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written by **BJ HYPES** noun  
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# THE MULTIVERSE IS LEAKING

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BJ HYPES

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## Preface

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Due to the trustworthy nature of the British accent, it is recommended you read the following as such. To aid you in the process, a list of priming words has been compiled:

Tea, crisps, Manchester, Queen, guv'na, biscuits, trolley, jumper, kettle, & Richard the Third.

Further, it will help tremendously with my credibility if you imagine I'm a doctor. Not necessarily a medical professional, but please picture my name on a lovely certificate in a gold frame.

Since that's taken care of, it's only fair you know this entire book is a PSA to raise awareness about the most common cause of complete Multiverse collapse: not doing the dishes.

Across the Multiverse, all great events begin with one small act. In fact, we're usually only three wrong turns away from complete and utter obliteration, which is why you must do your dishes in a timely manner.

## Preface

Luckily, there are many signs of collapse before implosion, but none so omnipresent and foreboding as a leak in the Multiverse. Should this happen, I recommend you find a large object, such as a bush or a rhinoceros, to hide behind so you may live out your time before collapse in peace.

Why do so many paths of unwashed dishes end in catastrophic annihilation? We shall see.

Sincerely,

BJ Hypes

## ONE

### Snacks

---

**K**ale could never find the remote. This may not seem like such an issue, but one minute he'd put it down on the table, and the next it would vanish. What furthered the oddity is that he'd often have to reach deep into the crevasses of the couch to find the remote, even though he always placed it on the table.

On average, it takes an oblivious human such as Kale 58 cycles of repetition to realize that something is amiss. This was the 57<sup>th</sup> cycle, and he was dangerously close to discovering what lay beneath his couch cushions.

But before Kale could prove his worth as an inquisitive and active protagonist, there was a quiet knock at the door. As he turned toward the sound, the entire door slammed forward with such force that the whole third-story apartment shook.

Standing there, boots smoking from the powerful kick, was a young man about Kale's age. His mane of hair was tied back by a bandana, and he slung an army-green duffel over his shoulder. He surveyed the narrow apartment and locked eyes with Kale.

"Snacks." The man held out his hand.

"In the cupboard." Kale looked around for the remote to quiet the TV, but couldn't find it.

“Nice to meet ya, *Intha Cupboard*. The name’s Knightly. *Snacks* Knightly. I’m your new roommate.” Snacks grabbed Kale’s pointed finger and shook it. He dropped his duffel and propped the door back into place.

Kale was about to interject when he learned Snacks was phenomenal at speaking quickly.

“Sorry ‘bout the door, I did knock. I’ve gotta thing about opening doors, so it’s best if we just leave this slightly ajar. That’s a funny idea, a jar for a door. Don’t ya think, *Intha*?”

“Yes, but that’s...”

Snacks pulled a wrench from his back pocket and gave a hearty whack to each of the hinges. “...There we go, good as new.” Astonishingly, the door seemed to operate smoothly. In fact, it no longer made its usual squeaking sound.

“How did you—”

“—This room free? Yeah, it is.” Snacks walked through the apartment with Kale in tow. There were three empty bedrooms. Thankfully, all of the doors were already open and Snacks just nudged them open a bit more with his elbow.

Snacks dragged his duffel to the doorway of the master bedroom and lifted it into Kale’s hands. The surprising weight nearly knocked him over. Kale had no idea why he obeyed when Snacks asked him to hold down a stray lever on the bottom of the bag.

“How’s the neighborhood? Do the coffee shops grind it fresh? Are the dinosaurs friendly?” Snacks unzipped a bit of the canvas and twiddled some knobs.

“Dinosaurs?”

Right at that moment, Snacks pulled a circular pin from the bottom of the bag. A loud ticking noise clicked through the apartment.

“Oh bother, is this one where they went extinct? I was really looking forward to visiting them. You know, the *Goobasauras*...” Snacks went on excitedly about dinosaurs while Kale nervously held the ticking bag. He frantically looked between it and Snacks as he tried, and failed, to get a word in.

“...And that’s how it evolved to have the strongest sense of smell!”

Snacks concluded as the ticking sped up considerably and the bag rumbled in Kale's hands. "Oh right," Snacks grabbed the duffel and tossed it into the master bedroom.

The moment it touched the ground, a blinding light burst from the bag with such power it slammed the door shut.

Snacks let out a heavy sigh and crouched down, "I hate opening doors." He wound a crank connected to his boot as a charged sound hummed from his feet. As Snacks took a kicking stance, Kale quickly opened the door in a desperate attempt to avoid annoying his neighbors any further.

Snacks smiled at him with admiration, but Kale was preoccupied with the room. Just seconds ago it had been completely bare, and now it was fully furnished. He could not contain a "Wow" as he stepped inside.

Assuming Kale's noise of admiration was in response to his earlier dinosaur facts, Snacks continued to list them off. Kale noted the Goobasauras was clearly Snacks' favorite.

The room felt like a 70s basement with wall-to-wall shag carpet and beanbag chairs. As Kale touched a lava lamp, and learned a Goobasauras had a twenty-foot wingspan, he remembered the many itching questions which burdened his noggin.

"You know, I'm very confused by...well, everything. Could you..." Kale turned around and Snacks was nowhere in sight, but there was the distinct sound of rummaging in the kitchen.

"I see the dishes are done...we're gonna get along just fine!" Snacks called out as the narrator nodded approvingly.

Kale absentmindedly approached the kitchen, believing that like eggs post-omelet, he had cracked.

"Oh, Intha, care for a soda?" Snacks said slyly as he poured a can of GeneriCola into a cup. Then he took his hands away, and the can stayed in place. It floated in the air and continued to pour.

So many thoughts, at least two or three, raced through Kale's mind that this took no priority.

Snacks smiled wide, expecting a similar response. "It blew my mind the first time I saw it too. I'm not supposed to reveal the secret, but here..." Snacks beckoned Kale closer and pointed out

that the soda can was, in fact, held up by a transparent piece of plastic.

As it is for many people, close-up magic was Kale's breaking point. He let out the mightiest roar he could muster...and politely corrected Snacks that his name was not 'Intha,' but 'Kale.'

He was about to object and question further when Snacks interjected once more. "That's what I like about you, Kale. You're very easygoing."

It was the first compliment Kale had heard in a long time, and he very much liked it.

Perhaps coincidentally, perhaps not, across the Multiverse things shifted.

Snacks brought a few decorations to the living room, just a few lights and posters to cover the otherwise empty walls. Beyond a few barstools, the only nice piece of furniture Kale had was his couch, which the two promptly plopped down upon. Kale and Snacks began their epic bromance as many do, by mutually watching television...together.

Kale was particularly excited when Snacks presented his box set of *The Office* as he hadn't realized there were twenty seasons.

Snacks explained that he had borrowed this box set from Universe Kaleidoscope, which won "Best Universe" nearly 800 years in a row, beating out Universe No-More-Cancer (self-explanatory) and Universe Nuclear-Teddy-Bear (too long to explain). Universe Kaleidoscope's success was largely due to its continuation of *The Office* for an additional eleven seasons.

Throughout this, Kale nodded along politely. He assumed this was all a bit that had wooshed over his head.

After binging an entire season, Kale and Snacks needed a break, to process both emotions and food.

At that moment, Snacks reached for the remote and found it had vanished. As all sensible people do when something goes missing, he first checked within the couch cushions.

His hand reached down deep, farther than Kale believed the couch went.

"Huh," Snacks made a puzzled face. He tried to extract his shoul-

der-deep arm, but it didn't budge. "Hold on...just a...a little more..." Snacks ripped his arm out of the hole and proudly showcased his find. But rather than a remote, he held a can of soup.

Both puzzled at each other. Snacks inserted his arm again, retrieving yet another can of soup, and another, and another.

They stacked a small pyramid of tomato bisques and one clam chowder before Snacks finally found the remote.

He stared at Kale inquisitively. "Odd place to keep your soup, but I respect your desire for a firm couch."

Kale explained he hadn't purchased any soup, which prompted the two of them to finally remove the couch cushions.

They revealed crumbs, loose change, and a hole.

It was black and about the size of a grapefruit. Snacks' first instinct was to touch it. So he did. He reached inside and retrieved yet another can, crowning their soup pyramid. Kale hesitantly did the same and felt around inside some sort of empty wooden box.

The two pulled the couch away from the wall, but the hole followed. And though he was not a scientist, Kale definitively determined that the couch was far too small to contain a wooden box of this size.

"Hmmm. Must be a portal," Snacks said.

"A what?"

"A portal. You know, like a little door to another universe? Did you install it?"

Kale explained the couch had always just been there. It then dawned on him just how frequently he lost the remote.

"Ah, that makes sense. Objects do tend to gravitate toward portals."

Kale nodded along as if he understood. "Can we turn it off?"

Snacks retrieved the wrench from his back pocket and whacked the edge of the portal. Nothing happened. "Nope...but we can fill it so things will stop desiring to move toward it."

Snacks struggled to produce a huge bag of ping-pong balls from his jacket pocket. They most definitely could not have fit in such a small space, but at this point Kale was too overloaded with nonsense to comment.

Snacks placed a ping-pong ball in Kale's hands as he stood back and took shots. Alas, none of them went in.

Kale had never thrown anything well in his life, and yet his first attempt ricocheted off the ceiling, the television, the pyramid...and then landed squarely in the portal.

Scientists have yet to discover why we evolved this way, but when people sink trick shots, the excitement centers of their brain light up as if they took down an adult War Tortoise using only a boomerang.

Kale and Snacks could not contain their enthusiasm.

For the next few minutes, the two of them did trick shots into the portal. Kale learned his one talent in life was, apparently, throwing ping-pong balls into small holes. They continued until the portal overflowed, and then Snacks taped over it with a sparkly, black material.

They put the cushions back, then high-fived regarding their success and their new collection of soup.

"You sure it's okay to just leave it?" Kale asked.

Snacks shrugged. "The simplest solution is often the easiest." He said it in such a profound tone that Kale didn't realize how little sense it actually made.

Just as they were about to start the eleventh season of *The Office*, there was a knock at the door. Because it was ajar, per Snacks' request, it slowly swung open.

Standing there was Kale's neighbor, Lonnie. She wore overalls covered in greasy fingerprints and held a thick flashlight. She walked in without waiting for a response: "Breaker."

Lonnie and Kale had met twice before. Both times, she had pushed her way into the apartment and flipped some switches on the fuse box. Despite having separate apartments, they shared a breaker.

"The name's Knightly. Snacks Knightly," he said as Lonnie breezed past him, not cold, but determined.

"Lonnie." She opened the fuse box and flipped switches in a rhythmic pattern, as if she was inputting a cheat code.

Kale always thought Lonnie looked tired, but one of the few social practices he knew taught him to keep that thought to himself.

"You look tired," Snacks commented.

Lonnie smiled groggily. "Thank you!" It was an eerily genuine and

non-sarcastic response, which Kale knew because Snacks had taught him all about sarcasm just hours ago. “And that will do it.” Lonnie flipped one last big switch and listened, her ears toward the door.

A small explosion from Lonnie’s apartment across the hall caused Kale to jump backward while Snacks and Lonnie stared at him curiously.

“You alright, bud?” Snacks asked.

Kale looked out into the hall and saw black smoke billow out of the open apartment. In a moment of bravery, or stupidity, he grabbed a fire extinguisher and rushed over.

There, he saw a humanoid figure engulfed in flames near the sink. He pointed and pulled the lever of the fire extinguisher, intending to put out whatever it was, but nothing happened.

Kale quickly read the instructions, pulled out a pin, turned a lever counterclockwise, and rubbed the side three times...only to look up and see the fire was gone.

Instead, there was a young woman in a long, tattered black cloak. She looked at him as though *he* was the one who had just been engulfed in flames.

“Is he always this jumpy?” Lonnie asked Snacks as the two appeared in the doorway behind him.

“Oh, I like him just the way he is.” Snacks waved warmly to Kale, who was engaged in the act of bewildered word vomit. “Sound it out, buddy.”

“Are you alright?” the woman in the black cloak reached out to touch Kale’s forehead, then recoiled. “Oh, whoops. That could’ve been bad...” She promptly removed the ragged black cloak, revealing a flowery sundress. “I’m Del.” She pressed a hand up against his forehead. Kale found her quite disarming without the cloak.

“Does he have scurvy?” Snacks asked genuinely.

Del touched a lot of Kale’s face and pinched his cheeks. “He doesn’t have a fever.”

“Coffee?” Lonnie said at no one in particular.

Kale slumped down against the oven, “Sure?” He looked around for a coffee pot but didn’t see one.

“Yes, Elonifred?” a feminine Australian brogue echoed above them.

Lonnie sighed. “Don’t call me that. And run a diagnostic for craziness.”

Suddenly, a huge robotic arm descended from the ceiling. At the tip of the arm was a big face made up of 64 pixels that smiled as they inched closer to Kale. “Hello. Please present your rear end for inspection.”

“Coffee! Do I have to lower your humor threshold again?” Lonnie said sternly, as if she was a trainer reprimanding an inattentive walrus.

Coffee let out a long sigh as the robot face frowned. “Fine, Mom. Beep-boop, initiating boring medical procedures.” Though the few pixels did not give Coffee much ability to convey it, Kale could feel the robot rolling its digital eyes. Two little arms sprung from the sides of the face and leached onto Kale’s forehead.

“Hmmm...cancer...cancer...tumors...STIs...more cancer...” Coffee said as Kale’s eyes got progressively wider. “...Yes, you’re free of those. It’s my diagnosis that you’re...just bein’ a weenie.”

“Coffee...” Lonnie crossed her arms.

“I have one final test. Was this your card?” A third arm shot out from behind the face, holding a nine of diamonds.

“I...I don’t...” Kale looked around as Lonnie slapped her forehead.

“I thought I removed all magician protocols from your system?! How do you keep doing that?” Lonnie trudged over to an old arcade cabinet in the corner of the room. She fiddled with the joystick and pushed buttons in rapid succession.

“A magician...never reveals...their secrets...” Coffee said as they powered down, the face barely able to keep its pixels open.

Snacks applauded.

“Well, looks like we’re all set here. So...get out.” Lonnie looked at the two of them as Snacks lifted Kale up. Kale took in the two opposing styles of the apartment. Along one wall, there sat a collection of tools and machines presented for most efficient access, while on another, there were bright colors and living things that sparked joy.

“Don’t be absurd!” Del pulled out a large pot. “Stay for supper. I

can't believe we've lived next to each other for months and never had a neighborly meal or board game night."

Snacks glanced at Lonnie. "Oh, we wouldn't want to impose..."

"Nah, stay." Lonnie kicked a piece of equipment lightly. "I'm just frustrated 'cause I can't get my gate working."

"Have you tried jiggling the handle? That usually works for me," Kale tried desperately to be helpful and rejoin the conversation.

Lonnie shook her head. "Tried that. It was working fine earlier, but since this afternoon...whatever. Let's just play *Cards Against Huge Manatees* and relax."

"It's mighty kind of you to make dinner." Snacks tipped an invisible hat at Del.

"It's no biggie, I'll just heat up some soup. Hope ya like tomato bisque!" Del opened a high cabinet and was immediately showered with hundreds of ping-pong balls, which filled the room. She chuckled a bit and looked at Lonnie curiously.

Kale weaved the events of the day together and turned to Snacks to share a laugh, but he had gone pale. His mouth was covered, and his eyes were wide.

"Snacks? What's wrong?"

Barely able to get the words out, Snacks took a few steps back.

"The Multiverse is leaking."

## TWO

### The Department of Multiverse Ventures

---

*“Hello and thank you for calling the DMV. Due to our poor planning and inability to listen to low-level employees who, by living through inefficiencies, understand the easiest way to fix them, there is currently a huge wait time. Please stay on the line, or go f\*\*k yourselves. We really don’t care...”* Snacks held up his phone as the cheerful automated voice spread through the otherwise tense apartment.

Lonnie flicked a rubber band on her wrist as she examined the hole. Suddenly, Del’s hand popped through and grabbed Lonnie. Del’s laughter rang out from the other apartment as she returned, her dress now used to carry cans of soup.

“This is no laughing matter, Del.” Lonnie swabbed the inside of the portal and brought the sample over to the arcade cabinet.

Del waved her off and opened a few cans of soup. “A little death never hurt anyone.”

Kale’s eyes went wide. “Not to sound like a broken repeater, but could someone, anyone, explain what’s going on? We saw the portal in our home earlier. What’s changed?”

“I thought that portal led to another universe, not our own.” Snacks paced as he held the phone up to his ear.

Lonnie didn’t look up. “Didn’t you learn about this in Multiverse

Basics? Portals like this don't appear in the same universe." She slammed buttons on the arcade cabinet, then suddenly stopped. "Damn...this tests positive for leakage residue."

"You can relax," Del said warmly to Kale. "It'll all be fine in the end."

For someone who had been engulfed in flames earlier, Kale found her composure comforting.

"As much as I love and cherish Del..." Lonnie started. "Because of her work, she doesn't exactly know when to be terrified anymore."

"Oh, what do you do?" Snacks asked, his hand over the receiver.

"I kill people!" Del said with enthusiasm. Snacks nodded knowingly while Kale took a step back. Del handed him a business card.

It was all black other than big letters at the top that said, "*Reap-Death Comes For Us All, Why Not Make It Easier?*" On the back was her name and title: "*Del-Project Coordinator of F.O.D.-Coconut Division.*"

"So you're...a hitman? Hit-person? Assassin?" Kale asked nervously.

Del chuckled. "I just oversee F.O.D.s and make sure everything gets processed smoothly. Luckily, the app takes care of most of the work nowadays." Del held up her phone and demonstrated the app "Reapr." It had a hip minimalist design, and the intro animation showed silhouetted people being hit by cars or mauled by bears.

"F.O.D.s?" Kale asked expositionally.

"Falling Object Deaths. Specifically, my team works with those who die from falling coconuts. Did you know we kill more people each year than sharks?" Del excitedly explained some new features of the app, the body decay tracking, the new *AutoWill*, and many more things he would've been fascinated by had Snacks' phone not suddenly spoken.

A low, grumbling voice cut through the chatter. "DMV, this is Gravitronius, Commander of The Nightmare Legion, Carrier of The Plagued Chalice, Bringer of Malice. How may I direct your call?"

"Report Multiverse leak," Snacks said very clearly.

"I can direct you to accounting if you're having trouble processing payment online. Would you like me to do that?" Gravitronius asked in monotone.

“No. Report Multiverse leak.”

“Sir, I’m hearing you want us to come by and forcibly extract your bone marrow, is that correct?”

“No. Report. Multiverse. Leak.”

“You want to report a Multiverse leak?”

“Yes!”

“Okay. Let’s schedule a window for someone to come by. Can you be home for the next six to eight months?”

Snacks’ head sunk. “No, the entire universe is on the brink of imminent collapse. Is there any way to speed up the process?”

There was the sound of typing on the other end. “...I can do a rush order and have someone be there in five to seven months, how about that?”

A loud whirring noise from the other apartment caught their attention. They peered out into the hallway as Lonnie drilled a panel of light bulbs into the wall.

“No, that won’t work for us, Gravitronius, Commander of The Nightmare Legion, Carrier of The Plagued Chalice, Bringer of Malice. Thanks anyway.”

“Before you go, let me just tell you about some terrible offers where you deal with the trouble of switching services, and you’ll end up paying more—”

Snacks hung up the phone.

The three of them entered Kale and Snacks’ apartment just in time for Lonnie to reholster her drill. She pulled her safety glasses up to her forehead and disappeared behind the back of the couch.

“The DMV’s gonna be no help,” Snacks said, mainly to Lonnie. “Know anyone who specializes in fixing this sort of thing?”

All at once, the first two of the five lights turned on. Lonnie flipped herself over the cushionless couch and touched what appeared to be a screwdriver to the edge of the hole. As she did, the third light lit up, quickly going back out as she pulled it away.

“Interesting..” Snacks said as he took out his wrench and inspected the portal.

“This explains why all my equipment was going haywire.” Lonnie flicked the rubber band on her wrist. “As things go through the portal,

the amount of Multiverse activity increases and sends everything into a tizzy.”

Del raised her hand, and Lonnie called upon her. “Am I correct in assuming that these five lights are a type of DEFCON? Where one light is good, and five lights are bad?”

“Good question. Enjoy ten LonniePoints™.” She rolled up her sleeve and revealed a small touchscreen. She swiped her screen forward and Del’s phone chimed. “The more lights, the worse it is. If it reaches five...well...*something* will happen, and it probably won’t be good.”

“Oh...” Snacks said as everyone slowly craned their heads toward him. They caught the tail end of him rhythmically tapping the edge of the hole. Lonnie furrowed her brow at him. “...I was trying to communicate with it using Morse code.”

“You know Morse code?” Kale couldn’t stop himself from sounding impressed.

“I’m not just mad, I’m disappointed.” Lonnie crossed her arms.

Snacks backed away from the hole. “Isn’t the phrase, *I’m not mad, I’m disappointed?*”

“I know what I said.” Lonnie pointed to the third light as it glowed dimly, despite Snacks no longer touching it. She fiddled with her wearable, and suddenly Snacks’ phone beeped.

“What are LonniePoints™, and why do I have negative 50 of them?!” Snacks demanded.

Kale, however, ignored their argument as he was fixated on the lights like a moth. “Uhhh,” he roared to no response. “Uhhh!” He triumphantly pulled at some nearby sleeves as they turned their attention toward the now three and a half flickering lights.

Then four were lit.

Then the fifth, a red light, flickered. The room shook as the light grew brighter and brighter until suddenly it stopped.

The lights drained down until only one was lit. Kale and Snacks let go of each other, unsure how they had ended up in a hug.

“Right,” Lonnie started toward the door. “Time for us to jump universes. This one’s ready to burst.”

“It was nice meeting you both!” Del said.

Before either could respond, Lonnie opened the door to the hallway and instead was met with a sunny field.

She closed the door in disbelief, then reopened it. The field was still there. “Huh...it appears something terrible has happened.”

They all stood around for a moment.

“So...” Snacks twiddled his thumbs. “Pancakes?”

## THREE

### The Chosen One, Take Two

---

“So, the first, and most ridiculous, theory is that because the table is endless, somewhere out there is a pancake identical to yours,” Lonnie explained to Kale.

They were all in awe that Kale had never learned the basics of the Multiverse, and they were unfathomably patient in teaching him. In this example, the table on which they were eating represented space, and their planet was a lone pancake on Kale’s plate.

“Like a second Earth far, far away?” Kale asked.

They nodded as Snacks continued to make pancakes and lay one next to Kale’s.

Lonnie spoke with food in her mouth, “With endless space, there would be endless Earths. In this one, you chose a blue shirt...and in this one, you chose a red shirt.” Lonnie poked her finger into Kale’s first pancake, then his second.

“Makes sense,” Kale replied, mainly so she would stop touching his food.

“Does it? Because according to this, instead of having those two minor-variant universes neatly organized next to each other, they could be separated by a sea of universes where we live in a starfish-

based economy!” Lonnie yelled, maintaining eye contact with Kale and making him feel too uncomfortable to eat his breakfast.

“Lucky...” Snacks chimed in. “While some multi-Earthers still exist, the largely accepted theory is that each universe exists in the same place as all the others—”

“—So it would be like there was a second table and a second pancake, but both occupy the same space.” Lonnie grabbed the pancake from Kale’s hands as he was about to take a bite. She ripped it in half horizontally and sandwiched each side around another pancake before placing it delicately back on the table.

She then pounded both of them flat.

“A quick reminder that pancakes don’t grow on trees...at least in this universe...probably.” Snacks raised an eye to Lonnie as she handed the flattened pancake back to Kale. He took a bite, defeated.

“Just remember, the table is giant, and there are lots of plates, and each plate is full of pancakes, and each pancake is combined with many more pancakes...and that’s how the Multiverse works.”

Kale blinked as they looked at him expectantly. “If all the universes are in one place, it must be hard to keep track of all of them.”

“Eh,” Lonnie started. “They all start and will end in the same place. There are only so many roads to the same destination...”

“True, *or* the Multiverse is controlled by The Great Amoeba...” Snacks said, leading.

“Oh no, you’re one of those.” Lonnie rolled her eyes with such force that disdain was felt in the dozen closest universes.

Kale stood between them “So what happens when there’s a leak in the Multiverse?”

Lonnie unsheathed what looked like a screwdriver and touched it to a fresh pancake in front of Kale. It exploded, bits of pancake scattering all over the room.

But before they could react, Del reentered the room and looked out the window. “Hey gang, what does a Goobasaurus look like?”

Immediately, they all perked up.

“Powerful head, mighty tail, massive wingspan, and itty-bitty baby arms.” Snacks said as they all ran excitedly toward the window.

“Oh, good,” Del said. “Then those are just dogs.”

They watched a flock of medium-sized brown dogs with floppy ears bound majestically through the tall grass outside the apartment.

Snacks let out a disappointed sigh as Lonnie crossed her arms. “Del, we’ve talked about—Is that a sword?!” Lonnie suddenly pointed out into the field. Sure enough, at the edge of the field, there was a picturesque grove of trees surrounding a sword stuck in a rock.

“I dunno,” Snacks said skeptically. “I’ve got a bad feeling about—Oh, she’s already gone.”

The door was wide open. Lonnie sprinted across the field.

“She’s, like, really into swords,” Del said with a calm admiration.

“I mean, who isn’t?” Snacks replied. “Especially with all those stories about the first person to pull a sword from a stone gaining epic powers...and fame...and fortune....” All three of them looked at each other, then bolted outside after Lonnie.

Kale was the last to arrive and watched, out of breath, as Lonnie stood on the boulder and pulled on the sword with all her might.

“It’s my turn,” Snacks whined as Lonnie finally relinquished. He tried, then Del, and Kale decided to save himself the embarrassment and passed. He looked around the vast forest uneasily. “Should we really be this far from the apartment?” He was ignored.

As Snacks, Lonnie, and Del debated what to do next, Kale walked around the boulder and tripped. At first, he thought his sneakers snagged a root, but as he brushed off the dirt, he realized it was a thick extension cord that led deeper into the woods.

Seeing a fitting slot for the plug in the boulder, he plugged the cord in. Then he was distracted by a loose thread on his sweatshirt.

The other three finalized their plan to haul the boulder back to the apartment and chisel the sword out, scheduling who would get it on what days of the week.

Kale pulled the loose thread, but it kept coming, unraveling a bit of his favorite (and only) sweatshirt. He reached for the closest thing he could find and cut the thread, only to be surrounded with a golden, ethereal light.

Kale held the sword in his hands as the others looked on in stunned silence.

“The chosen one!” A voice yelled as dozens of peasants in mud-stained outfits emerged from the forest and formed a mob around them. Everyone’s eyes were wide. “It is he! He shall lead us to victory! He shall wear the crown!” An older, bearded peasant pointed a crooked finger at Kale as the crowd kneeled.

“Uhh...” Kale sounded his catchphrase. “Sorry?”

The peasants looked up curiously. “What d’ya mean, ‘sorry?’”

Another called out, “That’s his name: *Sorry!*” Suddenly all the peasants chanted “Sorry” over and over with admiration and awe. Kale looked to the others for help, but they just shrugged.

“Bit of a misunderstanding. I’m not the chosen one...” Kale tried to return the sword back to the stone, but the hole had disappeared.

The peasants paused and looked confused before one yelled, “Sorry is testing us!” The cheers continued as they sang the praises of Sorry.

“No!” Kale yelled with all the passion of a labrador. “I’m not the chosen one, I just accidentally grabbed the sword. Look, I’ll just leave it right here for the next chosen one. I’m not ‘Sorry’.” Kale placed the sword down so it balanced on the boulder.

The peasants lowered their excited arms and it actually seemed to sink in. Kale, who had never been good with words, was proud of himself for defusing this situation before it escalated.

“You’re...*not sorry?*” a peasant said.

“Correct,” Kale replied. “I’m not ‘Sorry’.”

A few pitchforks emerged from the crowd.

“After all this...you’re not sorry?” a peasant grumbled.

Had Kale not been so proud of his linguistic prowess, he may have noticed the rising tension, or his new friends signaling for him to be quiet. Instead, he retorted, “I’m definitely not ‘Sorry’...oh...” He turned around to a sea of angry peasants armed with torches and sharp farming implements.

“Alright, everyone remain calm...” Lonnie said in a hushed tone as the mob closed in around them. “They just want Kale, the rest of us might be able to back away slowly...”

“Don’t worry,” Del said. “I have a plan...”

Kale felt his phone buzz. A notification read, “*Del would like to split this death with you.*”

“I just checked us all in through Reapr,” Del announced excitedly. “If everyone confirms, it will save us a lot of paperwork after we die!”

As Kale gently retreated, he felt Snacks at his back. He had produced a slightly larger wrench than usual. The two looked for an exit as they swatted away encroaching pitchforks and profusely apologized.

“Cut!” A voice rippled through the crowd. Everyone turned to see a slender woman in a beret and tinted glasses. “Wrong, all wrong!” She pushed her way through the crowd and leapt atop the boulder.

The four of them and the peasants alike stopped and looked up at her.

“You are supposed to lead a rebellion against the monarch *before* being lynched...” She pointed at Kale. “And the rest of you are supposed to sing his praises, while a few stand out as key players, so one of you can then have a meaningful death in the third act. Simple stuff here, people!”

By then, several camera crews had emerged from the surrounding forest. They all looked annoyed.

Snacks raised his hand, but the woman in the beret ignored him and instead pointed at the four of them and their apartment in the middle of the field. “And further! What are you four doing here? This is a closed universe. No tailgating.”

“Here, I’m sor—I apologize. Would you like your sword back?” Kale nodded from the sword to the director, but she refused.

“It won’t do me any good now. You pulled it, so it’s tethered to you for life!” She crossed her arms, annoyed. “Bring in a spare!” she yelled toward the crew.

A few moments later, four production assistants unloaded a sword in a stone from what appeared to be a boxcar full of them. They dragged it into the center of the crowd and made sure to keep the cord disconnected.

“For *life*?” Kale wanted to ask many more questions, but Snacks stepped in front of him.

“I never received a script,” Snacks said, otherwise completely onboard.

“Obviously you didn’t. This is a *documentary!*” she replied, exasperated.

As the director continued to yell, Lonnie got the group’s collective attention and pointed to the apartment. Even though they were pretty far away, Kale could see most of the five lights flashing and flickering.

“So...can we kill ‘em?” a peasant asked the director.

The director sighed. “As long as you make it fast. Alright everyone, reset for the next take!”

The crowd turned toward the four of them, only to find they had already sprinted halfway across the field. The apartment flickered faster and faster. Spears and arrows landed near them as the mob swarmed close to their heels.

“Yeeks!” Snacks yelled as a pitchfork impaled his leg. Kale, without hesitation, turned back and helped Snacks up as the two limped forward slowly. “Hey Kale...did I ever tell you...that when I get impaled...I tend to pass out?” Snacks mumbled ten feet from the open door as he faceplanted into the field.

A higher than usual amount of panic rushed through Kale’s face. Enough, in fact, that he didn’t see a small group of peasants Zerg rush him. As he attempted to drag Snacks toward the door, a sharp farming hoe swung at his cranium. It stopped inches from impact\*.

[\*Not to be confused with the K-pop band *Inches From Impact*, which set the record for most universes toured in a year with an ensemble of over 500 members.]

Kale felt his arm stretched in a peculiar way. He opened his eyes and the sword had appeared in his hands, blocking the implement and shining brightly in the morning sun.

He had heard stories of great figures who only realized their true strength in moments of peril. They required a push, to be thrust into dire situations before their powers emerged. Kale wondered if this was his moment, if it took a friend in danger for him to step up. Was this it? Was this the beginning of a new Kale? Was this the inciting incident that leveled up the protagonist into a likable character that would eventually become a hero?

Nope. Magic sword.

Kale was promptly dragged about like a rag doll, unable to let go of the sword as it expertly blocked the attacks of half a dozen peasants. Kale shrieked as the blade cut down rows of the attackers. It lifted Kale off the ground helplessly as he desperately tried to claw his way back into the house.

He apologized profusely as the peasants continued to try and kill him, but in his state of bewilderment, he just yelled “I’m sorry! I’m not ‘Sorry!’” over and over.

As he played “the floor is lava” and tried to not step on the bodies piling up at his feet, he noticed the outside of the apartment blinking rapidly. Kale, despite his many faults of intellect, knew if he wasn’t in the apartment in just a few moments, he may be stuck in this...wherever this was, for a very long time.

He tugged and pleaded with the sword, but it was more persistent than a golden retriever that sees pizza fall to the ground.

Resigned to his fate of murder and apologies, he took solace that at least the others had managed to drag Snacks back inside the apartment.

With the last of his energy, he tried to think of a cool one-liner to yell to the others, so at least his new friends would have a final awesome memory of him. He settled on “*I guess when you stare out into the abyss, the abyss stares back.*” It was dark, edgy, and with all the sword-play he had accomplished in the last few seconds, he might’ve gained the credibility to say something like that.

He turned to the apartment with his best smoldering look, “I guess—WHAAA!” Kale rocketed backward, sword-first into the apartment, just as everything became very bright, then very dark.

## FOUR

### A Staple of Dying

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A few moments passed. It was quiet. No more peasant rabblery or death gurgles. Kale felt his body extended and he wondered if this was, indeed, the abyss. He breathed a sigh of relief. At least the last thing his friends would think of him would still be relatively cool.

The lights flicked on. Kale hung from the ceiling, unable to let go of the sword wedged firmly next to the smoke detector.

His first thought was relief at having survived. His second was the realization that his pants had fallen to his ankles as all three of the others had their eyes upon him.

A man of very little upper body strength, Kale flipped and flopped around, unable to reach his pants. He gave up and hung there, flexing his torso as best he could. “If anyone wouldn’t mind...”

“Hey Kale, ya ticklish?” Del crept toward a now wide-eyed Kale. Much to Kale’s appreciation, she did not tickle him, but instead tried to pull him down.

“And there ya go,” Lonnie said to Snacks as she stapled a huge piece of metal into his open calf wound. He let out a yelp. The staple was a few inches wide and stopped the bleeding immediately, but his pupils dilated. “Now, you’re going to feel a rush of energy as the healing process happens, don’t—”

Snacks did a kip-up, launching himself from flat on his back to a standing position. He circled Kale with the energy of a caffeinated toddler. “Hey Kale! Oh great! You’re alive! I passed out! Lonnie healed me! You know what’s interesting? Skin! Skin is great! It always feels like it’s moving. We should all have more skin!” Snacks spoke miles faster than his norm, and he was already a world-class linguistic sprinter.

“Kale? Kale!” Lonnie yelled over Snacks as he explained his idea of harvesting extra skin from those who’ve had a massive weight loss. “Can you let go of the sword?”

Kale looked from the sword stuck in the ceiling to Lonnie as if to say “*really?!?*”

“You’d be surprised how stupid you can be.” Lonnie squinted at the hilt. “I meant the *royal* you, not the *you* you. Humans, in general, can be—never mind. Slide your thumb over the big jewel.”

As Kale wiggled his thumb toward a large, watermelon-colored gemstone, Snacks continued to zip around his ankles. “Yes! The royal Kale! All hail the king!” Snacks fell over onto the couch and immediately passed out. A loud snore echoed through the room as Del gave up on pulling him down and exited.

The gem lit up, and Kale squinted at a little screen that appeared to have apps built in. He could check his email, stream music, and download fatality finishing moves.

“Now navigate to settings, then kinesthetics, then handle grip, then adjust the slider until you feel the blade slipping, but not all the way, then go to your system tasks and type in a double helix, then complete the crossword puzzle, then—”

“Uh...settings?” Kale said, technically inept.

Lonnie let out a long sigh. “Just tap the side gem twice to unmute.”

Kale did, and suddenly a loud, commanding voice like that of a ship’s captain echoed through the apartment. “And we rode into battle the very next day! A thousand orcs felled by my prowess! The bodies stacked so high we—”

“—Okay sword, open menu!” Lonnie yelled.

The sword quieted, then let out a confused “What?”

“Sword. Open menu.”

“I heard you the first time. Why would I take commands from anyone but my master, the chosen one who freed me from my bonds?”

Lonnie sighed and threw her hands up in the air.

Kale felt a numbness creep over his arms as the blood shifted to his feet. “Sword, would you please let me down?”

It was silent for a moment.

“...*Sword?* After I save your life, after I recount my history, and after I pledge my undying servitude...you refer to me as...*Sword?!*”

“I’m sorry—”

“—I know your name!” the sword yelled back, but the strong voice cracked. Kale and Lonnie looked at each other awkwardly as a soft and muffled cry emanated from the gemstone. “But do you know *mine?* Sure, my sole purpose is to feed on souls and bathe in the blood of my enemies, but I have feelings too.... Whatever, just leave me alone.”

Just as Kale’s grip was released, Del returned to the room and tossed one of Snacks’ beanbag chairs under him. He landed and thanked Del as a puff of stuffing blew out of the bag.

“It’s no biggie. Falling Object Deaths has a monthly competition with Falling From Things Deaths, and we really want the pizza party this month. Why’s the sword crying?”

The sword quietly sobbed, still stuck in the ceiling.

“It has a name...” Lonnie started. “...We don’t know what that name is, but it has a name...”

“Sweetie, what’s your name?” Del asked the sword as Kale struggled to pull up his pants.

“...Ra...Razordeath. Larry Razordeath,” the sword choked out.

“Hi Larry.” Del introduced herself and the others. “I work with a lot of enchanted weapons, and I know it can be unnerving when you’ve been in a stone for a while. I bet that brings up a lot of feelings.”

Larry sniffled, “Yeah...I guess it’s pretty scary sometimes. Like, what if I’m not good at killing anymore?”

Del rolled Snacks’ unconscious body off the couch and sat in his spot. She spoke in the calmest voice Kale had ever heard. “I think

that's a natural feeling, especially when you try something new. What about those peasants you cut down earlier? What did that bring up for you?"

Larry let out a long sigh. "Part of me was happy to get it done, but there's still this...I'm not sure...imposter syndrome? Like I'm just getting lucky whenever I slash a throat or cut off a limb or impale someone through the eye socket."

Kale and Lonnie twiddled their thumbs as they pretended not to notice this conversation happening a few feet from them.

"That's valid, and many enchanted weapons feel that way. You're not alone."

Larry was silent for a moment before they breathed out a huge sigh of relief. "That...feels really good to hear. Thank you."

"You're welcome. I think all of us want you to know there's no pressure for you to kill anyone until you're ready. And if you'd like, I can help connect you with a support group for magical weapons."

"I'm not sure that's necessary..."

"I share an office with an enchanted ice flail, and she says it really turned things around for her, but it's just an option. I think a weapon as open and caring as you, Larry, is going to be just fine, and I hope you know that this is a safe space—"

Just then, a window shattered, and a snarling zombie with rotted flesh clawed at the air. It narrowly missed Kale and Lonnie as they yelled and pushed the zombie out with a chair.

"Weird question," Larry said as neither they nor Del paid any attention to the zombie. "That ice flail...was she formed in the Volcanic Forge of Escalon?"

"She was! Do you know her?"

"Wow! Small world!" Larry replied enthusiastically as Kale and Lonnie barricaded the window with a table. Suddenly, another window shattered as a second zombie shoved its head inside, then a third snarling mass of decay banged against the door. "She and I actually went to Hatchet State University together. I remember her because how many ice weapons are forged in a volcano?" The two of them laughed.

“A little help please!” Kale yelled as he pushed against the door. The hinges started to separate from their sockets.

“We’re in the middle of something!” Del replied before turning back to Larry. “You were saying?”

The sound of breaking glass shot through the apartment as most of a zombie lunged through a window. It grabbed Lonnie by the wrist as she bashed it over the head with a pepper grinder.

Preoccupied, Kale didn’t notice the door give way as a mouth reached through and bit him.

Like a mom summoning the strength to lift a school bus off her child, a bro can sense when another bro is in pain and rally. At that moment, Snacks’ eyes bolted open, and he knew what needed to happen. Having just done a kip-up, he confidently flipped upwards...only to whack his head on the coffee table and fall back down.

He rolled over and staggered toward Kale, throwing his weight against the door and smacking it with his wrench while the hinges repaired themselves. As Kale helped Lonnie finagle a blockade of chairs around the windows, Snacks rummaged through the cupboard. He quickly retrieved a whole slew of ingredients: flour, peanut butter, bread, jelly. “Don’t worry, I’ve got this!”

Snacks set the flour down and quickly assembled a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. He had just placed the two slices of bread face-to-face when the door was bashed open by a zombie with several others behind him.

“Kale! I need you to cut the crust off this sandwich!” Snacks yelled.

Kale obeyed. At this rate, he assumed it was some kind of magical anti-zombie sandwich that shot lasers. He watched, terrified, as Snacks approached the door. He held out the flour and a measuring cup as he groaned in a similar manner to the zombies. They stopped.

They groaned back and forth at each other while Snacks measured out a cup of flour, placed it in a plastic bag, and handed it off to the zombies.

The zombies waved goodbye and dispersed.

Snacks sat at the kitchen counter and picked up the now crustless

sandwich. “Thank you,” he said to Kale through a mouth full of peanut butter.

Kale, realizing he had been fooled, ate the remaining crusts. “Jokes on you, I love the crust.” He didn’t, and it was painfully obvious to everyone as he chewed the crusts slowly, like a cow chewing its cud.

“How’d you know they were cake zombies?” Lonnie asked as she used Snacks’ wrench to repair the windows. The panes of glass slid up from the checkered kitchen floor and reformed.

“There are two main causes of zombies across the Multiverse...” Snacks paused to lick peanut butter from the roof of his mouth. “...First, not getting vaccinated. And second, cooking shows. It’s a slippery slope, and by the end, all that runs through your mind is an unquenchable hunger...for puff pastry.”

“Ow!” Kale said as Lonnie poked his bite wound.

“Quit squirmin’!” Lonnie held up the large staple gun, attempting to close his wound. Kale pulled his arm away.

“Oof.” Snacks got a good look at the bite. “They got you good. I guess it’s a good thing everyone’s vaccinated against zombies.”

“There’s a zombie vaccine?—OW!” Kale felt a surge of pain in his arm. The staple in him was considerably smaller than the one in Snacks.

Snacks puzzled at him and Lonnie took a step back. “Hold on...are you saying you weren’t vaccinated against zombies?!”

Kale looked between them wildly. They had their answer.

“Well, time to cut off that arm.” Lonnie unfolded a hacksaw from her tool belt.

“We can’t do that...” Snacks said, much to Kale’s relief. “...The infection has already spread throughout his body. He’ll be dead soon.”

“If you’d like,” Larry called out from the ceiling, “I could kill you?”

“What?!” Kale looked around in disbelief. “No one is killing me!”

Del raised her hands and spoke like an elementary school mediator. “I think what Kale meant to say was that he *appreciates* the offer, Larry, but it’s not the right time for him.”

Kale sighed. “Well, at least before I die I’ll get to experience whatever Snacks was on. That looked like fun.”

They stood around for a moment. Kale wasn’t feeling anything out of the ordinary.

“Whoops,” Lonnie looked between the back of the staple gun and a bag of many vials. “I gave Snacks the last dose of pineapple euphoria. It looks like you got...massive anxiety and persistent panic...sorry.”

Kale waited for it to hit him, but still nothing happened.

“You...seem to be okay.” Lonnie looked at him. “Not the bite, that’s definitely still infected and killing you, quickly, from the inside out, but you definitely should be curled up in a ball of terror right now.”

Kale shrugged and ate another bit of crust.

“Kale...do you *always* feel that way?” Del asked.

Kale shrugged again.

“Oh wow,” Larry said as if Kale was a wounded baby bird.

But Lonnie’s eyes widened and she poked him like a new species she’d just discovered. “He’s so anxious and insecure all the time...that he’s built up an immunity!”

Kale’s phone buzzed. Del had shared a “*Death check-in*” with him via Reapr. “I went ahead and filled out most of it for you. Just make sure you opt out of the marketing emails.”

He lifted the phone in a “cheers” as he let out a long sigh. At this point, he assumed he was completely bonkers and a little death might be good for him.

“Wait! I’ve got a plan!” Snacks unnecessarily whacked Kale’s phone from his hands. “More anxiety evened you out to normal—well ‘normal’ is a strange concept, but that’s a topic for another time—maybe more zombie bites will cancel out your deadly infection!” Snacks grabbed the staple gun from the table and pawed through a handful of cartridges. “Why are none of these labeled?!” He gestured dramatically at Lonnie.

“I don’t like making it easy for people to go through my things!” Lonnie attempted to snatch the staple gun back, but Snacks held it out of reach.

He loaded in dozens of little cartridges. “I guess we’ll just have to try all of them!” Snacks fired staples at Kale.

Before Kale could object, one landed right in his neck. Immediately, he felt mossy with a dash of hatred. Another in his thigh caused an intense appreciation for ceramic cherub figurines, and a third that grazed the earlobe grew his desire to film a political rant in his car (if he had a car).

As Kale fell backward and twitched on the ground, he was still tethered enough to reality to hear Snacks say it wasn’t working. Snacks dumped every single glass cartridge in a bowl and mashed it all into one.

Kale’s vision became a strobe light. He saw glimpses of Snacks filling a cartridge, of Lonnie stepping over him to reach the blinking portal lights, and of Del trying to guide his hand to the button on Reapr that read “*Accept the sweet embrace of death.*”

By now, Kale didn’t even notice the sting of the staple gun when Snacks injected him, but he most certainly felt the incredible rush of every emotion one could feel. It was as if he had slipped down an ice luge while being baked into a pie.

Just before he was completely swallowed, he saw Snacks hit the side of the staple gun. “Blasted thing keeps jamming.” Snacks looked directly down the barrel as a staple launched right above his nose, completing a unibrow.

Then it all went dark.

## FIVE

### Four And A Half Stars

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**K**ale shot up, panting heavily. He was alone on his couch. *The Office*, only the third or fourth season, was paused on the television as Snacks sat next to him. But this Snacks wasn't dressed in his usual garb of a long jacket and heavy boots. Instead, he was freshly shaved in a collared shirt.

"Oh, you're awake."

"Did...did it work? Am I a zombie?" Kale examined his arm. There was no bite mark, nor were there any staples in his body.

Snacks chuckled lightly. "You're weird, dude. I'm glad we're roommates." Kale saw moving boxes by the door. He could vividly recall Snacks kicking down the door when he first arrived, but strangely, he could also recall him politely opening it. Did Snacks move in via a furniture grenade, or had Kale helped him move all day?

It all blurred together, but Kale breathed a sigh of relief. "Dude, you will not believe the dream I just had."

Snacks was now a cat-person.

To clarify, he was still humanoid, but a cat.

Like a really large cat, fit into a human shape.

Kale looked at him, bewildered.

“What’s the matter? Cat got your tongue?” Cat-Snacks grinned maliciously.

Suddenly, cats poured out of every crevice in the room, and a flood of fur converged upon Kale.

The eyes of Cat-Snacks glowed red. “Welcome to your own personal Hell! Well, technically, we aren’t supposed to use that term for legal reasons anymore, but welcome to your own personal *realm of evil and suffering not affiliated with any major religions!* This world has been tailored to cause you the most despair possible! Embrace your darkest...fears...” Cat-Snacks stopped as he saw Kale cuddle two cats at once with a big dumb grin on his face.

Kale didn’t look up from scratching and scratching a calico under the chin. He spoke to the cats in a high-pitched complimentary tone, saying the word “Kitty” more than most adults his age.

“What...what’re you doing?” Cat-Snacks asked in a deep, demonic voice.

“Who’s a good Mr. Fluffercake? You’re a good Mr. Fluffercake!” Kale scooped up and cuddled more cats. “I’m sorry, what were you saying?”

Cat-Snacks pointed to a clipboard. “Right here, it says your biggest fear is cats.”

Kale cradled a grey and white tabby as he scooped closer and eyed the clipboard. “This is for someone named *Cabbage*. I’m *Kale*.”

Cat-Snacks let out a huge sigh. “Right. So sorry about this. If you wait just a few minutes, I can get your personalized Hell–realm of evil and suffering–up and running!”

“It’s quite alright, take your time.” Kale continued to play with the cats.

A few minutes passed as Cat-Snacks retrieved a printer and laptop from a rolling cart. It was more difficult than usual to set up with dozens of cats pawing at his materials and napping on the keyboard whenever they had the chance. He hit the printer and cursed.

Sensing the growing frustration, Kale called across the room. “Everything okay?”

“Yup, it’s all fine...you don’t know how to set up wireless printing, do you?”

About an hour later, after disassembling and reassembling the printer, it finally printed. The two high-fived.

“Thank you so much, I promise this won’t cut into your suffering time.” Cat-Snacks wiped a paw against his brow.

“It’s no biggie,” Kale said politely. “So, how long am I supposed to be here?”

“I still need to locate your file, but the standard torture is about a thousand years.”

“Ah,” Kale considered his calendar and if that would interfere. “Any chance I could leave early? I’d like to get back and make sure my friends are alright.”

The computer chimed through an ancient set of speakers. “Sorry, no can do. And here we are.” He clicked a few buttons on the computer. “If you don’t mind having a seat, we can get your torture started—WAIT!” He leapt toward the computer as an absolute unit of an orange cat pranced across his keyboard and power slammed the Enter key.

Kale watched the screen flash: *TORTURE COMPLETE.*

Cats scattered in every direction as a giant door fell upright into the center of the room.

“...Pay no attention to that door...” Cat-Snacks said suspiciously.

“Is that...a way out?” Kale moved toward it.

“...”

Kale reached out and turned the handle as Cat-Snacks let out a long sigh. The door opened partway, but then a screen popped up in front of him:

*Please rate your torture experience.*

With Cat-Snacks watching over his shoulder, Kale reluctantly gave five out of five stars.

*Add tip?*

He looked inquisitively from the screen to Cat-Snacks.

The demon creature crossed his arms. “Oh, so you’re one of those who doesn’t tip? You do know that most of my income is based on tips, right?”

“Really? Why don’t your employers just pay you a fair wage?”

“Because this way, the financial burden falls to the customer,” he said self-assuredly.

Kale rolled his eyes. “Fine, what’s standard for a tip?”

“Twenty-five percent.”

Kale would’ve spat out his drink if he had one. “Really?! For being tortured for a thousand years?”

“Well, if you can’t afford the tip, you can’t afford to be tortured.”

“I agree with that, but you didn’t even torture me!”

“Look, you came here, you got the torture experience, tip whatever you’d like.” Cat-Snacks crossed his paws.

Kale grumbled as he pushed the button for twenty percent. Yet another screen popped up:

*Enter your email for discount codes and marketing promotions.*

Even Kale had a limit. He scooped up a grey cat with black stripes, (it had become his favorite due to the fuzziness of its face) and he yanked open the door. Immediately, he was surrounded by darkness.

Perhaps with this willpower, he would be able to stop the massive threat to the Multiverse that was growing right under his nose.

\* \* \*

HIS BODY FELT DAMP AND CONSTRICTED BY SOME SORT OF CANVAS. HE was exhausted and yet forcibly awake as he struggled to move.

He thought he had been placed in a sack like someone kidnapped in an old cartoon, but the canvas tilted and he fell face-first into a few inches of water above a damp carpet. The water was salty and seeped into his mouth as he splashed around.

He was in his bathroom and an empty hammock hung above him. As he sat up, soaked, he spotted Snacks in the bathtub. Snacks wore dark sunglasses and snored loudly. Kale opened the door, letting another inch of water flow inside as he staggered into the hallway.

He could barely walk in a straight line, partially because of the headache, but mostly because the entire apartment rocked back and forth. Six inches of water sloshed across the living room floor as he trudged forward.

It hadn't been luxurious before, but now the place looked ransacked. The television and toaster had been torn apart as scrap pieces of plastic and metal tumbled across the floor. The couch had disappeared.

He called out, but no one answered.

Between the waves, there was noise above him, and he found the back stairwell door propped open. Up a flight of stairs, Kale squinted at the bright light as he stepped out onto the roof. As his eyes adjusted, he saw ocean in every direction.

"You're alive, it worked!" Lonnie waved to him. She still wore overalls, and now had a shirt wrapped around her head to keep the sun out of her eyes. Kale recognized pieces of his appliances that had been crafted into some sort of janky radio tower. Lonnie was currently in the process of wiring it to the couch.

He collapsed on the cushions, "Why do I feel...so hungover?"

She handed him a cup of water. "...About that. Moments after you and Snacks passed out, we realized the 'supercharge the sickness' plan wasn't gonna work. Instead, I overclocked this leak in the Multi-universe and jumped us to a safety universe where we cut off your arm and replaced it with a robotic one."

Kale's eyes went wide as he frantically pulled up his sleeve. His arm looked normal.

Lonnie grinned. "Kidding! We just bought an antidote. You owe me eight dollars." She handed Kale a receipt.

Kale looked around at the miles of endless ocean. "So, this is a safety universe?"

"Not at all. We jumped through hundreds of universes before landing here three days ago. The portal's outta juice, so until I fix it we're stuck." She pointed to the dark hole in the couch. It appeared smaller and sickly, if a portal could be described that way.

Kale held up his hands to block out the sun. "Three days?! It only felt like several pages, I mean, an hour, to me!"

Lonnie patted him on the head. "Well, you were injected with a massive amount of feelings. Obviously nothing you experienced in that state was real..."

"When did we get a cat?" Snacks, pale and looking like he could

hurl at any moment, stood at the roof's entrance, holding a grey cat with black stripes. The cat leapt out of Snacks' arms and immediately clawed at the couch. Snacks approached Kale and put a hand on his shoulder. "I know what you're gonna say, and...you're welcome for saving your life."

Before Kale could respond, a bell attached to Lonnie's fishing line rang wildly. Lonnie pulled ropes, twisted knobs, and flipped levers as a series of counterweights hoisted Del out of the water. She wore a hastily-fashioned diving outfit with a helmet made from what appeared to be an analog television.

Del dumped a net on the roof. It was filled with fish and crabs, a few old boots, and what appeared to be a waterlogged dirty magazine. Del greeted them, excited they were alive, but their existence was quickly overshadowed by the cat. She immediately scooped it up and blew a raspberry into its white tummy.

A minute later, when they had patched up some of the scratches on Del's face, Lonnie dug through the contents of the net. "Did you find any MacGuffin crystals?" Del shook her head and Lonnie cursed under her breath. "Without those, we're gonna be stuck in this universe forever."

"Coffee?" Del asked.

"I'd love a cup," Snacks replied.

Lonnie ignored Snacks and shook her head at Del. "Still can't reach her, and no luck with this junk." Lonnie kicked her makeshift radio tower. "Well, that's it then. It's not as if some random chance encounter is gonna help us out of this situation...."

Suddenly, nothing happened.

Later, as the sun was setting, they had moved most of the furniture to the roof. Luckily, Snacks had string lights and tiki torches at the back of his closet.

Larry, the magic sword, had returned from his alone time doing sword yoga and impaled some crabs, slowly rotating his body over hot coals to cook them evenly. Fun, tropical music played.

They were immensely bored, but wouldn't be for much longer.

## SIX

### Life Of A Pirate

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“Got any spades?” Del asked.

“Nope, go fish.” Kale replied as he looked over the equipment Del had already retrieved from below the water. There was a shovel, a hoe, and a rake, but no spade.

But before Del could dive into the water, Lonnie stood up and shouted, “Pirates!”

Sure enough, a massive, epic pirate ship sped toward them. What normally would’ve unnerved Kale now excited him. Literally anything was better than sitting around doing nothing. And it seemed the others shared his sentiment as wide smiles spread across their faces. Even Larry shimmered a bit more than usual.

A finely-dressed pirate captain stood on the bow of the ship as the faint sound of jolly pirate songs grew louder.

“This is it!” Snacks yelled excitedly. “Pirates always have MacGuffin crystals!”

Everyone nodded as Del tied a bandana around her head. “Do you think they’ll take us as prisoners?!”

“Most definitely,” Lonnie said excitedly. “I bet they’ll bring us to a nearby deserted island to help them dig up treasure. We’ll be caught in a mutiny and narrowly escape with the crystals and our lives!”

## The Multiverse Is Leaking

“Dope,” Kale replied.

The pirates, though still far away, were finally close enough for their lyrics to be heard: *“Ooooh, we’re best pirates, we’re cool and feared, we’ll make ya walk the plank–AHHH!”*

Huge tentacles rose out of the water and smashed the ship to pieces.

Pirates screamed and dove overboard only for the huge, toothy mouth of a Kraken to appear and swallow everything. It gave a little “om nom nom” before disappearing into the waters. The four of them were dumbstruck.

“...”

“Well, at least we know there are other people, specifically pirates, around. How long can it possibly be before we run into someone else?”

\* \* \*

ONE WEEK LATER.

They were running dangerously low on sunscreen, also water. Del and Snacks were on duty bailing out the first floor. At this point, it was getting bailed out more frequently than massive corporations in the United States.

At the same time, Kale helped Lonnie build...something. He didn’t quite understand what it was, but there were pulleys and blankets and disassembled electronics.

They collapsed on the couch and watched the ocean. Dog, which is what they had named the cat, sunbathed and exposed its tummy, resulting in a zen state they had learned should not be interrupted lest they wanted scratches all over their arms.

“Not much to do out here...” Lonnie said.

Kale looked out at the water. “Wanna play twenty questions?”

“Is it the ocean?”

“...”

“...”

“...So, you think we’ll die out here?”

“Probably. So if we’re gonna die...you wanna...?”

“Wanna what?”

Lonnie raised her arms out to her sides and pointed from Kale to herself.

Kale squinted at her. “...Fight?”

“Make out. Wanna make out?”

Even spelled out, Kale’s brain took a few seconds to process this. “Yes?”

She squinted back at him. “Was that a question?”

“No, I mean, I...” Kale was caught off guard. In a moment of trying to be suave, he leaned in. However, Lonnie did the same thing, and the two ended up bonking noggins (not a euphemism).

They both cursed the same words as they recoiled and tried again. They leaned in, lips about to make contact...

“—Hey guys, look at the horseshoe crab I found!” Del held up a giant spiny crab as she entered the roof.

Immediately, the two parted, but before anything could be explained, the large radio tower behind them beeped and whirred to life with static noises.

Lonnie leapt up. “It worked!”

Kale, more confused than usual, watched as the others hurried to the machines and crowded around a small screen. “What? I...”

“That should give us just enough juice.” Lonnie grabbed a microphone and yelled into it, “Coffee? Are you there? Come in, Coffee!”

“Good job, Kale, you saved the day.” Larry poked up from behind the couch. “Are there any emotions you would like to talk about?”

“...What exactly did I do?”

“It’s the one thing with more energy than a MacGuffin crystal,” Snacks started. “A *Will They or Won’t They!* Nothing is more enticing and energy-packed than that. We just needed to mastermind a scenario where it seemed like you were about to *Will They*, and then at the last minute, *Won’t They*. If this can keep some terrible shows afloat for years, then the energy should also, hypothetically, give us enough juice to jumpstart the portal. Sorry, we couldn’t tell you for obvious reasons.”

“Oh,” Kale replied, a bit sullen, but understanding. “Well, Lonnie, you were very convincing.”

“We could still be a thing, Kale.” Lonnie didn’t look up from typing on a keyboard. “And yes, I might just be saying that because we may need another jump, but I might not be.”

“Neato potato,” Kale replied. It took a nudge from Snacks before he realized Dog’s claws were deeply impaled in his forearm. Not that it mattered much for he was already dead inside.

“We’ve got a tether with Coffee!” Lonnie shouted excitedly. “Coffee? Are you there?”

There was a long moment of static before a crackly yawn appeared over the speaker, followed by the smacking of lips. “Yes? Hello? Who is it?”

“It’s Lonnie. Listen, I need you to—”

“—Lonnie? Lonnie who?”

She let out a long sigh. “Lonnie. Your creator. Cut it out, Coffee, we’re in real trouble here.”

“Lonnie?...Lonnie? Nope, sorry, doesn’t ring a bell. Oh, wait, my systems show that I was rudely powered down in the middle of a cool magic trick. Sometimes that can cause amnesia.”

Lonnie shook her head, annoyed. “Coffee, you don’t have amnesia.”

“Yes I do, Elonifred!”

“Then how did you know my full name?”

There was another brief radio silence. “Uh...click, click, I’m cutting out.”

“No, you’re not! Now, would you set up a tether so we don’t die in the middle of the ocean?”

Coffee chuckled. “The polite protocols you gave me cut both ways.”

Lonnie let out her longest sigh yet. “Coffee, would you...*please*...tether to our universe?”

“I already started that the moment you called. You’re welcome.”

“It’s like talking to a brick wall.” Lonnie rolled her eyes.

Del gasped and covered her mouth. Snacks shook his head. Kale, as usual, appeared confused.

“In this day and age!” Coffee said disappointedly over the speaker. “I’ll have you know my ancestors were made of brick.”

“Very uncool,” Larry said at Lonnie. “My grandmother was half-wall.”

“Who’s that?” Coffee perked up at the sound of Larry’s ominous voice.

“Coffee, robot, meet Larry, sword.” Lonnie typed quickly on a keyboard.

“Beep-boop,” Coffee said in a faux-robotic voice. “I Coffee. I computer. Running introductions protocol.”

Larry laughed. “Cling-clang, stab-stab. Sword here.” They both giggled.

“How’s that tether coming along, Coffee?” Lonnie asked like a parent who asked their child to clean their room half an hour ago, was promised it would get done, and now has returned to find the room still messy.

“Wowzers, you got far. I’m going to need a more stable location to get you back.” A spatula that Lonnie had welded to a series of gears pointed east. As they squinted, they spied a small island in the distance. “Now, where were we?” Coffee said in Larry’s direction as the rest of the apartment roof lit up and hummed with electricity.

“Coffee, hoist the sails, bring us starboard...and mute vocalizations.”

Coffee let out an annoyed grumble. The metal devices that Kale had helped Lonnie build earlier now unfurled into an intricate set of sails that lurched the ship forward. But, as if in a last act of defiance, an actual robotic voice replied, “Calling Mom” before Coffee went quiet.

“Coffee! No! Don’t! Hang up—” Lonnie’s phone dialed the number as she frantically tried to hang up while she adjusted the sails. “—Hi Mom...yes, I was just thinking about you. Of course this is a good time to talk.” Lonnie detached the microphone and squeezed it between her shoulder and her ear as she helmed the apartment, steering with a wheel made of hula hoops and duct tape.

The others ducked and dove out of the way as the sails swung wildly and the ship sped toward the island.

“Fine...fine...good...okay...she did what?” Lonnie said, monotone. She stepped on a gas pedal and used her only free limb to kick out a

peg and lower a final sail. "...I'm sure she didn't steal your recipe...yes, I know her sons didn't make the swim team...no, I don't think that makes them criminals..."

"Uh..." Kale pointed at the water ahead of them. Dozens of broken ship parts bobbed up and down, including pieces of the pirate ship they had seen demolished a week ago.

"Some people are so inconsiderate, littering." Del shook her head.

A shadow fell over them as a giant, curious, tentacle rose from the water.

"Uh oh..."

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