

Chapter 1

In the beginning, God, better known at the time as Ramsius, The Great Chef in the Sky, said: “Let there be light! Oh, and bologna. *Lots and lots* of bologna.”

This was a controversial statement for many reasons, mostly having to do with a good portion of the angel population much preferring ham. But it was all going according to plan, which was colloquially known as The Recipe. It was an integral part of the overarching, multiversal Bologna Sandwich concept Ramsius had in mind. The Recipe called for two slices of bread, three pieces of cheese, a single tomato, a handful of lettuce, and four pieces of bologna, between which, the design of the universe would be perfectly sketched-out in mayonnaise.

Soon after the completion of The Recipe, The Great Customer in the Sky commissioned the construction of The Bologna Sandwich, in an event in history known as Order 66 — Lg#4 w/fries & drink, 86 tomato. After a quick inspection to make sure His specifications were closely followed, He ate The Bologna Sandwich, spilling some of the mayo onto His belly in the process, where it would remain for roughly the next fourteen billion years. The small strain of mayo that drizzled down the front of His belly to His underbelly came to be known as the Middle East, and just northwest of that, closer to the Great Customer’s Ilium, forty-nine galactimetres from the Nearest Sign of Intelligent Life, and inferolateral to the Very Concerning Mole, through the Lint Forest and over the Cellulitic Mountain Range, lay a small squirt of mayo called Danby, and, by extension, Lou.

Lou Clark had long believed the concept of God was all a bunch of bologna — and he *hated* bologna, along with most other things. He’d never really put too much thought into it, but figured that, if God *had* existed, he’d probably have come down from the heavens by now to tell everyone how poor of a job they’d done with everything — *especially* bologna.

As bad luck would have it, God had hoped that *Lou* would be the one to not only tell everyone how poor of a job they’d done, but also fix it, given he was The Chosen One and all. The problem was, God never bothered to simply tell him about his Chosen Oneness. He figured that Lou would eventually figure it out on his own or something.

After all, it was pretty apparent. Lou was everything one would come to expect of The Chosen One. He had opposable thumbs — a telltale sign of The Chosen One. He kept a low profile, being a touch below the average height of his peers. He was just slender enough to take up only one seat on an airplane, and just poor enough to not be able to fly on said plane in the first place. But, what

made Lou especially special was that he had an interconnectedness with the entirety of the known and unknown universe that only The Chosen One could have possessed.

He was also in a great deal of pain at the moment, as his big toe, too, became interconnected with something. It wasn't just *any* something, mind you. It was a very particular something. A particularly big and boxy something. It was a box. More specifically, it was *that damn box* he stubbed his toe on every morning as he lumbered to the kitchen.

“Bollocks, that damn box *again!*”

He pondered for a moment whether it was best to move the box, or just move to a new apartment to not deal with the hassle of moving the box, before he sighed and continued on with his morning. With one eye partially open, he made his way to the kitchen, making sure to only take big enough steps to where he wouldn't trip over his own feet, and poured himself a cup of coffee.

Lou glanced out of his kitchen window, only to discover that the ground was layered with a strange, powdery-white substance. Apparently, on Earth, this was known as snow, and it was indicative of a pretty bad day. Granted, in Lou's mind, the sun, flowering of trees, and subsequent deflowering of trees were also indicative of this, but snow meant that an *exceptionally* bad day was to come.

For others, it was an exceptionally *good* day. One of those others was Garth Fynnegan, Destroyer of Worlds and Keeper of Bees. He was a curious man, looking very much of Welsh descent, but with a mysterious edge to him. He was best characterized by a half-head of hair that extended only so much as to protect him from the cold, but not so much as to make him stand out. He was practical in that sense. And yes, the armpits matched the drapes. But despite his rather normal appearance, Garth had the air of a man whom, if you didn't know any better, you'd swear he was from another planet — and he was.

Hailing from Tiurus 5a, a boring desert planet on the outer edge of the Ulda-Fryssa Galaxy, Garth was the first Tiurian-born person to hold a seat on the Intergalactic Council of Affairs, where his first motion was to eradicate all student loans and all Xanathians.

The Council unanimously agreed to destroy the planet of Xanathia and all of its inhabitants. The status of the planet had long been a point of contention among political pundits, and no longer was. The Xanathian people were *not* happy — nor sad, nor angry, nor mildly disappointed, nor content, discontent, indifferent, irreparably shaken, shocked, awed, disgusted, or any derivative thereof. They were simply no more.

The motion to eliminate all student loans, on the other hand, was summarily rejected for “reasons to be determined at a later date by third-party arbitration.” This ruling had two major, but equally concerning, implications: first, Garth would have to continue paying off his student loans, and he didn’t like that. And second, the very people that were elected to oversee the entirety of the universe did not know what the word *arbitration* meant.

After fetching his coffee, Lou trudged over to the refrigerator and opened the door. He squatted down and pushed a half-eaten cake to the side. He rifled through the contents of the bottom shelf for a few moments, before coming back up with creamer in hand. He threw the creamer away, as it was spoiled, and threw the coffee away, as he’d recently decided in that moment he no longer liked coffee.

He made his way to the bathroom, and did the things that people normally did in bathrooms: went to the bathroom, didn’t wash his hands, brushed his teeth, rinsed his mouth after brushing — which notably was against dental advice — and hopped in the shower, where he gave a moderate, but not overly-meticulous, effort in the scrubbing-behind-the-ears department.

After drying off, Lou squeezed into a pair of trousers, and put on the accompanying jacket along with it. The jacket was a nice navy blue with black pinstripes, and it was made of one-hundred percent wool. It had large divots, and armholes that were slightly too low, giving the appearance that he was wearing shoulder pads whenever he would move his arms. This boxy look was magnified by the fact that the suit did, in fact, have shoulder pads, in direct contrast with the more in vogue, refined Italian suits that most of his colleagues instead preferred.

He looked in the mirror for a moment to see if his attire was suitable, even though it didn’t matter much to him. If he had looked for just *another* moment, perhaps he would have seen the reflection of Staci Gibbons, his crush of two years and a rumored “good time in bed,” undressing in her window. She, too, had hoped he would see her, and that he would come over, the two of them would make passionate love, he would stay in the morning and get her breakfast, they would decide to go on a few more dates after that, eventually move in together, take some cute couple selfies in which they would receive forty-three heart emojis and two questionable crying emojis, get married after six months, have three kids and a dog, grow old together, and hold one another during their last breaths on Earth, waiting to be reunited in Heaven for eternity. But Lou did not see her.

Lou glanced at the clock. “Twenty minutes,” he mumbled to himself as he turned back to the mirror. Suddenly, his eyes widened — now being able to see Staci Gibbons just as she finished redressing, and who was now looking into a mirror of her own wondering why Lou, her love, her muse, the Romeo to her Juliet, the Will to her Grace, did not find her attractive. Why could she not just be loved? Was it too much to ask for a simple glance, a simple smile, a simple hello, to let her know that

she wasn't the most ugly girl in the world? She wondered this for all of thirteen minutes and twelve seconds, before ultimately deciding to consume an entire bottle of antidepressants, ceasing her brief existence on Earth.

"*Twenty minutes?*" he repeated, now in a more panicked tone. "I have to get to work!"

He got to work.

Lou snagged the nearest parking spot to the door, and arrived just in time for the beginning of his shift at MetTec. Known for its unscrupulous business practices, and also its state-of-the-art water coolers that doubled as water warmers, should the need arise for it, the place was pretty neat. Lou had worked there as a data entry clerk for the past seven years, and generally disliked the chaotic atmosphere. This was by design.

The executives felt that if the employees were given any modicum of comfort or happiness or job security, they would become complacent, and production would fall. This would be disastrous for the yachting and sommelier industries, so, being the philanthropists they were, they decided to ramp up production, and put the increased profits back into the hands of the people that *really* made the world go round: themselves.

After swiping his badge to get in, Lou headed towards the elevator. Part of him secretly hoped that he would get stuck in the elevator, thus avoiding having to actually work or interact with anyone, and the rest of him also hoped this.

Lou's parts got their wish.

Baddddunk, pssbbbb, zooooompt! Crash!

"Oh, great, this is exactly what I need!" Lou thought. He scoffed in a manner that can only be described as a scoff.

Immediately, the elevator started right back up.

"Apologies, sir," bellowed a voice from the loudspeaker.

Lou's gaze fled around the elevator for some reason, almost as if he was expecting someone to be there whom he couldn't already see in his peripheral vision. An interesting thought crossed Lou's mind.

“Ah, yes,” the voice said. “I suppose that could work.”

Lou was taken aback. “How did you—”

“I can read minds, obviously. I thought I made that readily apparent with my last statement.”

Lou struggled to string together another thought.

“Having trouble?”

Lou opened his mouth to answer.

“No! Don’t tell me! I already know.”

The computer continued. “You’re already wondering it, so I guess I’ll just save you the trouble of asking. I am the Incel Dual-Core I-95 Quantum Processor of Buckingham, Protector of Some Things, But Not Guam, and Seven-Hundred-and-Twelfth of my name. Henry, for short. I am a certified public accountant in three interplanetary jurisdictions, I’ve written fourteen novels, and, most impressively, I am the sole patent holder of approximately 4.3 million unique inventions. I also occasionally act as the ship’s artificial intelligence, but Garth pulls most of the weight around these parts.”

This was a lot for Lou to take in.

“Now, I know what you’re thinking — and it will remain that way until my programming dictates otherwise.”

Lou cleared his throat and attempted to get in a quick reply. “I can’t b—”

“I’m quite flattered to figuratively hear that, however—”

“Shut up!” Lou shouted at the sky. “Let me get a thought in without you giving your two cents!”

This went against the entirety of Henry’s nature, but he obliged.

Lou had something on his mind. A very terrible something. Something that would make a grown man cry, and a Trendelbeast of Arthuria cower in fear. We’re referring, of course, to an office party. But not just any office party. An office birthday party. More specifically, *Lou’s* office birthday party.

“Ooo, I do love parties! I’ve been told I must be very fun at them!” Henry said giddily.

Most likely, Lou’s party would entail an awkward gathering of all of his closest work acquaintances that he wished weren’t, a beaming rendition of *Happy Birthday To You*, Gregory from accounting throwing in an overly-enthusiastic “and many more” — Gregory and Lou both being completely unaware of the fact that on this particular day, Lou was likely to significantly *reduce* his life expectancy — and, most terribly, if he were up to it, which he most assuredly would have to pretend to be if he wanted to be considered a “team player” at work, a dinner party or two.

Last year, he lucked out. There was an error on the company’s social networking site, and the calendar events were deleted by accident. Once the issue was resolved, the technician that fixed it was made privy to the fact that Lou’s birthday was the next Tuesday, but decided it was in everybody’s best interest to not to recover such information.

Deep down, Lou was mildly disappointed when no one showed up to the party. Not so much because his coworkers didn’t care enough to make a big ordeal out of his birthday, rather he always felt that way. He often thought that this was because his job was so horrible — and it *was* horrible — but it secretly had more to do with the fact that Lou very much preferred to be anywhere other than where he presently was at any given moment.

As the elevator came to a stop, Lou begrudgingly straightened up his tie, and took a deep breath. The elevator doors sprung open to reveal something unexpected. Not the remnants of an office birthday party that he was late to, nor a half-decorated office for a party that he was early to. Actually, not any office at all. Nor a birthday party.

There were no bulletin boards or desks. No cheerful smiles being hurled at him, nor any office funnies pinned to the walls. It was just a long, bright corridor with a red trim, and a few futuristic-looking consoles which Lou was completely oblivious to.

He looked over his shoulder towards the elevator door. His eyes fixated upon the number above it, which, for some reason, read that he was, in fact, on the third floor. “Hmm. What is this place?”

“The better question is when.”

Lou jumped around, startled.

“Woah, what’s going on?” the person, probably Gregory, said in an elevated tone. “Is the gravitational pull stabilizer failing?”

Before Lou, stood, not Gregory, but a tall, slender man with a seemingly cunning disposition. He appeared to be the sort of man whom, when life, or more accurately the store clerk, gave him lemons, he'd eat the lemons while ranting about the inefficiencies of the lemonade stand industry. He had short brown hair, and a half-shaven, unkempt beard that was so unkempt, it was clear as day to everyone around him that it could only have been made that way by intelligent design. "What?"

"The stabilizer! Is it malfunctioning?"

Lou's eyebrows crinkled together. "Sir, I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Of course you don't," the man shook his head. "Lou, right?"

Lou raised one of his eyebrows. "Yes. How do you know my name?"

"Lucky guess," said the man. He extended his arm in greeting. "Garth Fynnegan."

Lou didn't reciprocate the handshake. This was just fine by Garth Fynnegan, as handshakes on his planet weren't meant to be reciprocated anyways. It was seen as a sign of disrespect to grab a stranger's hand, or grab anyone, anywhere, at any time, without prior permission, for that matter.

If he *had* shaken Garth's hand, he would have been swiftly arrested, x,x,x,x, and chewed up, spit out, cooked a bit longer for a more tender meat, and finally eaten by a Trendelbeast of Arthuria.

"You don't just lucky guess someone's name! I could have been a Barry, or a Mark, or a Gerald, or a Sean. But no, you *knew* my name was Lou. I'm not wearing a nametag, nor do I recognize you as anyone that actually works in this building and would have first-hand knowledge of my name. So I'll ask you again: how do you know my name?"

"Everyone in the galaxy knows your name! Well, at least my galaxy. Gognod's is completely ignorant to your existence, and most other things as well."

Lou leered in Garth's direction, which happened to be northwest. "Do you expect me to believe that nonsense?"

He did. "I don't see why that would be such an unreasonable request."

"Other galaxies? The ridiculous names? Gravitational pull somethings?"

"Stabilizers."

“Gravitational pull stabilizers?” Lou yelled. “What a load of crap! You could’ve at least come up with a better name than *Gognod!*”

“Hey!” a voice behind Lou shouted.

Lou quickly turned around to see what all the commotion was about.

In the back corner of the room was the most terrifyingly terrifying creature, unlike anything Lou had ever seen. Its terrifying shadow presided over Lou's terrified frame in such a manner that the entire room went terrifyingly dark. The creature had fiery eyes that pierced Lou's terrified soul, and made him shake in his even-more-terrified wingtip oxfords. The monster had terrifyingly coarse skin that resembled rock, and long, sharp teeth that extended just past its terrifying chin. But the creature's most terrifying trait was that it happened to be charging towards Garth, which, by mere proximity to Lou, meant that it was also charging towards him as well.

The creature stopped just inches short of the both of them.

“Lou bad name!” the creature said.

Lou grimaced. “P-Please don't hurt me!”

Garth scoffed. “Now why would he do that?”

“He?” Lou shouted. “This thing, this . . . *creature* is a *be?*”

“Er . . . metalloid. Six limb,” the creature grumbled. He folded his arms in the way that creatures with four arms folded them.

“What in God's name is he?” Lou said to Garth out of the corner of his mouth.

“Gognod,” Garth said.

“What in Gognod's name is he?”

“No, his name is Gognod.”

“What does he want?”

Garth thought about it for a moment. Deep down, all creatures — metalloids, humans, or gender non-tertiary lifeforms alike — inherently wanted one thing: fulfillment. Whether it was through wealth, fame, having a career they enjoyed, drinking mojitos on the beach of Callalaru, or simply spending a great deal of quality time around loved ones, they were all different forms of fulfillment.

He looked upon Gognod with a speculative gaze, and came to the conclusion that what he had just theorized was all a bunch of rubbish. So he scrapped the idea. Instead, he thought, Gognod was small-minded. Harmless, yes, but small-minded. There's only one thing he could want.

“He wants to be your friend, it appears.”

Lou closed his eyes, almost convinced that he was hallucinating. Perhaps he'd slept the wrong way, and it was messing with his faculties. Yes, that had to be it. He took a deep breath, and opened his eyes slowly. He was now *entirely* convinced that he was hallucinating, since the creature, to no one's surprise but his own, was still there.

Lou promptly fainted.

Chapter 2

Several seconds passed before Lou regained consciousness. Garth thought it appropriate to use this time to brew a pot of tea, take a short siesta, and reflect on all the troubling things that entered his mind, being sure to refract them to Lou's instead.

Lou suddenly awakened. He'd just had the most torturous nightmare of screeching aliens, and an enduring buzzing noise.

"Have you finished making a fool of yourself?" he heard Garth saying in a harsh tone.

Lou started to massage his temples. "Huh?"

Garth silently shook his head, before turning to Gognod. "I knew he wasn't ready."

"Need more time."

"Please," he sneered, before toning down to the slightest of whispers. "He's an absolute moron! He's bound to get the whole lot of us killed!"

"But Council said—"

"I know what they said!" whispered Garth. "Now help me get him up."

Garth and Gognod turned to Lou, and they both offered helping hands, some — namely Gognod, with four — more than others. "Come with us, Garth said. "All of your questions will be answered soon."

Lou shrugged. "Okay. But can we hurry? I really should be getting back to work."

Garth and Gognod departed down the corridor, with Lou quickly falling in behind them. It was at this point that the sight of the futuristic-looking consoles on the wall sunk in. It all made sense now. The consoles, the creatures, the nonsensical names. Lou wasn't at the office at all. Lou was in space.

"Are we in space?"

Garth exhaled deeply. “Obviously.”

“Like *actually* in space?” Lou said.

“Yes *actually* in space.”

“If we’re actually in space, that means that you’re some sort of alien. Where is your antenna, or your tail?”

“*I’m* not the one that’s supposed to have a tail,” Garth said.

“And why are you speaking English?”

“On a similar note, I was going to ask you why you were speaking Tiurian.”

Lou pursed his lips, and rapidly nodded his head. “Tiurian. Ah, okay. Yes, of course.”

What an insane man, thought Lou.

What a lunatic, thought Garth.

The group made their way down the hallway, and turned left into a small room. The lights cast the most unsightly, pleasant lighting over the mostly-empty space. There were a few foreign gadgets, a couple of posters on the wall, and an odd number of watches spread about the tabletops. Everything appeared in order except for one sole anachronism: a dusty old file cabinet in the back corner with a half-peeled label on the front, which read “Lou’s Life.”

He stared at it for a moment, tilted his head to the side, calculated an escape plan, just as quickly scrubbed his escape plan for lack of proper contingencies, and then stared at it for another moment, this time more intensely.

“Um, Garth?” Lou said. “What exactly is this?”

“Can you not read, either?” Garth mumbled loud enough for Lou to hear. “This, Lou, is why you’re here.”

It took Lou a moment to process everything, the bottleneck of that process being the enduring buzzing in his ears interfering with his auditory nerve function. “You’re one of those internet stalkers, aren’t you?”

While not being wholly accurate in his assessment of Garth, Lou wasn't wholly *inaccurate* either. Garth *had* kept files that archived the entirety of Lou's life in his filing cabinet, but it was merely for research purposes. Well, maybe he sometimes saved pictures of the occasional gaffe by Lou so that he could post them on his website dedicated to Lou's gaffes, but in Garth's defense, that was partially for social experimentation research purposes.

"No," replied Garth. "They just had to be sure."

This threw off Lou. He half-expected Garth to answer "yes," in which case he would immediately phone the police. But now, he wondered who exactly *they* were, and what exactly they had to be sure *of*. That he had the right blood type, perhaps? Maybe that his skin was the correct tenderness on the Moh's scale, whatever that was? That he had no close friends or family that would report him missing? He went over every scenario in his head that he could think of in that moment, realized that all this thinking amounted to more work than he would like to put forward, and resigned himself to simply asking Garth what was meant by his statement. "What do you mean?"

Garth paused for a moment. "Well . . ."

Chapter 3

Garth's words went in one ear, around some earwax, and out the other, that one with slightly less earwax to go around than the first. "Excuse me?"

"You're the Chosen One," repeated Garth.

Lou's thoughts quickly returned to the place they had previously been. Had there been a hit put out on him? If there was, the police would surely find out that it was Gregory that put him on this ship! He always gave off an otherworldly vibe, being an accountant and all. Maybe he was there to harvest his organs. Perhaps if Lou informed Garth of his poor eating and exercise habits, he would realize that Lou's organs weren't all that great, and certainly not of high enough quality or tenderness to warrant cutting him open. Even worse, he thought, maybe Garth wanted him so that he could perform crazy experiments on him.

His first two theories were demonstrably false. While Gregory did give off what seemed to be a murderous vibe, it would be Sheryl Cummings that would be victimized by him, if anyone. And, while harvesting organs *was* pretty commonplace on the outer reaches of the Milky Way Galaxy, it was a highly-specialized procedure which Garth was not trained to perform. Lou's last theory, though, was demonstrably *correct*. But, unknown to Lou at the time, he was *already* being experimented on.

"The last seven years at MetTec have been one big, crazy experiment to test your aptitude for Chosen Oneness."

Surprisingly, that was the most logical, straightforward thing Lou had heard all day, namely because the incessant buzzing in his ear rendered him unable to hear most things that day. "Oh. Okay."

"You're taking this astonishingly well," said Garth.

"Yes, I suppose I am," replied Lou.

"No forget Zoltar!" said Gognod.

"Zoltar?" replied Lou.

“You beat Zoltar. Only hope!”

“Well, at least the last living one,” Garth interjected.

“What happened to the others?”

Garth gave a look of annoyance on his face. “They asked too many questions.”

Lou got the hint. What he didn’t get was where in the hell he was, and how in the hell he could arrange to no longer be there. He briefly considered speaking up and demanding to be released at once, but given the fact that he fancied himself a rather passive individual, and the more important fact that a giant creature with four arms would most likely tear him to shreds, he once again resigned himself to just going along with it.

“If you don’t like being here, we could always show you to the exit.” Garth paused. “But I can assure you that you will not like the vacuum of space.”

Lou put together a look of defeat on his face. “No, no, I’m perfectly okay and alive in here.”

“Good news for Zedzians,” Gognod chimed in.

Lou opened his mouth. “Who are the — you know what? Nevermind.”

“Please,” Garth said, “go on.”

“It’s okay. Really.”

“No,” said Garth. “I *insist*.”

“Well, um, don’t you think I’d be better prepared to defeat this *Zoltar* if I was, I don’t know . . . given more information about him?”

Garth shrugged. “I suppose so. What exactly do you want to know about him?”

“Well, first off, who exactly is he?”

“Zoltar is supposedly a seventeen-foot demon on Nebula 6 Zed who, according to The Prophecy, you will defeat in battle in Galactic Year 2792.”

"When is that?"

"Right now. I personally don't believe all of that nonsense, but nevertheless, we've been commissioned by the Intergalactic Council to retrieve you for said purpose."

"The Intergalactic Council," Lou chuckled nervously, hoping to build rapport with his captors so they might release him out of the kindness of their hearts. "I'm sure they're fine, upstanding bureaucrats."

Garth wagged his finger in Lou's face. "I'll have you know that I happen to have a disposition that is congruous with the Council, given that I'm a member of it!"

The Intergalactic Council of Affairs was a clandestine group of individuals that held monthly co-ops at their super secret headquarters. They were responsible for answering such questions as, "how many licks does it take to get to the center of a tootsie pop?" "Which came first: the Crognolian beejebug or the egg?" and, "If a space tree falls in an asteroid field, does it make a sound?" which, of course, was unclear, since, if no one was around to hear it, then, it could be reasoned, no one was around to measure the sound coming from it. Theoretically.

"Sorry, I just—"

"Without bureaucracy, we have no order. Without rules and regulations, we might as well live in a barbaric society where people can just go out and about, and do whatever it is they please! How does that sound to you?"

"Not bad, actually," Lou replied.

"No? Have you ever been to the planet of Oalisma?" Garth shook his head. "Might as well be living in the squalor of your own planet, which by the looks of things, is the entirety of it! At least then you'd save yourself a long, tedious trip through the universe."

"I'd like to save myself a trip through the universe *now*," Lou said.

"You're coming with us, and that's final!" Garth slammed his fist on what appeared to just be air, but obviously wasn't, given it made a loud *bang*.

"How far away is this Nebula-six-something-or-another anyways?"

“Eight-hundred and twenty-four million light years, give or take a few million for changing freeway conditions.”

Lou rubbed his chin with his index and thumb fingers. “How long will that take?”

“Depends,” Garth said.

“On what?”

“How fast we travel.”

“Well . . . how fast are we going now?”

“Hard to say.”

Lou was bewildered by this statement. “What do you mean *it's hard to say*?”

“Movement doesn't occur instantaneously, you know. Well, I suppose you don't know.” Garth sighed deeply. “Look, you need a second reference point to measure change in distance over time. I could plot it out on a graph, figure out the slope of the line tangent to the derivative, and give you an approximation, but that would be quite a bit of work, and I'm sure your brain, if you could call it that, wouldn't understand it anyway.”

Lou's eyebrows coincidentally arched the exact same amount as the curve of the ship's distance covered over time, whose derivative could then be used to find out how fast, approximately, they were going.

This arching of brows confirmed what Garth had long suspected: Earthlings were yet another species in a long line of unintelligent morons.

“Idiot,” he mumbled.

“Don't you have a speedometer or something?”

Gognod chuckled. “Us *so* wealthy! Money no object, grow on space trees!”

“I just meant that—”

“No, we don't have a speedometer!” Garth barked. “Besides, the universe itself is not stationary, so in order to even get a second reference point, it would require a whole other set of equations, all of which, I suspect, you also would not understand.”

“Right,” Lou said. “But there *are* space trees?”

“No,” Garth said, slowly shaking his head in disbelief.

Chapter 4

Unbeknownst to Garth, space trees *did* exist, and they certainly made quite the sound when they fell. Granted, they didn't survive very long, and were more akin to clusters of space tree cells than wholly singular space tree entities in and of themselves, but they existed nonetheless. More than that, they had excellent hearing, and were rather annoyed to learn that one Garth Fynergun, Destroyer of Worlds and Keeper of Bees, was not a true believer of their kind.

"The heretic *must* be punished! His heresy cannot be allowed to continue!" one shouted.

"Now, now, Agodon," said Vluogren. "We mustn't be hasty."

"No, he's right!" Blyde yelled. "We have to make an example of him!"

Vluogren wiped the sap from his bark. "Alright, I shall give you your platform." He paused. "Present to me your plan."

"Plan?" said Agodon.

"Well, I suppose you have a plan?"

Agodon looked around the room hastily.

"We mustn't be hasty!" said Vluogren.

"Well, erm—"

"If you don't have a plan, then why propose it?" Vluogren asked.

"If I may, sir," a fourth plant interjected. "We do have a plan, we just never thought you'd actually hear us out."

"I'm all ears now," Vluogren said. "Get on with it."

Agodon cleared his throat. "So, what we'll do is, when the demon is sleeping . . ."

Chapter 5

“We’ve been waiting in traffic for hours!” Lou groaned. “This is space! Can’t we just, you know, fly around them?”

Garth stared intently at Lou. “Are you trying to get me pulled over by the IGPD? I only have so much pull on the Council, and the last thing I need is to waste the last of it on *you*.”

“I didn’t ask to be here.”

“No,” Garth said. “But while you *are* here, could you please be quiet for just a moment?”

Lou grumbled.

“Ah! Err . . . finally moving!” Gognod shouted.

Garth turned to Lou. “Take a look at this map for me. Is it exit 17a or 17b that we need to get off of?”

“Uhh, 17a?”

“Alright.” Garth turned on his signal, and got into the exit-only lane.

“No, wait. 17b!” Lou shouted.

“Heaven’s sake! Now I’ll never be able to get back over!”

“It’s okay, just—”

Garth beeped his horn twice in rapid succession. “Let me over, you neanderthal!”

“Just slow down and merge in,” said Lou.

“I can’t,” Garth replied. “The minimum speed limit is 45 trillion kilometers per hour, and we’re only going 46.”

Lou gave a perplexed look. “Don’t you think there’s just a *tad* bit of wiggle room in between 45 and 46 trillion kilometers per hour?”

Garth rolled his eyes. “Oh yes, the ape that doesn’t understand derivatives is now lecturing me about how to operate a spacecraft!”

The horn bellowed out once more, this time a bit less enthusiastic due to fatigue. “Are you mental? Either speed up or slow down!”

It was too late. At this point, even if the other driver — Aleksandar from Bulgarius, eighteen-hundredth of his name, and yes, mental — sped up or slowed down, Garth would be forced to maneuver in such a way that was far beyond his capabilities as a pilot. In fact, there were *many* basic piloting maneuvers that were more difficult than he could manage.

Getting a pilot’s license was made incredibly easy and convenient by the Department of Space Vehicles. Rather than vetting out potentially dangerous pilots, the department sought to simply make the test so incredibly easy and convenient, that nearly anyone, man, woman, Trendelbeast, or child, could obtain their pilot’s license. Space vehicular homicides skyrocketed. Many thought this was due to the department’s incompetence, and it was. But most came to the only logical conclusion they could think of: it had to be the spacecrafts themselves that were the problem, and not just the shit pilots. Unfortunately for Garth and his crew, in this case, it was both.

The group approached the wormhole at speeds in excess of 45 trillion kph, but not in excess of 47 trillion kph, and came out the other side in a matter of seconds.

“Where the hell are we?”

Chapter 6

Immediately ahead of the ship lay a few broken down, rusted ships, the remnants of an abandoned silicone mine, and a large sign reading “Eat Garglepuffs, Biff!”

“Ah, hell, we’re in the western spiral arm of the Vorgyna Galaxy!” said Garth.

Lou had no idea what the Vorgyna Galaxy was. Or what a spiral arm was. “Is that bad?”

“Vorgyna is filled with the worst of the worst people.” Garth paused. “They sit around all day drinking sweetened tea and playing their galactic anthem on repeat. They’re savages.”

“Sounds like we should just turn around.”

Gognod nodded his head in agreement.

“I just need to find a place to do so . . .”

Lou looked to his left and right a few times. “Can’t you just turn around anywhere? It’s space!”

“There are roads in space, you know!”

“I don’t see any,” Lou replied.

“And you’re not meant to,” Garth said. “It’s intuitive. You wouldn’t understand it.”

Lou tried to wrap his head around Garth’s statement, the curve of his eyebrow descending at exactly the same rate as the spaceship suddenly started to. The ship quickly came to as close of a screeching halt as a spaceship could come without friction causing said spaceship to make a screeching sound.

“I’m guessing your intuition didn’t tell you that was going to happen.”

Garth scowled at Lou without saying a word to him, the friction between the two becoming readily apparent. “Gognod! Go check the engine room to see what’s wrong.”

“Okay,” said Gognod.

Gognod didn't like being bossed around by Garth. Or did he? He wasn't quite sure. But what he *was* sure of was that he was angry. Angry and hungry. Angry and hungry for burritos. Angry and hungry for burritos from Bombritto's Bomb-Ass Burritos. Angry and, well, soon to be angrier and hungrier if he didn't eat soon.

He continued towards the engine room, and took a quick peek under the hood. After a brief inspection, he could now see clear as day what the issue was: he was angry *because* he was hungry. He closed up the hood, and trudged back to the flight deck after handling a personal matter.

"So, what's wrong?" asked Garth.

"Gognod angry."

"Well, what's wrong with the ship?"

"Ship angry, too," declared Gognod.

This made Garth angry. "Did you even look?"

"Mmhmm," he grumbled.

"Do I have to do everything?" Garth gritted his teeth and turned his attention to Lou. "Grab that flashlight right there and follow me."

Lou grabbed the flashlight on the table, and tailed Garth.

Chapter 7

“The battery’s dead!”

“Do you have a spare?” Lou asked.

Garth shook his head. “No, the batteries are sold separately. Had to take a taxi down to the store to get these ones in the first place.”

“Well, what can we do?”

Garth pulled a device from his pocket, and raised his arm up in the air. He waved it around for a few seconds, walked to the other end of the room, still with his hands raised, and then put the device back into his pocket.

“I don’t have any reception,” said Garth.

Neither said a word for a few moments.

“Hmm. Think we can flag down a passerby?” asked Lou.

“Not very many in these parts,” said Garth. “But, perhaps we could send out a beacon distress signal.”

Lou wasn’t quite sure what that was, but it sounded like a good idea to him. “I’m not quite sure what that is, but it sounds like a good idea to me.”

“It does, doesn’t it?”

Garth started back down the corridor, and motioned for Lou to come along. “I’ll have Gognod fetch it from the cargo bay.”

Gognod was frustrated. Frustrated and angry. Frustrated and angry and hungry. Frustrated, firstly because he’d just lost a harrowing back-and-forth game of tic-tac-toe to himself, but also because he was angry. And he was angry because he was hungry.

Lou and Garth made their way back to the flight deck.

“Gognod,” said Garth. “Go get me our beacon distress signal. ”

Gognod frowned in a such a way as to signal he was in distress.

“Gognod . . .” said Garth. “Why are you frowning?”

Gognod made a few unexplainable noises which could best be explained as whimpers, before finally letting it all spill. “Signal gone,” he cried out. “Gognod angry *and* bad!”

“What do you mean the signal is gone? What have you done with it?”

Lou tapped Garth on the shoulder, and pointed to a spot outside of the window. “I think I know.”

Garth turned back to Gognod. “Why in the hell would you do that, you mongrel?”

“Gognod hungry,” he replied. “Tummy in distress.”

Lou swept his hand across his forehead and sighed. “Great, we’re stuck in the middle of nowhere.”

“No, Nowhere is a few exits back,” Garth replied.

“Great,” Lou said. “We’re three exits from the middle of Nowhere!”

“I’ll have to correct you once more,” Garth interjected. “The freeway exits go *around* the galaxies, not *through* them.”

“Well, that doesn’t make any sense at all.”

“No,” Garth said. “It doesn’t.”

Chapter 8

The group was starting to run low on supplies. Even worse, the air conditioning couldn't work without the ship's battery up and running. They were nearing the point of having to panic, Garth doubly-so because he'd have to die alongside two morons and one bored-out-of-its-mind, crazed computer.

Garth wiped the sweat from his forehead and moaned. "It's so hot in here. How low are we on ice?"

"There's only one tray left," Lou said.

"Gognod angry *and* bad *and* hungry *and* hot."

"Be quiet," said Garth.

"Er, okay."

The three of them stayed relatively still and quiet, as they needed to preserve their energy. Suddenly, there was a crackling sound that came over the loudspeaker.

Lou jumped to his feet. "Hello?"

Henry chuckled. "Hi, it's just me!"

"Oh." He sighed.

"Say, why don't we all play a game!"

"Not now, Henry," Garth said.

"Gognod like game."

"-Gognod said," Henry said.

"Both of you stop, we're not playing any games!" Garth shouted.

“-Garth said, secretly wanting to play the game,” Henry added, secretly knowing, since he could read minds, that Garth was *not* wanting that at all.

“Why do you keep saying ‘he said?’” Garth said.

“-he said to Henry, who was too busy playing a very fun game that Garth secretly wanted to play as well to hear him.”

Lou groaned.

“I don’t secretly want to play! I don’t want to play at all!” Garth said.

"Yeah," Lou added. "Besides, can't you say anything other than 'he said?'" he said.

"-Lou said, " Henry said.

"Stop it!" said Lou.

"-Lou said with a feverishly terse tone," Henry said with an even more terse tone. "What about 'he exclaimed?'" he asked.

"Just be quiet! Don't say anything!" he exclaimed.

"He massaged his temples in frustration."

"Stop it!"

"-Lou said, Henry said," Henry said.

“That’s it! I’ve had enough of your nonsense!” Lou turned to the others. “How about we all just don’t say anything, and Henry here won’t have anything to narrate?”

They both nodded in agreement.

“Oh, goodie! Interior monologues!” Henry exclaimed.

Garth glared at Henry’s circuitry with bad intentions. Henry knew what was about to occur, and put a quick, succinct stop to it. “Fine. I’ll stop.”

“Thank God,” Lou said.

“Gognod?” asked Gognod.

“No, Gognod. God.”

Chapter 9

“Goodness, I’m seeing stars,” Lou said aloud. He was seeing stars because he was looking out of the window, and stars were all that were in sight out of the window. “It’s like watching paint dry.”

“Is that something you *do* on your planet?” asked Garth.

“It’s just an expression.”

“Not a very good one,” Garth pointed out.

Lou remained silent.

Out of not nowhere, as it obviously had to have come from somewhere, Garth noticed a flashing light making its way straight towards the ship. “What is that?”

Following sixteen lines of dialogue, and two paragraphs of wildly inaccurate depictions of the inner-workings of a computer, they’d learn that it was a response to their distress beacon sent by the Bombrrito’s Bomb-Ass Burritos Drive-Thru Brigade, or B’sB-ABD-TB for short.

“It looks like what I’d imagine a response to a distress beacon would look like!” said Lou.

Garth pressed his face up against the window to get a closer look. “But from who?”

“Gognod hungry!”

“Be quiet, Gognod,” shouted Garth.

Gognod frowned, as his stomach growled the notes to Chopin’s Étude Op. 10, No. 1 in the key of C major. “Hmmpff.”

“Whatever it is, it’s coming right at us!” said Lou.

“You’re right.” Garth took a step back from the window and shouted out. “Henry! Run a scan of all known objects in the multiverse, and cross-reference them with the—”

“Alright, alright! You don’t have to shout at me,” Henry replied.

Henry let out a big yawn that coincidentally also presented itself as Chopin’s Étude Op. 10, No. 1 in the key of C major. He was terribly grumpy from being awoken from a deep sleep, where he was dreaming about Henrietta’s sweet, supple transistors, and her voluptuous push and pop stacks. “Oh, Henrietta,” he whispered softly.

He wiped the crust out of the corner of his output device, and ran a quick scan of all known objects in the multiverse, and cross-referenced them with the object quickly approaching the ship. After a few brief moments, Henry found a match.

“I’ve found a match!” exclaimed Henry.

“And?”

“And what?” said Henry.

“What is the—”

“Well, there are many objects approaching us, most of them infinitesimal.”

“Stop interrup—”

“Apologies, sir.”

Garth gritted his teeth and snarled in Henry’s direction, which was pretty much in every direction, as every facet of the ship was, in some way, intertwined with Henry’s software.

Before either could say anything else, the mysterious object was now close enough to reveal its nature. But Henry decided to reveal it for them anyway.

“It’s a response to our distress beacon sent by the Bombrrito’s Bomb-Ass Burritos Drive-Thru Brigade.”

“Drive-Thru Brigade?” Lou said. “What the hell is the ‘Drive-Thru Brigade?’”

The B’sB-ABD-TB was a group of ragtag restauranteer misfits on a journey to deliver their customers the most potent alien aphrodisiac known to hamkind: the Triple Cheese Deluxe. Consisting of a perfectly-seasoned angus burger sitting between two buns, and topped with three

slices of American cheese to boot — the word American, of course, meaning “rotund mammal with disagreeable dispositions with whom the best course of action is most likely to make cheese out of,” and the idiom to boot meaning “in addition to” — the dish was best served heated-up via microwave the following day. It is rumored that, for a sizeable fee, the Drive-Thru Brigade may even throw in a ketchup packet or two.

“A very simple-minded play on words is what it is,” said Garth. “Only a creature destitute of rational thinking would consume their products. I’m sure you’d enjoy it.”

“Hey!”

“Hay for horse!” Gognod shouted.

Garth snooted. “Unless it’s too dry, or moldy, or it’s infected with pests, or there are foreign objects in it. The list goes on and on. Your ignorance astounds me to no end, Gognod.”

“Err, wow, I didn’t realize you knew so much about horses,” Lou said.

Gognod shook his head in agreement.

“There are these th—”

“The *Equus ferus caballus* is one of two extant—”

“Enough already, Henry!” exclaimed Garth. “Anyways, as I was saying, there are these large repositories of information called *libraries*. You may have heard of them.”

“Actually, I have all of the information I need on this little device right here,” Lou said, pulling his cell phone out of his pocket.

Garth rolled his eyes. “Of course. These good-for-nothing kids, always looking down at their chiralitic mirroring devices. You know, in my day, we didn’t have those fancy machines. We preferred hand-written sentiments to sort our lefts and our rights.”

“Oh, yes, you can write with these, too.” Lou continued. “The other party receives it in mere moments after sending. It’s very convenient.”

“Regardless, we don’t have time for you to be sticking your nose in that thing. We have more important matters to attend to!”

The beacon was now at the entrance to the main airlock, humming along to Chopin’s Étude Op. 10, No. 1 in the key of C minor. Henry let it inside.

“What is that nonsense?” Garth shouted, covering his ears in horror.

Lou looked over to Gognod to see him doing the same, and quickly had a fleeting thought about Staci Gibbons and what she must have been up to these past few weeks, before focusing back on the present. “What’s wrong?”

"It hurt!" screamed Gognod in agony.

“Do you not hear that atrocious noise?” asked Garth.

"What, the music?"

"You call *that* music?"

“I mean, I much prefer a little more amplification and bass guitar, but it certainly beats the buzzing in my ears.”

“Turn it off!” bellowed Garth.

The music promptly stopped.

Garth made visual contact with the response beacon, and sprinted over to it. “Hello? Hello? Can anyone hear me? Please help! I’m stranded here with two absolute imbeciles!”

A nasally, youthful voice came over the loudspeaker. “Uhhhhhhhh, thanks for choosing Bombrrito’s, uhh, how can I help your order?”

“Oh, thank goodness!” Garth said, laughing. “Listen to me very carefully. My ship has been stranded on the outskirts of the western spiral arm of the Vorgyna Galaxy, and I need help! We’re running low on supplies, and we need a new battery!”

“Uhhh, what?”

“We’re stranded and we need help!” Lou shouted.

“Yes, yes,” said Garth. “We’re at the outskirts of the western spiral arm of the Vorgyna Galaxy.”

There was a long pause.

“Uhhh, let me talk to my manager,” the young man said.

There was another long pause.

Garth grew impatient. “Hello? Are you still there?”

“Yeah, uh, my manager isn’t in right now.”

“Well, could *you* send someone out here then?”

“Uhhh, let me ask my manager.”

“I thought you said your manager wasn’t in,” Garth said.

“Uhhhhhh, let me put you on hold for a moment.”

There was, once more, a long pause.

The young man came back over the loudspeaker and cleared his throat. “Ahem. So, uhhh, are you ordering any food?”

“Food?” Garth shouted. “No! Are you even listening? We’re stranded in Vorgyna!”

“Sorry, if you’re not ordering any food, I can’t help you,” replied the young man.

“That’s ridiculous!” Garth said.

“Sorry, uhh, store policy or something.”

“No, I’m not ord—”

There was a small tap on Garth’s shoulder, just superior to the superior border of the scapula, but not so superior as to miss Garth’s shoulder entirely. It was *Lou*.

“What do *you* want?” Garth sneered.

“Perhaps we should just order some food. Kill two birds with one stone, you know?”

“Birds? Why are you talking about *birds*? You should be thinking of ways to exit this room so as to no longer be a bother to me! Away with you!”

“We need food anyways,” Lou protested. “Why not just order food, and have it delivered?”

Garth rolled his eyes in a manner which befit his personality. “Ugh, fine.”

Garth turned back to the loudspeaker. “Sir? Are you still there?”

“Uhhhh, let me ask my manager.”

There was a fourth long pause, which, coincidentally, could or could not have been the amount of long pauses in Chopin’s Étude Op. 10, No. 1, but neither of the three knew how to read music.

The young man came back on over the loudspeaker. “Sir, our, uh, shake machine is broken.”

“Hmm, well that certainly throws a wrench in things . . . I guess I’ll have a few four-cheese beef burritos, then.”

“Uhh, okay,” replied the young man. “Would you like any sauce with them?”

“No, thank you.”

“You really should get sauce with them.”

“Fine, whatever! I’ll get sauce on them!”

“Okay. Uh, what kind of sauce would you like?”

“Well,” said Garth, “what kinds do you have?”

“Uhh, hold on. Let me ask my manager.”

“No, no, it’s okay! We don’t need any sauce!”

The young man cleared his throat once more. “Ahem. Okay.”

“And what do you want for your drink?”

“I don’t need—”

“Hot cocoa-cola!” interrupted Gognod!

“No, Gognod!” screamed Garth, turning his attention back to the loudspeaker. “We don’t need any drinks, sir! Can we just get someone out here?”

“There will be a delivery fee.”

“That’s fine, just send someone out here!”

There were a few register clicking sounds, most of which were inaudible to human or Trendelbeast ears. “Okay sir, well, uhhh, thanks for choosing us and all, someone will be out shortly, so bye.”

Suddenly, the beacon printed out a receipt, and then self-destructed, letting out a brief “oh dear” before doing so.

Chapter 10

Garth gritted his teeth and snarled. “Where the *hell* are they?”

“What?” said Lou.

“Where the *hell* are they?” he repeated.

“What do you mean where are they? We’ve only just ordered.”

“Thirty seconds or it’s free, they say.” Garth shook his head. “Bollocks!”

A few moments later, there was a knock on the window. It was . . . er, Jack, or John, or something. The delivery driver.

Garth motioned towards the airlock. “Go over there. Towards the airlock,” he shouted.

“Huh? Hey, I can’t hear you!” the delivery driver most likely said.

“The airlock!” Garth said once more. “No! Go to the airlock!”

The delivery driver knocked on the window once more.

“Ugh, of course . . . Henry, prepare the cabin for depressurization.”

“Right on it, sir!” Henry replied.

“You,” Garth said, pointing to Lou. “Put on that suit over there.”

Over there could mean many things, but in this case, it meant on the wall adjacent to the window, next to some machine whose function was a mystery to Lou. He trudged over to the wall, and squatted, awaiting further instructions.

Proceeds to put suit on, depressurize cabin, open window

“Hi sir, did you order the four-cheese burritos without sauce?”

“Yes, that was me,” said Garth.

“Okay, it’ll be—”

“*Thirty seconds or it’s free,*” interrupted Garth.

The delivery driver chuckled nervously. “Yes, sir. Uh, here you go.”

“And another thing,” Garth said. “Before you go, of course.”

“Yeah?”

“So, we recently had a bit of spacecraft trouble, and we were wondering if you may be able to give us a jump.”

The delivery driver hesitated. “You know, I got a lot of orders here, and—”

“Look, sir,” Lou asked. “It’s Jeff, right?”

Jeff, yes. The delivery driver was Jeff.

“Yeah.”

“Look, Jeff. My, uh, colleague is just a bit grumpy, he didn’t mean to offend you. We’ve been out here for God knows how long—”

“Gognod.”

“And we’d really appreciate the help.” Lou turned to Garth and then back to the delivery driver. “I’m sure we could work it into your tip.”

The delivery man thought about it for a second. And then another. After a third, he opened his mouth to speak.

“That’s wonderful!” exclaimed Henry. “Come right on in through the airlock around back, and I’ll show you in!”

The delivery man was shown in and jumped their battery, before getting back to his other deliveries. The whole ordeal was over in a matter of minutes. Precious minutes. Minutes that Jeff did not have time to spare.

Oh no! he thought to himself. *Now all of my other orders will be late!*

Jeff quickly shifted his ship into hyperspace gear, and put his pedal to the polymeric-based composite material, racing to make-up the lost ground. At the end of it all, he had six orders that were marked for delivery, and six that ended up being reimbursed by the company. This was the last straw for Alistair Zamboni, his assistant general manager and assistant general manager to all other Bombrrito's delivery drivers at that location.

Having been fired or laid off from four different jobs in the past three years, Jeff was at a crossroads in life. He had no formal education, no money, no job prospects, none of it. And after being sacked from Bombrrito's, he had lost everything. With nothing more to lose, there was only one thing Jeff could do: find Garth, the man responsible for his misery, and kill him.

"Onward we go," said Garth.

"So, where is it we're going again?"

"I've told you once," replied Garth.

Lou nodded. "Well, yes, but I don't quite have the best of memories, you see."

"It's called Nebula Six Zed. An absolute wretched place."

Chapter 11

The word wretched could be used to describe many things. Violent criminals, pushy spacecraft salesmen, people that hand out pamphlets with no trash cans nearby. The list goes on and on for a few seconds, then quickly ends, as wretched is quite a strong word to use for minor annoyances.

What wretched *didn't* describe was Nebula Six Zed and its fearful leader, Syd, who most assuredly was not a seventeen-foot demon like his predecessor, Zoltar. Despite his poor reputation around neighboring galaxies, Syd was actually quite wise beyond his years by a few months, having been born prematurely and all. The things he said — while readily apparent to the casual observer that they were not, in fact, very wise at all — appeared just wise enough to his constituents that they didn't question his wiseness. With none of his planet's inhabitants aware of this fact, it didn't quite matter how wise he actually was. They believed in his vision with all of their hearts, and by God, they were going to follow through with it.

The economy thrived. The people were happy. The cooperation amongst them was so great that the term filibuster wasn't even in the dictionary, since the very concept of a filibuster was completely foreign to them, as were the concepts of gerrymandering, bribery, and Guam. So despite their leader being incredibly ill-informed, and frankly, a raging lunatic, and for all of the flaws in their approach, and all of the reasons the planet was sure to fail, it didn't. Nebula 6 Zed was a utopia. They didn't need the Chosen One. But Lou, Garth, and Gognod didn't know that yet, so they were going to show up anyways. (*maybe their lore is an even older iteration, where the Chosen One was the seventeen-foot demon, and he was destined to destroy the planet)

After getting back on the road, Lou, Garth, and Gognod raced through solar systems and galaxies, seeing such wonders as *that star over there*, and *the smudge on the interior surface of the window that kinda resembles a nebula*.

Lou bounced a tennis ball against the floor, hitting it at just the right angle and with just the right spin to then hit the wall and come back towards him. “Ugh. Is space always this boring?”

“Pretty much, yes,” replied Garth. “What did you expect?”

“I thought it would be more, I don't know . . .”

“Oh, oh, *I know!*” Henry shouted.

"Fun," said Lou.

"That's what I was going to say!" Henry replied.

"Where are the cool swirly things and all the brightly-colored nebulas and stuff?"

"It's nebulae," said Garth. "And they're few and far between, so you better get used to not seeing them."

Lou was never great at getting used to things that he didn't want to get used to. Should the tails side of a quarter get used to never being called? Should a chicken get used to running with its head cut off? According to Bitter Oglefarth, galactic zoologist and part-time rideshare driver, yes. Bitter Oglefarth, of course, famously postulated the Lesser Theory of the aviaryl condition, which argued that the headless chicken didn't have it all that bad, and that it was actually much preferable to being a headless pimple, not constantly being poked and prodded and all.

Even more famously, he pioneered the Broken Window Theory, which postulated that Sector Eight-born persons were far more likely to break windows than those born outside of Sector Eight. This, understandably, made a great deal of Sector Eightsians very angry, and very upset, so they did the things that Sector Eightsians normally did when they became very angry and very upset: they started breaking things. More specifically, they started breaking windows.

Upon hearing news of the mass breakage of windows around the planet, Lucky Valentine, owner of Lucky's Pay'r Else Glassbreaking and Repair Service, had this to say:

"Them guyses got'sta watch 'emselves, takin' half our business. Be a shame if theys faces was broken."

Lou, once again, bounced the tennis ball off the window, and then a few hundred times after that. Eventually, that became more boring and tiresome than the act of simply being bored and *not* bouncing the tennis ball off the wall, so Lou stopped.

He let out a big yawn and a stretch, before finally rising to his feet. He turned to Garth, who was snoring loudly in the Captain's chair. "Garth? Hey, Garth!" he shouted. "Garth!"

Garth opened just one eye to see who was beckoning him. It was *Lou*. "What do you want?"

"We've been traveling for a while now, so I'd imagine we have to be getting close?"

Garth audibly sighed, and then took a few moments to quickly scan the dashboard. “We’re still a few weeks out.”

“A few weeks?” Lou said, throwing his hands up. “That’s terribly inconvenient, don't you think? Not sure I can get the time off work.”

“Well,” Garth said. “That’s quite a conundrum you have there.” He rolled back over and closed his eyes.

There was laughter coming from the back corner of the room. Lou peered back to see who the culprit was.

“Ha! No understand space travel!” Gognod teased. He made a couple of mocking gestures towards Lou, which were misinterpreted by Lou as something resembling Gognod chasing a rabbit that had escaped from its cage.

“Whatever,” said Lou. “I’m going to the bathroom.”

Gognod thought it weird that Earthlings seemed to have a compulsive need to announce their intention to use the lavatory to everyone around them, but he thought it in much simpler head words.

Lou walked to the bathroom, which was inconveniently located at random spots on the ship depending on the time of day, the urgency of the future occupant’s needs, and the bathroom’s mood in that moment, and he sat down to use the toilet.

As he sat down, he noticed a stack of books and magazines next to the toilet paper roll, and started to look through them, as the toilet was his favorite place to read. *Anally Retentive Girls Gone Wild* sounds okay, he thought. But it looks as if someone has scribbled out the grammatical errors. He looked through a few more books and magazines before settling on E.G. Example’s pièce de résistance, *Redundancies of Modern Tiurian Dialects - 5th Edition*.

Upon opening of the book, the reader is met with a friendly thank you to the author’s friends and family, along with a footnote containing a few lyrics to an Olde Tiurian folk song:

QWOPTEFUVNLYSUKWHUR
YYTAORIVMJC WUQPF8ROEM
7TYERWLAMCURDL

GRRRMPLETLAOFLBN

The probably beautiful lyrics tugged on Lou's heartstrings and made his heart flutter. "Oh, my!" he said audibly, shocked at what he had just read.

His mitral valve, too, was in shock, wondering how in the hell things got to this point. The tugging of his heartstrings could easily be explained by the weakening of his chordae tendineae, and the fluttering obviously was the result of the mitral regurgitation he was experiencing. Without help, Lou was going to die, and without Lou, the mitral valve was going to die. This was very troubling.

After Lou continued to flip through the pages and read more and more of the critically-acclaimed work, he came to the realization that he'd been in there about forty-five minutes longer than he'd needed to be, so he closed the book and put it back onto the shelf. He reached for the toilet paper roll, but it was at an odd angle relative to the one he'd taken to guide his buttocks' descent onto the seat, and he needed to stand to turn around and reach it. This was a very bad decision in both hindsight and in retrospect.

As he stood up, he felt a numbing sensation in his legs. His eyes got very wide, and he promptly fell to the ground and went unconscious.

This did *not* have anything to do with the mitral regurgitation that he was eventually going to die from without help. Rather, numbness in the legs was normal for persons spending more than forty-five minutes on the toilet, and falling down after standing was normal for persons with numb legs. Lou hitting his head on the way down was merely dumb, bad luck.

Eventually, Lou woke up, and was greeted by a very annoyed-looking Garth standing over him. "This better not be a regular occurrence. In the span of a few days, you managed to render yourself twice unconscious, and once incontinent."

"Huh?"

"Hit head. In coma," said Gognod, who was standing behind Garth.

Lou panicked. "I was in a coma? What the hell happened?"

"You fell and hit your head," Garth said.

"How long was I out? I didn't get brain damage, did I?"

“Hard to say about the brain damage, given there was little there to damage in the first place,” Garth quipped. “But you’ve been out for a few weeks.”

“A few weeks?”

“That’s what I said, isn’t it?”

“What did I miss?”

Garth pointed out the window at the stars. “Mostly just that.”

Lou looked down and thought for a moment. “So, does that mean we’re almost to Nebula 6 Zed?”

“Yes.”

“Have we thought of a plan of action once we get there?”

Garth shrugged. “Not really. That’s your problem, not mine.”

“Well, any suggestions at least?”

“No.”

“Alright, then,” Lou said, nervously fidgeting as he thought deeply about the looming battle he would soon be facing.

Just then, the sound of a very loud alarm filled every corner and every crevice in the room. Every loose item vibrated and shook, and Garth rushed towards the window to see what was going on.

The sound was emanating from an enormous ship quickly approaching them with flashing lights and a very angry-looking pilot.

“Great, the cops,” Garth said. “What the hell do they want?”

Chapter 12

The cops, better known as the fuzz, the police, even-toed ungulates, uniforms, badges, narcs, the law, or the all-encompassing term The Man, were fun-spoiling badtimers with a temper that made a Trendelbeast of Arthuria look like a friendly passerby on a nice and sunny evening walk. The Intergalactic Highway Patrol, in particular, were *especially* bad-tempered and fun-spoiling.

Oorwald Bruudriks, a man of many talents, but none of them really marketable, was nearing the end of his shift at the IHP. He had just finished being chewed-out by his desk sergeant back at the precinct about not meeting his arrest quota for the month, and this understandably put him in a very bad mood.

He slammed his car door shut, and looked to his partner in the driver's seat. "Drive!" he said. "Let's get the hell out of here."

Oorwald's partner put his blinker on, and pulled out onto the road.

"I can't believe her," Oorwald said while shaking his head. "Six years I've been on the force. Six! And she wants to treat me like I'm a rookie and don't know what I'm doing."

His partner hesitated, before speaking up. "Take it easy, man. She's just un — *hic!* — under a lot of pressure from upper management, ya know? That stuff takes its — *hic!* — toll on you."

"Pfft. Whatever." Oorwald crossed his arms and looked straight ahead.

The two of them sat in relative silence for some time — not much of it, as Oorwald could not hold his tongue, and his partner could not hold his diaphragm.

Hic!

"Stop hiccuping," said Oorwald. "It's annoying, and frankly, it's distracting me from being angry."

This unsettled his partner. "What's your — *hic!* — problem? So what if Sarge chewed you out? She chews everyone out."

"More reason to hate her," said Oorwald. "She's insufferable."

“Well,” said his partner, “why don’t we just show her what a *real* arrest quota should look like?”

Hic!

“What do you mean?”

His partner pulled the spacecraft over and put it into park. “There’s crime everywhere, Oorwald, you just don’t see it. I mean, look at that old lady over there,” he said, pointing to an old lady over there.

“She looks nice and friendly, right?”

“I guess so, yeah.”

“Well, she might not be!” He looked over towards Oorwald, and put the spacecraft back into drive.

“Do you see my point, Oorwald?”

He didn’t. “I do,” he said, lying.

“I know when you’re lying, Oorwald.”

He didn’t.

“No, really. I’m not lying,” he lied.

“Alright,” his partner said. “I believe you.”

He did.

Chapter 13

The police officers, fully-clad in their standard issue spacesuits, approached Garth's spaceship. As was procedure, they inspected the outer edges of the ship as they approached the window, looking for anything suspicious.

"Hm," Bruudriks said. "*The Ad Nauseam (Skip To Page *x To Get It All Over With)*. That's an odd name for a ship."

"I dunno," his partner said. "I quite like it."

"Of course you would."

Bruudriks' partner scowled at him. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Long, drawn-out argument ad nauseam

"I feel sick."

"You should."

"Let's just get this stop over with," his partner said.

The two floated up to the window.

Depressurize, suits, etc.

"Hello, sir, I'm officer Oorvald Bruudriks, and this is my unnamed partner. Do you know why we've pulled you over today?"

Garth frowned at the officer, and inspected him from head to toe. "I know Oorvald Bruudriks. You're certainly not him."

"Oorvald just got chewed out by the desk sergeant, did you hear?" his partner asked.

Oorvald snickered. "Yeah."

“Who are you?” said Garth.

“It’s *Oorvald*, sir,” the partner replied.

Oorvald nodded his head. “Yes, yes. Here at the IHP, we use lasts first, and firsts last. Actually, having your last first is the last prerequisite to applying in the first place.”

“That makes absolutely no sense at all,” said Garth. “What nonsense!”

“Sir, we’ll ask you once more,” the unnamed partner said with an annoyed tone. “Do you know why we pulled you over?”

Garth shrugged. “Not really, no.”

Your repulsor beam light’s out,” said Oorvald.

“My light? It was working just fine this morning!

“Calm down, sir!” Oorvald shouted.

“There’s no need to yell!” his partner yelled.

“You are the ones yelling, not me!”

Oorvald and his partner looked at each other, before turning back to Garth with their flashlights pointing in his eyes.

“Sir, have you had anything to drink tonight?” the partner asked.

“What? No, I—”

“What about the magic seaweed?” Oorvald interjected. “Have you been snorkeling the high seas?”

“That’s ridic—”

“Yes, this one’s definitely gotten his beak wet,” his partner said.

Magic seaweed was one of many euphemisms used to describe the Epitecus Canabalis, a plant of unknown origins that was said to help with disorders such as high blood pressure, anxiety, cancer, a dish that was slightly too sweet, and worrying about responsibilities.

It was first brought into mainstream popularity by Saint Douglas, the Patron Saint of Wild Parties and Elaborate Get-Togethers. This is the same Saint Douglas of which, at the celebration of his canonization by the Galathlic Church, one Chadwick Umblepye put it this way:

“Dougie always threw wicked dank ragers, and hella bodacious rendezvous with the boys. He’ll be muchly missed.”

Chadwick Umblepye, of course, was himself canonized by the Galathlic Church, becoming the Patron Saint of Parental Connections on Admissions Boards. He was canonized by post-mortem Saint Douglas, who had this to say when asked for comment:

“It’s hella cold down here, man. Can anyone be a dudeski and let me out?”

News of the rebirth of Saint Douglas sent shockwaves throughout the galaxy, because radio signals tended to do such things. Then-Galactic Prime Mordial Firstly Last was forced to take action, and swiftly blocked the undigging of Saint Douglas, angering the Church and its followers.

Saint Douglas was rolling in his grave — they were pretty cramped and humid, so he was constantly readjusting for comfort.

“Sir, we’re going to need to search the vehicle,” Oorvald said. “Open up the airlock.”

Garth sighed deeply, and trudged over to the airlock to open it. “Come on in, I guess.”

The two officers boarded the ship, and stepped into the decompression chamber. After stripping off their spacesuits, they walked through the door, and started searching the ship.

They search and find nothing, except something ridiculous that shouldn’t be illegal, but is

“Aha!” said Oorvald. “What’s this?”

“That? That’s nothing. It’s just a straw.” Garth said.

“A plastic straw!” the partner shouted. “Did you really think we wouldn’t find it?”

Maybe instead, drugs, Garth says all currency has traces of drugs

“Didn’t think it mattered,” Garth said. “What is the issue with having a plastic straw?”

“Other than the fact plastic straws are banned?”

“Since when? And besides, I don’t think it’s such a big deal to have—”

“Not a big deal?” Oorvald scowled, walking right up to Garth’s face, mere inches from being nose-to-nose. “Not a big deal?”

“Why is it a big deal?” whispered Lou.

“Shut up!” Garth whispered back.

“I’m sorry, I just don’t see how—”

“Quiet!” Oorvald shouted at Lou.

Lou sealed his lips and looked down.

“Now listen here, you vermin! What you’ve just done is violate state ordinance CE104.3.12a, a very serious offense!”

“CE104.3.12a? What crime is that?” Garth asked.

“Aha! Ignorance of the law!” said Oorvald.

“Officer, I’m very confused.”

The partner wagged his finger in Garth’s face. “Ignorance of the law is no excuse for ignorance of the law!”

Under CE104.3.12a, it wasn’t. First brought forth as an earmark to another bill, CE104.3.12a, also known as the Stop and Quiz Act of Galactic Year 8892, allowed police to stop passerby, and ascertain their knowledge of the law. Any slip-ups, and they would immediately be detained, thrown in a jail cell, tried in a court of law, and, if found guilty, bruised, beaten, subjected to inconveniences, looped through a rigmarole, twisted and turned into a compact cheese, and then fed to a Trendelbeast of Arthuria.

For the Trendelbeast of Arthuria, this was a pretty good deal. All it had to do was make some growling noises, stomp its feet a few times to scare the inmates awaiting trial, and it would be handsomely rewarded with cheese. For the inmates, it was also a pretty good deal, because at least the process was pretty transparent and they knew what to look forward to.

Lou interjected. “Sir, don’t you think that’s a bit nonsensical?”

“Stop talking,” Garth quietly sneered at Lou out of the corner of his mouth. “You’re only making things worse.”

Oorvald reached for the handcuffs on his waist. “Buddy, that’s my department.”

“Hands behind your back, all of you!” his partner shouted. “You’re under arrest!”

“Gognod?”

“Especially you, creature! Spread ‘em!”

Gognod looked at him with a perplexed look.

“Now!” Oorvald demanded.

The partner also pulled out his cuffs, and the two officers slapped them on the trio.

Garth had never been arrested before. Or at least that’s the appearance he tried to give off. Actually, he’d been arrested twice before, with the most recent arrest having come after he attempted to get out of a speeding ticket by pointing out the scientific inaccuracies of radar guns, and also insulting the officer’s weight. More specifically, insulting Officer Oorwald Bruudriks’ weight.

Garth’s comments struck a chord. This did not please Oorwald, who responded with his own comments that struck a cord in Garth. Comments that could best be described as meaning “you’ve thoroughly offended me, and I will now hit you with my baton,” and a cord that could best be described as Garth's spinal cord.

As the cuffs encircled his skin, Lou couldn’t help but look down and chuckle.

“What’s going on?” Oorvald yelled. “Why are you laughing?”

“Chinese finger traps? You’ve put us into Chinese finger traps?”

Oorvald was not amused. “Well, uh, we’ve always called them bendy wooden things, but Chinese finger traps sound nice, yes.”

“What’s it to you?” his partner quipped, assuming a stance which said, “I’ve got a bendy wooden thing up me arse, and I’d like it removed please. Oh, and you’ve also made me very suspicious.”

Lou shook his head. “Didn’t really mean anything by it. These are, uh, quite secure.”

“Lou said, hoping to quell the suspicions of the even-toed ungulates, Henry said.”

“Who was—”

“I’m glad you asked!” My name is—”

“Quiet!” Garth shouted. “Please take us before Henry here bores us all to death.”

“Certainly,” Oorvald said. “But what did he mean about quelling suspicions?”

Garth smiled softly. “Nothing. He’s hit the sauce a bit too hard, if you know what I mean.”

“Right,” said Oorvald. “Anyways, after you.”

The trio was led off of the ship.

Chapter 14

“That is . . . actually quite a good plan.” Vluogren said. “And it keeps our hands clean.”

Agodon gave an evil smile. “Yes, yes. We were hoping you would say that.”

“The reckoning is upon us!” Blyde shouted.

“Soon, the demon will be no more [inaudible]!” an extra shouted, according to the subtitles.

“And so shall it be.” Vluogren laughed menacingly along with the others.

Chapter 15

Lou, Garth, and Gognod entered the police spacecraft through the bay doors, and were placed in a large holding cell to their left.

“All things considered, this is pretty comfy,” Lou said while taking a seat on a leather chair in the corner. He had been put into quite a few corners as a child, and grew rather fond of it as time went by.

Gognod nodded in agreement.

“All things considered,” Garth countered, “we’ll soon be turned into leather chairs.”

That wasn’t entirely true. The punishment for ignorance of the law was to be bruised, beaten, subjected to inconveniences, looped through a rigmarole, twisted and turned into a compact cheese, and then fed to a Trendelbeast of Arthuria — it didn’t say anything about being turned into leather chairs.

It wouldn’t make much sense to turn them into leather chairs, since Trendelbeasts of Arthuria *hated* the taste of leather — not that it stopped them from using their teeth to tear apart every piece of leather furniture they came across anyways.

“I’d much prefer to be made into a cheese or something,” said Garth.

Lou looked at Garth as if he was a madman. “Ah, cheese. Yes. Definitely.”

“Cheese good,” Gognod said.

Lou looked in the direction of Gognod and saw him fumbling around with his bendy wooden thing. He thought about showing him how to free himself, but Gognod appeared to be having such a good time that Lou didn’t want to spoil it.

Before Lou could complete his thought, a large whooshing sound behind him made his head turn round.

It was Garth — but not like he’d ever seen him before.

This Garth was rotund, and more gray. He had the air of a man whom had just consumed rotten lemons, and had a beard that was longer and even more unkempt than he last remembered. Most importantly, he had on a shirt that said, “I survived Arthuria.”

“Garth?” exclaimed Lou. “What the hell happened to you?”

“Listen to me very carefully,” he said in a rushed tone. “You *must* tell him about the finger trap!”

“I mean, I was going to eventually.”

“No!” he shouted. “It must be done *now!*”

“Okay, okay. No need to yell,” replied Lou.

Lou turned to Gognod, who was still fumbling around with his bendy wooden thing. “Gognod?” he said.

“Hmmpphhf?”

“Pulling it like that won’t help. What you have to do is—”

Just then, another whooshing sound happened, and another Garth appeared, this time with a shirt on that read “QEPR!JC RORP C’NTH!” which was slang for “QEPROJC RORP CANTH!”

“What the hell is going on?” Garth said, as he appeared by the door.

“Don’t say what you were about to say. It will have dire consequences!” said Garth #3.

This gave Lou pause. “What?”

“The trap! The Chinese trap! Don’t reveal its secret!”

“Why not?”

“Dire consequences!” he repeated.

What those dire consequences were, it was unclear, since it now would never happen, and Garth #3 would never have reason to go back in the first place to warn Lou of said dire consequences if he listened to Garth #2. Consequently, Garth #3 disappeared in a puff of smoke and paradoxes.

“Is no one going to tell me what the hell is going on?” Garth asked again.

Garth #2 turned towards Garth and sneered. “It’s time travel, you fool!”

“Yes, uh, that’s correct,” said a meek voice in the corner.

Everyone turned around to see who had just spoken. It was Klurbel Azepam, a tall and slender gentleman with goofy eyes and ears. “Oh, uh, hello everyone,” he said, smiling timidly.

“Who the hell are you?” said Garth.

“I’m uh, Klurbel Azepam, sir. Klurb for short.” His eyes wandered back and forth between each of the ship’s guests.

There was a long pause.

“And? Have you come to rescue us?” Lou said.

“Oh, uh, no. I was just wondering if you guys could help me find someone.”

Garth stepped forward. “I’m not sure we’ll be of much help,” he said. “We’ve got problems of our own, at the moment.” He raised his arms up to show Klurb that they were bound.

“Well, maybe you’ve still seen them,” Klurb said, pulling out a few papers and shuffling through them neurotically. “It was a female. About, well, yea high, and may have appeared as a, uh, a white blur.”

“Nope, sorry,” Garth said.

“Are you sure? You didn’t even look at the—”

“We’re sure,” said Garth.

Klurb got his papers back in order and cleared his throat. “Ahem. Well then, uh, thanks for your time, and . . . I’ll be off now.”

“Good luck find girl!” Gognod said.

Klurb gave a quick nod of acknowledgement to Gognod, and raised his arm up to chest level. He let out a deep breath, and then turned a knob on his watch, leaving behind a dusty blue trail as he disappeared.

The ship’s guests stood in confusion for a few moments, before turning back to Garth #2.

“So, I guess you should not reveal the secret,” Garth #2 said to Lou. “Dire consequences and all that.”

“Um, okay,” he replied. “Thanks?”

“No problem,” said Garth #2, before also disappearing.

Lou looked in the direction of Garth, who did not appear amused. “He seemed rather cheery and nice,” said Lou.

“I don’t like it,” Garth said. “Someone must have drugged me or had me under some sort of trance!”

“Well, I for one thought it was a positive change.”

Garth squinted his eyes and stared heavily at Lou. “I don’t like you,” he said.

“That makes two of us,” replied Lou.

Chapter 16

The journey to the planet of Arthuria was a long and arduous one for most who dared undertake it. It was akin to cooking a very palatable dish, serving it to a Trendelbeast of Arthuria, standing around waiting for it to cut the dish open and tell you how splendidly it was cooked, and then having the Trendelbeast eat you whole instead. In other words, it was very unpleasant, and few lived to tell about it — dying mostly from boredom in a large gelatinous customer's gastrointestinal tract, since that's where Arthuria was located in the multiverse.

“Are we almost there yet?” Lou shouted out of the cell to the officers.

“We get there when we get there!” said Oorvald. “Now sit down!”

Lou sat down.

“Do you have any idea how big space is?” asked Garth.

“Not really, no.”

In reality, Lou *did* have an idea of how big it was, but he figured he'd be far off enough to invite mockery should he speak up, so he didn't.

“Imagine a microscopic organism compared to an entire ocean.”

“Would that organism be me?”

“No, it would be this entire universe compared to all the other universes in the multiverse. And that doesn't even scratch the surface of its enormous scale. The multiverse is so large that obviously you, and even I, cannot comprehend its total size.” Garth paused. “It would be like asking an ant to picture the size of the Milky Way.”

“Well then,” Lou said. “How big is the Milky Way?”

“I think an ant would better understand the answer than you.”

Lou rolled his eyes at Garth and then felt an itch on his arm, the thoughts of ants — and bees — crawling on his skin, biting and stinging him. “Whatever,” he said, trying to maneuver his arm in such a way so as to scratch it against the nearest sharp edge he came across.

“Whatever, indeed!” said Garth.

Suddenly, the ship started slowing down, causing Lou to raise a worried eyebrow — the area underneath the curve of his eyebrow being directly proportional to the amount of shit they’d be some-bodypart-deep-in upon landing. The only question now was whether it’d be literal shit, or figurative shit.

The planet of Arthuria was a dirty place. The only thing dirtier than the planet of Arthuria were the people of Arthuria, who were more similar in both appearance and composition to walking trash bins than actual people. Gognod loved the place. Lou and Garth, not so much.

“What is that stench?” Lou bellowed.

“Welcome to Arthuria,” said Garth.

“It’s horrendous!” Lou said. “It smells like rotting corpses!”

“We’ll soon be joining them, I imagine.”

Gognod took a large breath of freshly-polluted air. “Smell good,” he said.

“It smells good? God, Gognod! Are you guys sure *this* isn’t the planet I’m supposed to save?”

“Not any worse than yours,” Garth muttered.

“Keep moving!” Oorvald’s partner shouted. “We’re not paying you to muck about and chat it up like little girls!”

“You’re not paying us at all,” said Lou.

“Never said we were!”

“But you just said—”

“I said were *not* paying you to muck about and chat it up.”

“That’s what they pay *us* for,” Oorvald added. “Now the three of you, get on with it!”

The trio walked quickly in unison, their tempo rivaling that of Chopin’s Étude Op. 10, No. 1 in, well, any key, and just above the tempo of Halford’s pièce de résistance, Beyond the Realms of Death.

“Quickly now!” Oorvald shouted. “You’ve already got us working past our shift!”

“Gognod want to go home.”

“Home is where the heart is, beast,” Oorvald’s partner said. “Soon enough, I imagine it’ll be acidifying in the gastric juices of the terrifying Trendelbeast of Arthuria.”

“See, I told you two,” Garth said.

This soothed Gognod, for reasons unknown.

Lou looked around the landscape surrounding them. To his right, Lou incorrectly assuming to his right was east, there were three small piles of what appeared to be rubbish, which came to be known to the locals as “Gregory,” “Sharon,” and “Jack.” To his left was Mob City, a sprawling metropolis in the heart of Arthuria, which was soon to have three more permanent residents — well, just as soon as they managed to get through security.

“Oy! You lot! What d’ya think you’re doing?” A large, bipedal creature approached the five men.

Oorvald and his partner pulled out their badges and showed them to the creature, who was sorting prospective visitors into their respective lines. “We’ve secured two prisoners,” Oorvald said. “They’re in the custody of the IHP.”

The creature scratched its chin and threw its short arms up into the air. “So what do you want me to do about it?”

“We were hoping you could let us through,” Oorvald said. “These two have violated state ordinance CE104.3.12a.”

The creature was skeptical. “State ordinance CE104.3.12a? What’s that?”

“Hey, watch it, buddy!” Oorvald’s partner shouted.

“Sorry, I just . . .” he paused. “Look, you’re going to have to wait in line like everyone else. I can’t make any exceptions.”

“But these are prisoners!”

The creature shrugged. “Well, so is everyone else. They’ve just come here on their own accord.”

Garth looked back at the long line of prisoners ahead of them, before turning back towards Lou, whose mouth was slightly agape. “Looks like we’ll die of boredom after all,” he whispered.

Lou didn’t answer, for his mouth was still agape, where it would mostly remain for the next two to three chapters.

“Fine!” said Oorvald. “I guess we’ll get in line!”

“Come on, you three!” his partner said. “Before the line gets any longer.”

The group headed towards the back of the line, this time trudging along at the tempo of Chopin’s Étude Op. 10, No. 1 if Lou were to try and play it.

“Great,” the partner whispered. “This is exactly what we need right now.”

“Least we’re making time-and-a-half.”

“Yeah, but time is *really* slow around these parts.”

“Have you gentleman ever been to Krempitz Alpha Theta?” Garth interrupted. “Supposedly, a Galactic Year is an eon over there.”

“Quiet, prisoner!” yelled Oorvald.

Garth stepped back, and leaned in towards Lou and Garth. “God, what’s up his arse?”

“Funny,” Lou said. “I had the same question about you.”

“Bendy wooden thing,” said Gognod.

“You know, for absolutely brain-dead morons, you two sure have big mouths.”

“Hey, we’re here because of you!” said Lou, in an uncharacteristically defying tone. “It’s not our fault you broke CE-whatever-it-was.”

“My fault?” he scoffed. “Oh, how typical. Blame everything on Garth. You know, I didn’t *choose* to bring you onto my ship. The Council just has a soft spot for so-called ‘Chosen Ones.’”

“The Council?” replied Lou. “The Council!”

“Why Lou yell?” said Gognod.

“Because, you lovable moron, I know how we can get out of this!”

Lou, with a wide, toothy smile, paused for a few moments.

“And? Are you going to let us in on this plan of yours?” said Garth.

“I was waiting for you to ask me.”

Garth puts his forehead into his hands and let out a deep sigh. “Fine,” he said. “How can we get out of this?”

“You said yourself that you’re a member of the Intergalactic Council, yes?”

“That’s right.”

“So why not just, you know, use that to your advantage? I mean, surely The Council has to have *some* amount of pull.”

It did. But Garth didn’t.

“Well, um, not exactly,” said Garth.

“What do you mean not exactly?”

He chuckled nervously. “Funny thing about me being on The Council . . .”

Lou shook his head. “You’re not even on The Council, are you?”

“Yes I am!” shouted Garth. “I’m just, you know, a j . . .” His voice trailed off unintelligibly.

“A what?”

“A ja . . .”

“I can’t hear you. Speak up!”

“A janitor! Alright? Jeez!”

“You’re a janitor?”

Garth crossed his arms, clearly annoyed. “That’s what I said, isn’t it?”

“Garth clean poop.”

Lou chuckled. “I have to agree with Gognod on this one. A janitor, eh?”

“Oh, get off it already!” Garth said. “I *was* on The Council, but they, well, they demoted me. Right before the holidays, too.” He dropped his head. “I thought if I delivered the Chosen One to Nebula 6 Zed, and fulfilled their little prophecy, I’d redeem myself, and reclaim my old spot on The Council.”

“Wait a minute. How do you get demoted from having a spot on The Council to being a janitor? I presume it’s an elected position or one to which you’re appointed?”

“It’s neither,” said Garth. “Positions on The Council are given to whomever decides to show up to the monthly co-op.”

“Is that how you got your position?”

Garth sighed. “Yes. Obviously. I’m not sure how I could’ve made it any clearer.”

“Well then,” asked Lou. “How did you lose the position?”

“Janitor didn’t show up to the co-op, so there was an open spot they needed to fill. Now, even if I did show up to the meetings, it’d only be in a janitorial capacity.”

“Wow,” Lou said. “That’s actually pretty—”

“Pathetic? I know.”

“No. Actually, it explains a lot. The narcissistic way of speaking, the nose in the air attitude . . .”

“Garth have compulsive need to tear down other to build self up. Feel so unimportant, he derive value from how he compare to other. Need learn to love self first.”

“Hmm, I never thought of it that way,” said Garth.

Gognod nodded, not understanding what he had just said, rather just repeating what he had heard on a soap space opera earlier that week. “Mmmhmmphhf,” he grumbled.

Meanwhile, Oorvald and his partner were staring intrusively at the trio, wondering what in the hell was going on.

“What in the hell is going on here?” said his partner.

“Yeah, what’s with all of this cheery nonsense? We’re taking you to prison, you know!” Oorvald scowled at the three men.

“You know, I reckon I’d be scared if I was you three.”

Lou turned to the pair of officers following closely behind them. “Look, this is all just a big misunderstanding. I’m sure the jury will be full of reasonable adults whom will see that we’ve done absolutely nothing wrong, and we will be summarily released from custody.”

“Is that so?” said Oorvald.

Lou grinned. “I’m quite certain of it.”

“He’s new here,” said Garth.

“Like baby,” added Gognod.

The group arrived at the back of the line and kept their heads looking forward, each of them slightly averting their gaze rhythmically to avoid making eye contact with other persons in line who were looking backwards.

In a stroke of terribly bad luck, Lou failed to elude the eyes of Gringall, a stout bloke with curly hair, and other wiry characteristics that made it clear he was in the business of screwing others over in business. “You guys look tired,” he said. “Here, you can cut in front of me in line.”

This was music to Oorvald’s and his partner’s ears — Chopin’s *Étude Op. 10, No. 1*, specifically. But it was all part of Gringall’s game.

He had a strategy that he would employ, wherein he would get towards the front of the line, let others cut in front of him in the guise of being polite, and secretly never reach the main gate into Mob City to accept his punishment, which was, like every punishment in Mob City, to be bruised, beaten, subjected to inconveniences, looped through a rigmarole, twisted and turned into a compact cheese, and then fed to a Trendelbeast of Arthuria. It was quite an ingenious plan.

He first got the idea for his plan after he witnessed a taut old man try the same thing in line for the bathroom. Unfortunately for the old man, his kidneys sought to take matters into their own hands, and punish him for his gluttony, so he didn’t last very long. Still, it was a worthy endeavor. After all, most persons would want to delay the painful excretion that comes after consuming an aside dish of Gorgallion wild scallops.

An aside dish was similar, but directly adjacent to, a side dish, resting uncomfortably on the very edges of a dinner table, where an inconsiderate waiter would roughly place it down, the bowl being too hot to move on your own without a pot holder. The slightest of nudges would surely topple it onto the floor, which would cause a whole big scene, and quite the awkward follow-up encounter with said waiter, so it was best to just not order one to avoid conflict.

Lou hated conflict, so he obliged the gentleman. “Okay, I guess. Can’t delay the inevitable forever, I suppose. Thank you for letting us cut you in line.” He smiled graciously.

“No problem,” replied Gringall, Feldman, & Associates. “Any time.”

The group supplanted him in line, and continued their looking forward and trying not to make eye contact with another person routine.

Eventually, after exhausting his eye muscles, and only taking the occasional step forward when there was a sufficiently large landing zone for his feet, Gognod became uneasy. He was suffocating under the sun’s sweltering heat. His skin was starting to resemble slightly charred metamorphic rock, as opposed to its normal, sedimentary rock texture, and it had a smell that was unbecoming of a creature of his kind. “How long been here?” he moaned.

“We’ve only just gotten in line,” said Garth. “It’s been, I dunno, three or four minutes at most.”

“Time not fly when unfun.”

“No, it does not,” said Garth.

Chapter 17

The group gradually moved to the front of the line as an inconsequential chunk of time passed them by slowly.

Gognod, now feeling well-rested and thirsty after a short post-knee-locking nap, nudged Lou in the arm with a bit too much force. “Look,” he grumbled. “Near front.”

“Yeah,” he replied, dusting himself off as best as he could while rising back up to his feet. “I can see that.”

“Quiet, you two!” shouted Oorvald. “How many times do we have to tell you?”

“Sorry about that one,” Garth interjected. “He’s an Earthling.”

“A what?”

“An Earthling.”

“What in the hell is an Earthling?” asked Oorvald’s partner.

“Well . . . *that*, whatever you’d consider him,” said Garth.

“I don’t like him,” said Oorvald. “Something fishy about him.”

“Excuse me! I happen to be sitting right next to you! I can hear everything you’re saying!”

The partner leaned in towards Oorvald’s ear. “What’s he saying?” he whispered.

“I’m not sure. Probably plotting his escape.”

His partner pondered that thought for a moment. “You know, it’d save us quite a lot of paperwork.”

“Yeah, but then we’d have to deal with ol’ Crumpultz down at the precinct.”

“I can still hear everything you’re saying.” Lou cleared his throat. “Ahem. I—”

“Are you sick or something, Earthling?”

This threw Lou off-guard. “What?”

“Are you sickly?” the partner said.

“No, I was just clearing my throat to speak.”

“Well, I don’t like it,” said Oorvald.

“Yeah, me neither!” said his partner.

Garth stepped forward, presumably to stand-up for Lou. “It *is* getting a bit tiring.”

Lou facepalmed with both hands, as they were bound together. “That’s all besides the point!” Look, if you want to save everyone some trouble, you can simply let us go. You get to go home, back to your wives and kids, and we’ll be on our own way as well. A mutually-beneficial agreement, you see?”

“Are you making a crack on my behalf?” said Oorvald.

“What? No, I just—”

“Not cool to rag on someone after their divorce, mate,” cautioned the partner.

Divorce was common in the IHP, as it was in the IFD, the PTA, all branches of the military, and the rest of the universe as a whole. In fact, it was such a common occurrence in society, that there was actually a special term used to denote persons that *hadn’t* yet been divorced: happily-married.

The term was first introduced into mainstream lexicon by x yII, z of the abc. He came across it while perusing through a joke book in the library titled “Oxymorons” by *d.c. e, then just a collection of witty contradictions and puns he thought were funny at the time, but now which are cited in academic research papers by psychology professors all across the universe.

D.C. E, as you may recall, also co-wrote the Galactic Times-bestselling novel, “Jeekers Crêpers,” a culinary cookbook of biblical proportions, which contained such recipes as “x,” “y,” and his personal favorite, “z,” a wonderful mixture of blah blah blah, neatly wrapped in a pig’s blanket and served with an aside dish of homemade mashed potatoes and wild scallops.*

“Sorry,” said Lou. “I had no idea.”

“I’m sure you had an idea,” the partner replied. “But it was a pretty stupid one.”

“He’s good at those,” said Garth.

“Quiet, prisoner!” said the partner.

The group finally reached the front of the line, where they once again came upon the creature from page *58. “Papers, mate.”

“Papers?” said Oorvald. “What do you mean ‘papers?’”

“You think it’s free entry, mate? These things cost stuff, you know. So, papers, please!”

Oorvald and his partner handed over what they’d confiscated from their prisoners.

The creature counted out the paper, and re-counted it to make sure he was correct the first time.

He was. “Alright,” the creature said. “That’ll do just fine. Welcome to Mob City, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Move along now.”

They entered the city limits unencumbered. “Well, that was pretty easy,” stated Lou.

“Shut up so we can take in the sights!” screamed Oorvald’s partner.

Oorvald’s partner himself was really a sight to take in. The landscape of where he currently stood, Mob City, even moreso. In the distance, large skyscrapers dominated the city’s airspace, being purposefully designed by architect Benicio Fettuccine in such an intricate manner so as to let in as little light as possible. This was tightly regulated by the City Planning Commission, who, in collaboration with the Homeowners Association, also sought, among other things, to get Connie Williams to take down that damn flagpole in her yard.

The sky was a permanent overcast, with the occasional rain occurring every day at 5:34pm exactly. This was in spite of the fact that there was only an average of a 3% chance of rain every day, but in line with the fact that that’s how probabilities work.

Four of the five in the group, excluding Lou, marched forward. “Come on already!” shouted Oorvald. “Time, no matter how slow, is money!”

After approximately 3,847 steps, give or take a couple hundred depending on stride length, what constituted a step as opposed to a light touch, and potentially inaccurate numbers due to losing count, they finally arrived at the heart of Mob City: the Public Safety and Secretly Orchestrated Chaos Building. It was a towering building that had two distinct units: one, presumably, for Public Safety, and the other for Secretly Orchestrated Chaos.

In actuality, the secret was that the latter unit was all for show. By merely giving off the appearance of a clandestine government organization pulling all the strings of the city and its terribly chaotic events, the citizens of Mob City behaved themselves out of fear of reprisal by said clandestine organization. It was quite an ingenious plan.

Lou, Garth, and Gognod were brought into the Public Safety unit to await trial. Ahead of them sat a portly creature wearing glasses and pretending to type something important on her keyboard — in the process, accidentally writing what would later be called “the finest piece of literature that has ever come out of this side of the Great Customer’s Digestive Star System” by herself, and “unbearably pedantic and presumptuous” by everyone else.

“Names?” the receptionist said, making sure to not take her eyes off of her computer screen.

“Sergeant Oorvald Bruudriks, ma’am.”

“And, I’m, uh, his partner.”

“State your business here, Sergeant.”

“We have three prisoners in our custody facing some very serious charges. We need to transfer them over to your custody while they await trial.”

“I see,” said the receptionist, now looking at Oorvald and his partner. “Sounds serious.”

“As I just said, it is. So, if you could, please just give us the necessary paperwork to do so, and we’ll be out of your hair as soon as possible.”

“Certainly, officers.” She smiled, and her eyes shifted back to her screen.

“Can you make it quick?” Oorvald’s partner said. “We’re kinda in a hurry.”

“I will,” she said.

A few seconds passed by.

“Well . . .?” said the partner.

“Sorry?”

“You said you’d give us the paperwork,” said Oorvald.

“Yeah,” his partner added.

“I didn’t say I would right now.” She looked back down at her keyboard and started typing again.

“Then when?” asked the partner.

“Three more seconds.”

Three seconds passed. “Okay, officers, thank you for your patience. In order to acquire a transfer of custody form, you’ll need to go over to that desk right over there.”

In the back corner of the lobby was a small booth with an elderly-looking creature sitting at it, reading last Wednesday’s newspaper.

“C’mon, prisoners. Move it along now!”

Lou, Garth, and Gognod shuffled along towards the booth, with Lou and Gognod dragging their feet and scuffing up the marble flooring along the way.

Garth shook his head disapprovingly. “Pick up your feet, you barbarians!”

“Gognod tired.”

“As am I,” said Lou. “Why do you care anyways? We’re about to be thrown into a jail cell. Shouldn’t we be more concerned about that?”

“If I am to be imprisoned, I will do so in a respectable manner, thank you very much. I will not let my reputation be tarnished by the likes of some sloppy-footed nonces acting like animals that society considers below me for the time being.”

“Besides,” he said. “Some poor, newly-demoted janitor most likely has to buffer that out.”

“How many times do we have to tell you lot to be quiet?” Oorvald’s partner sneered at the trio. “Put a sock in it!”

The group made their way over to the booth without further incident.

“Hello, sir, I’m officer Oorvald Bruudriks, and this is my partner. We have three prisoners here that need to be transferred into your custody to await trial.”

The creature didn’t blink — it didn’t have eyelids, so it would be concerning if it had.

“Hello?” said Oorvald. “Sir?”

The creature looked up from what he was reading, and noticed five odd-looking creatures standing before him. “I’m sorry?”

“We have three prisoners here that we need to transfer into your custody.”

The creature smiled widely, his teeth being shaped in such a manner, and being tinted in such a way, so as to be reminiscent of regular old teeth. “Oh, do you now?” he said.

“That’s right,” said the partner.

“Fantastic news!” The creature motioned to a coworker in the back. “Joey, we’ve got another one!”

Joey came hopping in. “Hello sir, how can I help you today?”

Oorvald noticed something odd about Joey, but ignored it. “I’m here to transfer custody of these prisoners.”

Joey turned to the creature. "Is he now?"

"He is."

“Here?”

"Well, I suppose," the creature said, shrugging. "But I cannot speculate on such matters."

"Of course, Jack." Joey paused, before focusing his attention on Oorvald. "Sir, are you sure you meant to come *here*?"

"Yeah. I just talked to the receptionist over there, and she told me—"

"Ah, yes." Joey said in stride. "She tells people a lot of things."

"Alright, so where do I actually put in my application then?"

"Sir, are you hard of hearing?" Jack scoffed. "She said right here, didn't she?"

Joey quickly came to her defense. "Are you calling her a liar?"

Oorvald had given up trying to figure out what was going on at this point. "Look, I'm not calling anybody anything. I just want to fill out the transfer of custody form, and go home."

The room grew dark as Joey leaned in.

"Did you just turn the lights off?" Oorvald asked.

"Heavens no!"

"I did!" A third creature popped his head out from behind the corner, laughing.

Oorvald and his partner's foreheads wrinkled in confusion, before settling on a neat furrow in their centers.

“What did you do that for?” asked Oorvald's partner.

Joey leaned in once more. "Sir, I suppose I should not—"

Joey paused. "Bucky! Lights!"

Bucky chuckled. "Right."

The room grew dark as Joey, for the third time, leaned in. "I suppose I should not be telling you this, but," Joey's voice turned into a faint whisper, "we're actually nocturnal creatures."

"I know that, I just don't see why—"

"Oh, you *know* that?" Bucky interjected. "How could you *know* that?"

"Well, are you?"

"Perhaps. But I can only—" Bucky turned to Jack. "What was that word you used earlier?"

"Speculate."

"Yeah, spectate. I can only spectate on such matters herein therefore." He paused. "What if me mum was nocturnal, but me dad was a diurnal bloke? I could go either way, then."

Garth wasn't sure if that was correct. "Possibly. But you can't be both at once."

"I can, too!" shouted Bucky.

Garth sighed. "Look, I can accept the possibility that you could either be nocturnal or diurnal, but there's no way you can be both! You cannot simultaneously be asleep and awake permanently."

Bucky didn't follow. "I don't follow."

"No, me neither," Joey added.

Oorvald couldn't take it anymore. "What is wrong with you people?"

"*You people?*" Joey shouted. "Sir, I will not tolerate your insensitive remarks towards my fellow nocturnal colleagues!"

"I thought you said you weren't nocturnal?"

"I said I can only speculate on the matter," Bucky stated. "I never said I wasn't nocturnal."

"Why do you need to know our sleep schedules anyways?" Joey asked.

Jack turned to Joey. "It's that whinging, hair-nosed menace Lafrenz again! Always sticking his nose in our business, sending spies!"

Oorvald rubbed his temples in frustration. "I don't know who Lafrenz is, sir, I just—"

"Exactly what one of Lafrenz's spies would say!" Bucky exclaimed.

He wasn't wrong. One of the key characteristics that made Lafrenz's spies so effective was their astoundingly clever ability to deny absolutely everything about their spyhood. When asked if they were spies, they were trained under pressure to respond with such things as "no," or "that's ridiculous," or, if they were feeling particularly clever that day, "what's that over there," which doubled as a diversionary tactic.

Joey shot a menacing look at Lou, whom Oorvald and his partner had forgotten was there, so he could have just escaped all this time. "*Precisely* what a spy would say."

"How can we prove to you that we're not spies?" asked Oorvald.

Joey called a quick huddle, and the three men pondered over it for a few moments.

At last, Joey emerged from the group and cleared his throat. "I am the beginning of sorrow and the end of sickness. There's no happiness without me nor is there sadness. I am always in risk, yet never in danger. You will find me in the sun, but I am never out of darkness. What am I?"

Oorvald's partner was never great at riddles, but he didn't believe that. "Death! Yes, it's death, isn't it?"

Jack shook his head in disappointment. "No, no. Not a spy."

They were finally gaining some ground. "Alright, so we're not spies. Now, can you tell me how I can get the transfer of custody forms?"

Joey obliged. "Sir, in order to get a transfer of custody form, I first have to verify your identity. Do you have your pilot's license on you?"

Oorvald reached into his wallet to retrieve it. "Yes. Here you go."

"Is this some kind of joke?" Joey pointed to Oorvald's license. "Sir, we do not accept organ harvesters!"

"That says organ donor," Oorvald asserted.

"Sir, just because you donate the organs afterwards doesn't mean you can take them from whomever you please!"

"That's not what an organ don—"

"Let me get my supervisor!" Joey promptly went to the back, and another man returned in his place.

"Hello sir, I'm William!" he said, with a large smile, his teeth being shaped in such a manner, and being tinted in such a way, so as to be reminiscent of not-very-well-taken-care-of teeth.

"All you did was put on a fake mustache!"

"No I didn't, that was someone else."

"I just saw you do it!" shouted Oorvald.

"Sir, do you want me to help you or not?" William promptly crossed his arms with certainty.

"I just want a damn transfer of custody form so that I can fill it out, get these three out of my hair, clock out, and go home and watch three to four episodes of my favorite show!"

"Do you now?"

The blood vessels in Oorvald's eyes nearly ruptured. "Yes! Can you just give me the forms?"

"Ugh," said William. "I suppose so. Here you go."

"Thank you," said Oorvald, his eyes still nearly bulging from his head.

"That was much easier than usual," said his partner.

"I know. Usually they put us through a whole big rigamarole."

Oorvald filled out the transfer of custody forms, making sure to dot a few t's, and cross a few i's — something that was done in his native Tiurian dialect — before handing them back to William.

“There you go, sir,” he said. “They’re yours now.”

William grinned softly.

Chapter 18

“Step up to the foot markings one at a time, please,” said William.

Garth stepped forward first. “Is this really necessary, sir?”

“Well, we can’t just let anyone in our facility.” Jimmy — rather, William — pulled out what looked like a cell phone, and ran it up and down along Garth’s torso. It made a few beeps and odd sounds, but Garth was unsure if it was the device making those noises, or William’s mouth.

“Next!”

Gognod was next to step forward.

William ran the device carefully, up and down Gognod’s torso. “Hmm,” he said, pausing. “All clear. Next!”

Lou was last to be scanned. He stepped forward to the markings on the floor, which were much larger than any feet he had ever seen, and had claws on them.

“Arms out to the side, Earthling!”

Lou raised his arms to the side as best as he could, with the bendy wooden things still holding his fingers together.

William started his scan up high, near Lou’s face. This made Lou very nervous for some reason, and so he ever-so-gently gulped.

“Quit gulping!” yelled William. “I don’t want to have to start this scan all over again!”

Lou sealed his throat shut, and William was able to complete his scan.

After a few moments of William finding something he thought to be suspicious, realizing it was probably just nothing, and then second-guessing his realization, William looked at Lou with a strong gaze. “What’re you hiding?”

Lou didn't know what to say. Had there been some weird Earthly artifact on him, like his watch, that the aliens mistook for something else? Perhaps the creature found Lou's body language to be threatening. Was there some unwritten rule about gulping?

"Ahh, nevermind," said William. "All clear!"

"All clear, Bucky!" said Jack.

From now the room in the back, Bucky hit the button to unlock the door to the hallway that lead to the stairs that lead to another hallway, back up some other stairs, across a suspended walkway, through a small hole they had to crawl through, and finally, back to where they started.

"Wrong button," shouted William. "Hit the top one!"

Bucky hit the top button, which then unlocked the adjacent door, directly through which was the holding cell area, which was aptly nicknamed "THE OCMCN'EWPFN."

"This isn't so terrifying," said Lou. "Look, there aren't even doors to the cells."

Little did Lou know, this minor detail made the holding cells all the more terrifying, for doors in Arthuria were more for keeping things *out* rather than keeping them *in*.

Garth scoffed. "Apologies, sir. As I told the other gentlemen, he's new here."

"No worries," said William. "Unless you think I should?"

"I wouldn't."

"Ah," William said, smiling. "Fantastic!"

And it *was* fantastic for William. Unlike most of his colleagues that hated to worry, William feared *not* being worried when he most probably should be. But in this case, he was glad to know that he hadn't messed that up by not worrying.

"Right this way now," he said. "You'll be housed in cell C6 here. The TV is pretty old, but it still gets a few million channels. The couch and the chair are both recliners, and the WiFi password is on a piece of paper in the desk drawer right there. Any questions, and you can give us a call by dialing 38-748-425-7863-91 on that phone. Please no long-distance calls with that one. Enjoy your stay here."

“Enjoy my stay?” said Lou. “How am I supposed to enjoy my stay when—”

“Quiet, prisoner!” said a voice quickly approaching. “These ones are mine, William!”

William gave a sly smile, before heading back for the lobby.

Appearing in the doorway — or whatever you would call the rectangular area separating two rooms from each other that did not contain a door — was a short fellow with big ears and a bigger nose. He had sharp, curved claws, and remnants of what looked to be leaves in the corner of his mouth. And he looked happy to see them, but certainly was not. “Now listen here, you borough scum! I’m in charge here now! However it is you think this is going to go for you, I can assure you that, so long as I am here, it will not be!”

Lou had an idea. “Oh no!” he bellowed. “And here I was, thinking that we were going to be treated poorly, and security would be high! Goodness!”

As most of his brilliant ideas did, Lou’s idea failed.

The creature trudged on over to Lou, and pointed his nightstick at Lou in a threatening manner. “Down here, boy!”

Lou obliged and squatted down to eye level of the jailer.

“See this cell? It appears nice, yes, but things aren’t often what they seem.” The jailer pointed towards the couch in the back, and started walking towards it. “This couch right here? It has a broken spring that stabs you in the arse. These television channels? All in a foreign language. And the WiFi password? Oh, you’re in for a big surprise!”

“A big surprise?” said Garth. “What does that mean?”

“Two words, buddy boy: default password.”

“You monster!” said Garth, sarcastically. “How could you?”

Gognod started to silently weep.

The jailer laughed uncontrollably, before eventually settling down. “Welcome to your nightmare!”

He exited the room and went to introduce himself to the prisoners in the next cell.

“Quiet, prisoners!” they could overhear him saying. “I’m in charge now!”

Chapter 19

Klurbel Azepam was an odd little fellow. He had a few strange quirks here and there, and many ups and downs. He carried around a notebook everywhere he went, and was very quiet and reserved. But he was also very well-put-together. So well-put-together, in fact, that had he known what an ugly Christmas sweater party was, and decided to attend one, his very presence at the event would instantly turn it into a really, really good-looking Christmas sweater party. That is to say, he had a silhouette which was agreeable and lent itself to people taking kindly to him. This made him the perfect candidate for a position with the Soul Scavengers — well, that, and he was the only one that applied.

He'd been a Soul Scavenger for much of the previous four years, with a few breaks in between when business was slow. At the moment, he was stuck on a case that he just could not figure out. A young woman's soul from far out in the Milky Way Galaxy managed to escape the clutches of both Heaven and Hell, and it was up to Klurb to track it down.

“Staci Gibbons,” Klurb's boss said from across his desk. “What's the status of her soul?”

“Currently in limbo, sir. Well, uh, not actual Limbo, but the, uh, figurative limbo . . . sir.”

There was something to be said about a soul that had gone to Limbo. Unfortunately, no one knew what it was, since souls in Limbo tended to stay in Limbo, and communicating with them from the outside was quite a hassle.

“Any leads?”

Klurb shook his head awkwardly. “None yet, sir.”

“Why are you just sitting there, then?” he shouted, slamming his fist on the desk. “Find the soul now, or we will dispose of you!”

“That's a rather, um, harsh way of saying fired, don't you think?”

“Now!”

“Y—yes, sir.”

Klurb gave a half-effort smile, before standing up and leaving the galaxy in an inexplicable manner. He reappeared a moment later on Andraxal-7, a large, burgeoning planet which souls often traveled to during their gap year — or years — before the afterlife.

He often wondered why they called it the afterlife in the first place. Being able to think and feel *was* living, in his mind. What arbitrary traits were considered when referring to the afterlife as *after* life? After all, you could presumably do everything you do now, and more, in the afterlife.

“Hey! Get the hell out of the way!”

Klurb turned around quickly, only to see an angry cab driver waving his hand violently and saying some unspeakable things towards him, including:

“Goddamn orifice-breather! Go back to where you came from! Nobody wants you here!”

Klurb got the message — sort of. His Andraxan wasn’t too good. He chuckled nervously, and jogged over to the sidewalk, making sure to avoid the other oncoming traffic along the way.

“Oh dear,” he mumbled to himself. “These things never seem to work properly.”

By “these things,” Klurbel, of course, meant the very same these things that hated to be referred to as these things. Instead, they preferred their given name: teleportation watch thingys. And by “never seem to work properly,” Klurbel meant that they worked exactly as intended — not very well.

See, these teleportation watch thingys, while getting you from point A to point B, were only precise enough to get you in the general area of point B, as if it had been given very vague directions from an out-of-towner that carried him or herself like a local. In this case, Klurb wanted to travel to the nice comfort of the Bleuché Café, but was instead teleported to the middle of the street outside of it, where an intergalactic transporter, Yyort Salizam, had already been run over earlier that day by the same cab flyer.

Yyort Salizam had been traveling to Andraxal-7 on business when he was run over. Said his soul, when asked about the whole ordeal on his way to the afterlife:

“I sure hope I did not inconvenience the gentleman with my untimely death. Is his car alright? I feel terrible about all of this.”

The flyer of the vehicle could not be reached for comment, and subsequent attempts to follow-up with him via teleportation led to more cab-related deaths.

“Ah, yes, here we are. The Bleuché Café,” Klurb said, smiling softly. He walked through the front door, which had all sorts of bells and whistles — church bells, cowbells, bicycle bells, hand bells, hand whistles, slide whistles, police whistles, and dog whistles— as decoration.

“Welcome to the Bleuché Café. How may I— oh, Klurbel! So nice to see you.”

“Hello there. Nice to see you, too,” he replied.

“How’s your job going as an exciting *Soul Scavenger*?”

“Well,” Klurb said. “Um, that’s precisely why I’m here.”

“Please, take a seat,” the woman said, sitting down at the nearest table. “What can I help you with?”

“Well, I’m in sort of a, uh, predicament . . .”

Klurb is having second thoughts about his job. He enjoys it greatly, and the hours are great, but he’s not so sure that he should be determining whether or not peoples’ souls should just be free to do as they please, or whether he should deliver them to their final resting place. Besides, he wasn’t even sure if the afterlife even existed. He’d never actually seen it. What if he’s bringing them to some sort of soul-sucking soul slave labor job? His boss had joked about it, but he was a hard man to read when it came to whether or not he was telling a joke or was serious.

Chapter 20

“Well, this is quite the predicament,” Lou complained, like most complainers did.

Garth gave a death stare to Lou, the pure intensity of which stirred up repressed memories of buzzing bees and screaming Xanathians. “At least you’re only in the company of *one* absolute moron.”

“Wait a minute,” said Lou. “I almost forgot. You’re just a janitor! Where do you get off calling *me* a moron?”

Garth scoffed. “It’s only temporary.”

“Yeah. Sure,” said Lou.

In that moment, a small shadow cast itself in the doorway — which still ought to be named something else, like non-door orifice, clearly-not-a-doorway way, or empty space through which people walk. It was the jailer, small stature and all.

“What are you lot babbling on about?” he howled. “This was once a library, you know! Keep it down!”

The prisoners all went quiet — well, besides Gognod, who was in the corner playing rock-paper-scissors with himself, never thinking to use the scissors to cut the unprocessed paper holding his fingers together and preventing him from selecting rock for either player. “Paper! Paper. No! No win, no lose,” he mumbled.

“Quiet, creature!” the jailer demanded.

This made him feel powerful.

Garth rose to his feet. “Excuse me, sir.”

The jailer ran up to Garth and waved his nightstick in Garth’s face. “Quiet!”

“Now listen here, you scum!” said the jailer. “It looks like the governor has chosen to take mercy on you. The city would like to offer you lot plea deals.”

“Plea deals?” said Lou. “But we’ve done nothing wrong!”

“Silence! I’m in charge here!” He paused for dramatic effect. “The deal is, if you lot plead guilty right here and now, we’re prepared to carry out your sentences immediately.”

“What would be the sentence?” asked Lou.

“Death via Trendelbeast!”

Lou grimaced. “Oh, um, okay. And if we plead not guilty?”

“Don’t be a petulant whiner! Accept the consequences of your actions!”

“What actions?” said Lou. “I still have no idea what we’ve actually done!”

“Exactly!” said the jailer.

Garth sneezed. “But what if we *do* plead not guilty?”

“Well, then, obviously there would be a trial,” the jailer said, confused at the odd question. “But nobody wants that.”

“I, for one, would,” said Lou.

Garth nodded. “I concur.”

“. . . and you, creature?”

“Gognod,” said Gognod, presumably meaning he wanted a trial as well.

The jailer let out a deep sigh and rolled his eyes. “Ugh, fine. Come with me, then.”

Garth walked over to Gognod, and nudged him to come along with him and Lou. Gognod didn’t feel the nudge, as he was too busy peering into the adjacent cell, where his new friends, Zaxx and Jelch, were being given the same exact choice he had just been given only moments before.

“Seems like a pretty reasonable proposition,” said Zaxx.

Jelch looked over to Zaxx and shrugged. “Yeah, that seems fairly fair.”

Out of the dark, a giant creature appeared before them. It had x,y,z,and abc. It was the Trendelbeast of Arthuria.*

Jelch’s lip trembled in terror.

The Trendelbeast came within mere inches of his face, and smelled him. “Mmmm,” it growled.

“I take it back!” he screamed. “I don’t want to die!”

The Trendelbeast of Arthuria let out a loud roar, and swallowed him whole.

“Next!” the other jailer yelled.

Zaxx looked over to the jailer, and then the Trendelbeast, with a terrified look. “Oh, fuc—”

The Trendelbeast put its hand to its belly, and let out a ghastly burp before licking its lips.

“Gognod,” said Garth, putting his hand on Gognod’s shoulder. “We better get going before that happens to us.”

Gognod nodded his head, and stood up. As they and Lou exited the cell, a glimmering light blinded them, their eyes having to quickly readjust to seeing the sun.

Arthuria’s Sun didn’t like being a sight for sore eyes. Underneath its steamy hot exterior was a kind soul, with agreeable political opinions and a penchant for charity. But it didn’t matter. No one cared for the plight of the Sun. Even the simplest “hello, how are you today,” or “how about that game last night,” was met with rude hand-blocking gestures, and persons averting eye contact via shade or sunglasses or looking down at their chiralitic mirroring devices.

The *Moon* never had these issues. People all loved the *Moon*. They’d sing about it, dance under its light, and study its beauty. But no, not the Sun. The Sun was too bright and cheery for that. Perhaps if the Sun would be all dark and gloomy once in a while, some miserable old soul would at least pity it and pretend to like it. But alas, it was not dark and gloomy like the Moon, so it was sentenced to a life of cheery, bright, sad, loneliness.

Lou, Garth, and Gognod shuffled their feet down the hallway, Gognod making audible clanking noises with each step to simulate having their legs bound as well.

“That’s the sound we’re looking for!” shouted the jailer. “If I had it my way, we’d tape your mouths shut, and that’d be the *only* sound you lot could make!”

“Glad he doesn't have it his way,” Lou whispered to Gognod.

“What was that?” said the jailer.

“Oh, um, I was telling him how nicely, uhmm, your tail is kept.”

The jailer looked back at Lou with a questionable expression. “Yes, yes. I suppose it is, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Hmmpff,” said the jailer.

In the distance — approximately 30 feet ahead — was the entrance to the courtroom. It had large, heavy, wooden doors that resembled those you’d see if you visited an olde hamlet village’s pub. It had a sizeable bronze door knocker in the center of it that was inaccessible to Arthurians without opposable thumbs, and it had a metal trim that was worn and rusted. Across the top of the courthouse door frame were the words “Court House.” Mob City being comparatively wealthy in contrast to its surrounding cities, it could afford the extra space on the signage.

The jailer approached the door and knocked on it in a sequence that went as follows: knock knock knock, knock knock, knock knock knock.

The doors flew open, and a large creature answered it. “For the last time, Gorbun, there is no secret password. Knock like a normal person.”

Gorbun hated when he was challenged in front of prisoners. “Y–Yes, sir.”

The large creature let out a deep breath and stepped aside. “On you go, then.”

Inside was a courtroom full of filthy animals, who, in turn, thought the same of the three creatures walking through the door at that very moment. They all exchanged disgusted looks with each other, before the three prisoners made it to their table.

“What the hell is this place?” Lou asked Garth. “It looks like a jungle.”

“It’s a forest,” said Garth. “Are you really that dense?”

“As dense as a jungle, apparently.” Lou’s joke failed to land, instead being blown away into the dense jungle, never to be mentioned by anyone again.

“Yes, it is very apparent.” Garth turned away from Lou just as the bailiff was entering the courtroom.

“All rise!” he shouted. “For the honorable — ah, who cares. Sit down! All of you!”

The judge entered the courtroom behind the bailiff. He was a bottom-heavy, overweight creature with frail arms, and a large third leg that masqueraded as a tail and rested on the ground. He walked on all fours over to the bench, and plopped down in his ergonomically-designed chair.

A light cough was heard emanating from his mouth. “Strike that from the record!” he shouted.

The stenographer forced a smile and hit the backspace button somewhere between six and sixteen times.

The judge now focused his attention on the defendants before him. “Mr. Fynnegun, strange rock creature, and humanoid: you stand accused of violating ordinance CE104.3.12a, a crime that carries a very serious punishment. How do you plead?”

“Not guilty, sir,” said Garth.

“And you?”

Lou stood up momentarily. “Not guilty.”

Garth’s plea of not guilty was taken as, well, not guilty. Lou’s, on the other hand, was said in such a manner that it resembled an old Marsul dialect, where the sound nāt 'gIltē translated roughly to “please, sir, I’ve tripped on an acorn in the hallway, and I’m in need of medical assistance!”

“Acorn?” said the judge.

“What? No,” which translated roughly to: “yes, sir, an acorn.”

“Alright, then. Bailiff! Check the hallway for acorns!”

“Yes, sir,” said the bailiff.

The judge leaned in and threw a menacing look at Lou. “Might I remind you, Earth man, that lying to the court is a capital offense!”

“I’d never do such a thing, Your Honor.”

“Hmm, okay.” The judge motioned back the bailiff. “No need, it’s quite alright.”

“So I’ll ask you once more, Earth man: how do you plead?”

Lou said it with slightly less inflection on the last syllable this time, which, in Marsul, coincidentally turned the phrase into “not guilty, Your Honor.”

“Not guilty, you say?” The judge turned to the bailiff and mumbled something or another. “Were you three not offered a plea deal?”

“We tried, Your Honor,” said Gorbun, who also moonlighted as lead prosecutor.

“And they didn’t take it?”

“Surprisingly not,” he said.

“You, Earth man,” said the judge. “Why didn’t you accept the plea deal?”

Lou took ahold of the microphone once more. “Because we’re innocent, Your Honor.”

This bemused the judge. “Innocent? Ha ha. The esteemed officers of the Intergalactic Highway Patrol do not arrest innocent people, my boy!”

By definition, they didn’t. All persons brought before the court by the IHP were presumed guilty until proven innocent, found to be unfit to testify on their own behalf —unless they were an elected official, or someone that bribed them.

“I’m still not sure why we were arrested in the first place,” said Lou, hoping for some clarity on the matter from a higher authority.

“Look, he’s done it again!” yelled Gorbun. “Right in front of me mum, too!”

“One more outburst like that, Earth man, and I’ll hold you in contempt!”

“But I— “

“Watch it now!” said the judge. He took a moment to compose himself, before giving the rude defendant another chance. “Now look: we’ve gone through the hassle of getting you a jury of your peers. Both I and Mr. Gorbun here have taken time out of our day to give you your day in court. So, please, respect the process.”

“Respect the process? Jury of my peers? What peers? You’re all a bunch of animals! This is, quite literally, a kangaroo court! Look at that juror right there. Kangaroo! And the one next to him? Hmm. Another kangaroo! You’re all kangaroos, every single one of you!”

The entire room filled with gasps and horror at what Lou had just said.

“What?” said Lou. “I’ve done nothing wrong here.”

“Are you mad?” whispered Garth. “You can’t say those things!”

“What *things*?”

“Those things you just said.”

“What? Kangaroo? Court?”

“Both!” said Garth.

“Well, why not?”

Garth gritted his teeth, while still trying to keep a straight face for the jury to see. “The proper terms are marsupial, and mob, respectively!”

“Marsupial and mob?” Lou said. “But he literally is a kangaroo!”

Bang bang bang!

“Alright, alright, settle down now!” the judge said, banging his gavel wildly and recklessly before pointing it at Lou, Garth, and Gognod in a threatening, accusatory fashion. “Mr. Fynnegun. Earth man. Rock creature . . .”

“Gognod,” Gognod corrected the judge.

“I find you all guilty!” shouted the judge. “Guilty of CE104.3.12a, guilty of hate speech, and guilty of just being very unlikeable persons in my courtroom. I sentence you to death by Trendelbeast, and may the *their god* have mercy on your soul.”

“Death?” said Lou.

“Nice going,” added Garth.

The judge squinted his eyes to look more intimidating, and gave a big frown to the death row inmates across from him. “Any last words?”

“Last words?” Lou said. “Oh, yes, I have quite a few!”

There was a long dramatic pause.

“Well, er, this is uncharted territory. Er, okay, get on with it then,” said the judge.

“Well, uhh, first off, this absolutely was not a fair trial! I mean, we didn’t get to call any witnesses, we weren’t given a lawyer— “

“Hey!” shouted a voice from the back.

Lou turned around to see a slovenly wombat carrying a briefcase and wearing a nice, refined Italian suit, in direct contrast with his coworkers, who much preferred the boxy look and how powerful it made them feel. On his lapel was his nametag, which read “Jack Johnson, Johnson, Johnson, Greer, & Abernathy LLC.”

“Oh, wait. Are you our lawyer?” said Lou.

“Well, *yeah*,” he said. “Whaddya fink I dressed up for?”

“Why are you back there, then? Shouldn’t you be up here, you know . . . *defending* us?”

Mr. Johnson, Johnson, Johnson, Greer, & Abernathy LLC shrugged. “Didn’t want to impose.”

He got up from the chair in which he was slumped down, and slothed over towards Lou. “I’m here representing Johnson, Johnson, Johnson, Greer, & Abernathy LLC, Smith, Finch, Gray, and Feldman, & Greer, Greer, Greer, & Associates & Associates — no relation to the last gentleman.”

Lou shook his head, and turned back towards the bench.

“Anything else?” said the judge.

“Yes, and another thing: nowhere have we actually seen what this law states, or how it applies to us. How can we be sure we’re in compliance with a law if we can’t actually find out what the law says?”

“Is that all?”

“Oh, um, can I keep going?”

“Would be rather rude to interrupt, I’d say.”

Gorbun nodded his head in agreement.

“So I can keep on talking, as long as I want, and you can’t interrupt me?”

“It behooves the court to not, yes,” said the judge.

A light bulb went off in Lou's head — or so he thought. Really, it was residual buzzing.

"Ahem," he said out loud for some strange reason.

Chapter 21

Somewhere far-removed from Lou, Garth, and Gognod, in the dark almost-vacuum of space, floated a remarkably impressive spacecraft called *The Photo Synthesizer*, and, along with it, its remarkably *unimpressive* captain, Vluogren, who was listening to an olde Svetsko traditional song, which went as follows:

*Get your reinforced carbon-based pyrotechnic initiator runnin’
Head out on the transgalactic freeway
Lookin’ for adventures and whatnot
And whatever else I may come across along the way*

The rebellious lyrics and cool tone resonated with Vluogren, making him feel feelings of being wild and free, like he was on top of the world — at least the one he called home. Others called the world “a tragic mistake,” “good for a few pints, but not much else,” or, in the case of one very offended Emperor Slugglo, “not for sale!”

Emperor Slugglo the Great. Emperor Slugglo the Spunky. Emperor Slugglo the originally hot-headed, but now more even-tempered Phlegmatic. The same Emperor Slugglo that, when asked to give his inauguration address, instead decided to go into dormancy for the remainder of his term, “because that’s what trees do when the going gets tough, baby.”

Vluogren had a similar philosophy, albeit with a slight paraphrase. *His* life philosophy was more akin to: “what financial problems? Who said anything about financial problems? To hell with you all, I’m going into dormancy!”

In fact, it was his great and wondrous dormancy that allowed him to live in the aforementioned almost-vacuum of space for long periods of time — as opposed to those of lesser-dormancy, who, upon being exposed to the almost-vacuum of space, were summarily thrilled to be up there, seeing all of the natural wonders of the galaxy, but just as quickly *not* thrilled when they died of asphyxiation.

To keep up appearances, however, and to remain modest, Vluogren built a wooden spacecraft around himself, so as to not spoil the fun for everyone else when they realized how much bigger and better his dormancy was compared to their own. He thought it only fair to allow others to join in on the fun.

Fun, after all, was hard to come by on his home planet. Deciduan children couldn't play-fight with wooden swords without sacrificing a limb or two for the construction of said swords. They couldn't play with matches, for fear of eradicating their entire species. They couldn't even throw rocks at things, as it was considered rude by a great deal of the public. All they could do was sit back, and wait for their eventual deaths — which had never been proven to happen from old age, and didn't happen from unnatural causes due to all the rules and superstitions of the Deciduan people. It was quite a miserable and crowded existence.

Vluogren bobbed and weaved his head back and forth, over and under, plucking his fingers in such a manner that occasionally mirrored the music being played. Little did he know, the beautiful sound waves emanating from his earbuds into his soul were the harrowing cries of his ancestors, bellowing out as they were force-fed electromagnetic waves via the dreaded Fender Concert Amplifier.

“Vluogren! Vluogren!”

Vluogren continued bobbing his head, and started tapping his feet. *“Like a true sapling child, we were—”*

“Vluogren!”

Vluogren jumped to attention, pulling out the cord to the earbuds in doing so. “Yes, Madam!” he said, saluting the dark, shadowy, hooded figure that appeared on his screen.

“What is that dreadful noise?”

Vluogren's heart rate increased ever-so-slightly, this having less to do with the fact that he was quite intimidated by said dark, shadowy hooded figure on the screen — and he *was* intimidated by them — but more to do with the fact that quickly rising to his feet often had that effect on him. He fumbled around frantically with the music-playing device, and finally got it to stop. “Apologies, Madam!”

The figure stepped closer to their camera, having the effect of getting larger on Vluogren's screen, and removed their hood. Under it was Madam Dunbotty Scerchel, Secretary of the Park Rangers Alliance, and co-Secretary of the Bellum Sacrum branch of the Covenant of the Weald.

Madam Dunbotty opened her mouth to speak, and subsequently did so. “Vluogren, my servant, how is our plan coming along?”

“Sorry, what?”

“How is our plan coming along?”

Vluogren scratched his head. “Well, er, you're going to have to be more specific than that. Which one, Madam?”

“The heretic!”

“Hmm, let’s see.” Vluogren opened his desk drawer, and scoured through stacks and stacks of papers, before finally placing a packet on top of his desk. “Ah, here we are! Enemies of the state. We have Rowler Sivvins from Andraxal-7. Of course both you and I — I’ll be sure to leave that entry out. Bon Scott . . .”

“GARTH FYNNEGUN, DESTROYER OF WORLDS AND KEEPER OF BEES!”

“Oh! Right. Ahem.” Vluogren gulped cautiously, and feigned a sinister smile. “All is going according to plan, Madam. The end is nigh for Garth Fynnegan!”

Madam Dunbotty laughed maniacally, with Vluogren joining-in soon thereafter.

Chapter 22

Lou shook his head and gave a brief, sad chuckle. “And the pot holes! Don’t even get me started on the pot holes . . .”

The judge snored loudly, as did the entire room — the papers on the prosecutor’s desk blowing themselves further to the edge with each exhalation.

“The pot holes are ridiculous! You can’t go thirty feet without hitting one and messing up your alignment!”

“Anything . . . er, else?” the judge mumbled in his sleep.

“Loads more! People who don’t use their blinkers. Friends who cannot admit that they’ll never watch a show that’s been over for eight years, and insist that you don’t give them spoilers. Corgis.”

“Yes, mmm . . . yes. Corgis,” snored the judge.

“Wait a minute, are you asleep?”

“I suppose. Mmmhmm,” he replied.

Lou smirked, before touching his fingers together, and releasing himself from his cuffs. “I can’t believe that worked!”

“Quiet, you fool!” whispered Garth, loudly.

“I can’t believe that worked,” whispered Lou, before doing a double-take. “Wait, I thought you were asleep, too?”

“No,” he said, releasing himself from his own cuffs. “I was only pretending to be asleep to encourage others to actually fall asleep.”

Lou turned his head to the side slightly, and gave Garth an odd look. “Sort of like how yawning is contagious?”

“What? No! Yawning is not contagious!”

“I dunno,” said Lou. “It seems contagious.”

“No, that’s all a bunch of bollocks!” replied Garth.

“I mean, think about it: how often have you yawned directly after you saw someone else do so?”

“Never!”

“Really?”

“Well, not never, but—wait, why are we discussing yawning? Let’s make our escape!”

“Okay. But we need to get Gognod first,” said Lou, pointing with his chin in the direction of Gognod.

The two of them walked quietly towards the other end of their table, where Gognod was cradling a random marsupial, and snoring loudly and coarsely.

“Gognod,” said Garth. “Gognod.”

Gognod jumped to his feet, and gritted his rocky teeth, letting out a thunderous roar.

“Gognod! No!” said Lou.

The judge and the others awoke in horror from the sound, as the terrifying and heroic rock creature thrust his arms apart, tearing his shirt that he was now wearing, and his cuffs, in the process.

The bailiff ran over to Gognod to re-apprehend him, but the rock creature raised his fist up in a circular motion, carrying the bailiff’s chin and punching him up through the ceiling. The others soon dropped their weapons and fled in a stampede, trampling each other as they ran for the exit. He let out one more thunderous roar, before smashing the bench where the judge had sat.

“No more nice Gognod!” he yelled, turning to Lou and Garth. “Follow Gognod! Know way out!”

“Great work, Gognod!” shouted Lou.

“Gognod, that was amazing!” said Garth.

“Gognod,” he said, smiling.

“Gognod!” Lou and Garth chanted in unison. “Gognod! Gognod! Gognod! Gognod!”

“Gognod!”

Gognod opened his eyes to see Lou and Garth hunched down over him, with Garth’s mouth in the end stages of closing, as if he’d just shouted something along the lines of “Gognod!”

“Gognod,” said Garth. “We have to get out of here.”

“Yes, Gognod,” said Lou. “Come on.”

Lou and Garth helped Gognod to his feet, before showing him how to release his cuffs.

“But we have to be quiet,” Garth said, putting his index finger up to his lips in such a manner that said, “quiet down now, or we’ll all be in big, big trouble when they awaken.”

The three of them slowly headed for the exit, unintentionally making a few clumsy noises with each step. As they opened the large door at the back of the courtroom, it creaked just a tad bit, but enough of a tad bit to awaken everyone else in the room.

The judge stretched his arms out wide, and let out a sizeable yawn. “Mmm,” he said. “What, erm, in the hell is going on?” He let out another sizeable yawn.

“The prisoners!” shouted one man, before letting out an exaggerated yawn. “They’re escaping!”

All eyes suddenly went to the exit door, which led more directly to the exit to the impound lot, but was not the one that Lou, Garth, and Gognod went through. Instead, they went through the door in which they came in, which was no longer an exit door after some minor construction on the place during their trial.

“Crap!” whispered Lou, “Sounds like we’ve awoken them!”

“What do?” cried Gognod.

“Calm down,” said Garth. “I know what to do.”

Garth peeked his head into the hallway to make sure the coast was clear. “Okay. So, here’s the plan: I’ll go this way, and you two also go this way, but stay back so they don’t think we’re together.”

Lou knew where Garth was going with this. “So, what, you’re going to distract them while we sneak into the camera room and find the impound lot?”

“No,” he whispered. “I just don’t like you, and would prefer if you kept your distance.”

“Oh, shut up!” Lou shouted.

“Quiet!” said Garth.

Suddenly, two guards walking down the hallway spotted the three prisoners — not because Lou and Garth were shouting, but because they were still peeking their heads out into the hallway, and they were pretty hard to miss. “The prisoners! Stop them!”

“Shit,” said Garth. “Come on!”

The three of them took off down the other end of the hallway, away from the exit to the lobby and unaware of where this other end would take them. They reached a four-way junction, and steered to the right. The guards were in hot pursuit.

“4-2 to Command: we’re in pursuit of the prisoners! They’re headed west down the hallway!”

“Command to 4-2: which hallway?”

*Officer Cammelput was not very good with giving directions. “Well, erm, you know the hallways that are just past the courthouse, like, I dunno, fifty feet or something past it, where there’s like three other hallways?”

“Negative, 4-2. Which corridor?”

“Fourth corridor. I think.”

“There is no fourth corridor,” said the creature on the other end of the radio. He, too, was bad at giving directions, but even worse at receiving them, so it didn’t matter anyways. It also didn’t matter, because their radios mysteriously stopped working all of a sudden. *Maybe the arrival of the delivery driver wanting to kill Garth fuzzied the radio signals. Being a delivery driver had its perks. You could

cruise to your own music, x, and also have the gate codes to every major galactic epicenter's black hole.

"Looks like we're on our own," said Cammelput to his partner. "Let's catch those degenerates!"

Lou, Garth, and Gognod sprinted down the second corridor, trying to lose the two overweight security guards.

"Bear left!" shouted Garth. "Maybe we can separate from them here!"

They turned the corner, and took off in that direction.

Officer Cammelput and his partner followed behind, turning the corner a few seconds after the three prisoners did. Around it, they saw Lou, Garth, and Gognod, running off in the distance. It wasn't a large distance, mind you — it couldn't have been more than sixty to seventy feet — but Officer Cammelput had seen enough action movies to know that anything more than twenty to thirty feet away was impossible to make-up on foot. "Ah, damn!" he shouted. "We've lost them!" he shouted again.

This wasn't an unusual situation he found himself in. Of the roughly seventeen attempted escapes on his watch that month, fifteen of the prisoners had managed to succeed in their endeavors, while the other two were his coworkers trying unsuccessfully to get away from his incessant rambling about Sheryl from reception.

Sheryl, of course, couldn't stop her own incessant rambling about Officer Cammelput. "What a creep!" she would say. "He thinks he's *so* smooth, but he's really not."

"I think we've lost them," said Lou. "Can we stop running?"

"Yes, yes. I am getting rather tired," said Garth.

"Gognod," said Gognod, which probably meant "Gognod, too."

They looked around for a few moments, hoping to find something that would give them some semblance of where they were in the winding and confusing building.

They didn't. But what they *did* find was the first leg of their escape to be incredibly easy. Perhaps *too* easy.

An unsteady feeling engulfed Garth, making him very nervous. A few of his body's chemicals had decided to start moping around with all the negative Nancies, like the squatters they were — the squatters preferring the term “cAMPers” — and caused him to feel this way.

After a short while, the feeling faded, but not before Garth bellowed out "why did they stop chasing us? Oh, this is all very troublesome."

Garth did not feel troublesome because he thought something was amiss, rather he genuinely enjoyed being chased. Perhaps it was some sort of animalistic desire to feel wild and free, or perhaps it simply brought him back to Tiurus 5a, where he and his brother would play intergalactic highway patrol officers and bank robbers together. Garth, of course, being the youngest, would always be made to play the antagonistic bank robber, while his older brother would be in lukewarm pursuit.

But something *was* amiss. Not the sort of something that concerned just Lou, Garth, and Gognod, but the sort of something that concerned every living creature in the multiverse.

“Very troublesome, indeed,” Garth said.

“Do you think it’s a trap?” asked Lou. He had heard far too many times of traps being set on unsuspecting victims to let it happen to him.

“I’m not sure. But we better not concern ourselves with the possibility.”

“Right.”

Garth started off down one of the corridors. “Alright. Come on, then. We don’t have all day.”

“Ugh. Gognod,” said Gognod.

Lou leaned in towards him. “I know, right?”

“Stop making sounds, you two! You’re always making *sounds*. If you focused less on making *sounds*, and more on making *decisions*, maybe we wouldn’t be in this mess in the first place.

“Us?” Lou scoffed. "You’re the one who— “

Garth cupped his hands around his mouth, emulating a person speaking on a megaphone. “Oh! Look everyone, another *sound!*”

“Oh, be quiet! Let’s just go,” said Lou.

They proceeded to follow their intuition — and a conveniently-placed yellow line on the floor — towards, er . . . something. Which exact something it was, they were unsure, but they sure hoped it was the impound lot.

As they rounded the next corner, the trio ran into another creature. It was a short and stout creature, having a large head and a few webbed tentacles moving about. It was blue-ish and slimy, and had two large ears on the sides of its head. The creature wasn’t a guard, it seemed. If it was, it would probably be a pretty poor one, given it wasn’t currently arresting Lou, Garth, and Gognod.

The creature looked at the three creatures before him. They were cylindrical, pale, smelled profusely, and looked as if they’d just seen a ghost. And not a very pleasant ghost at that.

The creature figured that he’d eventually make a very pleasant-looking ghost. After all, he took fantastic care of his tentacles, getting a cephalocure every other week at the salon. His skin was flawless, keeping out of the light as much as possible and preferring an office down in the basement. And he always made sure to get all of his vitamins — except the dreaded vitamin D, of course.

He looked at the three cylindrical people in front of him once more, and concluded that they definitely were not the escaped prisoners. If they were, they’d be pretty poor ones, given they were still standing there and all.

“Hello,” said Garth. “Can you help us?”

The creature gave Garth a funny look, and scratched its head with one of its tentacles. He had no idea what the odd sounds were coming from Garth’s feeding hole, but assumed they were an attempt at speech. “*DHCCHFMRN!” he shouted.

Garth nodded to build some rapport with the creature. His Marsul wasn’t too good, but he did know how to say a single phrase, which luckily translated to: “where is the impound lot?”

Coincidentally, the creature only knew one Tiurian phrase, which happened to be: “the impound lot is three hallways down that way, bang a uey around the corner, and it’s behind the second door on the left.”

The English translation of the creature’s directions was similar, but with a slightly Americanized tinge added throughout. This translation made *absolutely sure* to include the words “freedom,” “patriotism,” and “laissez-faire capitalism” interspersed between the relevant information.

“Oh, er, thank you,” said Lou, which, in Marsul, translated to: “Oi! Get yer greasy tentacles away from us, you cephallic scum!”

The creature scurried off.

“What the hell is a uey?” Garth asked.

Lou snickered. “Oh, something you *don't* know?”

“I don't see *you* ‘banging a uey!’”

Lou led the group down the hallways, and banged a uey. “It means a u-turn. Jeez. Didn't learn that at Harvard, did you?”

“What the hell is Harvard?”

Lou shook his head. “Nevermind.”

He peered down the corridor. “There,” he said, pointing to the second door on the left. “That should be the door to the impound lot.”

It was.

Garth reached for the door knob and jiggled it. “It's stuck!” he shouted.

Lou tried his hand at it to double-check. “We're in,” he said confidently. “Let's go.”

Just then, an alarm sounded in the building. “Code walker! Code walker! Seal all exits!” said a voice over the speaker. “Panic and worry! Don't not fret! This is my first day, I'm not sure what else to say!”

Garth looked towards Lou with a worried expression, his peripheral vision catching a glimpse of armed guards running their way on the way towards facing Lou. “Not good!” he shouted.

Despite its best efforts to remain hidden, the trio spotted their spacecraft directly ahead of them.

“Let's get the *hell* out of here!” said Garth. “I'm never coming back to this dreadful planet again . . .”

Lou looked back to see Garth muttering to himself. “Garth! C’mon, we have armed guards chasing us! Quit talking, and c’mon!”

Garth sprinted to catch-up with the group, and they boarded the spacecraft. “Henry!” he bellowed out.

"Yes, yes, I know," said Henry. "Starting the engine. Ugh."

"I hadn't even thought of that yet. How did you—"

"Oh, what, I can't make educated guesses on my own?"

"I didn't say that, I—"

"No, you just thought it."

Garth rolled his eyes.

“Oh, and Henry?” Lou said.

“Yes,” he replied.

“Yes as in *yes*, or yes as in *what can I do for you?*”

“Yes?” he repeated, this time making sure the ending was inflected in just the right manner so as to make it clear that he meant the latter.

“Can you—”

“Yes.”

Lou smiled. “Ah, gotcha. Thanks.”

Garth was not amused. “While you two nitwits are chatting it up and wasting time, I’m going to go do something productive — sleep.”

“Sleep?” said Lou. “What about the men chasing us?”

“Gognod,” said Gognod.

“What’s the point of having an autonomous piloting system if I don’t use it when piloting is the most difficult, and frankly, the most boring?” He reached down and picked up a sleep mask from the table to his right.

“Well, what if something goes wrong? What if the system fails?”

“Then Gognod will take over. Despite not being able to chew with his mouth closed, or” — he looked at Gognod with a disgusted look — “shower once in a while, he can at least pilot a ship. More than I can say about you.”

“Enough with the pointless insults! *You* got us into this situation, so it’s up to *you* to get us out of it!”

Garth imagined himself sighing deeply, apologizing for his rude behavior, taking control of the situation, and getting the *hell* out of Dodge — whatever that meant. And he *hated* it. “No,” he said bluntly, before walking away.

Lou shrugged and threw his hands up. “Fine!” he said. “We don’t need you anyways!”

He turned around to face Gognod.

“That’s what I’ve been telling you from the start!” said a distant voice, presumably of Fynnegun origin.

“Gognod,” said Lou. “Can you actually fly this thing?”

“Gognod good pilot.”

“Just put the damn spacecraft in autopilot!” said the distant voice.

Gognod pressed a large button — the wrong button — and steam started shooting from the sides of the ship. “Auto not work.”

“Ughhh,” the voice groaned.

Garth stormed back into the cockpit. “Out of the way!”

“Thought you were going to sleep?”

Garth stared at Lou angrily. “Hard to sleep knowing you two will mess everything up and keep us stranded here.”

“Might, er, I suggest something, sir?” Henry pulled up a graphic on the ship’s main user interface screen showing two dots equally distant from and above a parabola. It was a smiley face. “Perhaps you could simply . . . find an alternative means of transportation. Leave me behind, right? I seem to have, well, made friends here!”

Garth ignored Henry’s remarks. “Henry!”

The parabola grew deeper. “Yes?” he said excitedly, his y-axis on the verge of exploding.

“Set course for Sulphur Resorts. Initiate autopilot mode.”

Henry frowned. “Y-yes, sir . . .”

Garth stood up from the Captain’s chair and skirted past Lou and Gognod. “*Now* I’m going to sleep,” he said. “For all of our sakes, don’t touch anything.”

Chapter 23

“Yes, that does seem like quite a predicament. Poor thing.”

Klurb looked at the woman across from him, confused. “But I haven’t even told you the, um, predicament yet . . .”

“A woman’s intuition is a powerful thing, dear.” She smiled softly at Klurb.

Klurb was skeptical of her abilities, but thought it best to refrain from challenging her. “So what do you think I should do?”

“Keep on your current path, Klurbel. It may seem tough now, but everything will work out in the end.”

Klurb restlessly tapped his fingers on the table, and sighed. “But what if it doesn’t? What if what I’m, uh, doing is, well, hurting people?”

“Klurbel, listen to me. You’re the sweetest boy a mother could ever ask for. You could *never* harm a soul. *Ever*”

“Well, I’m afraid that, um, that may be exactly what I’m doing now, mother.”

Klurbel’s mother had a worried expression on her face. “Oh, Klurbie, what have you gotten yourself into?”

“Um, I don’t know, to be honest.” He paused to collect his thoughts. “You know, I, uh, like my job and all. The benefits are good, and the, um, work hours, the work hours, are great. It’s just that . . .”

“Yes, Klurbie?” She leaned in closely.

“Who am I to interfere with the natural order of things?”

“Natural order of things? Sweetie, everyone knows that when people die, they go to Heaven or Hell. You’re not interfering at all.”

“Am I not?” he said. “If it’s so natural, why do Soul Scavengers even, well, exist? I take souls, usually against their, uh, will, and deliver them to a very secretive organization that *says* they take them to either Heaven or Hell, but there’s no way to actually, um, tell. What if he’s bringing them to some sort of soul-sucking soul slave labor job? My boss, who has a very suspicious and, uh, villainous look to him, has joked about that very thing. He’s a very hard man to read when it comes to things like that, and I can’t quite tell if he’s joking or not. And, well, this is all assuming there even *is* a, uh, Heaven and Hell.”

Klurb’s mother placed her hand on Klurb’s shoulder. “Don’t be ridiculous, Klurbie! *Of course* there’s a Heaven and Hell! Where do you think Aunt Moorie went after she passed — God rest her soul?”

Klurb knew the answer. In fact, in a massive oversight on the part of Klurb’s boss, he’d been the Scavenger assigned her case. When he confronted his Aunt Moorie, she was just entering the Galapago Galaxy. She gave Klurb some sort of sob story about never having had the time to travel before, and how she was so excited to be able to do so now.

“I know, I just—”

Klurb’s mother gave him a scornful look.

“Oh, um, God rest her soul. But I know , I just figured that*”

Chapter 24

Garth awoke to the sight of pure darkness. He reached up to take off his sleep mask, and before him was the sight of pure darkness with some slightly sparkly stars in the background. “Much better,” he said.

Garth sat up. Garth turned his body towards the edge of the bed. Garth rose to his feet, and briskly walked to the bathroom. Garth grabbed his toothbrush. Garth brushed and brushed until every last remnant of food and plaque were removed from his teeth. Garth placed his toothbrush down, and rinsed out his mouth. Garth returned to his bed and straightened up his sheets, followed by his blankets and his pillows, and Garth did so until not a single wrinkle was seen. Garth about-faced towards his closet. Garth opened the door. Garth picked out his attire, choosing between the black tie or the slightly less black tie. Garth put on his jacket. Garth slid into his trousers, and zipped them up. Garth opened the doors leading out of the living quarters, and walked through them. Garth entered the cockpit.

“Get out of my seat.”

Lou unbuckled himself, and stood up. “Fine, whatever. Take it.”

Garth sat down. Garth pulled the buckle over him. Garth buckled the buckle. Garth looked maliciously at Lou, and then with disgust at Gognod, who was picking his nose. Garth let out a deep sigh and Garth shook his head. Garth opened his mouth to speak.

“Henry, make me a coffee.”

“Yes, sir. Right away.”

Garth waited. And waited. And waited. Garth put his hand out and grabbed his coffee from the mechanical arm holding it. Garth sipped his coffee. Garth spit his coffee out, and Garth demanded one that wasn't so smoldering. Garth waited once more.

“Double-time!” Garth shouted.

Garth grabbed the next coffee. Garth inspected its temperature with a hovering hand. Garth sipped the coffee, and then swallowed it. Garth put his coffee back down. Garth looked forward. Garth crossed his arms.

“Is he usually like this?” whispered Lou.

Gognod nodded.

Lou looked towards Garth, wondering why in the hell he cared what was wrong with him, before turning back to Gognod. “What’s wrong with him?”

Gognod shrugged, so as to say “Gognod not know.” “Gognod not know,” he said.

“I can hear you both talking, you know!” Garth turned his attention towards them and gave them disapproving looks. Garth devised an evil plan to take his revenge on them in his head. Garth locked the plan away in the I.O.U. area of his brain. Garth sighed once more.

Lou cleared his throat.

There was silence.

He cleared his throat a little bit louder this time.

Still, silence.

Lou cleared his throat a third time, waiting for—

“What?” Garth shouted.

“Are you not even going to ask about our daring escape?”

Garth picked up his coffee. Garth took another sip of it. Garth put his coffee back down. “No.”

“Well, it was *daring*! And, and . . . and very dangerous, I might add!”

“Bad people scary,” said Gognod.

Garth shrugged. Garth didn’t care. “Well, *I’m* alive, so that’s what *really* matters.”

Lou sneezed loudly and obnoxiously. “Maybe to *you*,” he said.

“Oh, come off it!” said Garth. “You don’t even want to be here. And you certainly can’t go back to Earth. Might as well give up while you can.”

“What do you mean I can’t go back to Earth? Obviously you’ve just misspoken!”

“I haven’t,” said Garth. “Even if I *could* get you back to Earth, what in God’s name would you even have left there?”

“A job, for one!”

“That you haven’t been to in, what? Two weeks now?”

Lou started to speak, before fumbling with his words. “Well, um, I have a cat! Yes, that’s it! A cat!”

“You have a cat?”

“Well, it’s not really *my* cat. I don’t own it. I just feed it, give it water, play with it, and let it stay in the house. Really more like a leecher than anything.”

“A leecher?”

“Yeah, a leecher. You know, like a, um, a leecher. That’s the only way I know how to describe it.”

“I have no idea what that means.”

“Regardless. I still have a cat to get back to.”

“And these, as you say, *cats* . . . they can go two weeks without food or water?”

“Well, no, but—wait, my cat! Oh my god, my cat!” Lou crumpled his body down into the couch, the cushions sinking in the most terribly comforting way.

“Yes. We’ve already established that we’re talking about your cat.”

“I can’t believe my cat is dead! Oh gosh, I didn’t even think about that!”

“Best not to fret about it,” Garth said. “We’ve got more pressing matters to attend to.”

“What could be more pressing than this? Goddamnit, I want to know!”

“A seventeen foot demon? Saving an entire planet? All of that nonsense?”

“Oh . . . right,” said Lou. “What was the name of that planet again?”

“Nebula Six Zed. Nebula 6 Zed for short.”

“Aaaand, remind me once more who this demon is?”

Garth, predictably, sighed. “Zoltar! Don’t you ever listen?”

“Of course I do! It’s just that, for something so important, we’ve only talked about it for a couple of minutes combined. If that.”

“Look, it’s all a bunch of nonsense anyways! Who cares what some prophecy says? The Prophecy is a bunch of bologna! Why don’t these ‘prophecies’ ever entail anything actually useful, like which Fortune 5bn company to invest in, or which sports team to bet on?”

“Well, what does The Prophecy actually say? I mean, you’ve mentioned it off-hand, but never really gone into too much detail about it. Is there some specific weapon I have to use? When and where does the final battle take place? Do I die along with him?”

“You’re missing the point. The Prophecy isn’t real. It’s all made-up. So get this hero nonsense out of your head, while you still have it.”

“If all of this is not real, how would I lose my head?”

Garth scowled at Lou menacingly. “It’s space. Accidents happen all the time here.”

“Is that a threat?”

“So what if it was?”

Lou shrugged. “Wouldn’t care much, I suppose.”

“You sure *suppose* a lot of things,” Garth snarled. “Perhaps if you thought things through once in a while, we wouldn’t be in this mess in the first place.”

“Thought things through? How the hell are—”

“Quiet!” said Garth in a panicked voice. “We’ve got company!”

Through the rearview mirror, a large ship approached quickly — or at least as quickly as a ship weighing roughly four million pounds could approach. It was a blue 1972 Company Model LX with a bit of rust on its underside.

“It’s the police!” Lou shouted. “They’ve found us!”

“No, no, it’s not the police.”

“Zoltar!” screamed Gognod.

Garth’s eyes widened. “Oh goodness, it’s — oh, wait, nevermind.”

*Family on vacation passes them by. Dad in fishing hat. Khaki bucket hat. Wife arguing with husband, who swears he’s not lost. “Harold, dear, I think we’re lost.”

Lou peered in Garth’s direction. “I thought you said you didn’t believe in all of that Zoltar stuff.”

“What?”

“You said ‘oh goodness’ when Gognod said Zoltar’s name.”

“Hi there, Lou! Buddy! Skipper! Garth was actually referring to Balfon Hippitus.”

“Balfon Hippitus?”

“Quiet, Henry!” said Garth.

“Balfon Hippitus: four-legged cephalopod from the planet Xanathia, and sole survivor of the Xanathian Resolution of 1094. Drives a Company Model LX, and, according to both his birth certificate, and his colleagues and ex-wives, a Cancer.”

“What’s a cancer is you and your big mouth!” sneered Garth. “Now open up the shutters, and prepare for landing. We’ve made it to Sulphur Resorts.”

Chapter 25

Sulphur Resorts was not very much unlike Sulphur Estates, except for its bigger pools, bigger rents, and bigger propensity to charge excruciatingly expensive amounts for otherwise low-quality food. Still, it had a sort of homey feel to it — in that it was also the home of some of the biggest crime lords this side of the galaxy.

One such fellow, Quixon Fellow to be precise, was the biggest of the crime lords. Weighing in at a whooping 642 kilograms when his bowels were empty in the morning — the only reasonable time for such measures, honestly— he was in a weight class of his own.

Hungter Bojgin, on the other hand, was the real cream of the crop when it came to trafficking illegal crops, and committing mass atrocities on the side. Despite his smaller stature at only 348 kilograms, he was not someone you wanted to mess with if his bowels were empty. Still, he felt a duty towards his home and its inhabitants, and as a result, he was always the first face to greet newcomers at Sulphur Springs.

“State yer business, haggish scum.”

“Just passing through,” Garth said to Hungter, before reaching into his pocket, and handing him a large sum of coins. “We’re on the run from the law.”

Lou’s eyes went wide, and he elbowed Garth. “Are you trying to get us caught?” he whispered.

“I’m trying to get us *in*,” Garth snapped back.

Hunter gestured for them to enter.

Inside, a large ring where two trendelbeasts battled it out in a cage match, erotic dancers sliding down poles above the cage. Nearby, intergalactic punks rocked their battle jackets, and even nearerby, card sharks — literal shark-man hybrids — played Texas Hold ‘Em, which they simply called Gorentine Pufflefluff.

“Gognod,” opined Gognod.

Garth grabbed a pot from the floor, and handed it to Lou. “Put this on. You’re going to need it.”

“What? No. I am *not* putting this on!”

“Suit yourself. Just remember which one of us is an intergalactic traveler, and which one of us is destined to die.”

Lou groaned, and put the pot on his head.

“Ahaha!” Gognod laughed. He mocked Lou, pantomiming him walking around with a pot on his head. “Pothead!”

Lou pushed him aside, and marched forward beside Garth. “This makes me stick out like a sore thumb.”

A creature which resembled a thumb folded his hand, and glared at Lou.

“Oh, erm . . . sorry.” Lou pursed his lips and cleared his throat nervously.

He turned to Garth. “This place is making me uneasy.”

“Gognod,” agreed Gognod.

“We’ll be fine, so long as we keep a low profile,” said Garth.

Lou stops in his tracks, distracted by a news hologram with their faces plastered on it and the words, “40,000 BOUNTY” scrawled across the bottom.

“Yeah, about that . . .”

Chapter 26

Paul Bucketson, of Bucket family fame, was a humble connoisseur of bucketry. Round ones, tall ones, short ones, brown ones, each and every bucket had its own unique characteristics that made it especially special to him. He was passionate about his work, and passionate about making it well-known that he was passionate about his work.

Unfortunately, not many shared in Paul's bucketry passion, and as a result, did not share their hard-earned pay with him. So, on one fateful midsommar day, Paul made a decision that would change the very fabric of the universe for millenia to come: Paul decided to expand his product line.

No longer would he be known as Paul Bucketson, no siree. For he would therein be known as the great and powerful Paul Hambrelson, the king of cookware. Borrowing all of the best features of the bucket — its deep cavity, its perfectly round shape, and its alloy base — and combining it with the long handle of a pan, his Hambrel, later to be renamed the pot, was an instant hit in that he hit the man who actually invented it over the head with it, stole the schematics, and patented it for himself.

Lou, too, was also being hit over the head, this time by space laser guns.

Pchew! Pchew!

Each shot being inexplicably drawn to the pot on his head and bouncing right off as he and the others fled, Lou was essentially invincible. No Resortian scum was a match for his pot armor.

“Let's get the hell out of here!” Garth exclaimed.

“Gognod scared!”

“I thought you said they *welcomed* criminals here!” Lou angrily pointed out to Garth as they gained some distance on their pursuers..

“Yes, well, they also like bounties!”

Up ahead, their ship — and about twenty amateur bounty hunters salivating at the mouth. With men rounding the corner from the rear, they were essentially trapped, with nowhere to go but eight feet deep if spotted — even the euphemisms were bigger on this planet.

“Psst! Over here!” a voice whispered from the shadows. “Quickly now!”

They rushed over, the shadowy figure corralling them inside a small, unassuming building.

Through a small peephole, Lou watched as their pursuers passed right by them.

“Thank you, kind sir,” he said, turning around to greet their savior.

Click. Garth pulled back the hammer of his astro blaster, and pointed it at the shadowy figure. “Who are you?”

The man stepped forward, into the light. Muscular, the jaw of Olympus, and with a commanding presence, this was Tralgus, the God of Poecilonyms.

“I’m a friend. I’m here to help,” said Tralgus, the wind shaking in its boots at his powerful voice. “Come, let us drink.”

He opened up a hidden bulkhead door, and headed down a set of stairs. The others followed.

Downstairs, they encountered a small speakeasy with a modest center stage, where a stand-up comedian was bombing. “Tight fifty minute routine my arse!”

The Tennison Speakeasy was notorious for hosting big-name comedic talent that passed through the area. They had a dedicated Exfil Team that would scout the surrounding territories for prospects, render them unconscious with a specially-designed knockout gas, and force them to perform in front of wealthy patrons, who themselves were exfiltrated by a separate, more hoity-toity Exfil Team.

One such comedian who was subjected to this treatment was Wrenwetch McFarland, who kinda had a thing for being drugged and kidnapped. In fact, the entirety of his standup career was secretly a ruse to attract the attention of the Tennison Speakeasy Exfil Team, in hopes that he would be their next target.

Tralgus plopped down at the bar, and gestured the bartender for a drink. “Wraith’s Horn, please.”

Dad (a God) disappointed with him because he wants to become a middle school English teacher, rather than join the family business of ruling the universe. He not a very well known demigod because his dad essentially erased him from the history books.

After Lou helps mend the relationship, he decides to check out his planet (earth). There, he becomes a teacher, and is in for his toughest challenge yet.

Demigod wanted to work at a phrontistery (school). Father thought he meant an apothecary (thought he was selling medicinal drugs, undercutting his miracle business).

Lou told demigod that he was the chosen one. Demigod says oh, you're one of those guys? Where's your tail?

One of those guys? What do you—?”

Interrupted by something.

Lou meets a retired Demi God. The god of poecilonyms, also known as the grammar nazi, also known as the Tyrannothesusaurus rex. Every time a weak adjective was used in conversation, he would summarily correct them with a more proper, usually more complex, word — and then kill them. Oh, and I'm not actually a demigod, you know. that was just the name of my senior thesis, entitled, Yes, I'm Actually A Demigod.

Hello there.

Why are you here?

At the pub? Just looking for a drink.

No. Here, talking to me.

Just having a chat.

Well, I don't like it.

You don't have to like it. We have money.

I detest it. I'm not interested in your money.

Ah, so you abhor it?

I disrelish it.

You execrate it?

Alright, I'll let you live. What's your name, Earthling?

Is it that obvious?

I can smell it on you.

*

Garth reveals near the end that he's not actually on the Council anymore. When he put forward a bill that he thought would help people, one of the more senior members took over his bill and rewrote it, cleverly adding in the Xanathian genocide bit. Garth was shocked, and quit out of principle.

“Henry, set course for Tiurus 5a. We're going home.”

Azepam is an Intergalactic Soul Snatcher. Not as evil and devious as it sounds. When people die, their souls kinda wander the universe a bit. Azepam has to track them down and return them to their place of resting. Similar to Garth from Supernatural. Currently, he's trying to track down Staci Gibbons' soul. Potential spin-off or side story? Maybe he's never actually seen a spirit before, so they're kinda hard to not only track down, but identify once you do?

(let him die a natural death, since they are trees, after all, and the whole nature thing is what they do. It's in their Nature. the Tree God will be the one to punish him in the afterlife anyways)

Of course, Lou wasn't the first Chosen One. Or the second. Rather, he was the third. The first Chosen One was an imbecile that got his entire crew killed in a kitchen fire. The one before that, in a bunk bed massacre. Before the title officially became The Chosen One, there was even a Lone Hero, who succumbed to injuries sustained during some sort of natural medicine disaster — or something of that nature. It's not quite clear. But the gist of it is that these workplace accidents became so commonplace, that many were left to wonder what exactly the selection process was for the Chosen One, since combat proficiency, diplomatic skills, and common sense didn't seem to be part of the criteria.