reply. “I was the captain of our restaurant.”

Tim laughs. “Right, definitely a dream.”

I look at Tim's laughing face, and Dorothy's concerned expression.

“And you were there, and you were there.”

“Of course we were, Mike. We wouldn't leave you to dream alone,” she says. “I'm glad you turned back,” she whispers. “It would have been too crazy around here without you. You're the only normal person I know, now.”

I nod. Because – you know, I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing, being normal...

The phone is in my hand and my fingers instinctively flip to my music app, pressing play. But no, I stop the music and just listen to what's around me. The squish of the balls, the hum of the ship, the sounds in the kitchen as Tim prepares an order for takeout.

Just this time, I think I'd rather lay here and hear my own thoughts. Who knows, maybe somewhere in my head there's something worth thinking. Maybe, somewhere, there's something worthwhile.

It could be. It was at some point, in some life. So, maybe it will be again.

Chapter 3

When I was a kid, I would lay in the backyard of my house with my little brother Danny, and we'd stare up into the night sky looking at the stars. They were unnerving, in a way. Danny was younger than me, but he loved space, and would go on about how we're watching stars that have already died. He said that, in a way, the twinkling clusters were still alive. They were a hope beyond death – and through exploration of that void called space, their existence could be rekindled. Danny was one of those kids, the smart kind who surprise you with their ideas.

Stars finding new life in the eyes of two snotty children.

Danny found his meaning looking up into the sky. But it made me feel absolutely meaningless. Because even if I was the kid in the backyard who witnessed that star's passing existence, that didn't change the fact that we were living on a piece of rock that had no business thinking it was important. And we had no business thinking we matter.

The more I thought about space, the less I wanted to think about space.

So instead, I'd focus on the fireflies. They'd flit around us in the bush and long grass of the yard – more alive than a bunch of the dead stars. Their smallness was comforting.

Small is so much better than large.

Which is why I'm not at all happy with these circumstances. *All* I'm looking at now is that big black nothingness. I don't even get the illusion of comfort from the restaurant windows, because I am those restaurant windows. I'm not just hanging on the cliff of insecurity, I've tipped over the edge and am falling through it and into it and it's never going to stop.

That's why I need to find my body. My nice, small, twenty two year old body that is a cozy 32 degrees Celsius, and has this knack of making my existence feel incredibly contained.

"Team meeting," calls Tim. "Gather round people. And teddy bear."

"And Leon," I remind him.

"Right, Newbie. Gather round."

From various corners of the restaurant, everyone shuffles over to the counter where Tim is leaning. They look tired. I'm not tired at all. But *they* look like they've been run over with dump trucks filled with sleeping dust, and then the dump trucks reversed

back over them, and then the dump trucks *dumped* all of the sleeping dust down on them before taking off for more victims.

“I know it’s been a long and confusing night,” says Tim, “but I just wanted to let you folks know, I’m proud of you.”

“You’re proud of us?” asks Mike, pulling out an ear bud (he’s not actually been listening to *anything* this entire time. I would have heard the music if he was.) “I’ve been working here part-time for nine months, and you’ve never said anything remotely like that. One time, you said my work wasn’t so bad that it couldn’t be described as good, and that was the highest praise I’d ever heard you give.”

“Exceptional times call for exceptional words,” replies Tim. “Besides, I don’t think anyone could have handled this any better – definitely not James and his day team. There’s *no way* they would deal so competently with randomly appearing people who seem to have unexplainable powers. Managing those scenarios requires people skills, which can only be honed on the night shift.”

“Here, here!” agrees Dorothy. The teddy bear, Toto, is on her lap.

“Even you, Newbie. One day on the job, a body disappearance, and you’re still coping.”

“Oh? That is good.” I reply.

I think I’ve been in a constant state of hyper panic this entire time. But if he calls that coping, I won’t argue.

“Enough of this gushing. First order of business! The restaurant has been cleaned thanks to the vacuum of space and the waterworks that followed. Well done. Next order of business is prep. We need to get this place ready for the morning shift, and I won’t be tolerating any of this ‘I’m too tired to slice tomatoes’ business I can see on the tips of your tongues.”

Dorothy raises up her phone and snaps a picture. She types into her message bar ‘#MyBossIsAnIdiot’, then sends it out into space. Within seconds of posting she already has three likes.

“Mike, you prep the salad bar. Dorothy, you prep the takeout packages and get them lined out properly again. I’ll count the cash. Leon you—ahh. You just keep doing what you’re doing.”

“Maintaining environmental controls, monitoring the ship, life support, driving us through space, and so on,” I fill in.

“Right,” replies Tim.

Dorothy rests her chin upon Toto's head. "Tim, what's the point in prepping for tomorrow? We don't even know if tomorrow even exists anymore."

"It still exists," I tell her. "We've been in 'tomorrow' for the past two hours. It's officially just ticked over to two AM."

"And what about sleeping? What are we going to do for beds?"

Tim thinks this one over. I can see him eyeing the couch in the back office, just large enough for one person...

"Sleep in the ball pen," he tells Mike and Dorothy. "Grab the emergency fire blankets and just wrap yourselves up in that."

"I'm not sleeping in those balls," says Mike.

"Me neither," adds Dorothy.

"We need beds," says Mike.

Now I get to do the first really right thing of my spaceship career. Maybe I was helpless to protect them before against the Witch of the Wrest, but *this* I've got covered.

"Surprise! I made you sleeping chambers! The old staff room in the basement, I've reconfigured the

particles from the lockers into bunks – with one extra for when we find my body."

"You reconfigured what?"

"Particles."

"You can do that, Leon?" asks Dorothy to my camera.

"Already done."

"What *else* can you do?" asks Tim.

"I'm not actually sure."

"Can you slice the tomatoes?" asks Mike. "Like, reconfigure their particles to become *sliced* tomatoes."

"Probably."

"Give it a shot."

This takes a moment of processing.

"Done."

Mike hops over the counter and goes into the kitchen. "He did it!" he shouts from the salad counter. "They're all sliced."

"Can you re-stack the takeout wrapping?" asks Dorothy.

“Now hold on there, folks. We don’t take advantage of one another on this team. We all pull our own weight.”

“We do?” asks Mike.

“We do,” replies Tim.

But now I’m thinking about what else I can do. They carry on with their staff meeting, and somehow it feels less important to pay attention to their every word than it did, say, *before* I realized I’m one hell of a kickass spaceship restaurant. All it takes is a little finesse, and I can rearrange anything of the particles within me ... I think.

This calls for some experimentation.

Processing, processing. “Ding!” I declare.

“Ding?” asks Mike.

“Check the cash. I’ve counted it. We’re off by two dollars, which has fallen behind the till. So we’re even if you grab that. The packages have been restacked and cleaned off. I’ve coated the windows with a special UV light to block too-strong ultraviolet rays from passing suns and swirling universes. I’ve reset the clocks to reflect universal space time. . . which just happens to also be 2 AM. And I’ve untied all of your shoelaces, and retied them with a sailor’s knot. Except for your boots, Dorothy, which have no

shoelaces, and I couldn’t do anything with anyhow because they’re perfect already.

“Oh, thank you, Leon,” say Dorothy.

“Right. Is that all you can do?” asks Tim.

“Watch this.”

Processing, processing.

Ding!

“How about that?” I ask.

“Dude, he took your hair!” says Mike to Tim.

“What about you?” asks Tim. “He took yours too!”

Dorothy grabs her head, but it’s still got hair. Mike and Tim run off to the men’s washroom, and they start screaming as they find the mirror.

“Ding!” I say.

They scream even louder.

“What are you doing to them?” asks Dorothy, scrolling through her phone. It’s amazed me how nonchalant she can be about these things. It must be some kind of talent.

“I’ve just swapped their heads.”

“Wow,” she replies.

Ding!

“Swapped ‘em back?” she asks.

“Yeah.”

Tim and Mike have both passed out from the shock of having their heads swapped onto another person’s body. But their vitals are fine. They’ll come around in a moment.

Dorothy leans on the counter, still holding Toto who is reaching for the kiddie flamingo glasses and putting them onto its face.

“So you are really powerful, eh Leon?” she asks.

“Am I?” I reply. This can’t be good news. There’s that horrible saying, you know. With great power comes great responsibility. With responsibility comes . . . all kinds of things that make you uncomfortable in all kinds of ways.

Ding!

I splash water on Mike and Tim. They get up, look carefully in the mirror and come back into the restaurant.

“You’ve proved your point, Newbie,” says Tim. “Now, what do you want? Are you going to be swapping heads the whole time? Because if you are, I’m going to find us another spaceship restaurant.”

“There’s only one thing that I want,” I tell them. “I want to find my body.”

“Looks like you could just build yourself one.”

“I want *my* body. It’s home,” I reply.

Tim nods once. “Done. Let’s go.”

“Go?” I ask.

“To find your body.”

“Get some sleep, then find Leon’s body,” corrects Dorothy.

“Get some sleep, and double check the cash, open tomorrow if James hasn’t shown up and this doesn’t all prove to be some elaborate hoax, and then we find your body. Set a course!”

“For where?” I ask.

“For your body!” replies Tim.

Ding!

And just like that, a course is set in my navigational systems. “We’re on our way.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it,” utters Mike.

He shrugs, checks that his own head is still attached to his own body, and heads off toward the staff room in the basement.

“He’s not much of a joiner,” whispers Dorothy to Toto. The teddy bear nods. “Where are we going, Leon?” she asks.

“I don’t know yet. But we’re traveling at top leap.”

Dorothy nods, then heads off to the staff room sleeping bunks as well. “Oh Leon?” she asks.

“Yes?”

“Can you please create some face scrub, tooth brushes and toothpaste in the ladies washroom?”

Ding!

“Thanks, Leon.”

I stop tracking her, because there are some things a person prefers to do without an audience. It’s just me and Tim left. Tim is twiddling his finger on the counter, and looking down at it, then up at my camera over and over.

“Newbie?” he asks.

“Yeah?” I reply.

“I’m still your manager, remember.”

“Haven’t forgotten, sir.”

“So that means I’m in charge.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way, sir.”

“Even if you can swap heads and materialize things with your mind and all of that stuff?”

“With great power comes great responsibility, sir. And I can’t stand too much responsibility. Honestly, I’m far more of a follower, sir. So, you know, that is where my strength lays.”

Tim nods. “Okay then, so long as we’re clear.”

“You’re in charge.” I reply.

“Like a captain. Like a spaceship captain.”

“Okay.”

“To bravely go where no Wurgers restaurant employee has gone before.”

“Sounds right.”

“No matter the danger. No matter the peril. I will lead us through it all. Manager, captain, *the boss*.”

“You’re the boss.”

Tim smiles. It’s one of the first genuine smiles I’ve seen him give in the whole one day I’ve been working

at this place. He looks less . . . Tim . . . when he smiles.

“Good night, Leon.”

“Good night, sir.”

So he goes off, and I don't bother to follow. Sure, some part of me is monitoring all of them, but not directly. It's strange, this being a spaceship. And alright, I admit it, I might even miss the omnipotent sensation when we finally do find my body and I can get back inside its safe, small, warm, human space. But until that moment, I may as well make the best of this.

Switching off the lights, I let my cameras gaze outward and take in those far off swirling galaxies. And the blinking dots of starlight passing by. I imagine they are fireflies, and I'm in my backyard back on earth, laying on the blanket with my little brother. Everything is okay. We are okay. This is going to be okay.

*

I'm on the Isle of Wight, at a tea shop that's high up on the hill and overlooks the ocean. Or maybe it's a sea. No, it's probably the ocean. And there's my

mother with the biggest perm I've ever seen. Once, when I was six years old, before we moved away from England, I have some vague memory of her perming her hair. But this isn't like that time. It's more like her hair is this massive orb of red on top of her head.

“Leon, darling, drink your tea.”

I blink.

I'm looking at myself. I'm sitting opposite me, except that I'm not. I am me, and I feel eight years old. My mom's hair is this giant permed red ball, it is beautiful and I want it too . . . we are on the Isle of Wight. My body is sitting opposite me picking its nose and examining the results.

“Leon, drink your tea.”

Danny kicks my leg. Danny is six years old and he's hiding under the white picnic table where we're sitting on the Isle of Wight. He peers up from under the table and does that thing where he wiggles his eyebrows, and I know we're in trouble now.

His eyes wiggle. They say “come on.”

My eyes wiggle back. They say, “I'm drinking my tea.”

Danny punches my body – not me, but my seven year old self, but my fully grown 22 year old body goes “Hey!”

Mom looks at my adult body, and then pours it a cup of tea.

I slip underneath the picnic table with Danny, but we’re going to get into trouble.

“Leon, where did you go?” asks my mother from above.

Danny is giggling.

“Come on, Leon, he says.” And then he sticks his hand forward and pushes aside what seems like an invisible curtain, crawling through.

“I can’t leave Mum.” I tell him.

“Come on, Leon!” he says from behind the curtain.

Above the table, my body belches . . . loudly.

“If I leave my body, Danny, I’ll never find it again!”

Danny’s head pops back through the invisible curtain.

“Quit being a wet blanket, and come on. Don’t you want to have some fun?”

Not really, I reply in my head. But then Danny grabs my arm, and he’s yanking me through the curtain.

We are floating and I love the feeling. We’re in this dark space with little lights on the walls, and we’re floating around. Giggling. This is fun. I could fly around in here for a while all right. We just keep laughing and laughing as sounds fill the room, and we jump from wall to wall and lock arms in between to spin in circles.

But there’s something in here with us. It feels bad.

Danny is still giggling like an idiot.

“Shut up Danny, we need to hide!”

He’s still giggling, and I grab him and we start running, but there’s nowhere to run. And the bad thing feels like it’s closer now, except I can’t see anything because it’s so dark in here and the spots of light are only tiny pin points on the walls.

“Can spaceships dream?” it asks from somewhere.

Danny pulls out his bazooka water gun and water explodes over us. “Hell yes!” he says. Six year olds don’t say ‘hell’ but we’re not kids anymore. We’re teenagers now. Like hormonal string beans trying to grow muscles and moustaches.

“Let’s get out of here,” I say. And I find a door in the black wall and push, but with the lack of gravity, every time I push I end up floating *away* from the door. And the bad thing is waiting on the other side

of the room. If I float back there any further, if I float into it, I'm going to be devoured.

Danny punches through the door and pulls me through.

We are in the Wurgers now and everything is quiet. "This is where I work, Danny," I tell him. He nods, and picks up the flamingo pink kiddie glasses, putting them on his face. They're just right for him, even if pink clashes with his red hair. He's six years old again.

"Mom is going to be getting worried," he says.

"This is the cash register where I sometimes stand," I explain. "And back there next to the bathroom is where the mop is, so I can clean up the mess."

"Your body is hiding in that closet, Leon," says Danny. "I can see him through the door."

And he runs over to the utility closet and opens it up.

Except it's not my body in there. It's the bad thing. It's followed us through!

"Danny!" I yell, and he ducks under the legs of the thing and disappears into the closet.

"Danny come back." I yell.

"Come on, Leon!" I hear him yelling from the other side of the dark closet. The pink flamingo glasses are

on the ground; he's dropped them. The bad thing picks them up and puts them on, like it's forgotten that it's chasing anyone. I'd rather die than run through that thing's legs. But just in that moment, I'm not a teenager anymore either.

"I can't do it, Danny! I'm too scared" I tell him. I feel eight again like back on the Isle of Wight, when Danny went missing for hours and Mom had to call the police. And I was supposed to be watching him. He came back, and he wouldn't say a peep about where he'd been. But I should have been watching more closely. Now he's disappeared again, and again, I didn't follow him.

"Newbie!" I hear from over my shoulder. I look back, and it's a mistake. The bad thing runs at me, now wrapping itself all around me. Squeezing and squeezing. It's cold and empty and pressing.

"Newbie, do something now!" I hear Tim yell.

I think about my body. What's it doing hiding in the closet?

In the emptiness I see Dorothy. She's in the bad thing too, but it doesn't really bother her much. Looking up from her phone, she actually smiles. Holding up a camera, she snaps a photo of me. "Hashtag Overtherainbow," she says.

“Over the rainbow?” I ask.

“Look at yourself, Newbie,” she says.

And I look down to realize I’m not *any* kind of body anymore. I’m just random flashing colours swirling around in the midsts of this big empty coldness.

The thing is getting angry. It’s lost its grasp on me. I’m free! I’m out, it’s right behind me, getting bigger and bigger and angrier and angrier, but I’m just ahead of it. A blaze of rainbow light!

“Newbie, find your body!” I hear Tim bark from somewhere in the Wurgers.

Moving fast as light can move, I blink past the feeling of doom, the thing that is in my mind and in the restaurant and in this space.

“Spaceships can’t dream,” it tells me. But I dodge past, determined to find Danny, and dive straight into the dark cupboard. The door slams shut behind me.

*

There’s a crackle on the speaker and then comes a deep voice I don’t recognize. “Hello? Is this thing working? Are you there?”

“Who’s that?” I ask.

“I’d like a double sausage breakfast special, with a large cup of coffee and two creams on the side.”

“We’re not open,” I reply.

“It says right here on the sign that you serve breakfast. I’ve been traveling all night and this ‘coffee’ sounds like a novel idea.”

“Look, it’s been a long night. We’re not open for business.”

“Business?” asks Tim from his office. When the hell did he wake up, and why didn’t I notice? “Newbie, we *never* turn a customer away.”

He hops out of the back office and grabs the microphone at the drive through window. “That’s a double sausage special, one cup of coffee and two creamers. What size coffee would you like, sir?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never had coffee before. What would you suggest for a belly that’s five meters all around? I’m positively famished. How much do you imagine the sausage special will occupy?”

Tim looks up into my camera with a shrug.

“Approximately .010 meters by .008 meters by .003 meters, sir,” I reply.

“Fine,” he replies. “I’ll take a coffee to fill the rest.”

“So, that will be an extra large,” replies Tim. “It’s the biggest I can offer you on such short notice. Come around to the window, and I’ll get together your breakfast.”

What comes “around” to the window is the biggest lizard I’ve ever seen. It’s just floating out there in space, waiting patiently by the window as Tim runs around the kitchen firing up the grill, throwing on the egg mix, toasting the pre-cooked sausages, and pouring the cup of coffee. He packs it together in one bag, then opens the window – and I’ve got a nice bubble of atmosphere all set up for this.

They don’t realize it, of course, since they’re so used to opening their windows and doors all the time. If it weren’t for me watching out, they’d be sucked right out into space.

Anyhow, he opens the window and the massive lizard whips the package from Tim’s hands with his tongue and eats it whole.

“Tasty,” it replies. Then floats off.

“Hey!” Calls Tim. “That’s five dollars and twenty six cents!”

The lizard floats on.

“The nerve of that guy,” says Tim. “Go after him, Newbie.”

“Sir, I – ahh—can’t right now. We’ve been in hyper leap all night and my engines need time to cool. Yeah, so, too bad but he’s pulled one over on us. Oh well, I guess we can’t confront him now.”

“Well, if I ever see that gigantic lizard again, I’m going to be collecting that five dollars and twenty six cents.”

“Yes sir.”

Tim nods, then looks out the drive through window. “So, Leon. It wasn’t a dream after all.”

“I don’t think so.”

He keeps nodding.

“It’s daytime, somewhere, and we’re still here.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You know what that means, Newbie?”

“What, sir?”

“I’m finally the day manager!”

And he runs off to go wake Mike and Dorothy with the exciting news.

The lizard is heading in the exact same direction as us, to tell the truth. But I take us down to a putter. My body can wait a little longer if it means we don't have to 'collect' five dollars from that space lizard.

You know, space isn't turning out to be how I'd expected. Sure it's cold and empty and dark, but then there comes along a giant space lizard, or a really angry little woman with flames shooting out of her eyes, or a very pink planet, or a guy who can read your mind.

It feels like I should be remembering something, but it's all just drawing a blank. I'm this massive super powered restaurant spaceship, but I'm just drawing this massive blank.

Something else.

Someone else...

A dream...yeah, I had a dream!

Dorothy and Mike come up from the staff quarters, rubbing their eyes and making their way for the breakfast special, with Tim behind them – prodding them along.

“Another day, another adventure, gang,” he says.

“Save it till after the coffee, Tim,” says Mike. “Or Dorothy will ask Toto to eat you alive.”

Mike and Dorothy share a giggle. Toto, trailing along behind Tim, makes a strange stomach grumbling sound. Tim jumps up a little, then quickly makes his way back to the office.

“Good morning, Leon,” says Dorothy.

“You remembered I'm here,” I reply. That's a nice change.

“You're everywhere, Leon. So, I guess we need to remember that one.”

“I guess so.”

And Mike nods at the camera, wishing me – in his own way – good morning.

Suddenly I get this strange warm fuzzy feeling across my circuit. It's pleasant, and familiar and it makes me feel like I belong. But restaurant spaceships can't feel sentimental, right?

Spaceships aren't supposed to have emotions.

Spaceships aren't meant to dream.

So . . . What does that make me?

As confused and scared as ever. That's what.

*

A message comes over my receiver. At first the language is unrecognizable, and then somehow, it becomes coherent. “Manual docking or assisted docking?” the message asks over the restaurant speakers.

“Who’s that?” asks Tim.

“I’m guessing it’s one of those guys,” replies Dorothy, pointing her phone to the side windows where a gang of mechanics are waiting in tiny spacecrafts and waiting for instructions.

“Confirm: Manual docking or assisted docking?”

“Leon, do you know how to dock this thing?”

Just because *I’m* the spaceship, they assume I know everything. Sure, I can manipulate particles, within my own four walls, but it’s not as though I know everything there is to know in the entire universe. Almost, but not quite.

So I say, “Better get some assistance, sir.”

And who knew that would be my biggest mistake yet?

“Assistance, please” says Tim into our order microphone.

The alien mechanics zoom off to circle the building, and slowly wade me into the docking gate. I could get used to this kind of service. They also buff up my video camera, refresh my air supply and refill the fresh water reservoir I keep on hand for those need-to-put-out-flames-from-angry-witch moments. They’re alright fellows, actually.

You know when we arrived at this random little meteorite the size of the MallMart’s parking lot, I was suspicious. There seemed to be a lot of questionable spaceships floating in the dockyard just off the planet’s surface – all strung together with tape and rope and optic fibres sticking out with frayed ends. And there was the meteorite itself...

I never imagined that a big chunk of space rock would be *pretty*, of course, but I didn’t imagine it would be steaming something sulphurous and essentially burping up swamp puddles, either. I didn’t even want to dock at all – I just wanted to keep driving past and pretend we never meant to stop.

But . . . well, you know. My body. I can feel it is here. Maybe it’s neck deep in a sludge puddle. It needs me.

“Well thank you very much,” I say to them through the drive through ordering stand.

“Bits, Ram or Coin?” They ask next.

Tim and Dorothy look at one another. Mike's frying potatoes in the kitchen, and steps over to the front counter, munching on a fry. "They want to know how you're going to pay them," he advises.

"Burgers?" asks Tim into the mic.

The mechanics outside the ship all huddle together, then break.

"We're not hungry."

"Offer them packets of ketchup, or stacks of napkins," Dorothy suggests.

"We can prepare you for later hunger with ketchup packets, and napkins that will assist with cleanliness. They are, ah, very rare in this part of the galaxy," says Tim.

Again the group of workers huddle together. The tools they're all gripping in their hands are starting to look a bit more threatening than a comfort.

"A payment of 8,000 bits will be accepted for docking assistance."

They huddle once more.

"And an additional 4000 bits for the docking fees."

"Docking fees?" Asks Tim. "You made no mention of docking fees."

"There are always docking fees," is the response.

I can't even tell which one of these guys is speaking. But it doesn't matter really. Each one of them, though tiny, is muscular, and still carrying those very sharp tools in their hands . . . now raising up the very sharp tools and resting them on their shoulders . . . now raising the sharp tools above their shoulders, now getting ready to swing in our direction . . .

"No problem," says Dorothy just a touch too loudly. "We're waiting for a big payment on this meteorite here, and once we get it, the money is yours."

"Payment is required immediately," comes the response.

"Yeah, but if you are kind enough to wait, we'll bump the fee to 12,000 bits for your patience."

Again the creatures with the very sharp, raised, and threatening tools huddle together. There's a bit of animated exchange, and several times, the tools are thrown down onto the heads of others in the group. After a bit of this rough exchange, they break apart.

"Your suggestion has been accepted, but in good faith, we require 1000 of your best ketchup packets and napkins."

Tim scoffs at this. "You've got your exchange wrong, buddy. We'll give you one packet each, a small stack

of napkins, and, because I'm feeling generous, a small side of fries."

"Deal!" says the voice. No huddle this time. Maybe they knew they were pushing it.

Mike gets on with prepping the order while Dorothy packs the takeout box. Tim hands the gang of dock workers the goods through the takeout window, and I turn on the Wurgers security system (with a few updates I've included) and transfer myself to Dorothy's phone.

"Right people," says Tim to us, "Gather round."

There's a squeak.

"And small stuffed teddy bear. Gather round."

The group of us gather at the counter. Mike and Dorothy are munching on left over chips. Toto is devouring several of the napkin holders.

"Here's the plan, team. We're going to go onto this planet and we're going to find Leon's body. But that's not all we're doing. First, we need to figure out what 12,000 bits actually means. Maybe it's like five bucks or something?"

"Or five hundred" replies Mike.

"And then we're going to get some directions out of here, because I don't know about you – but I just

about had it with all of this space nonsense. It's time to go home."

We all nod along, though some of us are nodding more than the others.

"And no matter what happens, we need to stick together."

"Sure," replies Dorothy, picking up Toto and sticking it into her backpack. "So, I guess we just . . . walk out into space or something?"

"Of course not."

"Take the dock shuttle," I say. There's a shuttle waiting outside the door.

"To the shuttle," replied Tim. "But this had better not cost extra . . ."

And with that, we leave the safety of the spaceship, and are heading toward the rock of steam, sludge and one large broken down building . . . whatever happens next, you can't blame me. It's my body's fault. It's *always* its fault.

*

We're standing in line outside of the only logical place to go, the sketchy warehouse-like building. Well, they're standing. I'm tucked into Dorothy's shirt pocket with the camera facing outward for a view.

A large translucent blob creature with what must be fifteen squiggly arms is working the door. It stops us from entering and stands there, looking down over us.

"Glops, glop, gloop?" it asks.

"Newbie, can you translate that?" asks Tim.

"I think that's just the sound of his insides slushing around," I reply.

Dorothy steps forward and I can almost hear her blinking those big eyes and giving him her most genuine fake smile.

"Gloap," it says.

"Gloob glop?" she replies.

The massive blob jiggles and ripples with what I think is laughter. Up comes the rope and in we go.

"What is that," asks Mike, "some kind of magical power you have?"

"Nah," she says. "All you need is a little charm."

We're moving along a dark hallway that slants downward and keeps turning in strange fourty degree angles. There's fast pounding music coming from far away – and the ground is vibrating just a little as my camera shakes.

"What do you see?" I ask anyone who is listening.

"Not much," replies Dorothy. "Just a really gross hallway that needs way better lighting."

"Seriously, does it need to be so hot in here?" asks Tim.

"Didn't you notice the steaming pits of sulphur outside?" asks Mike.

"Good job, captain brilliant. A lotta brains in your head," says Tim.

"Apparently more than yours," Mike snaps back.

"But seriously, this air reeks," adds Dorothy.

"I don't think I'll ever eat another hard-boiled egg," whispers Tim, gagging on his words.

Down and down and down we go. Occasionally slipping by aliens doing something like making out in the darker corners. Dorothy snaps a picture. *#kinkyclubaliens* she announces to the world as the pictures go out, somehow, to her network of followers. *#getaroom* answers Megan345

#cutecouple says BigPizzaMan. Who the hell are these people, and how on earth can she still communicate with them?

The banging music is really, really loud now. With a few more turns and stumbles over stools, bottles and the occasional tentacle, we come out into the massive dark chamber that looks like a huge cave filled with stalactites and shouting people. My camera adjusts to compensate for the change in lighting. There are floating candles everywhere, zooming around and not staying still. All along the walls it looks like one massive bar with drinks of every colour and in every size, shape and type of container you can imagine. And in the middle is a boxing ring, and there are the brightest groupings of floating, moving candles around it, illuminating the fight that's happening inside of the ring. No one notices as we slip into the crowd; everyone in this dank club is focused on the fight, cheering it on.

There's this huge blue and green creature that's about ten feet tall and has *way* too many teeth, and it's being circled by this little pale skin fellow who looks a lot like—

“THAT'S MY BODY!” I shout.

It's circling the very angry alien creature in the middle of the ring, running here and there . . . and then, just as the tall guy bends over with a swipe of

its massive claws – my body ducks down, runs between the its legs, and has now jumped up onto its back, kicking it over and over with *my* legs, and holding the creature's head in a hard lock as *my* body uses *my* lungs to scream at the top of its voice and flex its muscles for the crowd with its free arm.

The giant alien is starting to waver, but it's holding on – swiping up behind itself with its clawed, flesh-shredding, hands.

“You made it!” comes a familiar voice from the crowd. “I wasn't sure if you'd get out of that pickle I left you in. But here you are, safe and sound.”

“Arrogon of Southern Space?” asks Dorothy.

“Nah, call me Arro, we're all friends here.”

He swings around Mike's head, patting him on the head. Mike shrugs him off.

“What are you doing here? And what is Leon's body doing in that ring?” asks Dorothy.

Arrogon is swaying.

“Have a drink, Dorothy, darling. Do you know, that sounds very good together. Drink Dorothy Darling, Drink!”

And he passes her the remains of his glass . . . there's something very blue and liquid-like swirling around in its bottom.

"Not a chance," she replies, pushing the glass aside. "I'll get my own drink, thanks."

"Come on you bunch," says Arrogon. "I've got a big table in the VIP section. Come on, let's go, DorDor. Comme on, Timbo and Mikey Mike." He starts singing to himself as he walks off.

Tim, Dorothy, and Mike all look at one another.

"We need to stop this fight," I say to everyone. "My body could get seriously hurt."

They all look over to the ring, where the big creature is down on the ground and I'm – or my body is – apparently doing a dance routine across its back.

"Maybe the Emperor guy can lend us money?" asks Mike.

"Maybe he can give us answers," adds Dorothy.

"Maybe he can help us find a way back home," says Tim.

And they turn toward the VIP area against the far wall.

"But what about my—"

"He's been okay this long, Newbie. He'll be fine for a few more minutes," cut in Tim.

So *he* said, and that was *his* big mistake of the evening.

"What can it hurt, Leon?" asks Dorothy. "We'll come right back, okay? Promise."

"Fine," I reply. "But in ten minutes we come back and rescue me. Okay? Tim?"

"Okay," replies Tim.

And we head for the VIP booth.

*

Drinks are ordered and Dorothy is kind enough to place me face up on the table so that I'm looking up everyone's noses as they sit in a semi circle in the VIP booth. My body is down in the wrestling ring still, reportedly having a great time.

"What *is* this green stuff. It's making me tingle all over," says Tim.

"Karthian Blood Runner," replies Arrogon. He waves his glowing martini as he waggles a finger. "Too many of those, friend, and you'll self-destruct."

“It feels kinda good,” replied Tim, taking another sip.

“Hell yeah, it does,” replies the space man, just barely managing the sentence.

Dorothy is sipping from a long pink straw that is shaped like a flamingo’s head and protruding from what *might* be considered a coconut if it wasn’t covered in purple fur.

“You are sooo smashed,” she says.

“Guys, I think you should be careful with the drinks,” I warn. This is *space* alcohol. Not what you’re used to.”

Mike isn’t saying anything, as usual. . . but he seems to be thinking really, really hard. He ordered something that came in an extremely tiny glass, and after shooting it back, he’s not blinked since. I know; I’ve been watching him. It’s been five minutes. The guy hasn’t moved.

Toto is holding a glass filled with what I would guess is cotton candy. Surprisingly, it’s not eating the glass – just shaking the fluff into its mouth. Oh, no, wait. There goes the glass too.

“What am I doing now?” I ask whoever is bothering to listen.

Dorothy takes a long pull on the flamingo neck. “Your body is *still* running circles around the big unconscious guy, Leon. And now you are trying to challenge the referee who is trying to call the fight.”

“Why am I acting like a maniac?”

“It’s free of *you*, that’s why,” replies Arrogon. “No more fear and free of inhibition. It’s free of logic. It is free of past memories and future consequences. It’s got nothing but the now. You can always bet large on a body without its soul.”

“Bet large?”

“Oh yeah. You’ve been a sure thing. Keep it on the down-low, but I’ve taken your body to at least five of these dive planets so far, and he’s beaten everyone they’ve stuck him against. Not bad right? I mean, no one can beat him! He’s a sure thing!”

“What do you mean you took my body – you knew where it was this whole time?”

The Emperor of Southern Space blinks. “I’ve been drugged!” he exclaims. “Someone’s slipped me a truth tablet!” Quick as a flash, he give himself the Heimlich against the table, and out flies a white pill, sailing past my phone camera and beyond.

Tim laughs. Dorothy laughs too. Mike still hasn’t blinked.

Suddenly a massive fist is slammed down in the center of the table, just inches from me. I bounce up into the air, and down into the soft darkness if Toto's mouth. It's muffled. I can't see much of anything. I hear smothered protests, and a yelp. There's the sound of something heavy being dragged, more protests. Some giggling. A door is slammed.

And then . . . silence.

With a belch, I'm projected into the air, and come to rest across the room from everyone, and somehow, almost miraculously, propped up so that my camera can see them all. Quite a convenient landing! The group, including Arrogon, are tied together with a *lot* of fibre optic cables on a metal bench.

"What just happened?" I ask.

Toto squeaks at me.

"Exactly," says Dorothy. "That's why we're a good team," she says to the pink bear.

"What just happened?!" I ask again. "And why do I always need to ask everything twice."

"Toto gobbled you up before we were snatched out of the booth," whispers Dorothy. "I think they're about to—"

The door opens, and in comes *my body!*

He's followed by the alien with the very large fist, and behind him, another creature that looks like a grumpy garden gnome. The large fisted goon stands in the corner. My body is grinning and it's the smile of an idiot. A total, helpless, idiot.

"I think this thing is yours," says the gnome, poking Arrogon in the chest of his shiny green spacesuit.

"What?" replies the Emperor. "Never seen him before in my life."

"You brought a disconnected body into *my* club, and entered him into *my* ring," says the gnome. It sparks up a match, and lights a cigar.

"I did no such thing," the Emperor, Arrogon, protests.

"Lay off the act, Arro. This body's so fresh, it can't even speak yet! All it can do is *act*." The gnome takes a few short puffs of his cigar, blowing out a few rings. Very cool. "And yet you bring a ringer into the game without consulting me first. Do you know how much money I've lost tonight?"

"About as much as I've won?" guesses The Emperor.

The gnome hisses. "Fist, take care of these idiots." The massive ball of hand muscle that's been waiting in the corner stands up and lumbers over to the group.

“Wait!” shouts Dorothy. “I’ve got the boots, and I’ll use them if you make me.”

The gnome holds up his tiny hand and the fist creature stops. Turning toward Dorothy, the bar-owning gnome walks around and pulls out a tiny magnifying glass. Leaning up close, he looks over the boots.

“They’re the real deal,” he whispers to himself.

“Damn right,” says Dorothy. “And I’m just about fed up with this. If you push much further, I’m going to have to get a little messy in here – if you know what I mean.”

“I think these would just about cover the debt owed,” says the gnome. He’s practically salivating now.

“Not a chance,” replies Arrogon. “We both know those boots are worth more than this planet itself – heck, they’re worth more than most planets.”

“Oh?” asks Dorothy. She leans over and examines them.

The ball of muscle lumbers closer. Dorothy snaps out of her reverie and stamps her feet. The gnome jumps backwards. “Hold on there, young lady! Let’s not be hasty.”

And while this is all happening, my body is standing there smelling its armpits. Seriously. He is smelling them.

“Hasty!” repeats Tim, falling into a fit of giggles.

Mike’s head tilts back and he begins to snore. He’s fallen asleep with his eyes wide open.

Tim mimics the snoring, and then breaks into even more hysterics and giggles.

Toto is beginning to eat the fibre optic rope. Chomping strand by strand. Soon enough they’ll be free.

“The boots aren’t for sale, and you’re pushing my patience,” replies Dorothy amongst the noise.

The gnome taps his nose, then pounds his tiny fist into his tiny palm.

“Fine, get out of here,” he says to Arrogon. “But I’m keeping the body. Deal?”

“Deal!” Says Arrogon.

“Now, wait just a minute,” I say from my place across the room.

My body perks up, and comes over. He picks me up and stares into the camera, sniffing it.

“You’re an idiot,” I tell my body.

It smiles.

“Hey, Leon’s body. Pass me my phone,” says Dorothy.

My body spins around and then it throws me through the air. I land right into Dorothy’s lap.

“The deal is made, take the body and let’s get out of here,” says the gnome. The giant-fisted muscle man waves something like a treat in front of my body, and apparently that’s enough to get my body to follow the goon out the door. The gnome kicks Arrogon, grunts at my body and ushers him out the door. The gnome turns to Arrogon.

“You’re lucky I’ve got a buyer for that body, Arro. And she’s paying enough to make this disaster of an evening less painful – for all of us.”

“Leon’s been bought?” Dorothy asks.

“And paid for,” replies the gnome.

“Paid for!” laughs Tim. Mike is now drooling onto Dorothy’s shoulder. She kindly doesn’t shrug him off, though the drool is dripping down onto my screen.

Toto chomps through the remains of the optical fibre, and the group of us fall this way and that as Tim doubles over, Mike falls forward, Dorothy stands up, and The Emperor reaches for the button on his wrist.

“Dorothy, he’s going to disappear again!” I shout through the phone speaker.

“Oh no you don’t,” says Dorothy, and she throws herself at him – still grasping me tightly – and wrestles his hand away from his magical button that lets him disappear. “Before you go *anywhere*, you’re going to answer a few questions.”

“And lend us some money!” I say.

“And give us your money,” amends Dorothy.

The man of muscle appears at the doorway once again. He stands there, staring as if high-level thought has not yet made its way in his species. Then, pointing to a door in the corner marked ‘exit’ he says two very clear words:

“Get . . . Out.”

*

“So just to recap, we came all the way to this meteorite to find my body, and now we’ve lost it all over again.”

“There are some battles better not fought, Leon,” says Dorothy. “That gnome was creepy.”

“I don’t know if I even want my body any more. He’s completely out of control. He’s an embarrassment. He’s going to go off and get himself killed without any consideration of me.”

“We’ll find your body,” she replies.

“I think I’m better off anyhow. All this time I’ve been missing my body, but hey – I’m some super cool spaceship now. It can’t get better than this, right?”

Dorothy shrugs.

“My body is probably off to become someone’s slave – they’ll have it breaking stones, or digging coal, or cleaning other people’s bedsheets . . . but he’s such an idiot. I don’t know. I feel torn.”

Mike has woken up. Arrogon pulled out some smelling salts and Mike woke up with a shake of his head that didn’t stop for a full five minutes. We’ve just been sitting here on the curb of the only road on this tiny, dirty planet waiting for him to stop shaking. Tim is now taking a nap on the ground – no one is in a rush to wake him up.

“Your body is actually kind of cool,” says Mike. “He’s crazy, but cool.”

“I can be crazy, too, in a cool way,” I reply.

“Of course you can,” says Dorothy.

Toto’s mouth is firmly clasped onto The Emperor’s hand at Dorothy’s request, covering the button and keeping him with us.

“We can buy you back,” says Mike.

“Forget about it. That body is trouble. I don’t even want him anymore.”

“You’re going to wake up tomorrow and regret saying that,” says Dorothy. “But I’m guessing Leon’s body isn’t going to be cheap,” says Dorothy.

“Forget my body, really. I’m done with it. He’s so stupid, he makes bricks look quick witted. He’s so reckless, you’d think spontaneous explosions had more planning. He’s such a big shot, you’d think—”

“We need to pay the docking fees, too,” adds Mike.

“Oh yeah,” I reply.

Arrogon flashes a big white smile and shakes his head in a way that I swear to god is set in slow-motion so that you can see how shiny and voluminous his hair is when it moves. “I might be filthy rich, but it’s rich in the way that you do a lot, and have a lot, and as a result, you owe a lot.”

“What are you saying?” asks Dorothy.

“The Emperor is saying that he’s broke,” replies Mike.

“Not broke,” says Arrogon. “In debt.”

“Even more than money, we need to find a way home,” says Dorothy. “Does anyone have a clue where Earth went?”

“Go see the wizard,” replies Arrogon. “He’s got more money and more information than he knows what to do with. He’s the guy I owe most of my everything to already.”

“The wizard?” asks Dorothy.

“The Wealthiest Wizard of Foz,” replies Arrogon. “That jackass has all the money systems under his thumb. Doesn’t hurt that he’s the universal banker. Everyone goes to see the Wizard when they need a little loan . . . or two . . . or a big loan . . . or a massive one.”

“We don’t even have any collateral.”

“I’m sure you can work out something. He trades for knowledge too.”

“So he might know the route back to Earth?” asks Mike.

“He might.”

“Hmm,” says Mike, slipping back on his earbuds and turning on his music.

“Fine, we’ll go see this wizard,” says Dorothy. “But first we need to pay those dock workers, because they look mean and I actually don’t know how to use these boots yet.”

And wouldn’t you know it, just as she says that aloud, a gargoyle shows up beside us on the road and whispers. “Street Fighting gonna happen. Wanna bite of the action?”

“Shove off, sly,” says Arrogon. “The lady isn’t interested in your little sideshow bets.”

The gargoyle begins to move off, but he’s made from stone and moves slow.

“Hold on a second,” says Dorothy. “Can we enter our own fighter in this match?”

The gargoyle looks at the group of us. He gives a gravelly chuckle. Other figures are beginning to appear in the darkness around us. Looks like there’s an audience. And oh, look, it’s the ball of muscle from before on his coffee break, ready to throw down.

“Why not?” replies the gargoyle. “I’ll even give you two to one, little girl.”

“We accept,” says Dorothy. There are grunts and snips of laughter from the darkness. “Two to one odds, I’ll bet 12,000 bits on my friend. Done deal?”

Tim is still sleeping, but Arrogon and Mike are starting to look pretty uncomfortable.

“Done it is,” says the gargoyle, watching. It slides back so that we are now at the center of a ring of people. The giant hand goon steps up toward us, giving a smile that glows with gold plated teeth. Creepy.

“Ready?” asks Dorothy.

There is a squeak in reply.

“Go get him,” she says.

Toto the Teddy Bear steps into the ring. The rest, as you might say, is history.

*

“According to The Emperor’s instructions, we need to travel 60 leaps toward the novella system,” Dorothy is punching the coordinates into the cash register. “Got that, Newbie?” she asks me.

“Got it.”

“But why is he wearing a set of gold teeth on a string around his neck?” asks Tim, looking over at Teddy.

“It was better than the guy’s head. We had to convince him of that one,” I reply, still trying to delete the memory files of that fight from my drive.

The little pink bear squeaks and spins.

Dorothy pulls out her phone and snaps a photo. “#HappyTeddyDance. You are a hit on my feed, Toto.”

Seems like everyone is in a good mood. Even Mike is smiling, a little, as he sits on the counter and stares out of the window. He’s been in a different kind of mood since that drink of his on the meteorite.

“And where’s the Newbie’s body?” asks Tim. He’s nursing a super-sized cup of black coffee.

“My body is a useless piece of meat,” I say. “I’m better off without him. Much better off. So much better off!”

“Someone bought Leon’s body,” says Dorothy to Tim. “He’s pouting about it.”

“I’m not pouting.”

“You are just upset because he was having a great time out here wrestling,” says Mike, “and you’ve been miserable.”

“I’m not miserable.”

“You haven’t been a basket of cherries, Newbie,” says Tim.

“Well you haven’t been a barrel of apples, *Tim*.”

I rev up the engine. It sends a course of power across my systems with the hyper accelerator getting ready to leap. We have this whole place in front of us. If my body can wrestle space creatures and survive . . . then what do I have to lose?

I can’t stub my toe. I can’t cut my finger. I can’t fall down twenty stories and crush my head into the ground. I’m in the machine . . . I can’t get hurt.

I can’t get hurt!

Unless, for some reason, I explode.

Exploding would be bad.

Whatever happens, I cannot explode.

But still, there are way fewer fears on my list of things to be afraid of today than there was yesterday. And if my body can be that crazy without me, maybe I can be even more incredible without *him*. Yeah. That sounds good.

Who needs a body? These fools sleep and eat and need that silly idea of air. Really, what’s a body good for but transportation? And I’m the best kind of transportation there is!

“I’m a spaceship!” I announce aloud.

Tim leans over to Dorothy. “Is he only noticing that *now*?” he whispers to her.

“Ready. Get set. Annnd, leap!”

With that, we set off away from the meteorite and back into the deep dark space. Look out universe, here I come. I’m a whole new kind of man – a *spaceship* kind of man!

Spaceships rule. Humans drool.

Chapter 4

“All crew to the deck,” says Leon on the speaker.

We’re hiding in the staff room, laying on our bunks. I drop my fry box origami swan. The hope was it would be decorative, but really it just looks like takeout. Leon was kind enough to make us some beds in the staff room. But he followed Tim’s instructions and the place is more like a bunker than a bedroom.

“Coming,” I reply. Perhaps another time I’d complain about being ordered around, but honestly I could use something to do. Idle hands.

Mike gets up from his bunk. Ever since that fever of his, he’s been acting a bit different. He has been acting . . . well, just different. I don’t know exactly what it is. For starters, he was just now *reading* and I’ve never seen him read anything before, even if it is only an Archie comic.

“Come on guys, Tim is calling a staff meeting,” says Leon. “He’d like Toto to come too, Dorothy.”

“You have to ask Toto,” I reply, tickling Toto who I’m using for a pillow at the moment. He squeaks his confirmation.

We gather at the restaurant counter.

“Right, team. Gather around.”

“We’re already here, Tim.” I remind him.

“Yes, well. Good. Now, we’ve been leaping for three days straight trying to get to this Wealthiest Wizard of Foz and figure out how to get back to Earth. At this progress, Leon estimates our arrival to be one more day, tops.”

“There is just one problem,” says Leon.

“Don’t pre-empt me newbie!”

“Sorry sir,” replies Leon.

“There’s just one problem,” says Tim. “The ship is stuck.”

The only time I know the ship is moving is whenever Leon starts a fresh leap. Then we all get thrown back as he throws everything forward.

“How are we stuck, exactly?” I ask.

“Leon, dim the lights.”

The restaurant lights go dark. Instead of the black emptiness of space I’d expected, all around us is what looks like a massive red, gently glowing clouds hovering in clusters all around us – they’re so thick,

you almost can't tell them apart from each other.
"What are they?" I ask.

"Poppies," replies Tim.

"Poppies? You expect us to believe that those are clouds of flowers growing in the middle of space?" asks Mike. We are all at the window now, even Toto, watching these massive clouds floating everywhere and blocking our path.

"Of course, I expect you to believe me. If you can believe everything else that has happened, you can believe in flowers that grow in space. And I know a poppy when I see one. Anyhow, we've been trying to navigate through these poppy clouds, but they are getting thicker and thicker.

"More dense," corrects Mike.

"Whatever," says Tim.

"So we've driven straight into it, and now we're stuck," replies Mike.

"That's the story," replies Tim.

I pull out my phone and snap a photograph, then zoom in to examine the cloud more closely. They're flowers all right. Possibly poppies – who am I to argue horticulture?

"So, we got stuck. That's the end of that story. New story: you two need to go out there and cut us free."

"What?" I ask. "Out there into those beautiful bunches of flowers, with all those petals and . . . actually, that sounds alright."

Mike nods. "Fine by me, too."

"Oh? Good. That was easier than I thought. Right, and take the teddy bear too. He can eat us out of this mess."

Toto growls.

"He really needs to stop referring to him in the third person," I reply.

Tim reaches out a cautious hand and pats Toto on the head. "Good little pink teddy bear. Sorry about that."

"I've fabricated you both some spacesuits so you can go outside safely and walk around the exterior of the restaurant."

"Thanks, Leon," says Mike.

"Thank you, Leon," I add.

"You're welcome! That's just one of my abilities as a state of the art miracle spaceship slash restaurant," replies Leon.

“Indeed,” replies Tim, warily. “Okay, go on you two. Cut us free of the flowers, don’t take all day. We have some leaping to do.”

Tim holds out two duffle bags that read *Mike*, *Dorothy*, and *Teddy*. Pulling open my duffle bag, there is a full body reflective suite. It’s both pretty and hard on the eyes. There’s also a massive bulb of a helmet that looks like a semi-transparent disco ball.

“Geez Leon, you went for a lot of flash,” I say.

“When in space, do as the space people do,” he replies.

Fair enough.

We get into our spacesuits – and yes, I snap a photograph for my feed, hashtag ‘SpaceWalk’ hashtag ‘FashionFoward’ and it gets six likes within six seconds, which shows promise for Leon’s taste in clothing – and head outside.

It’s different out here. Of course I knew it would be different, but you can’t be prepared for different until you’re smack in the middle of it. There’s a quietness. A total, still and perfect quietness. It’s so beautiful, it brings tears to my eyes. I can’t see the expanse of space with all these flower clouds around us but I can feel it nevertheless. It feels incredible.

Mike isn’t loving it. “Damn it, I forgot my music.”

“You don’t like this stillness?”

“It’s not that,” he replies. “I just think better with a song in my ear.”

I nod. Toto is having a good time in his spacesuit. I’m not sure if he even needs one – it’s not like he’s made up of organs with fluids and stuff . . . he really is just fluff. But he looks cute.

“Let’s find the snag,” I say.

We begin walking across the side of the restaurant. This is so bizarre. Even after all that has happened, it’s still plain weird to be walking on the side of Wurgers over the bricks and the pipes and the windows by some miracle of gravity that Leon is barely creating. If I jumped really hard, I’d float off of this and into another poppy cloud.

“Even if we get free here, what’s to say we won’t get snagged again?” asks Mike.

“We probably will,” I reply. “It’s going to be slow going for a while, I think. But what else do we have to do?” I ask.

He nods.

“Hey Mike?” I ask.

“Yeah?”

“What’s happened to you? You seem different. Like, you normally shrug, you don’t nod. You know? All of a sudden you are nodding all the time. You used to shrug. Was it that dream you had, then?”

He nods. “Yeah, but it wasn’t a dream. I was really there. It was like this world, but a bit different. And I was captain.”

“One second you are with us, the next you are in a different dimension? How?”

“I don’t know. I thought maybe you’d know, actually.”

“Why would I know?”

“Just a hunch,” he replies.

He’s been acting so strange.

We see the snag of poppies as we step onto the *bottom* of the Wurgers. This is all so strange.

“Hey Toto, can you chomp that away for us?”

Toto squeaks.

“Hold one second,” says Mike. He runs ahead and picks a handful of flowers. “Here Dorothy, flowers for you.”

He hands me the bunch of space poppies, and they really are the most beautiful bouquet of flowers.

What should I say? I look up at his face barely visible through the mirror of his ball, and see him waiting. For some reason, smart me isn’t speaking up, and physical me feels really confused. All I can do is blink and nod my head. Finally some words fall out of my mouth.

“Thank you?” I say, like an idiot.

“Nah, it’s nothing,” he replies, turning away. “Go at the rest of ‘em, Teddy.”

And with a few chomps from my little friend, the job is done and we’re set to sail forward.

*

Snag by snag we’ve been getting through this neverending field of poppies. Mike is back downstairs in his bunk reading again. Tim is in his office and Teddy is prowling around outside, snapping at the cluster of poppy roots that keep trying to cling to the restaurant.

To make up for my lack of gratitude before, I took the poppies and made them into a real bouquet – trimming the ends, putting them in a vase that Leon made for me, and arranging them layered one over the other. Considering they typically grow in space,

they seem to be holding up in our interior environment really well.

I placed them beside my bed in the basement for Mike to see, and they're just lovely. A real eruption of red, you know? I love the way the poppy petals look like the most fragile of tissue paper, and how the black middle is set off so strongly by the redness of the flower.

A part of me wants to go outside and collect some more. . . that is, if Teddy doesn't eat them all before I can get to them.

"Leon?" I ask. "Have you seen my spacesuit? I might go and get some more flowers."

"Sorry Dorothy, I just rematerialized it into fuel. This stop and go travelling is brutal on my energy efficiency. I'll bring it back for you once we clear the bulk of these petals."

"Fair enough, Leon."

Apparently, according to Arrogon's directions, we need to go directly through this poppy cluster to reach the Wizard. Although he never mentioned it being so difficult to navigate. Seriously, this is ridiculous.

"We should go outside and get more poppies."

I spin around. It's Mike. "Oh my god, Mike, you scared me. Why are you holding my bouquet?"

He puts the flowers down on the counter and walks toward the door, pulling at the handle.

"Why's this locked?" he asks.

"It's air locked, buddy," replies Leon. "For your own good, not for mine. You see, because I'm now machine, I don't need things like air anymore. Another human addiction you don't even notice until it's gone."

"Leon, breathing isn't an addition," I say with a smile, and a wink. "It's just a hobby."

I think - though you never can be sure - that the camera winks back at me.

"So I can't get outside?" asks Mike.

"Not till later," replies Leon.

"Ah well, another time," replies Mike. He picks up the bouquet of flowers and takes it with him into the kitchen.

"Why is he carrying my flowers around?" I wonder to myself aloud.

"Beats me," replies Leon.

Sometimes I forget that Leon is everywhere in this place. A girl can't wonder anything out loud without a burst of opinion from him. There's just one place where he's sworn to never intrude, so I head for the ladies washroom.

Before the Wurgers restaurant was sucked up into space by a freak tornado, which feels like ages ago now, this washroom was your run-of-the-mill restaurant-style gross. It constantly had this strange, musty smell no matter how often the stalls were washed, and the fluorescent lights had a way of making your skin look zombie pale in the mirror. And the sink always, without fail, had puddles of water around on the counter and little piles of wet tissues mixed with hairballs. The hand dryers were from twenty years ago, and blew just about everything in the room, including the smell, as they roared out the hot air.

But now, well, Leon's gone above and beyond himself. It's far less 'washroom' and far more ladies changing room at the swankiest shop you can imagine. There's always a box of chocolates, always a cup of tea ready to be made, the carpet is thick and springy, and there's an adorable love seat perfect for melting into with a stack of classic novels beside it for reading. And the air in here, freshest in the whole restaurant with that amazing air filter that Leon

installed. In short, it's a slice of paradise, toilet and shower included.

The guys do *not* know about this place.

Pushing through the doors, I collapse onto the love seat and begin flipping through the photos and news on my social feeds. As I snuggle into the cushions further, my feet begin to tickle. I kick the heel of my boot against the carpeted floor while typing to my friend Melanie how adorable her one year old looks in that pumpkin costume. But the boots keep on tickling me.

"I wish I could take you things off," I tell the emerald boots. "They say you're magic, but I don't see anything magical about you. The only magic bit so far has been your stubbornness to stay on my feet. What do you want there anyhow? You want me to keep you or what? Fine, I'll keep you. I promise that I won't give you away to anyone else. Not even if they are threatening to burn me alive or whatever. You are officially my boots."

The tickling stops, but I have the feeling the boots want a little more.

"You're very pretty boots. Worth every penny of your value."

It's like they are waiting for the full declaration or apology or something. And yeah, I think it's weird that I think they are waiting for anything. They're just boots right? Even magical boots are just boots.

The tickling comes back, crazy ticklish this time.

Squirming on the sofa, kicking my legs here and there in an effort to stop the tingles, I give in. "Okay, okay, so you aren't just boots. You're alive somehow. And you are my boots. I'm sorry I didn't want you in the first place, and I'm sorry I tried to give you away to the angry witch, and considered trading you for my life on the meteorite. Okay? I'm sorry for all of that. But you aren't giving me too many options, you know? I could use a little help once in a while, too.

The tickling pauses. I feel like they're listening to me all of a sudden. So, right. My boots are listening.

"You know what would be lovely?" I tell them.

They are waiting.

"It would be lovely if we could both breathe a little. You must be tired of my smelly feet, and goodness knows my toes haven't seen any fresh air for days now. What do you think? Can I take you both off?"

The boots are hesitating. I can feel it.

"I promise to put you back on. I swear my phone on it."

And suddenly, their grip on my legs loosens, and I slide them off without problem.

Oh my god, that's a good feeling. My feet definitely stink (yours would too after days upon days of crazy times in space) but they are so, so happy to be free. I plant them into the carpet and wiggling them against the plushness.

"Oh my god, that's amazing."

The boots seem pleased. Picking them up, I give them a big hug and then open the vanity dresser drawer by the mirror, pulling out a packet of soles.

"Want a mint? I have odor eaters." Leon has been thoroughly considerate in stocking the bathroom with essentials. . . except for the tampons. Seriously, I have toilet paper for fifty lifetimes, but not a tampon in sight.

Ripping open the package, I slip the feet-fresheners into the boots for some needed refreshment. They seem happier.

"Now that we're working together, I'd really like to learn what you are capable of," I tell my boots.

They keep quiet on this. “Well you’ll have to show me eventually,” I tell them. Crashing back into the sofa, I scroll through my feed and like a few photos. It’s strange that I can access everyone back on earth. It’s strange that I’m still picking up their lives. God, my roaming fees are going to be enormous. Just another massive bill waiting from uncontrolled overspending. I have a *wee* bit of a problem with that . . . but, you know, I’m working on it.

But a girl can’t give up her social life.

Scrolling timeline to timeline, I feel the pull of the cushions and relax into them until every bit of me feels particularly lovely, especially my toes, as I drift off into a very heavy nap.

Sometime later, I’m awoken by a knocking on the washroom door. “Dorothy, can you come out here please?” asks Tim.

God, if *he* knew about this place he’d be in here all the time.

“Just a minute,” I call back. “I’ll be right out.”

So far none of them have noticed my retreats into the washroom. They don’t ask, I don’t tell. Getting up from the sofa, I hop into the washroom stall and flush the toilet, hoping that’s somehow convincing.

“On my way,” I call again over the flush.

I turn on the sink tap and splash the sleep out of my face.

Tim pulls on the door handle to the washroom.

“Timothy! Just hold on, I’ll be out in a moment.”

My toes are still happy for their freedom, but I feel my boots watching and this doesn’t feel like the time to go letting them down. Pulling out the odour eaters, I slip them on. They feel different this time, they feel like they fit really, really well.

“Hmm, we’re getting along better aren’t we?” I say.

There’s another knock on the door.

“Look,” I shout, “You can’t rush a lady so back off from the door before I make you back off.”

There seems to be some mumbling on the other side.

“Step away from the door,” I say again. Since when did I become so assertive? Well, it feels good anyhow. “I need tampons in here, Tim. It’s a violation of my rights as a female employee who is lost in space. You need to figure out how to get me my tampons.”

There is what sounds like *more* murmured conversation on the other side of the door before it breaks with Tim singing out, “Just a minute!”

Well, that will distract him for a few moments. Fixing my hair in the mirror, I pinch my cheeks and stretch my mouth. That looks better. Not at all like I was just heavily napping to the point of leaving a small puddle of drool on the cushions.

Unlocking the door, I open it up and slip out. Then freeze.

The entire seating area is filled with red poppies. Blinking, I realize Mike is right there in front of me, and Toto beside him. Tim comes running back from the counters area, "I've got your tampons" he says.

They are all wearing the poppies. Toto has a couple actually *growing* out of his head, Mike has vines wrapped around his arms and legs with the flowers springing up everywhere, and Tim seems to have pinned the plants across his uniform. The three of them are smiling at me. Well, Toto isn't smiling, but I know Toto – and that's how he smiles.

"What's. Going. On?" I ask carefully.

"We thought you might like flowers in the ladies room," replies Mike. He holds out another bouquet of poppies. But this time it doesn't feel so very sweet. This time feels a lot more crazy. Crazy town. Big old cray cray.

I do what any sane person would do. "Thank you so much, Mike," I reply. Accepting the bouquet of flowers.

"And don't forget the tampons," adds Tim. He holds out the box. He pinned a poppy to it as well.

"No, of course. Thank you, Tim. That was really considerate."

"Something about you looks strange," says Mike.

"Definitely strange," adds Tim.

Teddy puts his little arm to his chin and nods along with them.

I carefully take one of the poppies from the bouquet, and tuck it behind my ear.

"That's so much better!" says Mike

"Yes, way better," adds Tim.

"I thought something was really wrong with you a for a second, Dorothy."

"Nope, just a normal flower girl, that's me." I say, with a smile, and backing a step toward the door.

"Oh, just wondering, is Leon around. Ha. I mean. He is always around. Leon? Leon you there?"

"Leon was acting really strange," says Tim. "I turned him off."

“You turned Leon *off*?” I reply.

“Yes.”

“How?”

“He has a breaker in the circuit board in my office. I switched him off.”

“Oh okay. Yes. That makes a lot of sense.”

“Would you like another poppy, Dorothy?” asks Mike, plucking one from his arm and holding it out to me.

Again, I take it. Carefully.

“I’m just going to go and put these flowers in the washroom,” I say. Backing into the washroom door. “So, I’ll go and do that now. Right now. And you guys keep doing, whatever it is your doing.”

“Okay, Dorothy,” says Mike.

“We’re on top of it,” adds Tim.

Opening the door to the washroom, I slip through and lock it behind me. The second I’m in there, I’m ripping the poppy from behind my ear and dropping it into the toilet. One after the other, I’m ripping off the petals and the black bulbs and the white roots and the green leaves, and I’m flushing them down, down, and away. Then I’m over at the sink scrubbing

my hands intensely with the bar of soap, and wiping off my face where the poppy may have touched.

What the heck is going on?!

The ship is full of those damn flowers, and Leon is powered down. That means we’re just drifting here in space, and we’ve probably now become one of those poppy clouds.

It’s time for a mirror conference. I stand in front of the sink, and look myself square in the eye. “Okay, Dorothy, you need to fix this. We need to turn Leon back on. He can help us. Which means I need to get to Tim’s office. They seemed pretty happy out there, after all, maybe they won’t notice I’m switching Leon back on? And once I have Leon on, I need to get the flowers out of here, and get us out of this poppy field.”

My boots are tingling.

“You have an idea?” I ask them.

Oh, of course. I can’t just go out there. For some reason, I’ve been safe in here this whole time. There was that bit earlier that I had wanted to go and get more poppies for the ship. But when I came in here that urge went away.

The air filter! Leon’s air filter must have stopped the odour or pheromones or whatever of the poppies. So

that's why I wasn't taken over by them. I was safe from their smell.

"So what do I do now?" I ask aloud.

With a tickle of my toes, I remember the odour eaters. "Brilliant idea," I tell my boots. Grabbing a foot freshener, I hold it up to my face like a mask.

It will have to do.

"Are you ready?" I ask my boots.

They seem quite ready. The emerald is even *more* emerald than normal.

"Here we go."

With a flip of the lock, I open up the ladies door and step out into the restaurant once again.

There are poppies lining the bathroom doors. I take a closer look. Tiny white roots are growing from the stems anywhere they touch another surface. It's like those vines that crawl up the side of a house and then ruin the brick. New shoots are growing off the stems too, and from the shoots, more roots. If this keeps up, we'll be so rooted into the poppy cloud that we'll never get out of this place.

Pulling off a small vine of poppy, I once again tuck it behind my ear and can already feel the roots slowly making their way across my lobe and neck.

"Squeak?" asks Teddy.

"Teddy! You startled me. Have you been there all along? I almost didn't see you."

He's a mass of red flowers, standing against a wall of red flowers. It looks like he's almost stuck to the wall itself, except surely he could chomp his way through without any trouble?

Still resting against the wall, Teddy points at my face.

"Oh this? Ah, I think I'm coming down with something very contagious. It's ah, you know, meant to stop germs. Very bad, plant killing germs. I don't want to get anyone else sick."

"Squeak, squeak, squeak?"

"Oh yeah. For sure it's normal. Our earth masks are in the shapes of earth feet so that we . . . don't lose motivation in the road to recovery."

Teddy nods and settles back against the wall.

"Ted, quick question. Where are Mike and Tim?"

He just stands there looking forward, disappearing more and more into the restaurant wall of thickly growing poppies.

Quietly and carefully, I tip toe past him and step over the strands of flowers that are beginning to make

criss-crosses of red upon the floor. I've seen a few things in my travels, but I've *never* seen a plant this aggressive or persuasive within its environment.

My boots are beginning to pulse just slightly with tiny bursts of pressure. Everywhere I step, the poppies are wilting slightly. That's promising to see.

"Ough," says a voice from the counter area. I creep forward and move into the main foyer of the restaurant. It's red, like the plushiest carpet you've ever seen. So soft and inviting you almost want to strip naked and roll across the floor as the petals rub against your bare skin.

Almost.

"Crap," I whisper and press the foot fresher more carefully against my mouth. The scent of poppies is competing with the minty fresh odour eater. Maybe I should just make a run for Tim's office and flip Leon back on. Maybe the lot of them have gone so poppy crazy that they won't even notice a little person like me sneaking by?

"Oughhhhh," moans the voice.

A hand drops down and grabs my head. Screaming, I spin around and its grip slips from my skull but it stays clasped to my hair. Swinging an arm, I try to bat it away. But it's got my hair in a tight grip now. I do

what anyone with long hair would do in that situation. I grab the bunch closest to the root to protect myself, and then I drop my body so that the hand is forced to release the weight of me.

Looking up, I see Mike staring down at me from the ceiling. Or at least, I see Mike's face staring down. He's splayed out upon the ceiling facing downward, nearly smothered in poppies except for his face and arms.

"Bad girl, Dorothy," He mumbles. "Trying to get my brain? I'll get your brain, my pretty."

"What the hell are you talking about, Mike? What the hell are you doing on the ceiling."

He makes another grab. "Don't you want another Poppy, Dorothy? Don't you want to rest with the poppies? They'll be good for us. We won't need to wander around anymore. We're finally home."

"Right, home. Of course."

He makes another swing with his arm, and the strangest thing happens. I step side ways and raise my own hands to block the grab, but his hand never connects. It just keeps on its swing till it finishes its arc, and then it seems to stay there against him and the poppy ceiling, pinned somehow."

"Ough!" moans Mike once more.

Something is happening in my head. Part of it feels . . . strange with what just happened. Another part feels very much like lying on the floor and taking a beautiful nap. Naps are so underrated. All I really want to do is surrender for fifteen minutes. Just fifteen sweet minutes, and then I can get up again.

With a drop of my hand, the odor eater falls from my face, and I crash down upon the floor with it. I lay there on the ground, breathing in the sweet floral scent that has become thick in our restaurant, even overtaking the perpetual smell of old grease and fried hamburger patties.

“Ough!” moans Mike from above.

I tilt my head back below him while laying on the ground, and blink once. Blink twice. Blink . . . there’s a patch in the window where the poppies aren’t yet growing. I can see out into space - or rather, I can see out at the poppy clouds. Could there be a ship at the center of all those clouds? Could there be a crew deep in sleep – so deep, that they’ve been sleeping for far too long. So long, there’s nothing left.

My mind begins spinning backward and the room starts to feel lighter and lighter.

“Ouuuggghhh,” moans Mike again.

Something warm and wet splashes onto my face.

“Ughh,” he continues.

More wetness, this time in my eye.

Instinctively, my hand raises up and wipes off the slick liquid.

More drip. More moans from Mike.

He’s drooling. It’s dripping down and landing on my own face.

That’s disgusting.

Somehow, I push up my body and my hand somehow finds the foot freshener. With some kind of growing strength, I hold it up to me and breath in the mint scent. The heaviness begins to lift. I get onto my knees, seeing that the poppies are receding, and then stand.

“Mike, you drooled on me. Gross, buddy. Extremely gross.”

He keeps drooling.

Quickly realizing he might be ready for other types of bodily excretions, I move ahead and make my way around the counter. Tim is here, I’m sure of it. There’s the all too familiar scratching of his fountain pen coming from his office where the circuit board it tucked away. (Why a night-manager at Wurgers

needs a fountain pen for the log book is beyond me, but there you have it.)

Making my way through the kitchen, watching as the poppy stems are more and more actively swinging away and wilting at my touch, I reach the office. As expected the place is completely red with the flowers *except* for Tim's desk, where he is sitting – poppy vines growing from his head and chest and body, scribbling furiously into the manager log book.

He stops writing and looks up.

“Dorothy, you are out of the washroom.”

“I am.”

“Pop quiz: the dinner rush has just ended and you have three things that need to get done; clean the dining tables, serve a customer who is waiting; and prep the poppies for the post-clubbing crowd. What do you do?”

“Serve the customers.”

“Wrong! You prep the poppies. You always prep the poppies. We've been doing it all wrong this entire time. The system is wrong, Dorothy! I can't believe I haven't realized it before. Prep the poppies! That's the key to the entire service industry.”

He grabs the pen again. The circuit box is right behind him.

“Dorothy!”

“Tim!”

“Why aren't you out there prepping the poppies for tonight's rush.”

“Ah, it's all done, Tim.”

“All done?”

“Yep.”

“All done. The poppies are all prepped. We are ready to roll. James can go and stuff it. He is going to lose his mind when he reads my theory on poppyism and fast food. Lose. His. Mind.”

“Someone will lose their mind, if they haven't lost it already.”

I creep closer to the desk and Tim. He bends back over and continues his scribbling. The fountain pen's ink is spluttering across the page with the start of every new sentence. I try to read the jibberish he's writing, but all I can really make out are the words Poppies First written over and over.

“The thing you have to remember is, the poppy always comes first.” He mutters. Now he's drawing

poppies across the page. Tim's a damn good drawer. You never know what talent lies beneath a person. I edge around him, brushing against the back of his chair. The poppies growing across Tim's back wilt as my arm accidentally sweeps against them.

Suddenly he stops and sits up very, very erect. I'm between him and the circuit box now. The box is open a crack and I swing it slightly wider. Tim twists his head toward me, still sitting perfectly straight.

"Dorothy," he sings. "You are acting weird."

"Oh really?" Looking in the circuit box, I haven't got a damn clue which one belongs to Leon. The circuits all have numbers written beside them. I squint and read them. It's nothing but a lot of numbers. How the hell am I supposed to try them all with Tim sitting here watching me.

"Yes. Weird. Why do you have a shoe sole against your mouth, Dorothy?"

"It's an odour eater, Tim."

"Does that explain anything?"

"No," I reply. "Say Tim, I think you're really onto something with your poppy idea. Maybe we should change the name of the restaurant to Poppy Palace instead of Wurgers."

He looks off for a moment and bites the end of his pen. Ink is dripping onto his fingers. "Or maybe, we can just call it *Poppy*," he replies.

"That's a good idea. And we can make poppy burgers and poppy pop and poppy fries."

Now he's nodding more vigorously. "I like that idea, Dorothy."

"Good, Tim. Oh, Tim?"

I can see the idea of a poppy franchise dancing in his managerial mind.

"Tim?" I ask again.

"Hmm?"

"How do you know what each of these fuses do? They're numbered but I don't understand the numbering."

He keeps chewing on the end of his pen, but gives me something you might call the "stink eye". That's a bad sign.

"Oh, sorry. I forgot, you're just the night manager. You probably don't know about these things."

"I'm *the* manager now! And all the numbers for that panel are written right here in the log book."

“Psh, I doubt it. James wouldn’t trust you with any of that stuff.”

“James! He’s not in charge of me. Here they are, just like I said.”

Tim flips to the back of the notebook and holds up a printed sheet taped onto the last page.

“Hold it!” I say with the wave of my hand.

“What the?” says Tim. He can’t move his arms. Somehow, he’s frozen into place.

I don’t know how the heck that just happened, but I’m not complaining. Number twenty-two - super computer intelligence. That’s our Leon.

With the flick of a finger I’ve switch the fuse for Leon back on.

“Welcome to Wurgers, how can I help you?” he asks.

“Leon, are you still you?”

“Calculating.”

Tim and I wait as there’s a whirring sound of the restaurant thinking. Or rather, I wait. Tim is struggling, but just barely. He can’t actually move more than a few centimeters here and there.

“Affirmative, I’m still me. Still disembodied. Still lost in space. Still a soul with capabilities far, far beyond the typical human experience.”

“Do you remember being shut off.”

“I remember Tim telling me to stop the leaping and rematerialize the spacesuits, which I did, and then I remember . . . nothing. So, they switched me off did they.”

The restaurant is becoming warmer.

“Think they can just come back here and turn off a person’s brain!”

And warmer.

“Think it’s cool to treat the new guy like an on/off button!”

And warmer.

The poppies are beginning to wilt at a rapid pace. They’re receding from the room and melting off of Tim as he breaks into a sweat. Within moments the flowers have pulled out of the office entirely like a flush of red out the door.

“Leon, could you please not bake us? It was a mistake. Tim, Mike and Teddy have been taken over by the poppies.”

“By the flowers. Seriously, you expect me to believe that?”

“I expect you to believe just about anything at this point. And they’ve been filling this place up with the flowers, and have turned into really, really crazy people.”

Tim is whimpering now.

“What’s wrong with him?” asks Leon.

“I don’t know. He can’t move. I think . . . well, maybe I froze him.”

“How’d you do that?”

“I just kinda, waved my hand like this.”

The desk flips over forward, and Tim is thrown to the side of the room. “Ow!” he yells. “You didn’t need to do that.”

“Interesting,” replies Leon.

As Leon is calming down, the room is returning to normal temperature. With that, the poppy vines seem to be contemplating returning, growing thick around the doorway.

“Plan time,” I say. “Leon, you need to warm up Wurgers. Warm it up to whatever you warmed it to

before. The poppies don’t like that. Tim, what comes first?”

Tim is on the ground rubbing his head. He glares up at me. “What comes first?”

“Here in Wurgers. What comes first?”

“The customer always comes first!” he barks.

“Good. Now you stay here while I fix this. Leon, can you please raise the temperature out there. But don’t bake Mike, okay?”

“Raising the temperature, not baking Mike.”

Within a minute there comes a crash as, I can only assume, Mike’s body falls onto the floor. It’s followed immediately by some very loud cursing.

The kitchen has been cleared of the flowers. And there on the other side of the counter in the foyer is Mike, lying flat on the floor and staring up at the ceiling.

“You okay, Mike?” I ask.

“What the fu-”

“You’re okay,” I cut in.

Teddy comes ambling forward looking lost. He stops as he reaches us and looks up at me.

“Squeak?”

“No, you didn’t.”

The poppy plant is now in a bunch against the entrance, and pushing against the door, withering with the heat and slowly turning into little more than potpourri.

“Leon, will you get that stuff out of here?”

The entrance door opens and the last bit of plant are sucked out into space where they float away.

“Well, that solves the problem of the those things,” says Leon. “But we still have an entire field of these things to get through without being snagged again.

I wander over to the window and look out into the cloud of red flowers here and there and everywhere.

“Which way toward the Wealthiest Wizard of Foz?” I ask Leon.

“To your left,” replies Leon.

I turn. “That way?”

“A bit more.”

“This way.”

“Right slightly.”

“Now?”

“Got it.” He replies.

And with not much more than a thought, some toe tickling, and a parting of my hands, the field of poppies opens up like the parting of water I imagine Moses must have done – and there on the far other side is a shining bright orb I can only assume is Foz.

“Holy hell,” mutters Tim from the counter.

“Temperatures up, and leap on, Leon.” I say.

“Aye aye,” replies Leon.

And with that, we’re on our way.

*

There’s a line up of spaceships hovering around the atmosphere of the planet of Foz. I’ve got my flamingo sunglasses firmly in place. This place is literally (according to Leon, who seems to know these things) a massive diamond. It’s huge, and it sparkles with the light of the nearest sun. Apparently people live on this thing, and somehow they’ve all managed to not go blind. You think, upon approaching, that you are about to drive into the sun – but no, just a diamond. No big deal. . .

If my mother could see this, she'd leave her latest husband, no matter how rich, and would be gunning for the Wealthiest Wizard of Foz. The guy wouldn't stand a chance.

A pleasant tone rings over Leon's sound system, followed by a very formal voice. "Welcome to the Wealthiest World of Foz. On behalf of the Wizard, and everyone of Foz, I'd like to inform you for the sake of transparency, that we have our bazooka lasers locked and loaded upon your ship ready to blast you from the atmosphere, as is standard procedure for all unidentified vessels that approach our planet.

"My name is Lars, and I'll be questioning you today. Please state your name and business. If you do not state your name and business within fifteen seconds of this query, you will be lassoed out into the nether regions of space. If you attempt any acts that can be interpreted as aggressive, we will not hesitate to, as mentioned, blow you away."

Tim, Mike and I look at one another.

"You have ten seconds to state your business."

"Hello! My name is Tim Tin of the restaurant spaceship Wurgers and we are here on very official business."

"Hello Mr Tin, please state your business."

"We are looking for a missing body that someone stole . . ."

"Mike here of the restaurant spaceship Wurgers. We also want to find a way back to earth, and I'm kinda curious to learn more about a guy named Otthome."

"Sorry, we can't help you. The Wizard does not accept unscheduled appointments, viewings, drop ins, or questions," replies the guard.

"Excuse me, I'm Leon, the seeker of the body. We were told the Wizard would be able to help us by a fellow named Arrogon. And my body has been sold into slavery, so that is an issue of human rights that needs to be addressed. And okay, he's not exactly a useful fellow, but he's my body you know. And I don't want to lose him."

"The Wealthiest Wizard of Foz does not do lost and found, or human rights. You need an entirely different planet for that," replies the guard. "And telling people that sent you isn't a good way to get through any doors, by the way. Overall, I'm not impressed with your claim. We do not admit ships without legitimate prospective business. Transmission over."

“Wait, I’ve got something the Wizard might find interesting. Dorothy, here,” I add, “of the restaurant spaceship Wurgers.”

“How many people on this ship will keep adding to this conversation?” asks the guard over the speaker system.

“There’s three humans, one kinda human super computer and a teddy bear,” I reply.

“Squeak,” adds Teddy.

“Toto is Teddiarian.”

“Yes, I know the species,” replies the guard.

“So, will you let us in?”

“Prepare to be lassoed across space. In ten, nine, eight, seven.”

“Wait!” I shout. “We didn’t just cross all that space and risk our lives over and over only to be thrown away now.”

“Six, five, four.”

“Your poppies almost killed us!”

“Three, two,”

“I’ve got the boots! The emerald boots. I am wearing the boots.”

The guard stops counting down. “You have the Emerald Boots?”

“What the lady means to say,” cuts in Tim, “is that we have a lucrative opportunity for your planet to get onto the side of a very good, very happy, very powerful person on this ship.”

“Do you really have *the* boots?”

“I do,” I reply.

A robot flies up to the ship and snaps a picture of us through the window.

“Okay, proceed into the docking bay with caution. I will forward you request for an appointment to the wizard’s personal assistant directly. When your appointment is arranged, you will be notified. Please proceed to the docking area for the capital city of Foz, and transport down to the planet.”

Tim nods, then winks at me. “Leon, proceed to dock.”

And in we glide.

*

“This is stupid,” says Mike.

He's mostly right. It is stupid, but I don't think anyone here on Foz is of the same opinion. Not more than fifteen minutes of stepping off of the ship and landing on the planet, we were handed a hundred page questionnaire to fill out, and list of the traditional Wizard Meeting Wardrobe requirements. Apparently the Wizard is quite strict on the attire of those who grace his presence.

"Where are we supposed to find a neck ruffle?" Mike is flipping through the pages of the list. Tim is filling out the questionnaire upon his lap, fountain pen in hand and already looking perplexed.

"Dorothy, what is your grandmother's maiden name?" asks Tim.

"Alixor." Gran was proud of her Alixor blood.

"That questionnaire is stupid," pitches in Mike. "What's the point of sharing who our grandparents were, what they did. That was ages ago."

"It's their system," I reply with a shrug. Raising up my phone, I snap a picture of the massive fountain we're sitting beside. It's yet another massive diamond, only this time with water shooting out of its top. Toto is currently on top of where the water shoots out, riding the wave.

"And that bit about my reoccurring dreams? Do they really need to know I used to dream King Kong was destroying my home town?" asks Mike.

"Psychological insight," says Tim.

"If we were on the ship, I could fill that thing out in less than four seconds," adds Leon, speaking through my phone as I change the tint on the photograph, then send it out to the world on my feed.

"Forms are made to be savoured, Leon. Now, how old were you when you lost your first baby tooth?"

"How should I know?"

"It's a big moment in a person's life, I should think."

"Just say I was eight."

"*Were* you eight?"

"Yes, I was eight."

Tim gets back to writing. Upon landing, we had flashes of what I imagine were body scans, and then this questionnaire filled with weird and random questions to answer. None of us answer the same thing, but all of us are fielding really, really stupid tid bits that seem to have no connection to anything. And while I try to respect the customs of other cultures . . . and planets, Mike might actually be right. This is getting stupid.

I snatch the list from Mike's hand. "Okay, Toto, you and I are off to go shopping. Tim you stay here, and Leon, you can answer our questions for us since you seem to know everything anyhow."

"I can't tell if you are mocking me, but since that statement is true, I'll accept it," says Leon.

"Go on then. But if you get the neck ruffles, make sure they aren't the itchy kind," says Tim with the wave of his pen.

Mike and I shoot another look. I look back at Tim. Tim keeps working on his questions.

"Don't bother asking," says Mike. "He's deep into his happy space."

I wave at Toto who is still splashing in the fountain. "Come on, Toto!" I call. With one last splash, he jumps down into the water, and makes his way toward us. One very wet shaking off later, we are on our way.

This place is fantastic. I've been to a lot of markets, but this place, this place is fantastic. I mean, this the ultimate in people watching pleasure.

We're winding our way through narrow streets lined with all kinds of vendors and species. I want to call them people, and maybe they are . . . but they're people of many different backgrounds. Here is an

extra set of arms. There is a fish-man with his head in a bowl of water. Behind that table is a woman who is a man that is a tree. That lady has deep ridges in her forehead. Those people are joined back to back. This person is selling space fuses for the engines of Ergonomic Engines, and that fellow is giving away messages to remind people to smile.

There are bodies pressing against us as we weave from stall to stall with our list, trying to find the array of items.

"How are we going to buy the stuff once we find it?"

"We'll just help ourselves when no one is looking," I reply.

"Seriously?" asks Mike.

"No. Of course not. Well, not as a first resort."

"I don't know what the jails are like on this planet," says Mike. "But I reckon even a diamond prison is still a prison."

"Nah, don't sweat it. We'll try asking nicely. If that doesn't work maybe we can barter something. A service for the stuff. I'm not saying we should steal just for fun . . ."

Although, I have been known to steal here and there just for the thrill. But only from the rich and arrogant

folks who would drop by our house when I was younger. Getting their keys and rooting through their cars was almost like treasure hunting. My mother told me once that I did it for the attention, but that's not true. I take a job at Wurgers for the attention – because she *hates* that I work for minimum wage at a fast food joint

Stealing, that was just a hobby. I gave it up eventually, anyhow. It just got too easy.

“. . . we'll play it by ear. It's far more fun to convince people to give you stuff than to just take it from them when they're not looking.”

“Okay, but if we get busted for swiping diamond neck ruffles, I'm going to be in a bad mood.”

“Noted,” I reply, and then I wink at him because for some reason, it just feels right.

I hold up the list of what we need to get. Our appointment is scheduled for tomorrow morning first thing, and we need to look good.

1 green dress, made by a Foz approved seamstress.

3 green suits, made by a Foz approved tailor, complete with neck ruffles, pocket squares, and secret pockets.

Two sets of green dress shoes.

One green parasol.

One sword and sheath.

One ruby rose.

And a delicatessen to present from your home planet to the wizard.

Taking the list, I show it to a vendor who is selling good quality cooking pots. “You know where I can find these things?” I ask him.

“Go to the Emporium. It's all in the Emporium,” says the vendor.

“And where do you think I might find the emporium?”

“Follow the yellow brick road.”

Mike and I look around.

“It's to your left, around that corner. You can't miss it.”

We thank him and move on, to our left and around the corner. There, much like the man promised, is a road of yellow bricks.

“I think this is gold,” says Mike.

My boots are tingling as I step onto the smooth, pliable yellow surface. “Hey yes this is gold. High carat too, none of that dirty cheap stuff.”

I bend down to the road and feel around.

“What are you doing, Dorothy?” asks Mike.

“Oh nothing. Just checking for a loose brick,” I reply. “Nope, they seem stuck in pretty well.”

Mike gives me a look.

“What?” I ask.

“Nothing. You just remind me of someone.”

We walk the street of gold and once again find ourselves winding between shoppers and vendors alike. I show the list to people over and over, and again and again they direct us onward to the shop just further down the street.

Just when I think there’s some joking going on, and maybe they just don’t want to sell to foreigners, I spot an opening in the wall with a loose strip of fabric hanging over. There’s a sign nailed above the door with some letters falling off, other letters turned sideways: The Emporium.

Mike and I walk up, and Toto, who has been trailing us all this time, slips through the entrance as though

he’s been here before. With a shrug and a nod, we follow him inside.

“Sir! Welcome back, welcome back,” squeals a voice from inside the room behind what looks like a massive pile of shoe boxes. “It’s been too long since you’ve stopped by.”

Toto squeaks.

“Oh! You are so bad. Go ahead and I’ll put it on your account. Go on, try it, try it. You are going to love this!”

There’s a burst of tissue paper from behind the wall of boxes, with much squeaking and exclamations of “perfection, just perfection.”

“Hello?” asks Mike.

A human-esque man pops his head from around the stack of boxes, then steps out into the shop floor to meet us. He has the longest handlebar moustache I’ve ever seen, and the tallest top hat you could ever consider reasonable. He is dressed head to toe in what looks like a coarse satin that reflects all kinds of colours from the many, many lamps he has burning within his shop.

“Wow,” I say. “I want what you are wearing.”

“Custom made,” replies the fellow. “But welcome, welcome. You have an appointment with the Wizard?”

I smile and hand him the list. “Yes we do,” I reply.

“And Toto, are these yours friends?”

Toto squeaks from the other side of the boxes.

“Well, a friend of the Sir Toto is a friend of mine, of course.” He snaps his fingers and waves his hand, “The list, hand me the list!”

Mike slowly reaches forward with the list, letting it hang between his two fingers. The man in the custom suit snatches it from his reach.

“Mhum. Yes. Oh, yes. And the ruffles? Very good. Umbrella . . . I will have to check in the back. And a sword . . .”

Toto gives a high squeak and jumps out from behind the boxes, running in a blur of pink and green for the door.

“Yes, I agree!” calls the man. “He’s just gone to fetch you a sword, young lady. Toto has some very good connections to the best forges on Foz. That should come as no surprise, given his situation in life. But anyhow my friends, my name is Charles De

Limousine, and I’m thrilled to welcome you to the Emporium.”

“Ah?” I reply.

“Sit down, sit down.” He directs us to two overstuffed seats, and almost throws us down into their embrace.

“Now, Ted has told me all about it. Don’t you worry your lovely little selves, Charles is on the case.”

With a whir from his mouth and the twist of his body, he begins gliding across the shop – pulling out this box, throwing away that one, opening this package, holding up this shirt – it soon becomes a frenzied blur of colours and papers and boxes and clothing. Before I know it, I’m pulled up out of the seat and the man is whirling around me with a measuring tape. Humming and nodding as he goes. Next up is Mike, who gets the same treatment. Then we’re back down in the chairs, and the whirring continues.

Till all of a sudden, there’s a sharp “Ding” on what turns out to be a cash register hiding behind a pile of boxes tied with string, all waiting to be taken away.

“That will be 100,000 bits if you please, and you can go on your way.”

“100,000 bits . . .” I reply. I am wondering, if we jumped up really, really fast and maybe pushed over

that pile of shoe boxes, would it be enough of a direction to get away with snatching the clothes and legging it out of here? No, that wouldn't work.

"You see, we don't have any money," says Mike.

Damn it, Mike, you didn't show all your cards in a round of cards!

"No . . . monkey?" asks Charles, the shopkeeper.

"No *money*," replies Mike.

"I'm so sorry young man, my hearing is not what it once was. Did you say you have no Monday?"

"Money."

"Monty?"

"Money."

"You have no mommy?"

"Squeak!" says Toto, appearing beside me with a long, thin sword strapped across his back.

"Oh, of course! I'll send you a bill and add it to the account."

Toto nods, then nods at us to get up, grab the packages and get moving. So, we do just that.

*

We're waiting in the great hall dressed in our green outfits. This place reminds me of City Hall back on earth, only on a much, much grander scale. The walls of pure green emerald are cold to the touch (yeah, I was touching everything I could when walking in here. It's good to scope out a place with all five senses), and reach up incredibly high into the air. High, high above – much like a massive cathedral, the walls find one another and open and break with the light from the sky shining through. It's spectacular, and I am wondering if there aren't huge diamonds embedded as skylights in the arch above. It's a dazzling place.

Something about this massive chamber feels a bit familiar. But it's hard to put my finger exactly on what isn't new.

Right now we're sitting in the waiting area of the city hall cathedral thing, marked by its red velvet rope much like a movie theater. The guys are twitching in their seats, pulling at their neck ruffles, taking turns to twiddle my sword in the air. Toto is off talking with another teddy bear that's carrying a pile of papers in its tiny arms. They seem to know each other well. He knows *everyone* on this planet, it seems. You think he might have prepared us for the poppy field.

The Wizard's palace is a busy, busy place. Councillors are crossing the floor non stop, moving across the massive empty hall from this doorway to that doorway, with their assistants tagging behind catching the escaping paperwork, juggling the drinks (even on alien planets they drink coffee, it appears), and talking to the other assistants. There's a tour group of Fozians moving slowly around the hall and stopping to pause in front of different places of the strong green walls. Security guards are posted before every single door, and then there's that one guard hanging out in the middle of the hall, trying not to fall asleep from what I can tell. Everyone is wearing sunglasses, not just us. Though the teddybears seem fine without them.

There is a huge clock on the far wall where you would normally expect some kind of religious symbol to be mounted, or altar, or something. Instead it's a pale green clock with fine golden (probably just plain wonderful boot-tingling gold, actually) numbers, or at least I assume they are numbers, laid into its face. Apparently our appointment is set for “./.” so the assistant told us when we checked in at the front desk – literally a desk at the front. After all of that formality getting here, I thought there might have been more.

This dress is better than just about anything I've ever owned. It's soft and light but thick and strong, and

it's cut so damn perfectly I could go back and kiss that gentleman at the shop.

“The Wizard is ready to see you,” says an upright pig-shaped assistant carrying a clip board. It's the same pig person who took the bundle of paperwork Tim had prepared and fed it into a little machine, paper after paper, that then produced a tiny ‘bing’ and printed out a small slip that the pig took off through a side door to god knows where. All of those life moments and histories, translated into ‘bing’.

“Finally!” says Tim, taking the liberty to unhook the velvet rope and walk out of the waiting pen. “This guy had better have some answers. We've been put through a lot of trouble over this.”

“The Wizard doesn't work in obligations,” says the pig as it clicked forward on its tiny cloven feet. We had followed in a line like school children to the waiting area. Mike whipped around the sword. I, for some reason, held the umbrella under my arm. Toto gave the sword to me, but these boys wanted to play with it so badly I let them have it and took the umbrella.

“Wait here, please,” instructed the pig.

“More waiting?” complains Tim.

Now we're standing in front of the clock. Its massive face is staring back at us and those markings are *definitely* gold, really, high carat gold, which means . . . no, no. Why do I keep slipping into this whole gold-fever every time I catch a glimpse of it?

I take Leon out of the specially designed transparent pocket in my dress and hold it up for a photo. Snapping a photo as up close as I can get of the i/i, I send it out into the world. "Hashtag Want."

My boots are gently buzzing now deep in the soles. They want it too, I can tell. And once again, like some flash, I feel as if this is all really familiar.

Suddenly the clock face creaks and slowly pulls apart revealing a massive round corridor behind it, barely lit and seemingly twisting off into nowhere.

"The Wizard of Foz will now see you all one at a time." Announces the pig.

"We're here as a group," I tell it.

"Timothy, Manager, you are to go first."

"I'm on my way," says Tim as he takes the sword from Mike, then takes off without even looking back at us. "Don't worry," he calls over his shoulder as he walks further into the tunnel, "I'll smooth things over for the rest of you."

And in he goes, twirling the sword and humming a little tune.

The minutes tick by.

"I have a feeling we're going to be here forever," mutters Mike.

My boots begin tapping. I'm getting impatient too. Only Teddy seems to be really enjoying himself, and if I'm right, he's also *flirting* with the pig assistant. There's a lot to that guy that I don't know about.

The pig eventually stiffens up again, and announces, "The Wizard will now see Mike, the burger flipper."

"But where's Tim?" asks Mike.

"He's in the waiting room on the other side, enjoying a complimentary beverage."

"Okay . . . but we want to go in together," replies Mike.

"One at a time. Those are the Wizard's orders."

Mike looks back at me with a shrug. I nod. He heads off into the dark tunnel alone and walks off till he disappears.

Minutes pass.

"Alright, you. Head on in," says the pig to Toto. Toto gives me a wave and - somehow - a wink, then strolls

ahead into the tunnel. Well, he's not worried at all, it seems. So that has to be a good sign, right?

Minutes pass again. And then more minutes. And more minutes. Finally, the pig assistant touches its large ear – and announces once more.

“The Wizard is now set to see Leon, the Newbie Super Computer.”

I begin to walk forward and the pig stops me. “Just Leon.”

“I'm here,” Leon says from my pocket.

The pig hesitates just a moment, then holds out its hoof. “I will carry you in to see the wizard.”

“No way am I giving my phone to a stranger,” I say. “All my personal information is on this thing.”

“I couldn't care less about your primitive device,” it replies.

“All the more reason you shouldn't be carrying it.”

“Don't worry about it,” says Leon. “I'm going to transfer myself to the Wizard's personal device. I can find my way no problem.”

“No!” says the pig. “That is a breach of security and you are not permitted.”

The guards that I can see are suddenly watching us. They aren't particularly friendly looking guards. . . and while I don't recognize the thing strapped to their backs, I also don't want to find out what it is.”

“Here,” I say, passing my phone over. “But no snooping around, and it needs to be treated well. Leon, watch out for my stuff, okay?”

“For sure, Dorothy.”

The pig lady accepts the phone and she and Leon disappear down the path.

I'm left to stand there and analyze the gold-embedded clock. My fingers can literally feel how easy it would be to just, gently, slide on of those 'i' out from its setting and pull it over here. But then of course I'd be faced with the challenge of carrying around a heavy golden 'i' and hiding it from the security guys now watching me intently.

That's the problem with these kinds of places. The guards have so little to do, there's nothing left but to either suspect everyone or fall asleep.

Hmm. How am I supposed to know when it's my turn to go in and see the wizard?

I stand there waiting, and the minutes tick by. Then more minutes. And more. My ears keep listening for

the assistant's telltale clicks as it comes back to meet me. But nothing.

With the flick of my finger, I take the front desk in this massive hall, and have it tumble forward, dropping paperwork and files everywhere across the floor. There's a hubbub of noise and the guards, for just a moment, are pulled toward the commotion.

I step into the tunnel and hurry down its dark corridor. With each step forward, it feels more and more like there's a sense of tugging, as if I couldn't turn back even if I wanted to. On the way is a twisting trail of arrows slightly glowing in the dim, with the words : this way only, keep moving, go on ahead, don't turn back, almost there, step sharp, hurry up, he doesn't have all day, let's go, move it! Written along the arrow lines.

The tunnel becomes darker and darker as I walk further and further, the only light now being the glow that has grown as the arrows on the walls are twisting and turning through the darkness to lead me forward. Before I know it, it's pitch black and I'm walking my arms held out in front, and the words on the walls have gotten larger and more demanding: Stand straight. Get ready. Think big. Go for it. Time is money. You got to spend money to make money. All in!

And with that last word, I step forward and begin falling.

"Akkkkkkujgh!" I scream, but there's no sound, instead I fall slowly downward – down, down, down through complete and total darkness, until the falling suddenly stops. Again, there's a small 'ding' that draws my attention toward a sign with a small light flickering above it, fixed onto a plain old door. "Welcome" reads the sign.

I stand a bit taller, smooth my dress, and push open the door.

Stepping through, I've walked into a dark movie theater in the middle of an old feature film. The room slants downward and is filled with empty seats. The stage at the center is raised and hosts the massive screen showing pictures from an old movie I don't recognize. The theater is filled with intricate carvings of angels and devils, and wood creatures and images of pan. A spotlight snaps on, and shines down onto a chair in the middle of the theater, empty but with a large bag of popcorn and a drink waiting by its side. I take the hint and head for that chair, sliding through the aisle and sitting down.

It's been forever since I've had movie theater popcorn, so of course I grab myself a handful. Oh my god, there's real butter on this stuff. Real, hot and salty butter.

“You know how to please this lady, that’s for sure,” I say aloud.

The movie projection freezes on the close up of a fellow’s face, and then the face turns away from the action and faces me instead. “I’m so glad you enjoy the popcorn, it’s my personal favourite as well.”

“The wealthiest wizard is a movie?” I ask.

“Today I’m a movie, tomorrow I’ll be something else.”

“Where are my friends?”

“In the waiting room.”

“You could have seen us all at once, you know. We work better as a team.”

“Which is why I’d rather see you one at a time.”

“Hmm.”

“Onto business. You have something of particular interest to me, young lady.”

“Oh? Do you need an umbrella so badly? I thought it would never rain down here in your little theater cave?”

The man smiles. Then peers down.

“Let’s see the boots,” he says.

I stand, popcorn still in hand, and lift one leg to show him the boot.

“Now the other,” he says.

I poke out the other leg.

“Once again,” he demands, pulling out an eyeglass from his pocket and leaning forward on the screen as if to get a better view.

“They aren’t for sale. Ever. The boots and I have already made a deal on that front.”

Clearly he’s upset.

“Let me get a better look at you girl, come up here before me.”

I leave the food and grab my umbrella, and head up onto the stage. Standing there before the giant screen, my shadow is black against it, except for the boots that shine through the silhouette of my dress with a beautiful green.

“As I thought, they’re the real thing. So, if you aren’t here to sell your boots, which I could give you a very good price for, what *are* you looking for in this visit.”

“Did my friends already ask you for help in buying back Leon’s body?”

He waves his hand. "Of course, though it's a bad investment."

"Maybe, but you can't put a price on sentiment."

"Fair point."

"And did they already ask you for a way back to earth?"

"Yes."

"And did Mike get to ask his question about that guy he's been talking about for some reason?"

"He did."

"Did they make any kind of deal with you already?"

"They did."

"Good. I guess that's it then. I don't want anything, myself."

"You *must* want something. Everyone who comes here needs to be ready to trade."

"Actually, you know what? There is something I want."

"That's my girl."

"Pardon?"

"What is it you want?"

"I want to know why all of this feels so familiar to me. And, what the heck are these new powers about? *And* why does Arrogon keep showing up and then disappearing again. He's your friend, but he's been a total flake from the moment I met him."

"The Emperor is a client, and I can't comment on our relationships."

"Except that he owes you a lot of bits."

"A *lot* of bits."

"And what do you want, then? Because you brought us here and I don't think you do anything without profit in mind . . ."

"It's simple. I have a problem, you have the power to fix it."

"My boots have the power, you mean."

"A little of both, my girl. Now, your other friends really had nothing to trade. Oh, a bit of information about their adventures here and there, but nothing actually worthwhile. And while the Sir Toto of the Teddybears is good to have as an ally, his planet is zero profit zero cost, which doesn't make it a very lucrative place for investments of favours."

"How important is Toto?"

"Extremely."

“Then why is he flying around with us in our restaurant?”

“He’s sworn to protect the wearer of the boots.”

“Really?”

“It’s a life debt. Teddybears forge bonds, and they honour those bonds. Back to my point, young lady. If you want answers and you want your friends to be happy, then here is my proposal. I need you to do something very simple.”

“Being?”

“Go collect my daughter and bring her back here.”

“That’s all?”

“That is all. If you do that, I’ll answer all of your questions and fulfill your friends’ wishes.”

“And wipe clean Arrogon’s debt?”

“What? No, of course not.”

“No deal then. Honestly, I’m not even convinced we really need your help. After all, if these boots are so powerful, then surely I’ll eventually figure them out and get us everything that we need.”

“It will take you almost forever to get that good.”

“Hey, the only thing I’ve got waiting for me on earth is a mother I barely speak to, and a life that smells like friend chicken all the time, no matter how much I clean it. Truth be told, I’m not rushing this ‘find home’ thing at all.”

“You get my daughter to come see me, and I’ll give you something I know you’re craving more than anything else.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s called Over the Rainbow, and all I can say is that it will be very, very worth your while. But that’s some high level stuff, young lady, and I don’t share high level so easily. Get my daughter, then we’ll talk.”

“And?”

“Hey, if you find Over The Rainbow, then you can do what you like with that exchange. But if you want my advice, don’t put all your eggs in that basket. Your Mike is another one of those bad investments.”

He’s right, I can sense it in my gut. But still . . . sentimental attachment has got me thinking.

“We’ll see. First things first, I’m going to help my friends.”

And then, with that, a trap door opens up beneath me, and I’m falling once again – sideways, down, and

now upward, until I fall up into a new room, and with a quiet 'bing' I look around, still feeling dizzy, and see my friends in the waiting room enjoying their complimentary beverages.

The pig walks over with an envelope and hands it to me.

"You instructions," it says. "Find her and bring her back."

"That's simple eh?"

"Right. Simple. Yes . . ."

And with that a door in the wall opens and in streams sunshine and fresh air.

"Good luck," says the pig. "And don't come back without her."

I grab a can of god-knows-what, because hey, I deserve a drink too, and out we go into the day.

As a group we stumble into the light, and the door behind us shuts solid.

Tim grabs the instructions from my hands and waves them into the air.

"Who's up for another adventure?" he asks.

"I am!" replies Leon.

Even Mike looks up for the challenge. And Toto is hopping ahead, happy as ever.

"Okay," I say. "Let's do this." Holding up my phone I snap a last photo. No hashtag this time.

Chapter 5

“The Witch of the Wrest is his daughter?” asks Mike, grabbing the note and staring at the sheet of paper.

“This makes no sense.”

“Why not? Spoiled little fire girl, running around the universe kicking up trouble. I’ve been there before, I get it. Except instead of shoplifting she throws fireballs.”

“But if she’s his daughter in this world . . . then that means in the other world . . .”

“You worry about other dimensions way too much, Mike,” says Dorothy. “What do I always tell you, you got to go with the flow.”

“Staff meeting!” I declare.

“We’re all here, Tim,” replies the Newbie.

“It’s Sir, to you, Leon. Captain if you want to address me otherwise.”

“Seriously?” asks Mike. “We need to call you captain now.”

“This is exactly why I’ve called this staff meeting.”

“Even though we were already all standing here,” says Dorothy.

You know, I always thought she was on my side. The change in this staff since we’ve inexplicably got sucked into space is ridiculous and makes a night manager think twice about getting informal with those beneath him.

“This is exactly why we need to have a meeting. Look, we are in a few different situations at this moment. Firstly, we’re a Wurgers restaurant. And that means we sell the best damn 2 dollar hamburgers anyone can buy that is produced in less than four minutes from order to consumption. We make food, and we do it well.”

“Because it comes prefrozen.”

“None of that from the peanut gallery, Michael.”

Mike moans.

“Secondly, we are a spaceship. Or well, Leon is the spaceship, but it’s our Wurgers and we live here too. Isn’t that fair to say, Leon?”

“Fair enough, I suppose,” he replies.

“And third – we are a crew on a mission. So, I’ve been thinking about it and we need new position titles. For

instance, since I'm the one in charge, it's natural for me to become the captain of Wurgers."

"You know when the crazy pirate aliens come, it's always the captain they make walk the plank?" says Dorothy.

"No, I didn't know that." I reply.

"Well that's what I would do if I was a space pirate," she replies.

"That's true," adds Mike.

"Don't ruin this moment for me you two. Now, Leon, you are no longer just the new hire newbie, you are our super computer and navigator."

"Yeah. I know. I've been doing that all along."

"Right, but now it's official. Mike you are the head 'Guy who does everything.'"

"And what's the official title for that, Tim? General manager?"

"No! Of course not. No, it's ah. . . lackey. You are the official lackey."

"I don't agree."

"Too bad. I'm the captain."

"And Dorothy, you are good at understanding everyone out here in space for some reason, so you'll be our official Translator and token female. Please expect to be kidnapped every other week, and don't worry, we will rescue you as often as possible."

Dorothy laughs. "Good luck with that, *Captain Tim*. Don't know if you noticed, but I'm the only one here with the awesome superpowers."

"Except my supercomputing."

"Except that, Leon."

She's right. Man, it seems to me that everyone has something that I am missing. Leon has the cyber brain and materializing ability. Dorothy can move stuff with her mind, and I have a feeling that's the tip of the iceberg. Mike . . . well, I'm not really sure what he has – but he *seems* to think he has something. And that isn't fair either. I don't really have anything . . . except this one thing.

"I have a plan for bringing the Witch of the Wrest home. It's her Achilles heel. . . that woman *likes* me."

I give the moment its dramatic pause. Dorothy's eyebrows go up. Mike looks unimpressed. Teddy, over there in the corner and who I'd rather pretend doesn't exist just in case he decides to eat me, taps a pink fuzzy foot.

“Did you catch that, Leon?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Good.”

“How is that a plan?” asks Mike.

“Well, if she likes me, she’s going to trust me.”

“But Tim, we have an Achilles heel as well. You *like* her.”

“I do not!”

“Your face is turning bright red,” says Dorothy.

“Well? So what if it is? That’s a perfectly normal colour for a perfectly normal face to turn. Now, moving on. Where do we find her?”

“I don’t know. The instructions from the Wizard just said we need to find her and bring her back. He threw in a few bits to help us get by, but apart from that – nothing.”

Mike looks like he is thinking. I say that because he’s paying attention.

“Yes, Mike?”

“If she’s the witch of the *wrest*, then she goes to places that no one wants or notices or claims. So

where around here would fit that description? Leon, do you know of any ideas?”

“How to go where no one wants to go? Sorry, I am only programmed for the most accessible or time efficient routes.”

“Toto,” I say to the bear, “you’re a local to this area. Where would you never want to end up?”

Teddy squeaks.

“Oh really? You know, I bet that place wouldn’t be *all bad*,” says Dorothy. “One person’s trash is another person’s treasure, after all.”

“Dorothy, if you’re going to be the official translator, can you actually do the translating?”

“Teddy says no one really wants to visit the mountain of garbage. It’s this massive mound of garbage that’s so large, it has its own gravity and solar orbit. And since trash doesn’t actually decompose in space, it just keeps getting bigger and bigger. But you know, it’s trash, so no one really wants to be there very much.”

“Except Wendy?” asks Mike.

“Possibly. I would say an enormous planet of garbage would be a good hiding spot. Though can I please

suggest spacesuits for touchdown? I'm curious, but I'm not crazy."

"You got all of that from one Teddy squeak, eh?" I ask her.

"For sure."

"Fair enough. Leon, do you know how to get to the mountain planet of garbage?"

"Calculating . . . mapping system has been updated and the coordinates are set. Prepare to leap."

I grasp the counter ledge.

"On my mark, get set, leap!"

And off we go to find the Witch of the Wrest. I wonder if she'll remember me.

*

Captain's log.

Sales have dropped to an almost indescribable low. While customers have approached the Wurgers with obvious anticipation – and I have to say, I'm quite pleased to see that the Wurgers name has preceded our arrival out here in space – but I believe there are aspects of our food that continue to be unpalatable

for the majority of species with the exception of the space rats, those tall purple things, and the little squeaker rubber bots. I've double checked the temperatures for cooking, and the expiry date on the boxes in the freezer . . . however, nothing seems amiss, and I have to conclude that Wurgers is designed specifically for those with human genomes in their DNA, and other species have yet to develop a resistance. That is what Mike the Hamburger Flipper told me, but Leon seemed to agree and when the super computer agrees, I assume he has some hard calculations behind that conclusion. Leon also suggested we stop selling the food in case some intergalactic law suites get slammed against us. But that's acting from a place of fear, which management 101 discourages.

Solution to our drop in sales? We are repackaging our meal options as culinary cleansers. Clients have that delicious Wurgers taste, and the issues to follow are all part of their healing properties as they purge the body of toxins. Dorothy helped me decide upon that stuff around the toxins, and it has seemed to make a great deal of sense – particularly to the extra clean Oober Aliens, who are on a constant mission to purge themselves of toxins. I throw in an extra order of fries whenever they zoom by in their ships. We are slowly but surely racking up the bits, though we are nowhere near an amount to buy back Leon's body.

The morale of the crew is up post Wizard visit. Apparently he has promised to give us the map to Earth, and buy back Leon's body if we just manage to find and return his daughter, Wendy the Witch of the Wrest. We're like bounty hunters now, and I have to say it's given an added thrill to this entire experience. So long as we don't get killed, shot or horribly lost in another field of poppies, I think things are looking up for the team here at Wurgers.

Mike had an idea to find the witch somewhere that could be qualified as the 'Wrest' which poses a particular challenge. Where do you go that no one wants to go, when you are someone who wants to go there? And does that place no longer exist the moment you want to find it? She's a slippery one this witch, that's for sure. And I really hope that when we do find her, she doesn't try to bake us alive.

*

Location update: we are in the dumpster system of the galaxy, as marked out by the map given to us by the Wealthiest Wizard of Foz. Apart from the small benefit of having a place to off load all the garbage we've been accumulating these past several days – and let's face it, it was starting to smell even if it was in a space locked container hanging off the bow of

the restaurant – I can't see why anyone would want to spend any amount of time in this place.

Dorothy is becoming more and more concerning everyday as she begins to play with her newfound powers. If she's not knocking one piece of space junk into another like a massive game of pool, she's slacking off on her duties by having Teddy simply eat any item that has been misplaced, and I can't be positive, but I think she's started a petition against Wurgers for making the crew work more hours than is typically allowed back on Earth in our country. I've seen her whispering to Mike while holding the employee guide book, and if that's not suspicious I don't know what is. In these moments, I like to ask myself – What would Wally Wurger do?

And when I really can't answer that kind of question, I slip into my office and lock the door, and employ my ultra top secret weapon for solving the bigger Wurger problems, without having to refer any of these issues to James the day manager, or even worse . . . head office.

There is the crackle of static as Leon's voice breaks in across my computer speakers as I'm in the back office rearranging the schedule. With a staff this short, it's hard to give *anyone* a day off. But I need to be ready with a plan if they start up with a strike.

"Sir, we have a big problem," says Leon.

I groan. In the back office, a manager is allowed to groan as loudly as they want. “Go ahead, Newbie. Give me the news and tell me how long they plan on keeping it up.”

“Keeping it up, sir?”

“The strike. I assume they’re out there with their list of demands.”

“They are out there sir, but I’m not certain they have a list. Do rats know how to write? It’s a fair enough question, I suppose, since just about everything we’ve come across so far has some level of sentience. But writing, I’m not sure. Would you like me to ask them whether they have a list, sir?”

“Leon, what are you talking about?”

“The two headed space rats, sir. They have surrounded the ship and are trying to infiltrate my shields.”

“Space rats? With two heads? My god, what the hell do they want. Are we keeping old food on board, Leon?”

“No sir.”

There’s a scream.

Running out of my office, I jump through the kitchen, over the counter and land in the foyer. Dorothy is

peering out from the side dining area, half hidden and covering her ears. “Jesus! Are those rats? I *hate* rats,” she shouts.

“Don’t worry, they aren’t able to get inside.”

Dorothy looks at me, and does a double take. “Tim, why the hell are you wearing the Wally Wurger costume?”

“It helps me think,” I reply. Seriously, it does. Wally Wurger was a pioneer of the fast food industry, mixing quality flavouring with the cheapest of meat. His secret recipe was a breakthrough in the cost of running a restaurant that keeps bringing the people back. Not only that, he was much loved by everyone around him. With his trademark red leather cowboy boots, white jump suit, golden lasso and green ten gallon hat, everyone knew old Wally from a mile away. It’s thanks to his charisma and determination that Wurgers has taken off as well as it did. That was fifty years ago, and we still have Wally Wurger days at the restaurant, god rest his soul.

“I heard all these quiet voices chanting from somewhere. They keep saying “boots, boots, wearing of the boots” over and over.”

“Okay, stay back, don’t let them see you.”

“Tim, they’ve already seen *you*. They see you and the Wurger cowboy boots.”

That’s when I notice the windows. Outside swarming the bubble of our shields are hundreds, maybe thousands of rats.

“Sir, we aren’t going to be able to keep them out forever,” says Leon. “They’re blocking my solar panels, and I won’t be able to recharge without the light.”

“Where are Mike and Teddy?” I ask Dorothy.

“Teddy is clinging to my leg.” She shows me a teddy-bear covered leg. The fellow is covering up her boot with his fuzzy pinkness. “Mike is in the bunk room working on something,” she adds.

“Of all the times to be working on your manifesto, I don’t think this is one of them!”

“Manifesto?” asks Dorothy.

“Don’t you go playing innocent with me. I know what you’re up to.”

“Tim, I think they want you *and* your boots.”

“Me? My boots?!”

I kick off the shoes and stand there in my stockinged feet. “Dorothy, do that thing with your hand and send them all flying away.”

She does the thing with her hand, but they don’t go anywhere.

“You might want to know that I’ve added shielding to the ship,” says Leon over the speaker. “It’s a breaker of energy waves, amongst other things, which I believe is interrupting your powers, Dorothy.”

“Seriously, Leon? Are you joking?”

“Unfortunately not. If magic can’t get out, magic can’t get in. Nor can laser beams or fire bombs or two headed rats.”

Mike comes up from the basement and walks past Dorothy into the foyer. He stands at the window and scratches the top of his head. “Did you say there are rats up here? With two heads, I’m guessing. Those rats . . . if these are as I expect them to be . . . are here on behalf of the Wicked Witch.”

“Do we really need to call her that? Her name is Wendy after all. The wicked part feels a bit harsh.”

“Says you,” replies Dorothy. “She’s sent two headed rats after us now.”

Mike is tapping on the glass. He's thinking again. It's never made me more nervous to see someone thinking. "I have a plan."

"You have a plan?"

"Yes, Tim. I get plans, you know. Do you have one at the moment?"

"Ah. Newbie. Do you have a plan?"

"No sir. I was thinking of turning myself off until they go away."

"Don't you dare, Leon."

"No sir, I won't sir."

"Dorothy, do you have a plan?"

"Yes," she replies.

Fantastic! "What is it?"

"Let's hear Mike's idea."

"Fine. Let's hear what the burger flipper has to say."

"Let's give them what they want. After all, if they were sent by the Witch of the West, and we need to find her anyhow . . . let's just give them what they want and we can follow them."

"And how do you propose to do that?" I ask.

"We'll send Leon along with you in Dorothy's phone. He can send us back the coordinates and jump from phone to ship."

I start laughing. That is literally *the* worst plan I've ever heard in my entire life. Once again, Mike lives up to my expectations. "Alright folks, I'm going to my office to think this over Wally style. Leon you let me know if the shields start to go. In the meanwhile, see if you can't shake off the rats and get some light exposure."

"Yes sir," replies Leon.

I move past the counter, through the kitchen and back into my closet. With one last laugh, I shut the door behind me. Then I lock it. Then I grab the sword the wizard had us get, and I go into the corner and crouch down behind the desk. They're not going to make me do it! I'm *not* going out there to be swarmed by a bunch of space rats with double the heads and double the sets of teeth. No way, no how. Not a chance. I'm just going to sit here with my sword and my outfit, and go *nowhere* at all.

And so that's exactly what I do. For ten minutes. Until there comes a knock on the door.

The lock unclicks itself. And the door slowly moves open.

“Yoo hoo, Tim? Can I come in?” asks Dorothy.

“Can I stop you from coming in?” I ask her.

“Well you’ll have to come out eventually, so even if you *could* stop me from coming in, you’d eventually have to come out.”

I groan. A manager can groan as loudly as they like in their office.

“Fine, come in.”

And she does. I’m a goner and I know it. She slips in through the door, Teddy still clinging to her leg, and takes a seat in front of the desk. I release my knees and get up from the floor, keeping the silver sword in my hand and sitting down in my manager’s chair.

“How can I help you?” I ask her.

“I don’t know Tim, how can you help me?”

“Are you here about the strike?”

“What? No. Tim, can you stop thinking about yourself and Wurgers for one minute and just check in to what is needed right now?”

“But why can’t *you* go with the rats instead of me? They want your boots, we both know that.”

“True,” replies Dorothy. “Okay, I’ll go in your place.”

“You can’t do that! I can’t allow one of my employees to willingly sacrifice themselves. Who is the captain of this ship, who is the full-time manager? I am. Me. And if they get you, who knows what will happen.”

“I’ll be taken to the Wicked Witch and she’ll do something evil genius-y I’m guessing. Maybe more evil than genius, but you know what I mean.”

“You wouldn’t stand a chance.”

“Well come on, I’d stand a damn good chance. I don’t think she can hurt me while I’m wearing these boots.”

“True,” I reply.

“Okay then. It’s settled. You can go back into your corner, and I’ll get ready to go.”

Teddy starts squeaking. “No, no, Teddy. This is how it has to be. They want me, and we need to find her. It’s the only thing that makes any sense.”

And she stands up and leaves me alone in my office.

Somehow, I feel like a chump. It makes sense for Dorothy to be the one to go, she can bring Leon along, and we’ll follow her to the Witch’s hideout. That’s good logic, there. But something is nagging at me. It’s nagging at me hard. I stand up to put the sword back into my locker, and that’s when I catch a

reflection of myself in the locker mirror – me and the big ten gallon hat.

What would Wally do?

He'd never let a lady put herself at risk like that. Not Wally Wurger.

And if I'm going to be the best manager I can be, then you know what? I shouldn't do it either. And while Dorothy has her magic boots, I've got my own kind of magic too. The witch *likes* me. That's something, right? That has got to give me a good chance of surviving this mess.

Reaching into the locker, I pull out the spacesuit and grab the helmet that's been shoved under the desk, a few stains of poppy still on its mirrored surface. It only takes two minutes to climb into the outfit.

"Leon, when I say go – you open the takeout window and create a grease bubble to carry me over to the rats. Then, I want you to make space for me in the shield so only I can get through and then you seal it behind me. You got that?"

"Are you sure about this, sir?"

"That's an order, Leon."

"Yes sir."

Opening my office door a crack, I check out the kitchen. No one is there. "Leon, where are Dorothy and Mike?"

"They are in the bunk room, sir, Dorothy is getting dressed in her space jumper."

"Does she have her phone with her, Leon?"

"Her phone is charging on the counter sir, it is at 97 percent."

"Perfect. Remember, when I say go--"

"I know, we go out into space to meet your doom."

"Your doom too, Leon."

"Not quite sir, I'll be with you. . . but, I'll be here at the same time. Split consciousness is a perk of not having a human body, sir."

"You know we're going through this mess for you Leon," I say, crawling through the kitchen so that no one hears me coming.

"And I appreciate it, sir."

"Now, Leon!" I say.

Springing up from behind the counter, I grab the mobile phone from the counter and pull its charger from the wall.

Dorothy's voice is on the main floor. She's walking from the stairs up into the foyer. In a matter of seconds, she'll be at the counter and ready to launch.

But it's too late, I'm at the takeout counter, and leaping through the window. The grease bubble forms around me and I sail through space and then, the next moment, I'm through the shield and away from Dorothy's crazy power before she can try to stop me.

I'm with the rats.

They form a living wall between me and the Wurger, and the last glimpse I have of the restaurant is one with Dorothy in her space jumper, helmet in her arm pressed up against the window with Mike watching right beside her.

Then, it's the darkness of furry bodies, and tiny limbs, long white tails running here and there across me, behind me, pushing me forward at a rapid pace between the heaps of garbage that litter the dumpster system. I can't keep track of where we're going – weaving here, slipping there, tumbling over, flying forwards. And as we pass by what looks like one of the last massive mounts of garbage, the rats form a circle around me, and I can't see anything anymore.

The only sensation is the sound of their squeals, and the chanting of some rat-like version that goes "Boots, Boots, Wearer of the Boots."

All I can do now is see what happens next, and hope the Wurgers is not far behind.

This is what I get for trying to do a good job. I totally deserve a raise.

*

Did you know that rats smell a lot like wet dog? So does that mean dogs are like rats, or that rats are like dogs? Or does smell have nothing to do with this? This is one of the things that goes through my mind as we continue onward through space. It much like I imagine jumping out of an airplane would be minus the incredible scenery. At first everything is terrifying and you wet yourself and need to vomit. But then, after a few hours of falling, it just becomes normal. And boring.

Oh right, skydivers don't fall for hours, but if they did, and it was through the vast emptiness of space, it would end up being a lot like this. Boring.

Man, there are so many people over on Earth who would kill to be in my situation right now – even if

the space rats might be bringing me to my death. They'd be sorely disappointed to discover that space is a whole lot of nothing, mixed in with the very occasional something trying to kill you. Otherwise, not much going on here.

"Ow! Hey," I shout out.

We've stopped and the mass of furry bodies surrounding me nearly crushed me to death just then. Maybe these are psychic rats and they can read my mind.

Oh no, we're moving again, but in a different direction this time. And oh, I see something through the tails. Yes, it's definitely something. Something big and orange and glowing.

The rats break apart, except for a few that cling to me through my grease bubble, and form a stream toward the massive orange cube. Hmm, there's something very familiar about this . . .

We get closer and closer until we've landed upon the soft springy surface of the cube. Suddenly I have a thought: What if that Mike was wrong all along, and these rats have *nothing* to do with the Witch of the Wrest? What if they just wanted a light snack for after their travels, and we happened to be around?

That idiot got me to jump out of my own ship, and throw myself into the clutches of space vermin for no good reason!

"Leon are you there?"

Somehow I've managed to hang onto him this entire time. My hand is cramped up around the phone, and I couldn't let go if I wanted to at this point.

"Newbie? Answer me."

The rats are running off over the massive spinning orange cube. Even the ones clinging to my suit jump off and scamper off. They're all nibbling at the ground, some are digging into the substance. Others have found their way to some massive holes in the surface.

"Leon?"

Nothing. I'm alone out here.

Now totally unattended to, I do what any brave soul who sacrificed himself for the sake of his staff would do: I try to hide. Some of the craters are as large as a proper cave opening, and though the rats are running here and there, none of them seem to be watching as I find a cozy sized crater and lower myself down into the hole. It's deeper than I anticipated, and I slide down the side into a small tunnel of what could be mistaken for massive air bubble-shaped caverns.

This place - its substance feels very familiar. I bend down in my hiding place and poke the ground; my finger, upon more persistent prodding, sinks into the orange.

I think it's cheese. Maybe some kind of cheddar swiss.

God, I would hate to meet the cow who produced a hunk of cheese *this* big.

Is this the rats' home base? Why do they need to eat me if they have so much cheese to devour? And how the hell am I going to get out of here if the restaurant wasn't able to follow me?

"Leon, come in!" I knock the phone on its side. Still nothing. The battery is full, the screen is on . . . but there's no sign of him anywhere. And if he's not here – how can they have possibly kept track of me all of that time?

Oh crap, I'm really, truly lost in space this time.

Suddenly, hiding feels really counter productive. Maybe this cheese is just a pit stop, and they're going to keep going – only they can't find me. And then I'm stuck here forever breathing my recycled oxygen and living off of swiss cheddar until I die of overexposure to radioactive dairy!

I pull myself out of the crater, just in time to see what looks like a massive metal square swing down over the cube of cheese, and slam down with a massive "Thwack" noise then a loud "Zap" as a laser grid appears above and all around us.

The rats start going wild. They are jumping off of the surface and throwing themselves against the grid energy, but it's too strong and they can't get out.

We're trapped in some kind of elaborate rat trap. This, I did not expect. Could it be the restaurant came to rescue me? A bit early, considering I haven't found the witch just yet.

As the rats keep flying and screaming in small rat voices, trying to escape over and over again, there comes a low laugh that sounds very much human – or at least, humanoid.

"Try all you like fellows, but you're not getting through that mesh. I've got a Stalla 5000 force field set up, and so long as it's humming you're not going anywhere."

The rats stop assaulting the grid and begin running back and forth across the cheese cube, trying to find the voice.

Suddenly he appears from one of the holes not more than ten meters from my own. It's Arrogon! Relief

pours over me and I go to shout when one of the rats – this particular rat that only has one head, with nothing but a stump where the other might have been, and on that one head, only one eye – jumps in front of my face and clings to my helmet, knocking me backward back down the cheese hole to land at the bottom of the air bubble chamber with a springy *thump, thump, thump*.

“Seriously? That was totally unnecessary.” I say, sitting up from the floor. The rat is sitting opposite me and watching.

“You aren’t going to jump on me again are you?” I ask it.

It doesn’t move. I take this to mean that there are no promises here.

“Right, well. Excuse me, I recognize that fellow up there, and if you just let me go and have a chat with him—”

The one-eyed rat begins running back and forth and up and down and shaking its head at me. I take it there is a problem of some kind.

“You see,” I explain, trying to get him to calm down, “I know that fellow. He is probably here to rescue me. Now, if you don’t mind, I will go up there and get

his take on the plan. No, no, stop getting in my way. I’m not afraid of you!”

The rat hisses and bares its teeth.

“Alright, I’m a little afraid of you.”

The rat calms down and again takes a seat in front of me, watching carefully.

“He’s here for *me* you know.”

The rat keeps watching

“I’m sure he’ll let all of you go once I show up.”

Still nothing.

“He’s going to find me eventually.”

Again, the rat flashes his teeth.

“Fine,” I say. “I’ll stay here but only till he takes care of the bunch of you up there. Then I’m going out, and getting rescued.”

Walking away from the opening to the surface and the rat, I head further into the cheese cave, move deeper and deeper into the cavern where it’s becoming darker and darker, and warmer and warmer. There are big and small caverns connecting to different passages. The rat is following me as I move deeper into the cheese cube, hissing every time I turn around. It’s so dark I can barely make out

the shape of my hands against the slick warmth of the passage walls.

I have an idea.

Pressing the power on Dorothy's phone, I unlock the screen and hold it up to the cheese wall for a picture.

"Hashtag say cheese" I declare, turning the phone toward the rodent, closing my eyes and taking the picture.

With the squeal of the animal, I know the bright white flash has gone off and I begin to run back where I came from, twisting upward through this passage, sliding over and across that passage. The rat, though momentarily blinded, seems to be following rather close behind. Damn him and his four legs. Unzipping the spacejumper and pulling out the sword, I begin slicing off chunks of the wall to block old one-eye-one-head's progress, and then I keep on running toward the light of the glowing cheese surface.

Dropping the sabre and reaching upward with both hands, I pull my head high enough out of the hole to spot Arrogon. He's over to the side holding about twenty rats by the tails in each hand, with piles more stuffed into small laser-like cages. The rats are screaming and he is shaking them in rage.

"You will tell me where she is!" he is shouting. "I need that bounty, and you are going to lead me to her."

What bounty is he talking about?

Again he starts shaking them this way and that, swinging them side to side. And again, they cry out with a horrible scream. One-eyed-Ratty scurries up beside me in the hole, and stops to sit upon my shoulder. We both watch the scene before us, Ratty hissing steadily toward the Emperor.

"What does he mean by bounty?" I ask the rat on my shoulder – because you know, they are smart and he's just sitting there and I have no one else to speak with.

"I know you know where she's hiding, and if one of you doesn't tell me soon, I'm just going to start slicing off these tails, and not just shaking them!"

"He's torturing them," I realize.

The rat growls. I had no idea a rat could growl.

"Well that does seem right. I mean, no one likes being kidnapped less than me, but you've been civil at least. No excessive biting or scratching. And what is this bounty thing? You know, it doesn't sound like he's here to find me at all."

The rat sighs and looks away from me with an expression that is so blank, I have to fill in its meaning.

“He’s not looking for me, is he?”

The rat keeps looking.

“He’s trying to claim a bounty . . . on the lady you work for.”

It doesn’t move or nod. I take that as encouragement.

“And the lady you work for is the Wicked Witch of the West.”

Its whiskers twitch!

“You know I met her once, she was rather nice when she wasn’t trying to blow us up. Though we did just flatten her sister, apparently, which gives plenty of reason for a person to be angry . . .”

The rat begins a quiet hiss.

“Fine, okay. So, he is not here to find me, unfortunately. But he is here to find the Witch. And the bounty. And he’s being a real jackass about it, too. I mean, we’re trying to find the witch and claim the bounty with the wizard, but we’d never be so cruel about it all. We’re a peaceful restaurant.”

There’s a scream as one of the rats has its tail cut off and drops to the ground. He did it! I can’t believe he did it. The nerve of that fellow. That’s it, I’ve had enough.

“What do—” I go to shout out. But can’t because the rat jumps onto my helmet, again, and tips me back downward into the cheese cave *again*.

Before I can draw enough breath to chastise the rat, he runs past me and begins scurrying down into the cheese cave. So I do the natural thing and follow him. We weave deeper and deeper, and once again it becomes darker and darker. I switch Dorothy’s phone to flashlight mode and keep following. At times the rat stops to smell the ground. How it can smell anything apart from this cheese is beyond me. The walls are sweating with cheesy perspiration and warmth. Frankly, it’s repulsive down here. I don’t think I’ll look at another cheeseburger quite the same way again.

The rat begins biting through one of the walls. Digging out a hole he can slip through. I slice it larger with the sword, and then step through myself.

There’s a strong humming noise now. The rat runs toward the vibration and I follow him. We run around a corner, and suddenly come up against a door. I open it, and out pours light, momentarily taking me off guard. Raising my arm before my face, I step

through and am followed by the rat. What I come face-to-face with is something I'd never, ever expected to find in the center of a block of cheese.

Inside a massive cavern of warm, sweating cheese is what looks like a huge generator, a small bed, a blackboard and a desk covered with papers. Lifting my camera, I snap a picture of the scene. Then approaching the desk, I snap a picture of its paperwork. Somehow, it feels important to capture these letters and scribbles. By the looks of the green caps here on the bed, and there on the chair, and over there hanging on the edge of the blackboard . . . this is where The Emperor has been hiding out for some time. When you're emperor of the universe, why the hell would you hide in a big cube of cheese?

There's a rudimentary sketch on the blackboard; raising the camera, I snap a picture. It shows the massive cheese cube and the large machine that's making the non-stop whirrrrring noise, and shows the force field contraption that is keeping the rats from escaping into space. Apparently energy is being piped through some of the caverns and is getting translated somehow into a high powered force field that can be manipulated with what looks like a small remote.

So, if I could turn off this force field . . . the rats could be freed.

Would that be a good thing?

Well . . . we're trying to find the witch to claim the bounty, and The Emperor is trying to find the witch to claim the bounty, so if we get to her first . . . yeah, I think that would be a good thing. Plus, he's just being horrible up there cutting of those tails.

It's one thing to set a trap in defence of your restaurant's sanitary standards, it's another to create a massive cube of cheese and set it out for your target's servants to find, and then trap them via laser power, and then cut off their tails!

Well, the rest of it is pretty clever actually – but the violence is quite unnecessary.

The rat is running around the generator, and I go over to take a look. There's a complex control panel, and while i'm sure there's a very easy way to turn it off . . . it's not very clear what the easy way may be.

“Is there a plug, maybe?” I ask.

But no plug either.

“Okay, well, here goes nothing.”

I hit a few buttons on the control panel, and a screen pops up in front of me . . . it's got the symbol of a lock, and the universe-wide blank space for a password.

“What do you think his password could be?” I ask the rat. It just stares at me, totally not helping.

“Leon, are you back on this phone yet?” I ask Dorothy’s phone. But it doesn’t answer, so he’s still AWOL.

“Fine, okay. What would the password be?” I think about him and his cape, and his wrist device thing . . . and that white-toothed smile of his. What would a guy like that have for his password?

What would a self-inflated egotistical space idiot who loves to get into trouble and hates to take responsibility use for a password.

I take a chance, and type in the letters

P-A-S-S-W-O-R-D

And hit enter. Bingo! The lock disappears and there upon the screen is a list of options. Of course a guy like Arrogon wouldn’t bother changing the factory settings. Age old story. Typical slacker behaviour if I’ve ever seen it.

“Now what do I press.”

The rat just sits there looking. He could have at least been happy that I cracked the code. It’s pretty much a one in a million shot, and I got it first try.

Maybe I can do it again?

I close my eyes, twirl my fingers and land somewhere on the screen. The whirring of the machine seems to lose its urgency. It’s slowing down.

“It’s slowing down!” I declare. “I did it again.”

“Internalizing force field,” says a female voice through the machine’s speaker. “Warning, core temperatures are set to rise above stabilization level. Internalizing force field. Warning, core temperatures are set to rise above stabilization level. Warning . . .”

“What did I do?” I ask.

The whirring is going down, down, down.

But it’s starting to get *really, really* warm in here. The ground is become sticky.

And now the whirring is slowly starting to make a kind of anti-whirring sound. The kind of sound your bathtub makes when you pull the drain plug, and the water forms that little cyclone and gets sucked down, down, down.

“What did I do?” I ask the machine.

With a squeak, the one-headed-one-eyed rat is running for the door. I follow suit, with drips of liquid cheese falling from the soles of my boots. Soon we’re out of the chamber and running through the tunnels of heavily perspiring swiss cheddar.

*

Right, left, over, around, we move it and I do my best not to skid into the next wall and bounce into the next. Finally the light of the nearby moon breaks through a shaft just ahead.

Once again, I peer upward to the surface. The rats are spinning in circles around and he's barely keeping them off with lashes of his energy field. I look up. The grid is gone.

"We have to get out of here," I say to the rat who is once again perched on my shoulder.

It stares at the commotion and then lets out some bizzaro rat bark. The swarm around stop their flying, leaving him to grab after them as they move away – clinging yet again to several escaping tails.

The rat scampers onto the surface and I follow him.

Arrogon looks at me and nearly loses his handful of rodents.

"I think I know you from somewhere," he says, pointing at me.

"Of course you do, I'm from—"

Again, the one headed rat flies into my face, but I'm ready this time and brace myself. Unfortunately, the surface has begun to sweat from the building's internal cheese cube head, and my feet brace too hard which throws them out from under me, and I'm knocked to the ground and bounce several feet.

"Not again! Seriously, that's enough of that," I tell the rat. It sits on my shoulder and stares.

Man, what does this animal think I am? A rat whisperer? But it keeps watching steadily as more and more rats are escaping from the massive cube of cheese, heading back into space.

"Ah, I mean, no you don't know me."

"You look very familiar – at least, your shape does."

"I'd take off my helmet, you see, except I'm not quite used to having no atmosphere," I reply.

"Well if you don't mind, I'm a little busy right now." He squeezes the tails and I'm certain I hear several cracks from within his palm.

"Of course you are. Carry on." I say, backing away. "Don't let me get in your way."

He looks away from the animals he's torching. "You know me. I shouldn't be surprised. Everyone knows me."

“That’s right, you are preceded by your reputation.”

“It’s the cape, isn’t it? I really need to lose the cape for these less attractive moments.”

“I’m a big fan of yours . . . ah, yes. I am a fan. You do so much. A fellow can only aspire to be as grand and as good looking as you.”

“Wait a second. I recognize your voice. I’ve met you before.”

With his free hand, he snaps his finger over and over while keeping a tight grip on the trapped rats. They are chewing at his fingers and he doesn’t take any notice.

“You – you are with that girl. Dorothy. I had to tell her about the boots. What are you doing here?”

The rat on my shoulder is still staring at me. It’s weird.

“Ah,” I try not to look at it. “You said we could buy back Leon’s body if we visited the Wealthiest Wizard of Foz.”

“I said that?”

“You did.”

“I must have been drunk.”

“You weren’t the only one.”

He smiles, “Good to see you again, old chum.”

Holding out his hand, I step forward and shake it. The rat lets out a warning squeak, but it’s too late. I’m stuck in the vice grip of Arrogon.

“What are you doing here, Wurgers?”

“I’m not Wally Wuger, I just like to dress up like him when I need to figure out a problem.”

He shakes his head. “That makes no sense. So, I’ll ask again. What are you doing here? Is your ship with you? Is Dorothy around?”

“Yeah, they’re nearby.”

He glances around. Of course there’s no one there. I haven’t got a damn clue where my restaurant has gone, or why Leon isn’t answering my calls.

“Why are you on my rat trap?” he asks.

“Why not?”

His grip tightens, soon it’s going to be my bones breaking.

“I am looking for the Witch of the Wrest. The Wizard wants us to find her and then we get to go home,” I confess.

But instead of letting go of my hand, the damn man keeps squeezing. “That’s-My-Bounty,” he hisses.

“Of course. I didn’t know. Realize it now. Your bounty. We don’t need it. Just go about your business, maybe leave off the rat tails a little. These fellows have feelings – so does my own hand, come to think about it, or it did one minute ago before you started squeezing so very, very, very hard.”

Something about Arrogon’s eyes is telling me he is not appeased. It might be the swirl of green developing in his pupils. His stare becomes brighter and brighter and brighter—until a beam of laser light shoots out and only just misses my head as I drop to the side and run around Arrogon’s back.

“Stand still!” he yells, his laser shooting all around him and cutting into the cheese.

“Not a chance,” I say, twisting and turning here and there hoping to hell he keeps aiming at my head and doesn’t bother cutting off my wrist that is still securely stuck within his hand.

And it’s as I dodge another blast that the ground begins to rumble hard and fast and loudly.

“What’s going on?” he asks.

“The cheese – I might have pushed a button, and I think we’re essentially standing on the crust of fondu right now. I reversed the energy beam into the core.”

“You did wha—”

And just like that I’m being dragged up into the air beside a steam eruption of hot swiss cheddar. Arrogon’s hand projects from inside the burning cheese, and then it lets me and the trapped rats go. We are flying outward into space, and then, with a quick and decisive swoosh, the other two headed rats dive in and collect us – minus the Emperor, who is shooting off now in the other direction along with the onslaught of cheese – and carries us away from the cube with its exploding liquid interior.

They huddle around me once again, the calm one-headed rat remaining on my shoulder, and off we fly away from the mess of the rat trap, and onward, I can only imagine, to their mistress’s lair.

Seriously, this has been a weird day.

It’s a shame I don’t have my log book.

*

After another few hours of traveling, the rat mass again comes to a sudden halt. Old one-head-one-eye on my shoulder barks some kind of rat order, and the rodents scatter here and there, finally allowing me a view. We’re floating beside a large jumble of something . . . possibly a spaceship, possibly a tiny

planet. It reflects the nearby sunlight, and sparkles with metallic shine.

“Are we here?” I ask the rat.

It looks on ahead, whiskers rising slowly up and down.

“Home sweet, home? I know the feeling. There’s really no place like it.”

Squeaking out some kind of order, a few of the larger rats fly behind me and begin pushing me toward the large metal . . . ship? I want to say ship. We are getting closer and closer, and finally I can make out the exterior, which appears to be – hmm, yep. It’s like the world’s largest collection of what you’d find at the back of your drawer. There are forks, and bent spoons, and washers, and paper clips, nails, coins, pins and more. Just as I think we’re about to run into the wall, it cracks open with the hiss of escaping air, and we’re going into the massive – I’m just going to call it – we’re going into the massive space vessel.

The crack closes slowly behind us, and the gravity plates on my spacesuit drops me down onto the metal floor. The rats don’t even try to hold me up as they float here and there, and then down beside me. “Thanks for not even trying to catch me,” I say. They just amble off like they don’t even care that my butt is now extremely sore from the landing. There’s a

hiss from the vent and it feels like fresh air is being pumped back into the room.

“Alright,” I say, “what comes next?”

Old one head scrambles down from my shoulder and over to the far wall. He begins tapping some morse-code type device. Then runs back, sits before me, and waits.

I wait too.

It isn’t long till I hear a tell-tale clicking bouncing into the hall. Looking around, I don’t see her, but that’s definitely the click of her boots. Oh my God, that means she’ll be here any second. And when she gets here, she’s going to whip off my helmet and know 100% that I’m not the wearer of the boots. Well, I am, but it’s the wrong set of boots.

Suddenly it feels very hot in this room. It could be her and her fire. . . but it could also be me and my perspiration.

Click-click-click.

“Yohoo!” she calls from the corridor, turning the corner and walking into the docking bay. “Welcome, welcome, welcome,” she says, clapping her hands together. She’s in a much better mood, apparently. “Such a good job Ralph,” she pulls a treat from her

pocket and throws it to one-head-one-eye. He snaps it up in the air, then returns to his place.

The witch – Wendy . . . can I still call her that? She’s clicking over to me, and that’s when I realize I’m still sitting on the floor. Without thinking, I hop up to meet her.

That’s when she abruptly stops and cocks her head. Then she crosses her arms. I know that body language. That is not good body language. The smile is most definitely gone from her expression.

“Who are you?” she asks.

I point to myself.

“Yes, you,” she replies.

I give her my best shrug.

“Take off that helmet.”

I shake my head with a definite no.

A fireball appears in her hand, which she tosses palm to palm. “Talk off that helmet, please.”

I mime a person choking to death.

“Don’t be an idiot. Of course you won’t choke. We have air, see?” She takes a deep breath in. Then out. I like the way her chest swells up when she does it.

That’s a healthy chest. Probably very good lungs in that chest. “Now. TAKE-THE-HELMET-OFF.”

Well there’s nothing for it. I release the safety latch and break the seal of the mirrored helmet from my glowy spacesuit. With both hands, I lift the helmet away.

Her mouth drops open.

I give her my very best smile.

Then this happens:

“IT’S NOT HER! That is NOT the wearer of the BOOOOOOTS!”

The rats are running here and there as the flame in her hand starts spinning and getting bigger. Old one-head-one-eye is frantically looking between me and her, his whiskers quivering as she starts turning into a literal ball of flames, and the hair on all these rats takes on a rather singed smell.

“Actually, I am the wearer of the boots,” I say quite desperately. Within seconds I’ve stripped off that spacesuit, and expose my Wally Wurger costume. “See? Red boots. And rats can’t tell the difference, can they? Red, green, it’s the same colour to them.”

Her flame flickers, and then begins to shrink. Her hands, however, continue holding a ball of flames.

“It’s not that I’m unhappy to see you, it’s more that I’m quite unhappy to not be seeing the *proper boots*. This is a big mess up, Ralph. A big one.”

The rat is watching her intently now.

“Well, it’s not really his fault though, your witchiness. We quite purposefully tricked him. They thought they were doing the right thing all along. And they took quite good care of me, too, in their kidnapping. Why, even when Arrogon ambushed us over on the cheese cube, which really turned out to be a massive rat trap, Old one-head-one-eye there stuck by the whole time making sure I didn’t get us in more trouble. He did a fine job with the whole kidnapping business. And as for the boots . . . these are pretty nice boots,” I say, holding them up a bit so she can get a better look.

The Wicked Witch of the West – aka the Wizard’s daughter, aka Wendy – lets out quite a long sigh. Finally the flame in her hand goes out. She points at me.

“You. Come with me,” she says, then spins around on her heel and begins marching off with a fast series of click-click-click-click.

I look down at one-head-one-eye . . . or Ralph, I guess, and give him a shrug.

“I should go with her?” I ask him.

“Don’t make me repeat myself!” she shouts, shooting a flare into the air as she spins around and crosses her arms.

“Coming!” I say, jumping forward and mouthing “bye” to Ralph.

Wendy spins around again, and furiously clicks her way out of the docking back and down into the hallway. I follow as quickly as I can, glancing back just once to my new friend, as he sits there quietly, watching, and then lifts a palm to wave goodbye.

It’s a bad thing when the rat is taking pity on you, that much I feel certain about. But I dug this grave myself. Now it seems it’s time to lay in it.

Chapter 6

Dorothy pounds on the window as the swarm of rats carries Tim away. “Get back here!” she shouts, pounding the glass again and again. Squinting her eyes, she strains for a moment. “Leon, drop these shields so I can bring him back.”

“No can do, Dorothy. I promised Tim I wouldn’t let him down,” replies Leon.

“You drop those shields right now, or I’ll-I’ll . . .” Everything that isn’t secured to the floor raises up off the ground, including me.

“Hey Dorothy, I need you to tap into that other side of yourself just for a moment. You know, the one that rolls with things. Snaps a picture. Plays it cool.”

“AHHHH!” she shouts at the top of her lungs, sending vibrations through the air as every floating object resonates with her scream.

Then she drops her arms and drops everything else, including me. “I just . . . they didn’t want him. I should be the one out there risking my life. The plan would have worked perfectly well if I’d been the one out there in the spacesuit.”

“He felt it was his duty as night manager,” says Leon.

The pack of rats has disappeared. They’ve leapt away and brought Tim with them.

“Leon, are you tracking them?”

“Following Tim.”

“Good, take us in that direction but keep a safe distance. We don’t want them to know we’re onto them.”

“Got it.”

And Leon begins to move us forward at half leap. Teddy is cuddling Dorothy’s leg, and she lifts him up into her arms. “It’s been a long day,” she says to him. He nods and gives her a hug. I swear to god, it’s damn near impossible to not be jealous of that teddy bear sometimes.

Dorothy turns away from the window and jumps up onto the counter. She lets Teddy to the ground, then pulls off her boots and wiggles her toes.

“You shouldn’t have let that happen,” she says to her shoes.

They don’t say anything back, because they’re shoes.

“I know you want to keep me safe, but I’m not a child – even if I happen to have a friend who is a teddy

bear – and you need to let me take action sometimes.”

Again, the boots just sit there . . . because they’re footwear and footwear doesn’t talk.

“Okay Mike, what comes next? You’re the man with the plan apparently, so we find this chick and then what? She’ll try to light us on fire or explode the ship, or something.”

“Excuse me?” says Leon.

“And then what will happen? How do we convince *her* to come back with *us*.”

I jump onto the counter beside her. “How should I know? You think I plan these things out?”

She punches at the cash. The register pops open, and in dips her hand to pull out a crisp new fifty from the bank.

“Seriously?” I ask.

“Tim’s not here, and as the most senior employee present at the moment, I’m going to solve our problem of overtime. It’s called the cash register. It’s called, a new fifty dollar bill. Here, Mike.”

She passes me the money. We’ve been discussing this lately – all these impromptu burger cook ups, the cleaning of the restaurant, the serving of customers,

the never, ever leaving this restaurant. I think Tim is onto us, the way he’s been freaking out – but the fact of the matter is, we are due our overtime.

But who am I kidding? It’s fifty bucks, I’ll take it whether it’s moral or not.

“Thank you very much.”

“You’re very welcome,” she replies. She grabs another and passes it to Teddy, who eats it. He then goes over to the condiments counter and begins eating the salt and pepper packets.

“*Aahem*,” says Leon.

“I’ll take a fifty for you too, Leon. And when you get your body back, we’ll give it to him to keep.”

“That idiot will lose it first thing. No, I’ll make an electronic transfer to my personal tab I’ve been counting of the bonus payment.”

“You can do that?” asks Dorothy.

“Of course, I’m a super computer.”

“Interesting. Say, can you do that with other banking systems, or just ours?”

“I don’t know, I’ve never tried any others.”

Dorothy ‘Hmms’ to herself. There’s a very familiar, and very unnerving glint in her eye that reminds me of the flipped dimension incident.

“Warning,” says Leon. “We’re skirting the edge of a bllllaaaacccccckkkk hoooooIIllleeeeeeeee.”

And like the flush of a toilet, everything starts spinning as the restaurant is getting spun around and around and around.

“Pull us out, Leon!” shouts Dorothy just as the force throws us off of the counter together and tossed across the restaurant dining area, coming to halt as the centripetal force pushes us up against the ball pen, she’s pressed against me to the point of near Mike-pancaking.

“I ccccooulllddd uuuuussssee a lllliiiitttllleee hhhhheellp hhhhere!” shouts Leon over the speakers.

Dorothy raises her air, but just as she flicks her wrist, Toto slips off of the condiment counter and goes flying by above us, belching out a dry shower of salt and pepper that hits us both right in the face. Right at that moment as Dorothy goes to pull us out of the wormhole, the salt blinds our eyes, and the pepper finds its way into our air passages, and we both let out a massive sneeze.

Everything goes still. It’s silent for just a moment – just the smallest fraction of a moment – where we might have had the time to notice a quiet whirring and ping of mechanisms in the background if it weren’t for the next sensation to follow.

“My eyes!” shouts Dorothy.

“They’re burning!” I shout back. “Leon, turn on the sprinklers, Leon, turn them on!”

But there are no sprinklers.

“We need water!” yells Dorothy, reaching out forward and grabbing onto my shirt to help pull me upward.

There’s a slap of water against our faces, and suddenly we’re sopping wet. I spit out a mouthful of very soapy water, and wipe the tears, salt and soapy water from my face. “Thank you,” I say.

“Where are we?” asks Dorothy.

Squinting through the pain, I open my eyes. The fluorescent brightness of Wurgers isn’t there. It’s dim. It feels small. As my eyes adjust, my hand reaches out and touches the nearby wall. It’s the grain of polished wood. I blink and then begin to see a little better.

It looks like we're . . . in a . . . space submarine? With impeccable decorating like you'd expect at a very exclusive, very expensive, very historic high society club.

"Squeak?"

Looking down, there's Toto with a bucket in his arms, *and* eye patch.

I groan. "Oh no."

"What?" asks Dorothy.

"I've done it again."

"You've done what?" she asks.

"I've jumped dimensions."

"Then why am I here?"

I step back from her. We're both a mess of pepper, salt, water and crazy. She looks like my Dorothy – not that other Dorothy.

"Well, well. What do we have here?" asks Dorothina from behind us.

Spinning around, I'm face to face with The Lady.

"Couldn't get enough of me the first time," she asks, walking slowly around me – staring without

interruption, smiling in a way that would explain the shivers if I wasn't already soaking wet and cold.

"Ah?" is about all I can manage.

"And who is this?"

"Who is this?" asks Dorothy. "I'm not a this, that's for sure. Who are you, lady? And why the hell do you look exactly like me?"

The Lady looks at her now, getting even closer to Dorothy. "This shouldn't be possible," she replies.

"Well of course it's possible, otherwise we wouldn't be here."

"Honey, I've been around this place a lot longer than you, so you can trust me when I say it should not be possible."

Dorothy stands up straight and gives that look that typically wins her any argument. The problem is of course, that they're both capable of such a look. The two of them are staring at one another so hard, everything in the ship is beginning to vibrate from the intensity – including me.

"I'm gonnnaaaa pppuuukkkkeee iiffff youuu don'ttt stoppp." I manage.

"Squeueueuk," adds pirate version Toto.

The two of them break it off.

“Jump dimensions, granted, but we can’t *cross* dimensions. Believe me when I say this, I’ve been jumping my entire life.”

“Like spaceship jumping?” I ask the Lady.

“Ah, you’re cute, did you know that?”

“Hey, Mike is not cute *at all*. And he is offended that you think so,” says Dorothy.

“I am?” I ask.

“Yes, you are,” she replies.

Women are weird.

The Lady, pirate version Dorothy, who I guess I’ll called Dotty from now on—

“Call me Dorothina if you have to call me anything other than The Lady, which is all anyone is ever allowed to call me by the way, not that you seem to listen,” says the Lady.

“Stay out of my head,” I snap.

Anyhow, Dotty—

“Nope” she adds.

Fine, Dorothina walks around us and plunks herself down into one of the front two seats at the front of this submarine thing. She pushes buttons, pulls some levers, and the ship groans gently as it heads upon a new course.

“Toto, can you watch this. I don’t want to collide with any of those asteroids passing through.”

Toto puts down the empty bucket and runs over to the seat, taking The Lady’s place. Dorothina gets up and walks over to a dark wooden closet. Opening it up, she pulls out what looks like a suit cover upon a hanger and tosses it to Dorothy. “Here, put that on. You look like an overdressed idiot.”

“Don’t go telling me what to do,” replies Dorothy.

She then unzips the cover and takes a peek inside.

“But, you know, since the clothes are wet . . . is your washroom just down this way?” she asks. And before I can say “Don’t leave me alone with this crazy pirate women,” Dorothy is slipping into the washroom and is gone.

I turn back to the Lady.

“We were on the ship. How did we get here?” I ask her.

“That I’m not sure of. It should be possible. Now if you just teleported in, I’d say you being here makes a

load of sense. I mean, who cannot want to find Over The Rainbow once they've heard about it? Right? I know. I've got full dibs, by the way, and don't test me on that."

"Whatever."

"The big problem here, is that *she* exists, and that isn't possible."

"Why can't I exist?" asks Dorothy, exiting the washroom. And oh my god, she looks amazing. She's in a loose jumpsuit that goes head to toe in a light blue colour with some touches of white bits here and there. What do you call that stuff?

"Gingham," replies Dorothisina.

"Seriously, you need to stay out of my head," I tell her.

She rolls her eyes at me. She's in a purple gingham jumpsuit that is much the same, only she wears it a bit more . . . well, she wears it differently.

The Lady motions us over to the large window at the front of this long narrow spaceship. It looks like we're driving through a field of shooting stars. Jesus, it's one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen.

Picking up a nearby kettle, The Lady makes us two cups of strong tea. I'm still in my wet Wurgers uniform, so the drink helps . . . just.

"The universe is a really incredible place, but even it has rules. And when it comes to different dimensions . . . it's simply impossible to exist as a separate, unique, individual entity across dimensions."

"What does that mean?" I ask.

She points to Teddy. "Say Toto jumped to your world, where he's, ah."

"He's Toto, and he's not a pirate. He's the king of the Teddy bears."

"Humm?" Squeaks Teddy, nearly steering us sideways and colliding with a passing burning rock.

"Eyes on the road, Toto," says Dorothisina. "Right, so say Toto crossed over to your friendly Teddy dimension. He wouldn't be my Toto anymore – he'd be in the life, body of your Teddy, even if not mind. Because Toto the pirate and Toto the - whatever - can't exist at the same time in the same dimension."

"So that's why when I came over here the first time, I was me, but also Mike the Captain of Wurgers?"

"Exactly."

"Then how did I bring Dorothy over?"

“You didn’t buddy,” says Dorothisa. “Sorry, Mike, but you need to have the kind of power that goes beyond the laws of the universe. And while you’re cute, and in your past life you were an absolute genius, neither you nor him had the ability to cross dimensions. If you did, then we’d have two Mikes in this ship right now.”

“Or maybe, Mike the Wurgers Captain is still in this dimension back at the restaurant.”

“Nope.”

“How do you know?”

“Ah, because I kidnapped you again, this time just for fun, and we’ve been chasing down Over The Rainbow together ever since. But now he’s gone, and you are here.”

“Who the hell is captain Mike?” asks my Dorothy.

“You’d like him, believe me,” replies Dorothisa with a wink.

*

Ted at the controls has been quietly maneuvering the ship this whole time with a tiny ancient arcade joystick. The comets have been streaking by the

window one after another upon another and then *another*. It’s a shower of meteorites. Still watching the window and touching the joystick here and there, he waves one free pink paw in the air.

“Squeak, squeak, squeak.”

“Alright, prepare to launch the grabber.”

The streaks of white light continue as the ship tilts left and right to avoid collision. I’m impressed that a teddy bear with just one eye can steer so well.

“Look, there it is,” says Dorothisa, followed by a deep intake of breath held for what seems forever.

There it is, I think. Off in the far off distance, it looks like a tiny rainbow dot of light is approaching amongst the white oncoming balls of the meteorites. It’s far, far away still, but hurling forward with a growing streak of green behind it.

“My boots are glowing,” says Dorothy.

Dorothisa looks down at Dorothy’s boots, then at her own.

“What are you?” she asks Dorothy.

“I’m just me,” replies Dorothy.

“Squeak!” injects Ted.

“Right, hold it, aim, fire!” shouts Dorothina the pirate witch, pushing her arm out forward as the ship jumps into the stream of meteors and a large metal claw shoots out from beneath us and grabs for the oncoming rainbow rock of fire meteorite. We’re thrown back as the claw finds its target and we go flying forward with the momentum of the flying stone.

I pick myself up from the floor, and look around. Dorothy’s hand reaches upward and I grab it, and together we stand upward.

“Where did Dorothina go?” I ask, looking around and trying to keep from collapsing again as the ship rattles behind the flying comet and we bounce with every rattle.

Dorothy looks around.

“I don’t know. She was here just a second ago.”

Toto turns away from the window and looks about the cabin. Then he hops out of the driver’s seat and begins checking behind tables and under chairs and in cupboards. Then he turns on us, pointing an accusing pink fluffy paw and begins squeaking at us fast and furious.

“I didn’t make her disappear!” replies Dorothy.

Ted keeps on squeaking, keeps on shaking his pink fist.

“It’s not all my fault. She was here just a second ago, how the heck should I know where she disappeared to. Maybe she jumped dimensions.”

And then I realize there’s something different here. This Dorothy definitely feels and stands and speaks like the Dorothy from my reality – but she’s not wearing her blue gingham jumpsuit anymore. She’s in purple now – the same purple Dorothina was wearing.

“I think the switch clicked over,” I say. “Look at your clothes.”

Dorothy looks down at her outfit.

“I’m wearing her clothes.”

“No, you’re wearing her body, Dorothy. You’re Dorothina now. You’ve jumped dimensions properly this time.”

“Hm,” she replies.

That’s as far as we get until Toto jumps in between us, stomping his feet even harder and shaking a map into Dorothy’s face. She takes it from him and gives it a look. I take a peek myself. It seems to be some kind

of print out, but I can't understand the language for the life of me.

"It's a map," says Dorothy.

"How can you tell, it's impossible to read, and it sure as hell doesn't look like a map."

"I don't know. I can just tell."

"Like you can just talk to every species we encounter, and you can just send messages back to your friends on earth, and you can just slip between dimensions and defy the laws of the universe."

She looks up from the paper and shrugs. Fair enough I guess.

Ted is tapping his foot and staring up at her, then at us both. "Is this a . . . treasure map?" she asks. A crack of a grin starts to spread across her expression.

"The Lady Dorothisa was obsessed with this place called Over The Rainbow. Maybe that's what it is."

Dorothy smiles even wider now. She hops down into the passenger seat and lifts Ted off the ground with the point of her finger, plunking him down in the driver's seat.

"Get this ship under control, Toto, and let me take care of reading these instructions," she says to him.

The very angry teddy bear does as he's told, though he keeps growling.

"You know Tim is still out there somewhere getting escorted by a huge mass of rats."

"Tim will be fine," she says, with the wave of her hand. Her boots are glowing intensely now as we trail the rainbow comet, casting a pale green over the ship's interior. "At least he will be for a few hours. Don't worry, Leon's on the ship following him, he's not alone. And according to this map, we're not far from the loot."

Something in me is starting to feel . . . uncomfortable with what we're doing. If me of a past life didn't want anyone finding Over the Rainbow, then shouldn't I in this life be protecting its whereabouts? Mind you, I can't say *why* it shouldn't be found. But still, Otthome felt this was important to hide.

In an unusual act of quick decision making, I snatch the map from Dorothy's hand.

Dorothy just watches unsuspectingly. The bear looks back and gives a squeak. Before I can change my mind, I begin ripping it to pieces and swallowing bit after bit of the printed sheet.

Then, chewing the last bit of paper cud I can manage, I pick Toto up and toss him across the room. Pushing

some button that looks right, and releasing the grappling hook from the comet just as I fall forward onto the joystick and twist it to the far right.

The spaceship skids hard to the right and is tossed between the currents of many passing comets, we're thrown back and forth and I swear to god, it's only a matter of time until we're blown to a million bits by one of these hurtling rocks.

Dorothy is holding her hands out like a ball, straining with every tug and throw as we bounce across the stream of shooting stars.

"You. Are. Out. Of. Your. Mind!" she manages.

"I know! I know, but I had to do it," I say, holding onto the control panel for dear life and trying with all my might not to fall back onto the joystick and send us spinning in another direction.

Suddenly something fuzzy and angry is on my back, growling as it grabs onto my head and covers my eyes. We fall forward together, back down over the control panel as Ted pushes his face toward my head, with his little mouth opening wider and wider.

"Do NOT eat Mike!" says Dorothy. "I need to concentrate so the two of you—"

A comet blinds us with its burning whiteness, and again the ship is tossed to the side, rolling over and over and pushing the gravity shield to its maximum.

"See what happens when you fight?! I can't keep this ship protected much longer. Get us out of this meteor shower, now."

Pirate Toto jumps off of me and pushes me back away from the control panel. Sliding into the pilot seat, he grabs the joystick and steers us up and down, side to side between the oncoming meteors. It is a tense ten minutes of leaping, but we clear the stream of shooting stars.

Dorothy puts down her hands and closes her eyes, taking a long breath in, then a long breath out. She opens them and looks at Toto the crazy violent teddy bear.

"Was that the only copy?"

He nods.

"Mike, what the hell just happened? What were you thinking. You could have killed us!"

"I know!" I reply. "I don't know what came over me. There was just this overwhelming urge to destroy that map."

“But all that treasure, Mike. Imagine it.” It looks like Dorothy is about to cry. At least she isn’t thinking of ripping my head off. That has to be a good sign, right?

“Dorothy, we don’t even know what Over the Rainbow *is*. Who knows if it’s space treasure or just some cheap strip club the Professor Otthome liked to visit. It doesn’t matter, we *can’t* find it. Not after I went to so much trouble to keep it hidden in my previous life.”

Her boots aren’t glowing anymore. Not like they were before, at least. They’re always kinda shimmering or something . . . but there’s no megawatt light bulb effect happening. “Yeah, I guess,” she says.

“And that other you – she’s not exactly a good person, Dorothy. So if she wants it, I reckon no one should have it.”

Ted grumbles at us and Dorothy nods. “I know,” she replies to him.

“What did he say?”

“He said that she’s as a good person as any, and that she just goes for what she wants. Many people are intimidated by ambitious women.”

“I’m not saying that.”

“Sure, sure, of course.”

“No, really. She wanted to cut out a piece of my brain. No, actually, she did take out a piece of my brain. It looked like straw, but it was still my brain!”

“Sure Mike. Well, apparently that was the only bit of brain that had the map to Over the Rainbow embedded within it, so Toto here says, and he says that Dorothona is going to be properly furious when she jumps back into this dimension.”

Hmm. I hadn’t thought of that. “Angry enough to come after us?”

“Us?”

“Come on, Dorothy. You’re my friend.”

“Yes, angry enough to come after us. So now I’m going to have to figure out how to stop her from jumping into our world.”

With the nod of her head, Ted raises his paws and covers his own ears.

She whispers, “Which I think shouldn’t be too difficult. There’s something about me, Mike. Something special somehow. I might even be stronger than her – or me, or whatever. There’s something about me that she hasn’t got . . . maybe none of the other Dorothys out there have it.”

Chapter 7

“I always thought you were unique.”

She blushes. Holding out her hand, she motions for me to take it.

“What are you doing?” I ask, taking her hand.

“Going back.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, it’s probably time we check on Leon. Make sure he hasn’t had a panic attack. Ready?”

“Ready.”

Dorothy breathes in sharply, and lets out a good, hard sneeze.

I’m in a very dark space, with traces of lights flying by along what might be . . . hold on, yes . . . I think it’s akin to a giant circuit board. I am one of the lights, flying faster than the eye can follow along an optic track of energy conductors. All around me are tracks of data and light flying here and there.

Did I pull the ship out of the black hole? Am I in the ship? Has the black hole broken me down into my most basic element – thought?

The last thing I remember is Dorothy, Mike and Teddy flying across the restaurant and no one helping me reverse thrusters to escape the pull of the hole. We were spinning and spinning. My processing was pulled, my calculations were next to impossible.

So where am I now? What happened?

God, life gets a lot more abstract when you become a super computer. You’d think everything would suddenly make sense – it would compute. Maybe for the humans who operate the machines, but for the machines themselves . . . machines like me . . . nothing is straightforward and everything has an infinite number of variables to consider. It’s damn

near impossible. I'm rounding down or up all the time just to quicken the computational process.

My beam of light passes through others with a sort of pulsing sensation. It is over nearly as soon as it starts. I keep travelling along my pathway.

Where is this place?

Is it space? Am I in space still, or is this what the inside of a black hole looks like?

Thoughts of Mike flicker through my mind. Thoughts of the crew, and if they're still alive, dabble on the edge of my consciousness. But this, this is far more interesting. It takes a load of might, but as my energy stream continues, I manage to shoot myself upward at a ninety degree angle and erupt from the invisible board of nothing as a pinpoint of light moving so fast, I must look like a steady beam to anyone watching . . . if eyes can watch this sort of thing.

What is this place?

This is cyberspace.

That was a voice! There is a voice in here. I'm not alone.

No, you are not alone. You are alone. But you are not alone.

This is weird.

This is weird, this is not weird. Everything is weird, but nothing is weird.

No, this is definitely without question weird. For instance, you showing up in my thoughts is weird. It might even be insanity.

Have it your way.

My point of existence comes to an abrupt stop that takes every ounce of mental capability I have. I'm hovering in the circuit, resisting the current of energies that are passing through me pulse after pulse. If I had the ability to sense, I'd almost say it tickles.

You have the ability of sensation, Leon. You have anything you desire here. This is cyberspace.

The voice knows my name. Somehow that doesn't scare me.

As I exist in that single spot, which is extremely difficult to maintain, by the way, I absorb everything around me. Down there below, so much is going on. It looks like the pictures astronauts take from space, only instead of the glow of cities, I can see the stream of cars, and the headlights of each vehicle, and the radio glow as the drivers switch the stations and the sweat on their fingertips, the bacteria growing upon the dial, the elements of the knob . . . the space

between electrons. I can see vague streaks of something on the smallest scale and specific flashes of everything on the largest. It is a grid, but it is a swirl of complex corridors. It feels like waves.

Honest to goodness, it makes me feel like God.

You are not god, and you are god.

And you, voice guy, whoever you are, can't pick a side on anything.

I should be terrified right now. I am out of body, out of mind, out of touch, out of out . . . I'm a pinpoint of the tiniest of tiny existences stubbornly stagnating above a throbbing display of life. This is what it must be to be dead.

You are not dead, Leon. You cannot die.

"Who are you?" I ask.

"Turn around," it replies.

But there is no front or back where I am. There is nowhere to turn.

Turn around.

I turn around.

It's my brother, Dan. He's been right behind me this entire time.

"Dan, what are you doing here?"

"I was waiting for you to find me, Leon."

"Is this where you've been hiding all these years?"

"In a way."

"I don't understand," I reply.

"That's because you're trying to understand," he says. "Turn back around. It will be easier on you."

"No," I reply. "I don't want to lose you again."

"You won't lose me this time, Leon. I want to show you some things, and I promise that you won't lose me."

We lost him when he was just a kid. He and I used to run and hide and play all day together, me and Dan. We used to go have adventures when we could escape our mother's watchful eyes. She wasn't horrible, she just worried incessantly. We'd break away and go have a few laughs. It didn't hurt anyone and we always came back. I watched after Dan since I was the older, bigger brother. But then one day he ran too far ahead, and then he didn't come back. I went to follow him, but he was gone. He was just completely gone.

That changed everything. I haven't stopped missing him since.

“Leon, stop trying to understand, you idiot. Just come on.”

I am a blip of emotion high above a streaming mass of life and streaks of energy along connected, complex circuits. Dan pulses through me and heads downward toward the action. I let go of my resistance and follow him . . . follow it . . . I just simply follow.

Where are we going?

We are pulled downward by some existing momentum and sucked down, down, down into the heart of the intricate existences. But suddenly, we are nowhere again, we are in space and surrounded by nothing. Far, far off in the distance, I can feel the current of energy and suggestions of light.

How can it be so open? How can it not be crowded.

It is what we choose it to be.

I don't understand you, Dan.

Follow me, Leon. If you aren't afraid.

Thoughts of death flash through my mind . . . if I have a mind. Images of pain and violence and helplessness spark against my lightness, but Dan is moving forward and I follow him, leaving those blips of nothingness to disappear into the emptiness.

I'm not afraid, Dan.

Good.

Mom was always afraid, wasn't she? And I became just like her without you to push me onward.

Focus on this moment, Leon.

Says the pulse that is travelling in front of me – spreading forward and backward along this invisible circuit route.

Where are we going? I ask again.

Come on. We are going.

When will we get there.

As soon as we get there.

See what I mean, this shit is high level abstract. You can't do this with a human body.

Suddenly I'm in a massive room - like a real room, and it's filled with the brightest light. I have to squint. I have to squint. I'm in my body! I'm me again. I'm the real Leon! It's cold and hard in this room of white light.

“Dan, are you here?”

“Here, Leon,” says Dan.

“Why can’t I see you?”

“I’m not ready to be seen.”

“Come on.”

“No.”

Slowly, I can open my eyes wider, then a bit wider. Soon I can see this room, despite the brightness. But even better, I can see myself. There are my hands. I hold them up to my eyes. Here are the intricate lines etched into the skin. There are the veins that must be carrying millions upon millions of cells. And this is my skin. Each hand feels along its opposite arm. I have a body again. It’s my body.

“Can I keep this? Can I keep it?”

Leon, you are not your body. But this is always here. Now, follow me.

Me and my body walk forward. It’s down there, I’m up here. We are walking and along the far wall, a door opens leading into another bright room. I enter.

You know, these black holes are really cryptic. If people knew going through one would be so trippy, there would be a line up from here to Earth to get in and swirl apart.

Stepping through the door, I shut it behind me and take a seat upon the bright red sofa in the middle of the room. My body sits down and I remain above it.

I’ve missed you, Leon. But you’re here now.

What is this place.

This is your place. You make it. In cyberspace nothing exists until you make it.

I make a giraffe appear. It looks startled and stoops its enormous head down toward my face. My body gives it a kiss on the nose, and the giraffe disappears.

This place is fucking crazy.

It’s whatever you make it to be.

What happened after you disappeared, Dan?

I found a doorway that opened as I passed by, and I walked through. That was all. Everything changed after that. I’ve wanted to come back, but everything changed. Now I’m here. You found me.

But where is here?

Space. Cyber Space. Space space. I’m here and there. I’m everywhere. I’m no where.

You’ve gotten weird.

It’s been a long time, Leon.

So, am I dead?

Were you dead after losing your body?

No.

So, do you think you are dead now?

No.

Okay then, I guess. Let's say you aren't dead.

Cryptic.

This is what you make it, Leon. I keep telling you that.

What about my friends.

They won't miss you for long.

What did you want to show me, Dan?

This.

We are in a green room, and there's a bright green emerald in front of us. It's shooting out light in waves and patterns across the walls. It looks almost alive.

That's me, Leon. It's my home. Here they call me the Wizard of Foz.

You are the wizard, Dan? How can you be in there, in that big world, and here at the same time. And what about your body, how did it get to be so much older than us?

Another time, another story. You'll find out.

So I'm that witch's uncle?

In a way, yes. But that was my body's doing. Anyhow, let's get back to all this surreal stuff. You found me, Leon. I was here all along. You found me.

Because of the black hole?

I'm sure it helped, but Leon – you aren't just in space. You are the space. It isn't just stardust and spaceships . . . it's streaks of stories, thoughts, data, lives, information . . . it's passing messages, and crossing communications. You can find me anytime, Leon. We are special that way.

Because . . .

Because we can leave our bodies and still exist. Not everyone can do that. Not everyone can find this place.

My hands are tingling. No, my arms and legs, my entire body is tingling with the realization that this is special.

So what comes next?

Next you explore without constraints. But take my advice. Before you look for me, go and find your body. That was my mistake, I became too enamored by the pleasure of independence . . . find your body first,

make amends by letting it be, and the rest will soon make sense. I will see you again, when you are ready.

And he's gone. Just like that, my little brother, if he really is my little brother, has left me again.

I lost him again. The emotions of fear and sadness and helplessness fill up my body that exists within the weird room. I look at them from above. I scoop them up into a large ball, and lift them above my head. I throw them as far and as hard as I can and the room explodes into a burst of nothing.

I'm gone. There is the grandness of nothing all around me once again, and the far off specks of existence.

It feels better to be this way, to be free of the emotions and the unstable haunting of life.

I am here.

I feel nothing.

I feel everything.

I look up.

Traces of thought streak across the sky like shooting stars. One of them is a bright rainbow. It looks familiar. I follow it.

*

"Are we back? Are we *really* back?" asks Dorothy.
"Leon, can you hear me?"

Am I back? Am I really back? I don't have a clue anymore.

"Leon? Are you there?"

"I'm here. I think we're alive."

"What do you mean?"

"I think we were sucked into the black hole. By all accounts, we should be nothing but stardust now – not even stardust, we should be the space between the electrons."

Tim is pulling himself up from the ground, helping Dorothy up. I start checking my systems. How the hell did we survive the black hole? There's no way we could have avoided it, I didn't have the power to pull us out of the vacuum. We must have gone through. We must have.

And if that's true. Then where are we now?

I scan the area for some familiar space signage.

"What is that light speeding away out there?" I ask.

Dorothy and Mike run over to the wall of windows and press their faces against the glass to look out. "It's my treasure," says Dorothy.

"It's my legacy," adds Mike.

"It reminds me of something. Someone. My brother. Could that be my brother?"

Dorothy and Tim stop to look at the camera. "Your brother, Leon?"

"Long story that I don't understand," I reply.

"Mike and I were grapple-hooked to that shooting star until he unhooked the claw."

"I had to unhook the claw. I need to protect the secret of my previous life plans."

"You know, I bet that past life guy, that Otthome, was just an old jerk who didn't like to share the goods," replies Dorothy. "Stingy!" she proclaims.

"I don't think we're ready to go after it," I say.

Mike nods. "Exactly, we are the good guys. We don't go busting people's secret treasures."

"We bust people's secret treasures open precisely *because* we're the good guys," replies Dorothy.

There's a squeak from the ball pen, and out climbs Toto. He's shaking his head and stomping his little feet. He does *not* want to follow that rock either.

I study the burning emerald that is moving further and further away. We could abandon everything and chase after it. There's something special about that rock. But I don't know. Could it really be possible that the consciousness of my little brother is out there in space? Or maybe, it's not my brother. Maybe it's some manipulative power trying to trick us? This could be a trap.

In any case, I watch it and watch it and look very, very closely before coming back to the Wurgers. It's easier now to scan everything.

"First things first, Tim is all alone out there with the rats, we need to go after him first," I say.

Dorothy pouts, but then nods. "Yeah, I know."

"Right, let's go get him," adds Mike.

Teddy nods, then begins to chew upon a table leg.

"Great," I reply. "Now we just need to find him . . ."

"You can't find Tim?"

"Ah, well, no."

"But Leon, he has my phone."

“Yeah, I know. For some reason my connection broke from the phone. Maybe it was the black hole, I haven’t got a clue.”

“So Tim is out there lost in space with a bunch of rats, heading toward that Crazy witch . . . and we’ve let him down completely.”

“Not completely,” I reply. “Dorothy, your phone has a tracker in it whether I’m there or not. We just need to find its trace. So, we just need to drive around until we hear the ping.”

“Until we hear the ping?! Leon, that’s like a needle in a haystack,” says Mike.

“Hey, we can’t blame him. He’s doing his best. We’re all just doing our best,” replies Dorothy. “I’ve got a crazy headache, so wake me when we hear the ping,” she heads for the bunker, and Toto follows.

“Don’t worry Mike, I’ll find him. I’m getting better at this stuff.”

“Okay Leon, I trust you.”

“Really?”

“Of course.”

“Well alright. I like the sounds of that. I trust you too Mike.”

“Hey, let’s not turn this into a moment or anything.”

“Right.”

“Carry on, Leon.”

“Will do, sir.”

And away we go.

*

I’ve pulled an all nighter with the algorithms, and I think I’ve managed to find where we may have been rematerialized after having passed through the black hole. And I know what you’re thinking – that is impossible, Leon. Normally I’d agree with you, but the thing is, nothing is actually quite impossible, and it was actually a wormhole - but tell no one, less impressive.

So just go with it. No one else gives me a hard time on this ship, I don’t expect *you* to be pitching into the conversation with your little thoughts of “but what if?” and “but how did?” Everything is possible. Just deal with it.

Anyhow, apologies. I’ve been up all night and it’s making me just a little bit . . . crazy. I mean, okay, I don’t sleep, but there’s a certain kind of down cycle

my circuits seem to enjoy, and I didn't get a wink of it last night.

"Where are we leaping now, Leon?" asks Dorothy.

"Well, Dorothy, I've taken us away from the meteor shower, and have reversed the pull of their gravity to shoot us off in a direction that corresponds to the approximate location of the initial event. Added to that, I've extrapolated the general direction we last saw Tim and the cloud of rats—"

"Ugh,"

"Ugh," I agree. "Where we last saw Tim and the cloud of two-headed rats—"

"Oh man."

"Yes, gross."

"Seriously, I can't believe he just threw himself out there into their tiny little claws. I always assumed he was the kind of manager who would lock himself in the office at the first sign of trouble."

"Well, the cowboy costume does give him a certain kind of – je ne sais quoi."

"Confidence," adds Mike, chewing on a fry and playing with his lighter. "It gives him some bizzaro confidence."

"Anyhow, if I may."

"Sorry," replies Dorothy. "Go on about the rats."

"I've included an extrapolation of their trajectory into my calculations, and comparing it to that cheap space chart we picked up at the massive diamond planet, we're on a course that will hopefully take us, somehow, in the right direction."

"So, you mean we'll need to stop and ask directions," says Dorothy. She's doing yoga in the front of the restaurant, currently striking an impressive downward dog post. Mike has been standing there with his now cold French fries for the past ten minutes mesmerized.

"Who says we'll need to ask for directions?" I reply.

"We'll need to ask for directions," replies Dorothy.

"Maybe someone would have spotted a massive cloud of rats passing by. It's not like that's hard to miss."

Dorothy moves to the snake pose.

"And who would be floating out here in the middle of nothing? We haven't leaped past a planet cluster in ages," I reply.

"What about that guy?" asks Dorothy, nodding her head towards the entrance and lowering her chest

back down to the map. “That dude might have seen something.”

I flip on my sensors and do a general sweep. There’s no one out there.

“I don’t see anyone, Dorothy.”

“Right there,” she says, sitting up into a cross-legged position and resting her hands palm up on her knees. “Mike back me up on this.” She takes in a deep breath, closing her eyes, and slowly begins to exhale.

Mike is still staring at Dorothy. The French fry hasn’t even made it to his mouth this time. Teddy is hovering around his legs, chomping up the misfired chips as they fall to the ground.

“Mike?” I ask. “Back *me* up on this.”

“Ah?” Mike leans over the counter and looks out the glass entrance doorway. “I don’t see anything Dorothy.”

Dorothy creaks open one eye. “You can’t see that thing?”

“Nope.”

“That massive slug like thing out there, just creeping along?”

“No.”

“It’s headed right for us.”

I do another sweep. “Look, I have really advanced scanning tools here, and if there was something huge and slug-like heading toward us, I would know—”

Suddenly I’m thrown out of my leap by a massive force hitting me on the entrance side of the restaurant, sending us skidding sideways through space. Thankfully, this is space and we hit nothing.

“So how do you explain that?” asks Dorothy.

“Ah. Well. A massive invisible space slug must have somehow attached itself to us?”

The lights flicker. Then shut off completely.

“Oh come on, can’t we catch a break?” asks Mike.

I scan my own systems. There’s a big loss. It’s like someone has pulled the plug on my energy supply and is draining me. Oh my god, I wish I had down cycled last night. I was off my game already before whatever this is happened. It feels like there’s a hole in my side, and I’ve suddenly become a straw. Instead of the pleasant pulse of energy within me, there’s this cold, sucking leak of energy escaping .

“What is that thing?” asks Mike.

I adjust my camera. The slug is in fact visible now. It's covering the entire window. Ah no, wait, I think it's covering the entire damn restaurant!

"Leon, how is life support holding up?"

"Just barely, Mike."

"Can you search the database we picked up from the planet of Foz? Does it mention this kind of thing. Look under parasite?"

I take a look. "There it is. It's an Invisible Slug. Basically, sir, it hooks onto passing lifeforms and sucks them dry of energy."

"Are they intelligent?" asks Mike.

"How the heck should I know? They're barely mentioned. Incredibly rare, not well studied, apparently."

"Maybe we can burn it off," suggests Dorothy. She's making her way through the pitch black kitchen now, knocking into the occasional pan and rifling through the cupboards. With this click of a switch, she turns on a flashlight and is making her way back to the store front.

"How does that sound?"

"And how are we going to burn it?" asks Mike.

"I don't know." She holds out her hand and it begins to glow somehow. But nothing else happens. "Damn it. No fire."

"Maybe you can rip it off?" asks Mike.

"Not without ripping off the entire side of our restaurant spaceship," replies Dorothy. "That wouldn't be helpful, I think."

She walks over to the massive window upon which the slug has pressed its body. Tapping the glass, she puts her ear to the window.

"Hello?" she asks. "Can you hear me?"

We listen.

There's a gurgle.

"It can hear you!" I say.

"Ah, Leon, that was just my stomach," says Mike.

Toto laughs in a series of little squeaks. Stupid bear.

"It's not talking," replies Dorothy.

"Life support down to 15%."

"Crack open the backup air tanks, Leon," says Dorothy.

"Ah, no can do."

“What do you *mean* no can do?” asks Mike. “It’s been ages since the poppy plants tried to kill us, are you telling me they weren’t refilled since then?”

Humans, what bags of flesh.

“Sure, blame the super computer for all of your problems. Don’t blame the yogi over there who just watched the space slug crawl up out of nowhere.”

“I said there was something out there,” replies Dorothy.

“How could you see it anyhow?”

“Honestly, I don’t know how; I can’t explain anything that I’m doing.”

I shrug. They can’t see it, but I shrug. My systems run off of the light. Even the small pinpricks of light can be enough to charge my battery, I’m just that awesome. But when it comes to oxygen and this whole ‘air’ business . . . why do they think it’s a good idea to put me in charge? I’ve got other things on my mind. Such as, for the time being, this massive slug that’s blocking every bit of light.

Light!

“Dorothy, shine that flashlight at my light sensor that’s just outside the exit. Maybe that will help. Life support is down to 5%.”

She opens the door into the tiny glass foyer and shines the flashlight at my light sensor. Or at least, at the bit of the sensor that is not smothered by the slug.

I charge up.

“It’s working! Life support up to 7% no, 10%, oh, 15% and rising!”

The slug takes a big sip from its straw. It’s like being smacked with a ton of bricks. “The Slug is drinking more. It’s a greedy son-of-aaaa....”

No more wasting energy on vocalization. Life support is down to 5%. The flashlight isn’t enough – whatever we make, the slug drinks.

Mike and Dorothy are feeling the effects of the diminishing life support. They’re on the floor now, laying there with shallow breaths. The only one who isn’t affected is Toto, and he’s opening the entrance door kicking at the body of the slug. But it’s not moving.

4%.

3%.

2%.

There’s a loud, slapping sound.

“EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!” screams the Invisible Slug, retracting its body from the restaurant and propelling off to the side with what looks like a massive orange glob of burning something splashed across its body.

5%

7%

10%

“I’ve got light. I’ve got energy. I’m recharging!”

13%

15%

Suddenly, a large splatter of orange splashes against the side window and steams as it drips to the side as we continue to spin. All around us are globs of burning . . . cheese. Splatter and globs of molten *fromage*. I leap left and right avoiding the largest globs.

“Air, sweet air. No more black spots in my eyes,” says Mike, sitting up from the floor.

“Jesus,” says Dorothy, pushing herself upward. “Does this stuff need to happen so often?” She takes in a deep breath. “Sweet wonderful fresh air. I love it.”

“There’s flying melted cheese *everywhere!*” I tell them, still carrying the ship left and right, trying to

avoid the biggest chunks. “The slug took a hit for us. If it wasn’t for that parasite, we might have become fondu!”

A streak of green cape flies past our window.

“Arrogon?” asks Dorothy. She pops up from the ground and moves toward the window. “It’s him! He’s out there. We need to save him!”

She reaches out her hand, and somehow ‘grabs’ him from his course, pulling him back toward the ship. “He’s a mess of cheese.”

“Do we *have* to bring him onboard? That dude is going to stink,” says Mike.

“Hold your breath,” replies Dorothy. “Leon, prepare to board Arrogon.”

“Boarding ready,” I reply. The entrance door airlock is released and he floats in. I shut the door behind him, and re-pressurize. The Emperor collapses to the floor.

At this point, I’m quite glad for my lack of smell in this flesh based plane. Dorothy and Mike look like they’re going to be sick. Toto on the other hand . . . he walks over to the unconscious space man, and in one massive bite, eats the fellow whole.

“Toto!” shouts Dorothy.

Chapter 8

Toto swishes the Emperor around in his mouth, then, with a burp, spits the man back out totally cleaned of cheese.

“Oh, you tricked us,” replies Dorothy. She gives Toto a kiss on the head. The little bear bows, as it falls flat to the ground. Men.

“What do you think he was doing out there?” asks Mike.

“I don’t know,” replied Dorothy, looking over Arrogon. “But I guess we’ll find out soon enough. Mike can you lend him some clothes that aren’t so . . . burned? And Leon, any signs of the rats?”

I scan the quadrant.

“From the bio traces of cheese, it’s hard to detect any heat trails worth pursuing . . . but . . . that cluster over there looks less splatter like and more hoard of rats and one human like. That way, is my guess.”

“Let’s do it,” replies Dorothy.

“Thatta way, Leon,” adds Mike, dragging Arrogon towards the bunks.

“Aye, Aye,” I reply. And we’re off once again.

So what is this anyhow? One second he is here. The next he is gone. And then, *and then* he’s flying by my window unconscious and covered in cheese. And even then, he is so damn beautiful it hurts to look at him. Like literally, part of me can’t stop staring, and some other part feels like it might get blinded from the aura of hotness he gives off.

My boots seem to like him, if nothing else. They have this quiet way of existing just that little bit extra when he is in the room. I have to stifle the urge to tap dance.

Arrogon is laying on Tim’s bunk, dressed in a Wurgers uniform. He’s been sleeping for the past hour while we’ve been tracing the rat cluster heat trail. Leon is stretching out into something he calls cyberspace looking for my phone signal. We’re bound to find Tim any moment, I reckon.

Find Tim, get that woman back to the Wizard of Foz, and then I can get out of here and chase down that rainbow rock. I don’t know *why* I want to find it so badly, all I can say is that it feels like some strange deep scratch that I never realized before – but now

that I feel it, I'm aching to scratch. Kind of like a wool sweater that way. Hmm.

Mike walks into the bunk room and stops in front of Arrogon. He's not happy.

"Still not awake?"

"Hey, at least he's breathing. The guy was smothered in burning cheese."

"Well if he can withstand the vacuum of space, I think he can tolerate a little cheddar."

I get up from the bunk. "Where are we now?"

"I'm not sure. Leon has ditched the map and is leaping after what he thinks is the trace of a mobile signal shooting out into space. If we get close enough, he can jump over to the phone to scope out Tim's whereabouts. But till then we're leaping blind. He's deep into this cyberspace thing and is getting more and more pesky each time I draw him out of there for an update. I say we let him roll with it."

"Sounds good to me."

I look down at the sleeping Emperor of the Universe.

"What should we do with him?" I ask.

"Jettison him?"

"Mike, come on. He can help us, I'm sure. Maybe he saw the rats passing by."

"I guess the cheese plus rats makes sense."

Mike bends over me and pinches Arrogon's nose closed. His jaw drops open, and lets out a long, deep snore. "WAKE UP!" shouts Mike, releasing the nose.

He doesn't move.

"We could do with a bit of his help right about now," Mike says. "I'm sure he knows something. He *always* knows something."

"True," I reply. Going over to my locker, I open it up and take out a large bottle of white liquid.

"God, not that stuff again!"

"Oh yes, this stuff. But don't worry, we're not drinking it."

Opening the lid, I hold the bottle down to Arrogon's face and waft the smell toward him.

His mouth begins to smack its lips. Then there's a deep inhalation.

"Hmm, yes. That smells good, doesn't it? Don't ya just want to drink it?"

I slosh the bottle.

Pouring a few drops onto my fingers, I let them drip into his mouth.

His eyes open wide, and he grabs the bottle from my hand. With a swig of white stuff, he looks around the room. His eyes pass over Mike critically, then they turn to me and stay there.

“Yep, it’s us again,” I say.

“Well that’s a coincidence,” he replies.

“It is.”

“I just saw your friend, not more than a . . . well, I don’t know now how long ago it was. Not long ago. Before the cheese exploded, that’s certain.”

“The cheese exploded?”

He takes another swig. “There were rats. Lots of rats! I was trying to get them to-ah-to-ah . . .”

Grabbing the bottle from his hand, I cork it and shove it back into my locker. “Trying to what?”

“To release your friend. Yes. He was with them, I recall.”

Mike bends over Arrogon and squints particularly hard. Arrogon just grins back and flashes those large, brilliant teeth. Dentists everywhere would kill to be the genius behind teeth like that. Well, I imagine they

would. Maybe that’s not where their priorities actually lay. Maybe they have families and pets and dreams of vacations in Hawaii.

“Tell us everything,” says Mike.

“The rats had your friend, and I tried to save him. Yes, that’s what happened. I was gallantly trying to save the fellow, and then all of a sudden the cheese exploded and I must have been knocked out. And now I’m here, apparently.”

“So you don’t know where they went?” asks Mike.

“No.”

“You’re sure.”

“Positive. Do *you* know where they went?”

“We might,” I reply. “Leon is on it.”

Leon’s voice pipes over the speaker. “Excuse me Dorothy and Mike, we have rats ahead.”

“Rats!” shouts Arrogon, jumping up from the bed and running into the locker, opening it up and promptly shutting it. Then he runs to another locker and gets in. He steps back out. Tentatively he walks toward the door, and opens it, looking through. “Ah yes, the exit.” Grabbing his cape that is hanging from the back of the door, he strides out into the hallway and up toward the restaurant.

“That guy is 100% idiot,” says Mike.

“Maybe,” I reply. “But at least he’s pretty.”

“Seriously guys, we have rats, lots of rats,” says Leon. “And they are headed right this way.”

“Evasive maneuvers, Leon,” says Mike. “We’re coming up right now.”

*

The rats are flying in what looks like tiny squadrons, soaring towards us.

“Should I put the shields up?” asks Leon.

“Don’t bother,” I reply.

As the animals get closer and flank to either side, I push them aside one group after another, sending them shooting around me like a slingshot to sail off into the space behind us. “Just keep moving forward, Leon. I’ll keep them off.”

It’s slow going, but we cut through the attack of rodents, sending them skidding off to the sides.

“I can feel it now. Your phone is close, Dorothy. And that means Tim is around here somewhere.”

“The witch has taken him by now,” says Arrogon.

“He’s a goner. Probably charred into a heap of steaming flesh on the floor.”

“Gross,” replies Mike. “But a good point if true. How are we going to avoid that ourselves?”

I hadn’t actually thought this far yet. How are we going to get the Witch of the West to come back with us? Am I going to have to drag her the entire way across the universe back to Foz? That wouldn’t even be possible, I figure, since she’s got the power of fire – and things could become rather uncomfortable for everyone quite quickly with the heat and burning and flames. “We need a plan.”

“Leon, can you do some recon?” asks Mike.

“I’m on it. Somewhere ahead is what I think is a space station. And I can feel the signal now. I’ll leave the ship on autopilot, and meet you there. If I can find my way into the system, then I can probably at least lower her shields for you to dock. After that, you’re on your own.”

“Arrogon, you know this witch, right?” I ask.

“I’ve seen her around, yeah.”

“What do you mean you’ve seen her around?” I ask. Does that question sound jealous? Should I be

jealous? What is it with this guy! Oh my god, I just remembered he can read minds.

Arrogon winks at me.

Oh my god. If there was a hole, I'd go and hide in it.

"It's not quite a hole, but there's always the ball pen," he replies with *another* wink.

"Stay out of my head," I tell him.

"What about the ball pen?" asks Mike.

"Nothing."

"You're too young to understand," replies the emperor, now winking at Mike! What a flirt!

"Squeak!" Toto sits up with an explosion of balls; he's been in the ball pen all along. Hopping out of the pen, he passes by and kicks Arrogon on the shin before heading back into the kitchen, then into Tim's office.

"You've ruined his nap," I tell Arrogon.

"Anyhow," continues Mike, "there has to be something we can do to snuff out her powers."

"You can't snuff out a witch unless you somehow get them to willingly give up their power source. And even then, it just diminishes what they're capable of – it will never actually, fully remove their ability."

"So, what? Her boots? Is that it?"

"Just like you, the boots."

"So we need to get her to willingly give up the boots, and she'll be powerless."

"Less powerful."

"Weak enough to drag across the universe back to Foz without her burning us to a crisp?"

"That sounds about right," replies Arrogon. "But you won't get her to give up her boots. It's impossible. Just like you wouldn't give up yours, and there's no way I'll be parting with my cape."

So, his power is in his cape.

"Damn it," he mutters.

"Our secret," I reply to him, with a wink.

"Well if you two are done flirting—"

"I wasn't flirting," I cut in.

"Whatever. If you were paying attention, you might have noticed that Leon is right. We're coming up to a space station, and the rats are retreating."

"So what do we do?!"

“There’s another way to get her. It’s not as profitable as getting her boots, but . . .”

“But what?” I ask.

He pulls out a little green bottle. “We need to get her in here. If we can get her into this bottle, it will mute her powers sufficiently. Getting her out will be another story, because once out – she’ll be really damn mad.”

Mike and I look at the bottle as our restaurant sails closer to the glittering space station, and the windows are filling with a bright light.

“That is a tiny bottle.” I finally say. “What are we going to do, liquefy her?”

Arrogon nods his head. “You have an interesting idea. I thought I’d just shrink her with my laser gun.”

Reaching into his cape, he pulls out a large and elaborate laser gun. “I’ll set it to ‘shrink’,” he says, turning the dial.

“Fine,” hisses Mike. “You shoot her or whatever and she shrinks. Then we’ll get her into that bottle somehow, and take her back to Foz.”

“No, I don’t think so.”

Turning on Mike, the Emperor shoots his laser and I stand aghast as Mike shrinks nearly out of sight. The

next thing I know, the laser light flashes at me too and everything is whoosing inward as the room becomes larger, and larger, and the light from the station gets brighter and brighter.

I’m tiny and dazed, but not out. With the raise of my hand, I lift it to throw Arrogon across the room.

“Ah, ah, ah! I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Mike is in his fist being squeezed.

“Mike!” I shout.

“Into the bottle, please, Dorothy,” he says. And then winks.

I could rip him into two right now! I *should* rip him into twenty, pull out his hair, take out his eyes, yank out his teeth. But . . .

“Fine,” I reply, and slide into the bottle he holds before me.

In slides Mike, right behind. Moments later, Toto is in there with us. It’s exactly like the inside of that bottle from I Dream of Genie, only green – everything green. Maybe the set designer had been an alien, too.

“Consider yourself lucky,” booms Arrogon from outside the container. “I didn’t take your boots. The only person who could afford them is the Wizard of

Chapter 9

Foz, and he's the one who made me give them to you in the first place," he sighs. "So, I'll just have to take your Witch of the Wrest bounty instead. Behave yourself kiddies. I have business to attend to."

And with that, the bottle is corked and we're tossed side to side as it is slips back into his cape pocket.

Okay, so when you get kidnapped by a hoard of space rats and dragged back to their secret lair, what you don't expect to find is a candlelit meal waiting for you in the containment cell. Especially not one with garlic bread as a side, fresh pasta and the best damn tomato sauce you've ever eaten.

"You like it? I made it myself," says the Witch of the Wrest as she twirls her fork in the heap of spaghetti and takes a dainty mouthful.

"Listen, I know you space people can read one another's thoughts. But where I come from, we leave that sort of thing alone."

"So, Tim, I want to hear all about you. What's this place you come from? What's your day in the life?"

Now, I'm a damn good night manager. I mean, I lead my team and we get those customers served, but if I'm being honest . . . I've gone through life never feeling so very . . . well liked. The witch keeps asking me about myself, and I'm just not sure what to do. I bet James would know, that smug idiot with his fancy car and reflective glasses. He's used to people

wanting to be his friend. I'm just used to being their boss. "Ahh..."

"I don't know who this James guy is you are always thinking of, but you need to let that go . . . *Tim.*"

I would say she should stop reading my mind. . . but did you hear how she just said my name? No one says my name like that. Suddenly this room is feeling rather warm. Is anyone else sweating?

"Do they have string pasticles with tomato sauce on your planet?"

"We call it spaghetti."

"Funny, don't you think? Who would imagine that two galaxies so incredibly far apart would both have similar stuff like pasticles."

"And tomatoes."

"And tomatoes," she replies, giggling. Raising her champagne flute, she helps herself to another pour.

I hold up my glass, and it's refilled to the top.

"My father's considerably well travelled in this galaxy, being the Wizard of Foz. He's the one who taught me how to make tomato sauce, well, before his accident and everything went crazy."

"What went crazy?"

She shrugged it off. "You'll never guess the secret ingredient in my tomato sauce."

"Basil?"

"What's that?"

"It's this green leafy spice. Smells like . . . spice."

She shakes her head. My god, this witch – ah, I mean, Wendy – has a big mouth. She has this beautiful big mouth. And it's smiling at me.

"Ah, is it wine?"

"Nope! I have some wine in there, but that's not the secret ingredient."

"I give up."

She leans in and drops her voice to a whisper. I lean in too, because, you know, we're having fun . . . in my cell, after I was dragged here across space by two headed rats.

"It's sodium chloride!" she exclaims, shooting back up and toasting into the air with her champagne flute.

"Salt!" I exclaim, raising my glass for the toast.

Just as our glasses collide in a "ting" that bounces off the walls of my metallic shell of a cell, the entire room shutters and I'm thrown down to the ground –

sodium chloride flavoured tomato sauce and pasta particles all over me.

The cell force field flickers, then collapses. The rat, I think it's my buddy, runs up with a squeak and looks panicked.

"It's what?! They're not working? How the hell are our shields not working?"

This room is heating up. No mistaking that. She turns on me. "Your friends are firing on my base!"

"It must be some misunderstanding. They're just worrie—"

There's another massive shutter as I fall again sideways. Funny enough, Wendy remains standing like the room isn't suddenly impossible to remain standing upon. The shakes settle down. With a burst of light, she's off and running away from the cell. I stand here next to the mess of extinguished candles and spaghetti.

The rat looks at me with his little rat face for a good long moment, then he too runs after the witch.

I reach my hand forward – still no force field. So I do what anyone would do. I follow.

*

"Arm the flame throwers and shoot a volley on my mark." She says from the landing bay as I run back into the massive space. "Fire!" she shouts – pointing a finger outward toward what I can see on the view screen to be my Wurgers. Suddenly fire balls are sailing straight for it, and the restaurant is dancing back and forth out there, almost expanding and contracting in size as it avoids the flames.

"Those are my friends!" I shout. "You can't fire on them!"

"Friends? Those people? You're better off with me, Tim. Fire again!"

"Don't fire again!" I shout back to the rats.

They ignore me, because you know, I'm not actually their leader, and I don't have the ability to burn living creatures with just a thought.

The restaurant is still dodging. Suddenly, it's firing back with flames of its own. We watch as a massive hot gob comes towards us on the view screen. Wendy holds out a palm and the flames seem to separate – they freeze in their place, but from them comes a hot clear . . . liquid?

Again, we're hit, and the ship shudders.

“Grease. They’re firing balls of burning grease. That’s why I can’t stop it. You!” She points at me now and I have to dodge as a stream of flames erupts from her finger tips.

“Me?” I ask from behind a crate.

“You tell them to stop this right now.”

“How?”

“Open radio channels!” she shouts to my friend the rat. He’s at the control panel, and gives a nod.

A speaker crackles somewhere above us. “Attention Wurgers assailants, this is the Witch of the Wrest speaking, and I have a friend who wants to speak with you.”

The room of rats and witch turn to me, waiting.

“Ah, hi guys. You there? It’s me. Can you stop firing on this space station, please? We were just having dinner, and now that’s all ruined. And you know, I’m fine. So stop it. Stop now.”

Another gob is ejected from the Wurgers and comes flying towards us. Again Wendy stays the flames, but the grease continues, hitting the side of the ship. Bits of debris are flying off into space now . . . floating into the view screen around the restaurant.

“Stop it you idiots!” I shout. “As your manager, I order you to stop right now. Seriously, what are you people thinking? Hello? Hello, is anybody there?”

There’s a ringing sound throughout the room. The rats are looking between them. My rat is pushing buttons on the console. The ringing continues.

“Will someone answer that?” shouts Wendy from her station.

Where is it . . . hang on. I pat my pocket and pull out Dorothy’s phone. It’s ringing. I answer.

“Hello?”

“Tim! Are you alright?”

“Of course I am, is this Leon?”

“Yes, sir.” Our conversation is bouncing around the entire docking station, everyone is listening. If there was ever a time for me to seem in charge, this would be a good one.

“Leon, what the hell are you doing firing on this space station when you know I’m inside of it.”

“It’s not me sir, I’m here on the space station – it was my job to lower the shields, and now I can’t get back to the restaurant. Something is blocking my signal.”

“What do you mean?”

“I am not sure, sir, when Mike, Dorothy and Arrogon were—”

“Wait a second, Arrogon?”

“Yes sir.”

“And you left them with him?”

“Ah, yes . . . sir?”

“That guy is a maniac, he just tried to kill me on some big ball of cheese planet that was really a massive rat trap!”

“Really, because that sounds a little, you know, ridiculous.”

“Newbie, are you questioning me?”

“No sir.”

“Leon, we cannot trust that guy. He’s crazy.”

“And she’s not?”

I look over at Wendy by the battle controls. Well, if she’s crazy, she’s at least . . . nice to me.

There’s another hard shake that sends me to the ground, the rats are running everywhere.

“The spaceship is losing structural integrity, sir,” reports Leon.

“Fire on the restaurant,” shouts Wendy.

A series of flames shoot out onto the view screen, chasing the Wurgers.

“Increase the intensity, raise the velocity, densify the consistency!”

In seconds it looks like a wall of fire is filling up the space out there. How can anything survive in that inferno?”

“Stop!” I shout. “Stop it. My friends are on that ship.”

Volley after volley is launched.

And as we shoot out, glob after glob of hot steaming grease flies toward the station. The room is shaking, things are falling and being incinerated in the cross fire.

“Wendy!” I shout, somehow moving towards her as the floor vibrates and it’s nearly impossible to stand. She’s steady though. She’s unaffected. I’m beside her now, as close as I dare to get. “Wendy, the space station is being destroyed. And my friends, you will KILL them.”

“GOOD!” she screams back at me over the explosions and screams of her space station.

It’s like I’ve been slapped. She doesn’t care. She just doesn’t care. Whatever there was, it was a lie. It was

nothing – it was just another game that people play.
I’m just another idiot.

She’s not who I thought she was. She doesn’t care.

I give in to the shaking and drop to the floor. Helpless
here like I am everywhere.

But then, just for a second, she hesitates. There’s a
short pause in her fury.

From the ground, I lunge at her legs – at those bright
red boots, and grabbing them a shock of I don’t know
what passes through me, constricting every muscle,
forcing me to hold her ever more tightly till she’s
brought down to the ground away from the control
panel. Somewhere in the distance, there is this sound
of a thousand tiny claws running towards us to save
their Witch. Something is burning. It could be me. I
think it’s me.

“Wendy, please,” I say as the smoke fills my eyes.
“Stop. Just stop.”

The room goes dark.

I go dark.

The rest is . . .

. . . really green?

“Is he awake?” asks a voice.

“I think so. Hey, Tim? Buddy, wake up.”

Everything green. I blink again, and the colour pours
in around me.

“He’s waking up!”

Mike?

“Oh thank God.”

Dorothy.

“Squeak.”

Teddy!

Then I feel the burn in my lungs and throat, and a fit
of coughing overtakes me. Hands pull me upward as I
struggle to catch my breath.

“Where—am—I?” I manage between the hacks.

“You are in a stupid little bottle,” replies a new voice.

“Wendy?” I ask.

“I’m mad at you right now,” she says.

She’s here? I’m here? We’re alive?

“What happened?” I ask, as Teddy passes me a glass
of water and I try to drink between the coughing.

Dorothy explains. “She surrendered. I thought we were about to be baked in the sky, when suddenly, all the light stopped and the temperature . . . well, it was hot, I won’t kid you, but it wasn’t death-hot. And then, the next thing you know, she’s sliding into the bottle and you’re dropped in behind with some rat on your back.” Dorothy holds up Leon the Phone and snaps a picture of the high-above bottle neck. “Hashtag trapped, Hashtag help, Hashtag genieinabottle,” she says, typing.

As if taking his cue, the rat wiggles his whiskers against my right ear. Gross, but, reassuring.

“That jackass has kidnapped *all* of us for his bounty, and now he’s going to get his bounty, and we’re going to get diddly-squat from the Emperor.”

I look over at Wendy, who is most definitely pouting in the corner. “You gave yourself up for me?” I ask her.

“I don’t know what I did. It was a spur of the moment decision.”

She gave herself up.

SHE gave herself up. Because I asked her too. There’s no other reason. She did it because she cares!

“Oh don’t flatter yourself,” says Wendy. “I did it because my space station was going to crumble.”

“You care,” I reply.

She gives me this weird look, and since no woman has ever given me such a look, I’m not even sure how to describe it – but she gives it to me, and then she turns back to the green glass and keeps up her staring out toward the restaurant.

“Can’t even use my powers in here . . .” she mumbles.

Oh my god, this is the best damn day of my life. Who cares if my hair is burnt and I can’t smell anything but smoke? This crazy talented lady likes me. ME! I’m the night manager, and she likes *me*.

What else matters when you are in love?

“Love!” she exclaims. And I swear too goodness, I actually see her blush.

“Careful,” Dorothy says, “you get her any more red, and she’ll spontaneously ignite.”

Wendy shoots daggers at Dorothy. “I don’t like you.”

Dorothy gives a shrug.

“Come on now, Wendy, Dorothy’s a great worker.”

Both women turn their eye daggers on me.

I cough. “Oh, so tired.” And pretend to fall back asleep.

Chapter 10

If you'd asked me only a few weeks ago whether I'd *care* about being stuck inside some green genie jar, the most you'd have gotten from me was a shrug. A meh. Now I'm just not sure. In one dimension I'm the captain of the Wurgers ship and seem to know what I'm doing. In a past life, I've been a genius scientist who protected the secret of some big treasure over the rainbow.

So far in this actual reality, you know – where I'm in the jar – all I've managed so far is to flip over 1000 burgers, and I guess, to survive being lost in space. So far.

"We need to get out of here." I mutter.

"What's that?" asks Leon from Dorothy's phone.

"We need to get out of here. We need to make a plan."

"I'm in the middle of calculating multiple scenarios of escape."

"Anything looking good?"

"So far, you appear to die in everyone one of them."

"Just me?"

"You and the rat."

The two-headed rat hears this, I think. Wonder if it makes him feel as good as it makes me feel.

"Well figure out a different way, then."

"Calculating."

"Right. Good luck with that."

"Mike!" barks Tim. "Get over here, I have an idea."

"What, Tim?"

"I have a plan. You climb onto my shoulders, and then Wendy can climb onto yours, and she can burn that kidnapping, backstabbing green-caped Emperor Arrogon moron into flames and then, a steaming hunk of blackened mess."

"Tim, man. That is gruesome."

"Gruesome times take gruesome measures!"

"Are you just talking big because she's in here with us?" I nod over towards Wendy, who is pressed against the glass wall, and keeping us all warm with her rage heat.

"Oh, I get it. You don't want to clean up the mess afterwards. Look, I know that Wurgers isn't

everyone's glamour job, but if we're going to pay you to work here, you need to work."

"Actually, speaking of being paid to work . . ."

"No time for that! Get on my shoulders."

So, I shrug, and then start trying to climb up Tim . . . except he's damn hard to climb.

"I do not calculate favourable odds for this plan," says Leon.

Dorothy holds up her phone and snaps a picture of our struggles. "Toto, can you help Mike get up?"

Next thing I know, the teddy bear is coming at me with his mouth wide open, and then everything goes dark and soft for a moment, then I'm being spat out in the air, landing squarely and shakily upon Tim's shoulders.

"Damn it you're heavy!"

"I'm lighter than you, you idiot!"

Toto is clinging to the open lip of the bottle, his furry feet holding onto my head, and Tim is jiggling down below, holding onto my feet. This doesn't feel like it's going to last.

"I guess that means it's my turn?" asks Wendy.

"Ralph, come on."

The rat jumps onto her shoulder, and she starts climbing, with Tim shaking even more as he lifts her up. "Ow!"

"Sorry."

"Just cool down," says Tim.

"I'm *trying*."

"Maybe I should climb up?" suggests Dorothy.

"NO, I've got this," replies Wendy.

"Someone climb up, because this arrangement isn't going to last long," I pitch in.

"The odds of this attempt being successful are currently 21%," adds Leon.

"And do the rat and I die in that scenario?" I ask.

"There is a 78% likelihood of death."

"Why! I'm not even at the top!"

"The numbers don't give reasons, Mike. Sorry."

"Bullshit."

Wendy starts climbing again. Soon she's pulling on my trousers and I'm damn glad for belts and their ability to not let women pull down trousers while climbing upwards.

“Hello, give me a lift?” she asks, reaching upwards.

I think of the Wendy who I knew in the other place, that other version of me. That’s the Wendy I reach down to help give a lift – not this maniac Witch of the Wrest.

“Maniac is harsh,” she tells me as I pull her up. “And since *when* have we been friends?”

“Keep moving,” I mumble, passing her up so that Toto can give her that last lift out of the jar.

“Got there!” she cries.

“Tim, are you sure we can even trust her?” asks Dorothy to Tim below.

“Couldn’t you have asked that question earlier?” I add in.

“Shut up the both of you,” replies Tim.

I’m kinda surprised by that, actually.

“What do you see?” shouts Tim from below.

“The restaurant,” hisses the witch from above.

“Arrogon has been eating a lot of burgers, there are wrappers everywhere!”

“He’d have better paid for all of those!” Tim replies.

“He’s coming!” she says.

The Witch of the Wrest suddenly supercharges with a burst of heat. Toto drops to the ground and suddenly the Witch is standing on top of *my* head, and I smell burning . . . hair. “My hair! You’re burning me up!” Even the rat has jumped off her, scrambling down us with his tail on fire. I can’t take this, I have to do something.

So, I fall.

And as I’m falling, I think about how my hair may be on fire. And I wonder what I’d look like with no hair. And then I wonder if I was bald in a past life when people actually considered me important. Then, by then time I crash into the ground, landing on Teddy and bouncing off, rolling to the side as Dorothy is patting my head with a cushion and I smell burnt everything . . . I wonder if it even really matters that we get out of this jar.

Who even cares? So he kidnapped us all and wants to steal our bounty. Who cares? So we won’t be given answers and direction home by the Wizard of Foz. Who cares? So I won’t go back to my do-nothing life on earth. Who would care? No one probably even noticed yet, except my landlord who is due the rent. So my stuff is all on a curb by now, being picked over by sidewalk vultures who will sell things like my Ginsu kitchen knife online for 20 bucks when it’s really worth 200. Who cares?

Maybe folks would notice an entire restaurant is missing.

But again, who fucking cares?

Being in this bottle might have been the best thing that happened to us so far. At least here we can relax, and let that moron in the cape worry about ridiculous space aliens and unexpected detours as we get a ride back to the most reasonable planet we've encountered so far.

And I think all of that, as people are shouting around me, and there's more smoke and then a booming voice all around. It's the Emperor . . . if he's really an emperor at all. I'm beginning to suspect otherwise.

"If you group of idiots try that again, I'm going to stop this bottle and let you all suffocate," he booms.

"Ha!" shouts Wendy, hanging from the lip of this genie jar, high up above and shaking her fist. "Only about two of us would suffocate, and you know it!"

"Okay, I'll just cap the bottle then." A massive shadow looms overhead as the cork approaches.

"Ah, can I vote against suffocation?" asks Tim. "Mike, get in on this. We both vote for not suffocating us."

"Me too," says Dorothy. And she nudges Teddy, who raises his hand.

"And me," says Leon.

"Okay! We don't do it again! We like breathing!" shouts Tim to the approaching cork stopper.

Wendy looks down at us. "Don't be such a bunch of spineless cowards."

As a group, we shrug.

"Good. Now not another peep till we reach Foz," booms the emperor, and we watch him walk away.

The Witch lets herself hang now, as Tim reaches up to catch her. She drops into his arms.

"I guess I couldn't *really* kill him anyhow," she says to Tim as he holds her.

"What do you mean? Because he's magical too?" asks Tim.

"No, I mean. You know. He's my father."

"What?!" shouts Tim, dropping her onto the floor.

This is when I reach into my back pocket and pull out two things I've been missing for a long, long time. My headphones and player, and a big fat joint saved for moments just like this.

"Anyone have a light?" I ask.

The Witch of the Wreath shoots me a flame.

“Thanks.”

Then, with my music cranked high, I lean back and close my eyes, and pretend I’m far, far away.

And then, suddenly, I am.

*

It’s dark. I mean, I my eyes are open and it’s dark. And cool. It’s dark and cool and I can’t see a damn thing. My music seems to have stopped. My joint is most definitely gone.

“Hello?”

I go to move, but can’t. My body is tied to what must be a chair. “Hello! I think you have the wrong guy!” I shout.

Footsteps – I can hear them approaching.

There is a crack of light. “Is it you?” a woman asks.

“Ahh, well. It is me, yes. Who are you?”

There’s a flood of light suddenly, and there she is: Dorothisa. Last time I’d been in her reality, we sabotaged her chances of finding Over the Rainbow.

“It’s taken you long enough to get back here,” she says, lingering in the doorway, and untying my ropes

with flicks of her finger. “You wouldn’t believe what I’ve had to go through to get you alone. I mean, your people are ridiculous. Every time I think I’ve beaten them back, they show up again with another ridiculous plan to get you out alive.”

“Alive? That sounds like a good word.”

“Don’t think I didn’t want to kill you! The way you and your ‘Dorothy’ flashed me out of my reality to hers, where they fly around in a greasy spaceship that’s on the brink of obliteration. Your computer offline and I’m getting shaken apart. It’s a damn good thing I’m magical, otherwise that would have been the end of everything.”

The ropes fall off of me, one after another.

“And then, after I save your ship from total oblivion, and manage to get back to my own reality – turns out, *you’ve uncoupled us from the comet!*”

“Ah?”

“My life’s work! My only purpose! All I’ve wanted since I was a little girl hearing stories from my father, was to go to Over the Rainbow and steal it. That’s all. It was a simple enough dream, Mike. Simple. Enough. Until. I. Met. You.”

“You know what’s really strange? I’m kidnapped in this dimension, and I’m kidnapped at the very

moment in the other dimension. What are the odds of that?”

“Really damn good, actually.”

“Oh.”

The last of the rope falls from my shoulders, but I don’t jump out of the chair. I’m not actually sure where I’d go.

“Sorry, go on. You want to find Over the Rainbow. A place I spent my entire past life investigating and protecting.”

“Exactly. And since it was you who messed everything up, it’s going to be you who fixes it too.”

My body is lifted out of the chair, and I’m levitated right out of the room. We’re still in the spaceship submarine, it seems. She floats me down the hall, and drops me into the captain’s chair at the front of the ship.

“Plot me a course, right now, or I squeeze you so hard, your eyes pop out of your head.”

“I can’t plot a course.”

“Enough with this protecting a legacy garbage.”

“It’s not that. I don’t know what course to plot.”

Toto – with the eye patch – spins around in the chair beside me and squeaks. A red alert light is flashing on the control panel.

“Damn it!” shouts Dorothisa. “How did they get onto the ship this time?”

Teddy squeaks again.

“The cupcake! I knew baked goods in space were too good to be true, but no, you were hungry.” She turned to Mike. “Your friends hid themselves inside the giant cupcake we found the other day. I should have known, but Toto has such a sweet tooth. I couldn’t say no.”

A voice over in the intercom announced: Intruder Alert. Intruder Alert. Deck 12.

“Is it me, or is it getting warmer in here?” I ask. And no, it’s not just me. It is getting warmer. Wendy – my friend Wendy, is nearby.

Dorothisa groans.

She pushes a button and speaks into the microphone: “Computer, activate the jettison program on the intruders.”

“No!” I jump up. “That will kill them.”

“Meh. Maybe yes, maybe no.”

“No, look, let me go and talk to them, okay? They’re my crew, I guess, and they are just doing their duty. I’ll go tell them that I’m okay.”

“Right. And then you all escape.”

“No, I swear to God, I will come back.”

“Who is God?”

“Seriously?”

“What, is he your high commander or something?”

“God is . . . yes. He’s the high commander.”

“Well that’s not good enough. Swear on something else. Something I can believe.”

“I swear on, ah.” What can I swear on? My mother’s grave? No, she’s alive in Portland with her husband Rick. There’s no one worth swearing on, really. Well. . . maybe one thing she’ll believe in.

“I swear on our friendship,” I offer.

“You and I are just friends? I had the impression there was something more here – in between the power struggles, I mean.”

So, I blush. Obviously.

“I swear on my friendship with Dorothy.”

“So you mean I can go kill her if you lie.”

“You’d kill *yourself*?”

“She’s a whole different life line. Of course I’d do it.”

“Really?”

“Is this a test?”

Toto squeaks a question.

“No, don’t jettison them yet. Keep them isolated. Let this one go and tell them to back off.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t forget, you can’t leave until I get what I want.”

“Yeah, yeah. Where are they?”

“Just follow the glowing arrows, they’ll lead you to the idio— I mean, intruders.”

I follow the arrows through the swanky space submarine. Everything is polished wood here. Like, everything. I can only image how much this would cost. She probably stole it from some space bazillionaire.

“Intruders ahead,” says the computer.

And there are my friends.

“Mike!” cries Wendy and Leon from behind their isolation force field.

“Are you okay?” asks Wendy. “Did she hurt you? I knew we couldn’t give up! I knew we’d get you back. Tim, he’s here. Mike is here.”

“Oh goodie,” says Tim.

“Nice to see you too Tim,” I reply to the phone Wendy is holding towards me.

“Man, we thought you were a goner. That cupcake plan was a last ditch effort. I thought we’d lost you!” says Leon, tears streaking down his face.

“I’m okay. She was just waiting around for me to show up.”

Wendy wrinkles her nose. “I don’t get it?”

“It’s me, Mike from the other dimension.”

“Oh! Are you okay?” asks Wendy. “Has she been feeding you?”

I nod. I want to reach out and give them all hugs, for some reason. For some reason, I’m so damn glad to be with them. Mike of this dimension is a really damn lucky guy.

“Look, you guys. I’m okay. I’m going to be okay. She won’t stop until she gets what she wants, and I don’t want any of you to get hurt in the process.”

Wendy spits a flame onto the floor. “You just let me at her, and I’ll eliminate the problem.”

“Nah,” I reply. “She’s not so bad.”

“Not so bad? What do yo—”

“He’s got the hots for her,” declares Tim from the phone.

Wendy gives me a look over. Leon giggles.

“Is that true?” asks Wendy.

I wave the idea away. “All that matters right now, is that she’s ready to throw you into space. I’m not sure whether you’d survive.”

“Oh, I’ve figured that one out already. I can do this atmosphere thing, and with that, I don’t die! Leon is a bit trickier, but I’ve got him covered.”

“She extends her atmosphere to me,” says Leon.

“So long as no one gets too cozy!” says Tim from the phone.

“We just want you back, Mike. You’re our Captain. We’re not going to give up on you.”

So for some reason I want to cry. I want to just sob and sob and sob hearing what they are saying. They baked themselves into a cupcake for me! They've dodged attacking rats, and tackled bursting pirate ships, and who knows what else all for me.

They care. They are the ones. My friends care. And this suddenly makes me think about Tim, Dorothy and Leon from my world. Do they care in the same way? Would they put their lives on the line for me?

"I wish I could hug you guys," I say.

"Don't be sappy," replies Tim.

"We wish we could hug you too," says Leon.

I make a decision. "I am ordering you to go back to the Wurgers, and stay there till I return."

"What do you mean? We're right here. We can figure out a plan to save you!"

"No, that's my order. You are all to go back and wait. Don't get too far away, but don't attract trouble either. I'm going to take care of things here, and then we can get on our way."

"Ay, ay, Captain. If you're sure," says Wendy.

"I'm sure," I reply.

"Okay, she can eject us. I'll fly us back to the ship."

"Good luck, crew," I say.

"Good luck, sir," Leon replies.

"Bye!" says Wendy.

"Yeah, yeah," says Tim.

As just on cue – as if she'd been listening in the entire time . . . which now that I think about it, seems likely, Dorothona has the computer eject them from the ship in one big, space sucking moment before the cabin is sealed and pressure re-established.

"You have a good team," she says over the intercom.

"Yes I do," I reply. "And now it's time to sort this out."

Turning around I head back to the control room.

Dorothona is in the captain's chair now. It's her chair, of course.

"And don't you forget it," she says, spinning it towards me. "But you can borrow it, if you give me what I need." Then she winks. Man, this woman.

"I have a proposition for you," I reply, "I will – somehow – help you find Over the Rainbow. But, we're going with you."

She laughs, but it's not one of those 'I'm delighted with that idea' laughs. It's defiant.

“What do you mean, you’re going with me? Don’t know if you noticed, but this is a one-woman show. I get the booty. There is no we.”

Teddy squeaks.

“Right, well, there’s a we – but it doesn’t involve *you*.”

“Listen up. My entire past-life, I investigated this Over the Rainbow you are so obsessed with. And then, I died. Just died. Didn’t ever get to go see it or anything. So, I’ve been thinking about this. Obviously it’s important, otherwise I wouldn’t have hid it. But at the same time, why didn’t I ever go and find it? I’ll help you figure out the navigation, and my ship and crew will go with you.”

“We can’t all fit onto this spaceship. It’s ‘personalized’ for two. Me and Teddy.”

“You’ll need to come on ours, then.”

“What? That ugly fluorescent thing? I wouldn’t be caught dead riding around in that place.”

“Well then. I guess you’ll never find Over the Rainbow.”

“I could just extract it from your brain like before.”

“You tried that already, and didn’t get far enough.”

“Only because you ruined it all! You and that girl who took my favourite blue gingham jumpsuit!”

“So, think of how much better this could be if we work together. We’ll find Over the Rainbow *together*. And then we’ll see what happens next.”

Everything in the room seems to lift, just a little bit. She’s mad . . . but she’s controlling it. Dorothy was always good at being calm.

“Don’t bring her into this.”

Everything goes from being lifted to now most definitely floating. That includes me. I’m slowly turning in my place as the ship seems to have lost its gravity – except it hasn’t. But hey, at least she’s not killing me with her mind.

“It would be easy enough to do! Now stop gabbing and let me think quietly.”

I think of my music, and that spliff left behind in the other dimension.

I go blank as everything slowly spins.

And then, everything stops.

She gets up from her chair and walks towards me, stopping inches from my face – except I’m upside down, and she’s right side up.

Chapter 11

“Okay, let’s shake on it.”

Holding out our hands, we shake on it. Teddy squeaks. She leans in and kisses me.

And then – then – I’m gone. Or back. I’m slouched against the edge of the green genie bottle, music blaring into my head, and my joint nothing more than a long piece off ash.

Damn it.

I am going to burn out this circuit system – Dorothy’s mobile phone might be surprisingly sophisticated, but this is *not* where I should be. I’m a super computer for data’s sake. I move through cyberspace. I am not one thing or place or piece of software. And yet, here I am, stuck in this mobile, not even able to access the ship’s central thought center because that idiot emerald Arrogon emperor moron is jamming my signal with that strange teleporter device of his. I can’t even tap into the wifi. How is a computer supposed to calculate into the abstract with these processor limitations?

And since when did I start considering myself a computer?

My name is Leon. I am a person, who has just lost his body. I’m also a hyper-powerful entity that exists beyond the physical plane in the world of information . . . but you know, I keep things grounded.

Computing the statistical probabilities of escape has been posing a problem. With all factors remaining the same, the greatest likelihood of escape lays in actually deciding to let us go once we arrive at the planet of Foz. And then I don’t think that would be

considered escape, per se. That's more, you know, the release.

And now, the Witch of the Wrest has just announced that that green caped douche bag is her father! What? Her father? Adding a new condition to my calculations. Repositioning likelihood of escape. Calculating. Calculating. Calculating. Calculating! Damn it! This mobile phone system is not meant for high level processing.

"Cannot compute. Implementing protection mode. Switching to basic functions," I say aloud.

"You're his daughter?" asks Dorothy. "*You are his daughter?*"

"Cannot compute." I say. Apparently in basic mode I'm really, really basic.

"Yeah, obviously he's my dad. What? You didn't know that? Everyone knows that idiot is my father."

"Basic systems functioning."

"We didn't know it," snaps Dorothy. She holds me up and takes a picture of Wendy, sharing it on her social feed, "Hashtag Daddysgirl," she mutters, typing on my keyboard and pressing send.

"Daddy's girl? You are calling me a daddy's girl?"

"I'm actually trying to make you feel like an idiot. It was passive aggressive."

"Idiot?! Passive aggressive?!"

"Honey, the room is getting pretty hot again."

"Jesus, Tim!" Dorothy turns to him. "Since when is the Witch of the Wrest your girlfriend?"

Tim puts an arm around the small witch. Her internal core temperature is currently 40 degrees celcius, and rising. Tim keeps his arm there. Some part of me is impressed with him. It's surprising.

"Recalculating expectations," I announce.

"Dorothy, you need to back off. She's not all that evil."

"She's been trying to kill us non stop, Tim," replies Dorothy.

"Oh give me a break," replies the witch. "If I had wanted to *kill you for real*, you'd totally be dead by now. Beside, *you* actually *did* kill my sister!"

"She was a blow up doll!" Dorothy replies.

"Well, I never held it against her. What are you, some kind of a typist?"

"Does not compute."

“Typist?”

“Yeah, discrimination about type. Typist. Jesus, you people. Find a dictionary!”

“Wendy . . .” says Tim.

“Sorry.”

“Mike, can you back me up here?” asks Dorothy.

Mike stares forward, unresponsive.

“Mike?”

Nothing.

She waves a hand in front of his face. “Hello, are you in there?”

Finally he blinks. “Unfortunately,” he replies.

Dorothy snaps a photo of the stick of ash held between his fingers. She shares it on her social media. Hashtag, #wastedopportunity.

Wait a second. We can’t get out. But somehow . . . her messages are still transmitting.

“Transmission alert.”

“What’s that?” asks Tim.

“Transmission alert.”

“Leon, you got to come back to us. What transmission?”

“Basic operating mode. Safety is on.”

“Turn it off and come back to us. We need you, newbie.”

“Safety mode on.”

“Turn it off. Come back to us now. That’s an order.”

“Safety mode on.”

“Leon!”

“Yes sir?”

“That’s better. Now, what are you going on about?”

“I have noticed many things. Dorothy can send messages out of this bottle through her social media feed, Mike has jumped realities and returned, you are in love.”

“Well, I mean, it’s pretty early to be declaring love.”

“The Witch of the Wrest has two fathers –” I continue.

“Not unheard of,” replies Tim.

“Perfectly normal,” agrees Dorothy.

“Yeah,” says the Witch. “I mean, I’m not the first person to have a father who separated from his body and now lives as both the conscious, bodiless, id and reckless, physical ego. Just look at your computer. He did the same thing, right?”

“What?” asks Tim.

“The Witch of the Wrest’s father separated from his body. Separated from his body. Separated from his body. I separated from my body. I separated. I. I. I. I. I.”

“Oh no.”

“System cannot computer. Failure imminent. Failure immediate. Processor cannot compute. Overheating. Overheating. Overheat—”

Quiet.

Gone.

Silence.

Almost.

Suddenly there is a sensation - yes, a physical sensation – of lightness. Of charging. Of function! Systems check, running diagnostics, reconnecting to the cybersphere – processing – processing beautifully!

I blink, and the world comes into focus. The spaceship is a wreck. We’re being slammed right to left. Everyone – I mean, the others, are still tiny and inside the jar, the jar is somehow fixed to the main counter, but they’re flying around inside. Everything here is flying around. Bursts of energy are streaking across the floor.

There is definitely screaming.

Through the messaging system of Dorothy’s social media, I tap into the restaurant camera and see my body – MY BODY! Running from the kitchen into the foyer, back flipping itself over the counter and landing in a crouch on the other side with Arrogon’s teleporter in his hand. He’s growling and chewing on the thing. And he is in a dress. A very pretty floral dress, and . . . he is wearing what looks like pearl earrings. AND, that’s definitely a string of pearls around his neck. I’m dressed like a 1950s housewife!

“AHHUGHA!” my body screams, rolling across the floor as another laser burst fills the room and chars the ground beside him. I rematerialize the floor, fixing the ship as my body jumps up and begins bouncing off of surfaces, followed blast by blast. “AUGHAAA!” I – it – shouts.

“Stand still you mindless disconnection!” yells Arrogon. He is perched behind the counter, shooting rounds into the seating areas as my body flaps from

table to table – floral pattern flying, pearls shaking, as he avoids the deadly bursts.

“Leon,” I say to myself over the speaker. “You have to get the green jar and let everyone out. Get the jar and let them out.”

“Augh!” it shouts back.

Arrogon points to my control board that he was jamming previously, shooting at it with his gun. I’m faster, though, and have a force field blocking the controls. Just as the idea comes to me to isolate Arrogon from the bottle with a shield, he grabs the damn thing. Mini screams come from the jar as everyone is thrown against its side.

Taking aim, he shoots again at my body as it begins backflipping towards him.

Leon dodges to the side, somehow, mid flip. My body is incredible. I mean, it’s *incredible*. Who knew I could move like that. I’m incredible!

“Aughgha!” screams my body, whipping off the string of pearls and snapping it at Arrogon, right in the face. “Not in the face,” he whines, staggering back.

Just as he looks down at the stainless steel Wurgers cash counter, looking at his red cheek, Leon snaps

the string of pearls again, this time landing it on the knuckles that are so tightly holding the genie jar.

“Ow!” cries Arrogon.

The bottle drops to the ground and shatters.

Next thing I know, everything is being levitated, like we’ve lost gravity . . . except gravity is definitely functioning. Arrogon is suddenly thrown across the restaurant seating area and slammed up against the glass wall. His body is pinned to the window, and his fingers are pried open. The laser gun clatters to the floor.

There is a squeak.

“Augh?” my body asks, looking down at the shattered green glass and scattering of tiny people.

The squeak gets louder.

“She’s telling you to get the gun,” I tell my body.

He straightens up out of his animalistic hunch, and wraps the string of pearls back around his neck, fixing his – my – our hair before walking back to Arrogon pressed against the far wall.

There are some further squeaks of astonishment. Some mentions of the floral dress.

“Hey,” I tell them. “Let’s not be typists, right? Live and let live.”

They murmur their agreement.

My body picks up the gun and walks back, pointing it towards the group and shooting a burst of energy right into the middle of their huddle.

“No, Leon!” I call while throwing up a force field only *just* in time to protect the lot of them. I can’t be positive, but I think Tim might be crying now.

“Turn the dial to GROW, and *then* shoot them.”

He . . . or maybe she, changes the dial. “Show it to me, please.”

She, I . . . my body shows me the gun. It is set to grow. “Good, now do me a favour and shoot them with it.”

Tim yelps.

“It’s okay, I checked the setting. Everyone stand still.”

Leon, my body, points the gun at the group and shoots. With a loud zzzzziiiippp and pop! they grow back to their original size.

Dorothy runs over to my body and gives it a big hug. “You saved us!” It hugs her back. I miss hugs.

“Yeah, you got lucky with this one. When my dad split between body and mind, his body – that idiot over there – was never the kind to swoop in and save anyone.”

“Leon, how did you find us?” I ask myself.

He walks over to the corner and picks up his purse. Pulling out my old mobile phone, he flips open the phone and scrolls down the photos stream.”

“Aughah,” I reply – or she replies.

“Yes! I knew it. I follow you online, Dorothy. Body Leon saw your picture about being in distress. I don’t know how he did it, but he found his way to us.”

My body holds up Arrogon’s teleporter computer scrambling device and then breaks it into pieces, throwing them up into the air, as Toto jumps up and gobbles up the bits.

“I guess there’s that.”

“What are we going to do with him?” asks Mike, finally saying *something*.

“Good question,” replies Dorothy. “How about we rip his guts out?”

Wendy rubs her hands, “How about we burn off his hair?”

“Not the hair!” shouts Arrogon from the back.

“You’d attack your own dad?” asks Tim.

Wendy shrugs. “Have you met the guy? He’s nuts.”

Tim nods.

“Wait, just wait. Can we get this clear?” I ask. “This guy is your father.”

“Yep,” she replies.

“And your other dad is the Wizard of Foz.”

“That’s what he tells me.”

“So, they’re like me?”

“I don’t know if they’re like you. I don’t even know you.”

“But I mean, they are a split between body and mind?”

Wendy nods. “Yeah. And neither of them are on my good list. Arrogon is an egotistic self-absorbed ass, and The Wizard of Foz is just distant, you know? I can’t ever do things right for him. He wasn’t even upset when you guys killed my inflatable sister, Dotty. He was happy! He told me it was a good thing! Can you believe that?”

“What does your dad *look like*?”

“What do you mean, he’s a consciousness. He doesn’t look like anything.”

“So you don’t look at him.”

“I mean, he expresses through this green emerald, if that’s what you are asking. It’s his power source or something.”

My circuits are tingling. I mean, this is something. This is really something. Finally I have found him.

Finally I ask the most important question of them all: “Wendy, do you know your dad’s first name?”

Wendy laughs, “What a stupid question. Of course I know it. Daniel. His first name is Daniel. I always thought it was a bit too . . . you know, exotic, but then, he named me Wendy, so I guess we do weird names in our family or something.”

“Danny.”

“Yeah, right. I guess. He’s said it once or twice.”

The all powerful Wizard of Foz is Danny, my long-lost brother. He’s real, he is *real*.

“Preparing to jump to the diamond planet Foz, hold on tight!”

And with that, I launch us across the universe at top speed. After all these years, if this is really true, I

don't want to wait another second to see my brother.

Chapter 12

I hunker down behind the counter with a Builder Wurger and an extra large fry. Tim has Mike flipping patties and making buns, for the rush of customers we're bound to receive at the Diamond Planet, and Mike's heart seems more in it than normal. Part of me is holing against the back wall, still pinned. Another part of me bites into my fully loaded Builder Wurger and finds some solace in the tang of dill pickles and mayo.

Now that we're on a straight line for the Wizard of Foz, and things have settled down, I've had time to start thinking, and here is what's on my mind.

That Dorothina has it too good. She's a space pirate. She gets to steal stuff and have fun. She'll be chasing after Over the Rainbow right now. Buy you know what? Maybe I want to go have a little bit of fun too. It's nice to be nice, and goodness knows we're both rather self-absorbed. But the big difference that I see is while I'm stuck stealing a buck or two from the cash register, and snapping pictures with hashtags and – yes – am blessed with a massive online social following . . . none of that actually translates into real

life adventure. Dorothisina gets all the laughs. And all the fun.

Unfortunately everyone here is focused on one thing and one thing only – getting home. But we're in space! Yeah, okay, I miss the concept of grass and river water and blue skies. I even miss my mess of a mother who probably has now realized I'm missing and has alerted the authorities. My face is probably all over the news, along with everyone else's . . . so that would be fun to come home to.

At least, for about five minutes.

"Hey Mike."

"Yep."

"You're really focusing on those burgers."

"Just thinking."

"Hmm."

"You're really focusing on that French fry," he replies.

I suddenly realize, I've been staring at a fry that has long since gone cold, and eat it anyhow.

"I was just thinking about Dorothisina and Over the Rainbow," I say.

Mike stops tending the patties and turns to me.

"What about them?"

"I just kinda wish we'd kept following that comet. I mean, I get you felt the need to protect your legacy and all. But you know, she's not going to stop looking for it. And what if she finds it? What then? Maybe it would be better if you and I found it first?"

Mike turns back to his burgers. They're starting to burn up.

"What do you think, Mike? Want to go treasure hunting? Teddy will be up for it."

"I don't know. We probably don't need to do that."

"Why not? What if it's really important, and she's the one who ends up with it."

"It's not going to be a problem."

"What makes you so sure?"

Now he is stacking those burgers and clearing the grill, picking off the buns and starting to dress them. He's so into his work, carefully arranging the pickles, tomato and lettuce. I've *never* seen Mike so into his work.

With the twitch of a thought, I hold his hands still and slowly move his body around to face me. "Mike, what are you not telling me?"

"I might have made a deal with Dorothisa already. She was going to kill everyone and I couldn't allow it. So I promised her I'd help her find Over the Rainbow."

What the tuck!?! He's promised to help her?

"So break your promise and help me instead."

"I can't, Dorothy. She made me swear to her I'd help, and . . . she made me swear on your life."

I rise up from the ground, now, and float right into his face.

"What gives you the right to swear on my life?"

"Dorothy, you're starting to levitate everything. You know who will have to clean it up if the condiments go everywhere again? You and I, that's who."

"What gives you the right, Mike? How could you choose to help her? You know she's only going to steal it for herself."

"And what would you do, Dorothy? The two of you are more similar than not."

"I wouldn't steal it. I'd just . . . take a picture."

Mike laughs. There's a flash in me that literally wants to strangle him, but there's a much, much bigger part

that would never let that happen. So instead, I let him go. I let everything go.

"Fine," I snap back. "I don't need your help anyhow."

"Come on, Dorothy. Maybe we can all find it together."

Hopping onto and over the counter, I stomp away, waving him off. Who needs him anyhow? Not me. Forget it.

The Rat and Tim are deep in a game of checkers – Teddy is eating the discarded game pieces, then spitting them out across the restaurant over to Arrogon. I stomp to the Ladies' room, my boots pulsating against my legs and leaving dents in the floor, and push through the door.

Wendy and Leon's Body spin around from the mirror to me with a look of surprise.

Apparently, Leon's Body has been getting a makeover.

"What's wrong with you?" asks Wendy.

"What's going on here?" I ask back.

"AUuugh!" pipes in Leon's Body.

Stomping by, I swing open a stall and take refuge inside – arms crossed tight so I don't rip apart the

restaurant with my frustration. Jaw clenched shut.
Frustration at its peak.

There's a knock on my stall.

"Augh?"

"Go away Leon's Body. I am fine."

"Aughh."

"She says her name is now Leona," says Wendy.

"I heard him," I reply. "You're not the only one with a knack for understanding everyone."

"Ah...."

"Her. I heard her." And despite my anger, my curiosity takes control. "What's your story anyhow, Leon—I mean, Leona? When did you get into florals and pearls?"

"Aughhhaa."

"Really?! I would have never known. Leon never said a thing about it."

"I don't know your friend, Leon. But I do know what happens when bodies and minds separate," says Wendy the Witch. "Different qualities are split. Our new friend is all impulse and physicality. She is strong and brave and, let's just say it, a little bit reckless. Your Leon is ... well..."

"He's smart, and kind and maybe, I guess, a little scared of everything. And passive. But he's a damn good super computer."

"Hey, open the door. It's stupid to make us talk to you in that stall. It's actually disgusting, now that I think about it."

"I'm not doing anything."

"To hell you aren't! Everything in this room is two inches off the ground right now, and vibrating like the molecules want to split in all directions."

"Oh, that."

"That."

I open the bathroom stall door and peer out at the two of them. Wendy gives one last brush of blush upon Leona's cheek, then leans back. "You look perfect," she decides.

He looks alright, I guess.

Wendy snaps her fingers at me with a spark of flame.

I sigh.

"You look beautiful, Leona."

Leona smiles.

"Let's go outside," she says to me.

“I’m tired of this restaurant,” I reply.

“No, I mean *outside*.”

“In space? We’re leaping – it’s dangerous as hell to go out there when we’re leaping, we’ll just get swept way.”

“You really know nothing about your magic, do you?”

My boots seem to nod in agreement.

“Come on and trust me. Seriously. I don’t know why I want to help you, but some part of me... probably my own boots, actually, are insisting upon it. They won’t stop itching till I do, so let’s go get this over with.”

*

We’re cruising above the Wurgers with Tim, Leona, Arrogon, Teddy and Mike watching from the inside. Leon is with me in my phone, but he’s been oddly quiet since throwing us into leap speed.

“Okay, first lesson – use the overflow magic. See that cluster of meteors in the distance – I want you to make ‘em crumble to bits.”

I laugh. Yeah, right, sure.

“What was pissing you off so deeply when you barged into the Ladies room?” asks Wendy.

“Ha! Like I’ll tell you. You’re evil.”

“I’m short-tempered.”

“More like hot tempered.”

“Oh funny, fire jokes. What’s wrong? Are you feeling under pressure? Need a lift? Maybe I can raise your spirits?”

“Okay, fine. No more word jokes, I get it. I am frustrated because someone jumped into another dimension and made a deal with someone else that involved putting *my* life on the line. And now I’m stuck being the damn damsel in distress when what I really want is to get out there and find my own damn treasure!”

And with a surge of anger, I reach over to meteors in the distance and, instead of crushing them, reach deeper into their structures, right down to the atoms, and rip them apart in a massive explosion that fills the sky with a blinding light. Next thing I know, bits of molten rock are flying towards us and between Leon’s quick- thinking shield, my deflection of the debris, and Wendy’s control of fire, we just manage to shield the ship from total annihilation.

Wendy punches the air. “Excellent!”

I smile. "It felt good."

Leon continues to jump us toward the diamond planet, undeterred.

"Hell yes," replies Wendy. "Sometimes we just need to blow shit up!"

"Ha!"

"But seriously, that's why you need to blow off steam. I know you're cool and relaxed and water off of a duckzoid's back and whatever, but with all that potential, if you don't explode some rocks occasionally, it'll leak out and go 'bang' at the very worst of moments."

"Hmm," I reply. Holding up my phone, I take a picture of the now far off scattering of red glowing meteoroid debris. Hashtag, lookwhatidid smiley face.

"Want to do more?" asks Wendy.

"Yes." I reply.

She snaps her fingers, and in an instant I can't breathe and the lack of atmosphere is pulling me apart – and then, in the next instant, my boots click together and I can breathe again, and space is back to feeling like a comfortable spring afternoon.

"OW!" I say to her.

"Yeah, it hurts the first few times till you get the hang of the timing."

"What the hell was that?"

"Just a demonstration. You don't need me to create your atmosphere. You have the boots, and the boots have you. Together you guys are pretty damn powerful. Actually, you a little more powerful than I had expected. What's up with that?"

"I don't know."

"Hey, here's a question I have for *you*," I ask her. "Why don't you just fly away now and escape? Arrogon is captured, and we don't have the power to stop you leaving."

"Ah well. I'm here now."

"Is Tim really that worth it?"

"I think so."

"Love is weird."

"There's that word again. Your species really overuses the term. Beside, I never really had that many friends before. So, I'm giving it a try."

"We're your friends? You don't really understand that term do you?"

Wendy shrugs. "I said I'm trying it, not that I'm liking it. Here's my question for you, Dorothy. You have the boots. You have the power. You have the ability. Why not just fly off now and chase after this treasure you want so badly. You don't need us, do you?"

I don't even know what to say to that. Do I need them? Could I go it alone? Why don't I want to? "I don't know why, but I feel convinced we're supposed to stay together, I guess. We're a team."

"You're staff."

"No, I think we're more than that. But you're right about one thing, why do I need to wait for Mike to go after Over the Rainbow?"

"Hold on, you're chasing down Over the Rainbow?"

"Why, you know about it?"

"My Dad used to tell me stories about it. Said his stone came from there. But I thought it was just made up bedtime stuff."

"Which Dad are you talking about this time?"

"The Wizard of Foz, of course. This idiot we have onboard was never around to put me to sleep. He doesn't deserve to be called 'dad'. Anyhow, if you want to find it, then you'll need to talk to my old man."

"Can you do me a favour, Wendy?"

"What's that?"

"Can we keep this between us?"

"A secret? Well, on one hand, I'm supposed to hate you, you know, for killing my sister."

"On the other hand?"

"On the other hand, she was just a blow up doll who didn't say or do much. They told me she was my sister, but it was strange how she barely had an actual life. And come to think of it . . ."

"What?"

"No, it wouldn't make much sense."

"What?"

"It's just that you kind of look like her."

"Like a blow up doll?"

"Yeah, a little."

"Thanks..."

"Anyhow, I won't keep it a secret, but I won't mention it either. Fair enough."

"Fair enough," I reply.

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“How about we let off some steam and fly circles around this restaurant?” she asks.

“Good idea,” I reply. And with that, we’re somewhere between friends and enemies – certainly two women with a great deal of power in common, and we rise up higher and begin to fly, going faster and faster till the world becomes this strange glowing blur and I’m laughing my head off because it tickles. There’s a smile on my face – a real, big smile, for no one else but me, and it feels so damn good.

The Wizard of Foz will owe us a favour for bringing back the Witch of the Wrest, and he can cash it in by telling me a nice, simple bedtime story.

I am suddenly looking very much forward to completing this mission. Mike or no Mike, I’ll find my treasure yet.

Manager’s Log

Date unknown. Leon could tell me, but he’s been radio silent since we arrived at the Diamond planet. And seriously, who cares? We are in space.

The crew is restless and upset. But this is a restaurant, not just a spaceship, and when we finally get back to earth I need to turn a profit from this little jaunt through space. We may be bringing the Wurgers burger to where no burger has gone before, but bottom line is king.

The Restaurant is positioned just outside the Foz Diamond planet parking jurisdiction, and we have erected, courtesy of the silent but complying Leon, a massive flashing OPEN sign upon our roof. The staff, however, are restless and I am beginning to fear mutiny may be on their minds. Wendy has kept them in line so far, easily taking up the role of floor manager and barking orders. She’s so cute when she is barking orders. The dimple in her cheek jumps just so, and her curls shake and I just want to... ah well. Stuff not for the log book, right fellas? Don’t worry I’ve learned my lesson.

It occurs to me that I haven't thought about James the Day Manger in quite some time. Perhaps because space is continually dark, and it is, therefore, continually night. Maybe it's because I'm not entirely sure James would have launched himself into a pack of space rats to help save his staff. Or it could be because the parking lot, and James, and even Wurgers headquarters has somehow become quite small in my mind. Very far away.

But! We're here to do a job. Sales this past hour have been triple a normal Saturday. We've been having creatures of all kinds filing through our drive through. I say open the doors and let them in, but here everyone else stubbornly refuses. Apparently this isn't so much restaurant anymore as it is spaceship. Quicker turnover anyhow, customer in, customer out. Dorothy is on window, Mike on grill, Arrogon is at the fryer, much to his discontent – but Dorothy has a way of being persuasive, and Teddy is trolling the floor eating anything and everything that falls. What a team.

Leon's body on the other hand, Leona. . . if it were up to me, I'd say the newbie isn't cut out for the fast food business. He's all 'Aughgh' and punching buttons at the cash completely recklessly. Leon is barely paying enough attention to fix the multitude of errors his body is creating. We'll have to have a serious review at the end of his trial period. But, to put in this

good word, he has been steadily obedient up to this point, and his body did save us from a crazy space man. Still, the boy has a ways to go before becoming Wurgerer of the Month.

“Knock, knock,” says Dorothy from the door.

“Dorothy! If you're not on window – who is taking the money!”

“Tim, they aren't even paying with money. We've gotten strange tokens and rocks and – unsurprisingly, diamonds galore. We have enough for parking and then some. Everyone is done. We're approaching the planet.”

Wendy pops in behind her. “They mutinied! I even threatened to set the grease on fire, but no one cared! Dorothy just threw the entire ball of flame out the window.”

I wave a hand, and Wendy extinguishes the flame in her eyes. “How many sales at least?”

“232 customers in two hours, and we're not doing a single more,” replies Dorothy.

“Prepare for docking,” announces Leon through the speaker. The restaurant gives a gentle shuffle and then a considerable bump.

“Pay attention, Leon!” I shout out past the ladies to the restaurant floor. Of course, he doesn’t reply.

“Well, I guess there’s no more delaying it,” I say, rising up.

“Delaying it? This is a good thing!” says Dorothy

“Turning in my girlfriend is a good thing?” I reply.

Wendy blushes. So do I. Actually, I more start to sweat. Not sure if it’s her blush, or just how I react to women. Probably both.

“Don’t worry, Tim. He’s just worried about me. We parted a bit unhappily. I might have blown up a few statues.”

Suddenly the Wurgers security alarm begins to flash. “Intruder alert,” announces Leon.

“Raise the shields, Leon.”

“Intruder alert.”

“Leon!”

Nothing. “Stay here ladies, I’ll take care of this.”

Rising from my desk, and sliding between the two of them who are, for some reason, giggling, I rush back into the restaurant foyer as the alarm continues to blare. Standing there, pointing what look like sleek ray guns at the staff behind the counter, are a bunch

of creatures. . . rigid, armoured creatures, with about six arms each and a gun in each hand. I put on my manager hat and remember this: The customer always comes first.

“Welcome to Wurgers. I am the manager of this fine restaurant. How may I help you? Would you like a Wurger Burger? Maybe a side of fries?”

“Auogjsd lj 355 jsdf lj 3 slf,” is the reply.

Dorothy steps out from the back office, calling over the translation: “They received a distress signal from our ship. Apparently someone is being held under duress.”

“Help me!” called Arrogon from the fryer. “They’ve forced me to work.”

“lkdj((&djjd & *88dfn,” the front creature, who looks like the one in charge, says.

“It’s illegal in the diamond planet region to force labour upon any creature or object.”

The lead creature waves one of its arm to another in its group, who walks through the counter – just walks right through like it’s not even there – and grabs Arrogon by the shoulder, carrying him back through the counter to the foyer.

Now the guns are turned towards me. “Hey now, fellows. We mean no harm. Have a milkshake on the house.”

“Don’t be fooled by him,” says Arrogon. “The milkshakes are terrible here.”

“What? So you can’t even make a toaster toast?” Mike asks from the back.

Wendy steps out from the back office, with Dorothy behind her. “You need to ask its permission, obviously,” replies Wendy.

The security crew creatures suddenly manage to go even more rigid, and now they’re babbling between one another in a high pitch string of numbers.

“And when the toaster says nothing?” asks Mike over the noise.

Wendy shrugs. “At least you asked it,” she replies.

The security rescue team’s chatter is speeding up even faster, and now one of them is waving his many gun-holding arms.

Suddenly, each of their six arms, minus their leader’s, are waving in the air. It’s like Chinese fire crackers all at once with pops going off all over and the restaurant is under a barrage of firing! The bullets

must be tiny – little fizzes of light – but one hits me on the arm and it’s like a wasp sting. “Yow!” I cry.

The guns are all going off in a massive disaster of noise, light and smoke. Behind the counter, everyone has hit the floor, so it’s just me out here with these things – and I’m getting wasp stung over and over. “Leon!” I shout. “Erect shield between us and them.”

Nothing.

Diving towards the only non-firing one of them, I stand far too close for comfort to the leader of this would-be rescue team and enjoy the shelter of his wasp-bullet proof armour. He is quivering, staring into my eyes with a look of frozen panic. I recognize a new manager when I see one. A fellow who is in charge, but out of control. A person who hasn’t yet had to really, really lead. Hasn’t had to really take control. His arms seem to be fighting his will. Any second he’ll start shooting now, and his body won’t be much of a shield anymore.

“You are in charge,” I tell him. “Get your team to stop right now. We are here on a peaceful mission to sell burgers and visit the wizard. Sir, calm down yourselves. What is the problem here? What is your problem?”

The creature to which I’m standing face-to-face barks some kind of stern command. As a group, they stop

shooting and turn as one to Wendy, who is peeking over the counter as she looks over to me with a smile, waving first to me, and then to them.

“They are terrified of her,” says Dorothy, still hidden.

“It’s the perk of being me,” replies Wendy, with a wink.

I step up to the leader of the security team. His many arms are quivering, and I can see he is resisting the temptation to start waving them around like most of his team are now, the occasional gun still cracking off into the restaurant. “You seem like you’re doing your best.” I say to the fellow, or lady, or thing. “I understand, it’s not easy to be a leader. But this guy you’ve come to rescue committed crimes against the Wizard’s mission. We’re bringing him, and her—” I nod to Wendy, “in to see him. Now, if you like, I can leave them both with you to deliver. Otherwise, make way and we’ll get on with our assignment.”

The leader of the security team stops his number babbles, and then barks a short order to the crew member holding Arrogon.

Just as easily as they entered the ship, they now begin to back away, arms still waving wildly, but no gunfire, and exit through the walls.

I first pat the stings on my body. No blood. It hurts, but no blood. Then I turn to Arrogon. “Distress call? Seriously, how many tricks are up those floppy sleeves?”

“Apparently not enough,” he replies.

“Alright folks, time to make the delivery,” I say. “Let’s get out of here.”

There’s a round of cheers. But I am watching Wendy, and my heart wilts like day old lettuce. She walks round the counter, coming close to whisper in my ear: “You did well,” she says quietly.

And once again, I’m filled up with something new. Something . . . strong.

“Leon, open the doors and start paying attention,” I say to the speakers.

Nothing.

“Newbie! Answer me! We needed you back then, and you were nowhere. Snap to it this instant!”

“Yes sir,” he finally replies through the speakers.

“Sorry, Newbie, I didn’t hear you.”

“Yes sir, Tim, sir!”

“Good. We have a mission to complete. And then, we are going home.” I turn to Wendy. “And if I have my

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way, we're taking you with us." Pulling her forward, I plant a kiss right there on her mouth, and it's the best damn thing I've done my entire life.

The doors crack open, and we are on our way.

I can't even begin to tell you how it would have gone down, if not for the ice cream truck. Why a giant diamond planet that is unfathomable lightyears and galaxies and wormholes away from earth would have *ice cream*, I cannot say. But we were gliding in a transportation pod through the space docs, headed for the Wizard's palace, when Dorothy begins talking to me, and I don't have a clue what she's saying.

"Mmuhm sssnnd," Dorothy says to me.

I pull the ear bud out of my head. "What's that?"

"I know that sound!" she says, perking up like I haven't seen her perk in days and staring out and around the dock ships as we are gliding by.

Then I catch it, that faint familiar tinny jingle in the air.

Teddy jumps up too, and climbs upon Dorothy's shoulders.

"It's the ice cream man!" says Tim.

Now we're all leaning against the glass, looking for the ice cream. Leon's body is holding Arrogon. He is

draped across his shoulder, cuffed by some kind of space wire, and starts pointing to the small white truck that is parked between the ships.

“Ice cream!” my mouth says. “Leon, steer us over there.”

“I can’t believe you have *ice cream in space!*” adds Tim to Wendy.

“What are you talking about?” asks Wendy.

“Ice cream in space?” asks the Emperor of Space from over Leon’s body’s shoulder. “Is it profitable?”

The transparent transportation pod redirects from its path towards the planet, and we are all going for ice cream!

The music is becoming louder and louder. The more I hear it, the more I’m thinking of vanilla and chocolate heaped in scoops onto one another, six balls high. Hell yes, I’ll take that stomach ache for a little taste of home.

Our pod slows to a stop in front of the truck. The music carries on, and the big window slowly slides open, releasing a dense cloud of vapour into the void of space.

Through the opening, a shadowy figure can be just be made out through the pouring stream of vapour.

“Mhuumph?” it says.

“Ice cream!” calls out Tim.

“Ice cream!” calls out Dorothy.

“Ice cream!” I find myself calling out.

“Managers first,” says Tim. He leans over to the window and places his order: double butter scotch Sunday with nuts.

“Ladies first!” says Dorothy, pushing him aside.

“Strawberry, Lemon, Blueberry and Raspberry sorbet, for me, with rainbow sprinkles,” she says.

“Me first!” I say, having no particular claim to priority. “Chocolate covered chocolate chip chocolate ice cream – five scoops!”

Just as I reach out my hand to grab the ice cream before the others, Dorothy totally cheats by using her ‘magic’ to push the two of us aside, as Teddy himself jumps from her shoulders from our pod to the edge of the ice cream truck window, diving into the creature’s misty space.

The ice cream truck shakes, and the music begins to accelerate faster and faster in pace.

“Seriously, what is ice cream?” asks Wendy, I don’t even know how I can hear her over the blaring

speakers of the truck. Teddy and the creature of the mist seem to wrestle.

“Ice cream is a fatty milk product that is flavoured and cooled till it reaches a creamy consistency. It’s delicious. I miss it,” announces Leon over the intercom.

“Sounds gross,” replies Wendy. “Anyhow, that thing you’re all fighting over isn’t an ‘iced cream’ ship, or whatever you’re talking about. It’s a desire booth. And if you’re not careful, that little bugger will take you for all you’re worth.”

“Desire booth?” I ask, glancing away from the open truck window just long enough to look back at Wendy and see her look of disapproval.

“It makes you see what you want, and then you’ll pretty much give it anything to get that thing.”

“Ice cream!” I reply. “Dorothy, get Teddy out of the way. He’s going to eat all the ice cream.”

Dorothy banged on the side of the truck through our space pod. “Teddy, did you see any rainbow sprinkles?” she asks. Turning to me, “they were my favourite thing growing up – the rainbow sprinkles. Always reminds me of being at home. My mom, on her good days, would put them on top of *everything*.”

Teddy suddenly pops back up with a long purple tentacle sticking out of his mouth.

“Teddy! You ate the ice cream alien?!”

Teddy burped, and out popped a small purple squid-like creature, which dove back into the truck and proceeded to zoom away from our place between the ships.

“Well, at least you won’t get ripped off. Desire booths are addictive. One taste of what they’re selling and you’ll be chasing after what you want in a way that can get very, very expensive,” advises Wendy.

“Or dangerous!” added

“Shut it, you,” snaps Wendy to her father.

Teddy burped again. Sprinkles rained from his fuzzy mouth into our little pod – rainbow sprinkles.

“Just like home!” says Dorothy as she captures them in her hands, and pops them into her mouth. “Mom would throw them at me sometimes, just for fun... And for lunch.”

I stare down at the floor of our pod, at the sprinkles on my shoes. Something in my brain is nagging me. Something is saying: LOOK AT THIS AND FORM A CONCLUSION!”

My fingers are playing with the ear buds, and my brain is screaming for me not to tune out . . . not . . . just . . . yet.

Tim is looking at the sprinkles on his shoulders. “I never liked sprinkles,” he said. “They might be the colour of the rainbow, but they taste all exactly the same.”

“That’s very sensible, dear,” replies Wendy, gently guiding him away from where the Desire Booth had been parked.

“Can we get going?” asks Leon. I’m pretty sure he’s holding a grudge that he can’t eat ice cream any more. Fair enough, I suppose.

“Just one more thing,” says Dorothy. And then, she’s just gone. Her and teddy are out of the pod and making a run down the dock between the two ships. And then, up she goes, climbing the wooden planks of some random spaceship . . . like . . . it’s . . . natural.

“I recognize that ship,” I say to them.

“What is she doing?” asks Tim.

“She’s going to steal that ship.”

“Looks like a pirate ship to me,” says Tim.

“Dorothy wouldn’t steal a pirate ship,” says Leon.

“Actually, I think she would . . .” I begin, thinking of another Dorothy I happen to know.

“I told you guys, once you eat something from a Desire Booth, it’s really hard to stop. They’ll keep feeding what you want most.”

“But it was chased off by Teddy!” says Tim. “Should we stop her? Or what?”

“Stop her?” says Wendy. “Hell, let’s *join her!*”

And with that Wendy is hopping out of our pod and running down the dock on a path of flames, exploding herself upwards, and then with a very sudden ‘pop’ out jumps Leon’s body too – carrying Arrogon as she climbs easily up the side of the spaceship.

“Did I say we could abort the mission?!” shouts Tim to the rest of us.

“No sir, No!” replies Leon.

“But Tim, you know we have to go after them,” I reply.

“Of course I do. I just wish they would have asked before going crazy and stealing ships. Leon, redirect the pod. Take us to that ship.”

“Are you sure? I really want to get going here. And they can figure it out, I assume.”

“That’s a direct order, newbie.”

“We should go to the planet, sir.”

“Leon, these are our crew you’re talking about abandoning.”

“They did just *abandon us*, sir.”

“Forget your logic, Mr. Super Computer. Dorothy is our friend, and she’s currently under a spell by some rainbow sprinkles.”

“That remind her of home,” I add.

“Yes, thank you, I got that,” says Tim to me. Okay, he still thinks I’m an idiot, but I’ll tell you what – something is forming in my head, and it’s a BIG something. So big, I’m still chewing on the edges of it.

“To the pirate ship!” says Tim.

“Aye, captain!”

And off we go.

*

As the transportation pod rises like an elevator to the dock, we see that this space boat didn’t even put up a fight. The few zoids who were left to guard it are

tied to the main mast along with Arrogon, and Dorothy is now at the helm of the boat, shouting orders down to Teddy and Leon’s body who are raising the sails. Wendy is sitting on the side of the boat, swinging her legs.

“It’s fun not to be the only bad one,” she says as we dock on the boat.

“You’re not bad,” says Tim. “You’re just misunderstood.”

She gives him a kiss on the cheek.

Dorothy waves at me from behind her wheel. “I always wanted to steal a pirate ship!” she calls down to me.

“It’s not *actually* a space pirate ship,” whispers Wendy to us. “It’s just one of Daddy’s fleet. But she seems so happy. And hey, if we *do* steal it and use it to loot other ships, then I guess Dorothy will make it one after all.”

“I cannot abide by stealing. It’s against the Wurgers code of professionalism,” says Tim.

“What are you going to say next, ‘we have to stop her?’” asks Wendy.

“We have to stop her,” confirms Tim.

I walk away.

There are things I want to get done, and playing around on a pirate ship isn't one of them. But Dorothy has the sails up, and she's pushing them somehow from behind the wheel – the entire thing sways away from the dock, and there's only the slight resistance of ropes tied to the moors, then nothing as they snap.

I walk across the deck and climb the stairs to the wheel. Dorothy looks at me, and she's just – she's *sparkling*. “I'm doing it, Mike! I'm stealing myself a ship! Screw that Dorothy and her judgement of me. Screw it!” she says laughing, as her head tilts back and sprinkles drop from her shoulder and hair onto the boards between us. “From now on, I'm going to do what I want. And what I want to do right now, is this!”

The entire ship begins to twist and suddenly the diamond planet is circling around us – except we're the ones who are really circling. She's spinning us in space. The sight of it gets me dizzy, and my eyes shoot down to the boards again. And again, I'm fixed on the sprinkles.

“What did you say they reminded you of?” I ask Dorothy.

“What reminds me of what?”

Now there are blazes of fire with explosions off the side. The dock security team is after us again. Wendy is down below next to Tim, her two headed squirrel upon her shoulder, and shooting out fire balls at the zoids – no cannon needed.

I'm not bothering with any of that. Instead I kneel down and pick up some of the remaining rainbow sprinkles.

“These, the sprinkles. What do they remind you of?”

“Home,” she replies, with a sharp twist of the wheel in the other direction. Teddy swings past us on a rope, and somehow he's found himself an eye patch and a cutlass. He flies through the air and tackles two security aliens as they attempt to land upon the deck.

Rainbow sprinkles. Somewhere over the rainbow . . .

If you were a brainiac genius guy who spent his entire life chasing after this mystic treasure only known as over the rainbow, and you devoted every thought and every moment to the goal – and then, one day you actually break the secret and discover the truth of what that treasure is – what would *you* want most in the world?

“Chew 'em good, Teddy!” shouts Dorothy!

“To stop working, and just enjoy it,” I say aloud.

“What’s that?” asks Dorothy.

“To just enjoy it.” I reply.

Dorothy is not even laughing now as she steers us top speed towards the planet.

“Enjoy what?” she asks.

“The treasure.”

“And that is?”

“Dorothy?” Calls Tim from below. “We’re headed for the planet at slightly break neck speeds.”

“Slow DOWN you crazy power drunk fool!” shouts Wendy.

“What’s the treasure you are talking about? What is the answer, Mike? What is over the rainbow?”

“Dorothina?” I ask.

“Her? Forget her. Tell me. Tell your friend Dorothy who you trust so much and want to marry and have three kids with, or, at least, maybe go on a date with, if you can ever get smart enough to actually ask her out.”

“Dorothina!”

“TELL ME.”

Suddenly she lifts me up and pulls me right against her. Her breath smells like cinnamon gum. Mine probably smells like . . .

‘Burger sauce,’ says Dorothina.

A blaze of fire shoots across our heads. “Stop the ship, you idiot!” screams Wendy.

“Quiet,” says Dorothina.

And suddenly, it *is* quiet. All their commotion, all the flame, all the movement slides around us as if we’re in some kind of protective bubble.

“You promised to come and find it with me,” says Dorothina. “But you were about to tell *her*.”

“That doesn’t mean I wasn’t going to tell *you*.” I reply.

“You’re lying,” she replies.

“Not entirely,” I say. “It’s earth,” I tell her. “Earth is Over the Rainbow.”

And this time, I lean in and kiss *her*.

Everything and everyone all around us go flying. Except for me and Dorothina. Gently she lowers me down, and I pull her even closer to me and then even time seems to stop for us in that single, silent, still moment.

After what feels like the most dizzying moment of my life, I pull back. She looks at me, I look at her. “Mike, that was totally---HiYA!” Dorothisa – no, not her, it’s Dorothy screaming now! “Think you can take over my body! Take that you crazy bitch!”

“Dorothy!” shouts Tim from below.

And when we turn and see the point of the Wizard’s Palace headed straight for our ship.

Dorothy raises her arms and screams, slowing us only enough to break through the roof of the diamond palace with her force, and landing us with a skid across the immense foyer, through the doors of the Wizard, and cruising the entire ship deep into the Wizard’s chambers, dropping down through his entrance, and then, finally, coming to a screeching, wood burning halt in the room at attendance.

As the dust settles, we pick ourselves out of the rubble, Dorothy lifting the bigger pieces off of us, and apologizing gently to everyone all around.

“WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS!” booms a voice.

“Hello, Daddy,” says Wendy with a small wave.

Dorothy leans over to me, with a whisper.

“Someone’s in trouble.”

“I’m not the only one,” snaps Wendy.

“Takes one to know one,” replies Dorothy.

And all I can think about is the feel of Dorothisa’s lips against my own.

I think about Over the Rainbow, my entire past-life’s work. He might have been focused on dissecting the puzzle, but what about the other parts of his life? What were they made up of? What was the use of being a genius if your greatest achievement is retirement? Suddenly, for once in my life, I actually feel happy for where I am, for who I am, for just being me and no one any more remarkable.

Here’s a jilted-adulthood-fact-of-life-tid-bit I grew up knowing: There’s no place that’s home.

And yet, suddenly, I feel like there is. And I really want to find her and get her back into my arms.

Ending

This is the ending of my book, in some file form. It is not written like the story because at this point I am not in the condition to actually write this baby out. But that is okay. I am going to write out my outline right now, and you can follow along as you wish. It is 3:00 AM. Names, colours, lines of thought will definitely be confused. So, if you dare read on.

In the dock yard of the big green emerald planet and city (name currently forgotten - say emerald city, wisest wizard of Foz or something), Dorothy decides to stop doing what is right and go on a more power crazed adventure when she spots a giant pirate spaceship like in the other dimension where Dorothina lives. After all, if Dorothina can be bad, so can Dorothy. And she *loves* this idea.

Onto the boat she jumps.

"What is she doing?" asks Mike.

She's taking the boat, replies Wendy - dead pan.

"We have to stop her!" he commands.

And they all get on the boat - of course. Friends follow friends when things get stupid, especially if that friend is about to get in trouble.

On the boat.

"Come back, Dorothy," tries Mike.

No go.

Tim: "As your manager, I have to say this is a grand act of theft I as a Wurgers ship Captain/All time manager simply cannot condone."

Toto the pink Teddy bear from that crazy teddy bear planet jumps onto Dorothy's back.

"That's right Toto," replies Dorothy. "Let's take this spaceship and run for it!"

The emperor of the universe is tied up and unable to say much.

Leon: "You know I'm still in your pocket Dorothy, right? Put me down young lady."

Mike, however, is still the consistent friend. "Stop her, Wendy."

Wendy: "Nah."

Tim: "Please, love bug?"

Wendy: "Love bug. Well if you put it that way."

Wendy goes to flick Dorothy back. But Dorothy has control.

Dorothy: "Back off lady! I've got your number and my boots are stronger than yours." *Dorothy lets off this strange cackle. She forces them all to the ground (except Toto on her shoulders).* "Just one ride, then I'll probably put it back."

But Wendy won't have it. She manages a quick stream of flame that lands right on

Toto's back - sending a tiny fringe of flame across his body as if you burnt the lint on your sock while wearing it.

As Dorothy gets the spaceship in the air, she sees Toto in distress and goes to pat him out. The entire ship weaves to the side drastically, and they all plunge sideways, downwards, pinned still to the ship and protected by Dorothy. The ship goes down, down, down and crashes into the big emerald tower where the Wizard of Foz lives. We go down through the building and weird halls, till the ship skids for a stop in front of the wizard's room itself, bursting through the doors.

Dorothy had fun: "Now that, was fun."

Everyone gets up.

Leon: "And unnecessary."

The wizard: "An entrance, I suppose. About time. I have things to say to all of you."

The wizard turns himself on for them. Here is the gist of what he reveals.

Wendy is Dorothy's sister. They were both born on Earth (otherwise known as Over the Rainbow). But he split custody with their mother and only took one of them (in this reality it was Wendy, in the other it is Dorothy. The blow up doll was a stand-in till Dorothy found her way back. No one else seems to mind it. Clearly he is not a great papa because in either reality his daughter is a baddie living a life of fun

and little consequence) back to the Giant emerald planet. The other grew up on earth.

Dorothy's powers are excessive. Because they were never trained, they just became massive. Only the power of social media and boredom ever kept them in check. With the possibility of space before her, she is starting to see the world differently.

Mike is that Captain in the other dimension, and that brainiac from a previous life. He isn't just the stoned guy flipping burgers in the back room of Wurgers. "Wooohooo, I really am smart and relevant. Captain Mike!"

Leon is the brother of The Wizard. But due to time travel and such, separated himself from his body at a much earlier occasion and has had time to grow and establish power in that corner of the universe. Leon has a choice to make, stay separated from his body or rejoin Leona.

Leon thinks about it, as he tends to do. Leona is a part of him, always was - Leona is the truth of him in that he was a woman, but now... he is no gender. He was always Leona, never Leon. He wasn't happy as Leona because of the hiding of herself, but this body version without the element of fear seems happy. Plus, quite frankly, he is starting to feel new things - big universe things. In time Leona will develop into her own full person now that she is

free. She is happy about this and jumps around.

Also, Leon is thinking of going off to tickle a few stars with Tim. Why not be a spaceship for a bit longer. It is time to move out of Dorothy's phone and into himself.

The Emperor is the physical body of the Wizard, left a long time to his own devices. Because he was always an ass, he became an ass. The Emperor (green cape dude, I might have changed the name) is the bodily father of both Wendy and Dorothy. He liked Earth: a lot of suckers there.

As promised, The Wizard opens a portal that will take everyone back to Earth. But as he does, everyone decides they don't want to go back.

(Tim is in love, a captain, and the full time manager here.)

(Dorothy has finally come home.)

(Mike wants to chase after Dorothina. Dorothy, being so strong in power, does this for him and he switches to the different universe. The other Mike switches over, thoroughly confused. Too bad for him.)

(Leon wants to see and be more of time and space and computing.)

Everyone is happy.

Suddenly the Emperor breaks free and dives into the vortex. "Suckers!" he yells behind him. "You'll never catch me." Except he trips the mechanism and is sent back in time (before meeting their mother) through the portal. Thus, he is about to father the two sisters.

All that aside...everyone is rather pleased to be rid of him.

They all set off on their own adventures in space.

Will they be reunited?

Who will end up with who?

Does it matter when you are part of a Space Opera in Space?

Find out next time kiddies in an adventure I like to call: Your imagination.

The end.