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The Search

“I’m afraid there aren’t any Chefs available at such short notice” said the restaurant manager to the eager gentleman.

“Not even one?” he asked dejectedly.

“I’m sorry, Sir. Not even one.”

“But I’m desperate! I really need a chef for my book!”

“Padon me, did you say you needed one for your book?”

“Yeah, I’m writing a book – a novel if you please, which takes an in-depth look into a chef’s life gone awry. It’s gonna make me millions! Since I don’t know anything about chefs, I thought it would be nice to do a bit of research on them. You know how any writer worth his salt is supposed to research his characters to make his writing more believable? It’s called 'getting under the skin of the character' …”

“Get out!” screamed the manager.

“Excuse me?”

“You want to hire a ‘Grandioso’ chef- one who is sought after by the elitist of the elite, for some lousy two-bit book! It’s preposterous!”

“What? It’s not like I won’t pay him. In fact, he can have 1% of the royalties from the book sales…and an honourable mention in the book…although I can’t guarantee that I’ll use his real name – makes it seem more mysterious, you know?”

“Security!”

“I’m going! I’m going!”

As he walked away, Viz was still as determined as ever to get his writing career off the ground. He believed that he had found the easiest gimmick to get rich quickly – a writer was always only one best-seller away from becoming a billionaire, after all. And even though he didn’t know much about writing, he believed that 'researching the character’ was absolutely essential. And since he was writing an epic science-fiction/fantasy/mystery with a chef as its protagonist, he needed a chef!

Viz looked around as he prodded on towards the bus stop. The street was full of fancy restaurants with glass windows. His eyes lit up as he saw a sign on one such window.

“Kitchen Help Wanted” it said.

“That amounts to a front row seat to a Chef’s performance” he thought. What better place to observe a chef than his kitchen itself.

“I hope you have the requisite experience for the position?” the manager asked him after the preliminaries were complete.

“I can boil eggs.” Viz ventured.

“You’ve studied cooking at college, of course?”

“I boiled eggs when I was at college.” replied Viz earnestly.

“I’m sorry but you’re unsuitable….” the manager was interrupted midway by a voice from behind the kitchen door.

”Send him in.” the voice said.

“But Chi, he doesn’t have the skills or the expe….” the manager began, but was

stopped yet again.

“Just send him in!”

“You heard the boss.” The manager pointed Viz towards the kitchen.

Viz opened the kitchen door and walked in to see a man in a Chef's hat chopping some vegetables on the slab. He strode out towards him and stuck out his hand.

“Hi, I'm Viz. I saw you ad outside and...”

“Tell me Viz, can you boil eggs?”

“Done it all my life.”

“You’re hired.” Chi said quickly.

Viz scrutinised the kitchen. It was rectangular in shape and had cabinets, for appliances and dishes, at one end and wash-basins at the other. There was a large rectangular marble slab, built around a pillar, in the centre of the room where the major cooking related activities seemed to take place. A bunch of wires were plugged into a switchboard near the wash-basins. The other end of the wires vanished under a door to the side.

“Where is the rest of the staff?” Viz enquired, looking around at the empty kitchen.

“What staff?” Chi said distantly. He seemed to be busy scribbling in a small notebook he had just taken out.

“The cooking staff. You couldn’t possibly run a restaurant kitchen with just two people, can you?”

“Oh, we manage to get by.” His scribbling intensified.

“How?” asked a bewildered Viz.

“I suppose I’d better tell you all.”

Chi walked across the room to the door and opened it. Viz followed him and peered inside with anticipation.

Viz tried to make sense of what Chi was pointing at, but all he could see in the room was a bed. A pretty bed. A pretty pink bed covered with yellow polka dots. A pretty pink bed covered with yellow polka dots that was nailed to the ceiling. He was about to utter a bunch of words in Chi's direction, mostly beginning with 'wh-', but he had to stop himself. It had come to his sudden notice that the bed had turned into a human form and had floated down to face him. Chi thought for a moment, decided that no answer from Chi would be good enough for him at this point, and promptly fainted.

When Viz came to, he found himself lying on a bed in an unfamiliar room. He tried to recollect how he got there. He looked down at the bed and thought that it reminded him of something but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. He shrugged his shoulders and closed his eyes to go back to sleep. After all, he was tired and the bed was really comfortable. It wasn't just comfortable, he thought, it was in fact the most comfortable bed he had ever slept on. He was making a mental note to go and seek out the owner post-nap and find out where he'd bought the bed , when he remembered.

Chi heard the loud shriek followed by the even louder banging on the guest room door. He allowed himself a little smile before turning to his companion. “He's up. Let's get ourselves introduced.”

His companion floated mistily to the drawing room door and waited patiently as Chi opened the door and asked Viz to calm down. He wondered if Viz would be able to help him out. But then he remembered the others that had come before him. This would end the same way too, he thought. Horribly.

“Morphy, meet Viz. Viz, meet Morphy.” Chi said with every bit of nonchalance that he could muster. He always enjoyed these meetings.

“What is tha-that thing?” squeaked Viz, as he pointed an accusing finger at Morphy.

“He's an alien. And stop pointing, it's rude.” Chi slapped Viz's hand down.

“Nice to meet you, Viz” said Morphy.

“Uh...likewise...” was all Viz could manage to splutter out.

"Maybe you should sit down."

Viz looked at the bed nervously.

"Don't worry, that one's just a plain old regular bed." chuckled Chi.

Viz sat on the bed reluctantly. He wouldn't be able to trust any beds for a while, he thought. He was immediately conscious of what an absurd fear that was and tried to compose himself. He looked up at the alien and studied him properly for the first time. Morphy wasn't very tall, in fact he was probably a few inches shorter than him. He had an almost perfectly round face and an even more perfectly spherical nose to complement it. The other 'human' features were pretty run-of-the-mill too. He was smartly but simply dressed in a striped t-shirt and long oxymoronic shorts. Morphy could almost have passed as one of them, Viz thought, if he didn't have just one eye. Of course, there was also the small matter of his skin being pink and yellow polka dotted and the fact that he could float in air.

Viz was trying to sift through his limited encounters with science-fiction novels to remember whether Martians were supposed to be green or pink, when his thoughts were interrupted by Chi.

“Let me try to tell you all...again. And please try not to pass out this time.”

“It all started on April 20th, 2250. It was a bright and stormy night...with a full moon...which was the cause of the brightness. And I think I also saw a shooting star or two go by. Great set up right?” Chi began.

Viz nodded resignedly.

“Yes it was. I should have known that something big was going to happen to me that night. I was engrossed in perfecting my signature recipes, when I heard something crash... wait...this doesn't feel right! A story like this deserves to be told...nay experienced... better! Morphy, prepare the time machine! We'll let Viz see the events as they transpired that night in their full glory, in person.”

“I'm afraid the Sinetransmorgodor, or what you call the 'time machine', did not survive the milkshake incident. And since I cannot contact my planet anymore, the only recourse for us is to wait until your people invent inter-planetary travel so that I can ask the manufacturers to deliver the spare parts here.”

“How long will it take for us to invent it again?” Chi asked with hopeful eyes.

“The same time as when I told you last. Five hundred and twenty four more years.” Morphy said bluntly as he glowered at Chi. Viz couldn't help but think that it was an impressive feat to do that so convincingly with his solitary eye.

“Don't look at me like that! How was I to know that your alien technology is so susceptible to milk based drinks? And why don't they have a service centre in this part of the solar system? They're the people you should be mad at!” said Chi defiantly.

“You guys have a time machine?” Viz asked.

“Where were we?” said Chi quickly. “Ah yes, the crash. It wasn't very loud actually. I don't think anyone except me would even have heard it. I went to the back of the restaurant to investigate anyway. The sight was something out of a science-fiction movie. The entire area was covered in smoke and there was a small crater in the middle of the backyard. In the middle of that crater, lay what looked like a spaceship.”

“It was a spaceship.” Morphy interjected.

“I'm telling it. Let me tell it my way!”

“All right. Go ahead.”

“In the middle of the crater was a spaceship” continued Chi while scowling at Morphy “And before I could do anything, a small door slid open on one side noiselessly, and a mysterious misty figure stumbled out of it.” Chi paused for effect.

“It was me.” said Morphy.

“Why did you have to ruin it? Why??” thundered Chi.

“It's okay. I kinda guessed it was him anyway. Please continue.” Viz tried to calm him down.

“What's left to tell? Morphy here stumbled out of that door, told me who he was and where he came from and he's been living with me ever since.” said Chi grumpily.

“As it's already been revealed, prematurely, it was Morphy that stumbled out of the spaceship. Anyone else in my position might have been scared, but I stood my ground. Also, he looked and walked kind of funny.” chuckled Chi.

“I had just crash landed on an alien planet after travelling for days, maybe even months. I was tired and disoriented.” said Morthy defensively.

“Yeah, yeah. Don't get your antennae in a bunch.”

“I don't have antennae. Are you blind? I've warned you about the stereotyping before. If you do that again, I'll...”

“What happened next?” Viz intervened before the argument could escalate any further.

“I asked E.T. here where he came from. At which point he mumbled something incoherent and passed out. I had to drag his scrawny alien body inside and wait for him to come to. I kept expecting a knock on the restaurant door from someone in the government or the neighbouring establishments but no one came. Luckily it was almost closing time and I didn't have any customers to worry about.”

“By that logic, it's always closing time here.” Morphy winked at Chi, or he may have just blinked his eye, it was hard for Viz to tell.

Chi pretended not to hear the jibe and continued, “When he finally came to, after zoning out for a few hours, I tried to find out where he was from and what he was doing here. I was surprised to find that he could understand and speak English pretty well..”

“It's not that hard. My planet's language had one million, five hundred and twenty eight thousand, three hundred and twenty eight consonants and vowels at last count. And I'm sure a few hundred thousand must have been added since I've lost contact. I was easily able to master your 'language' during the journey.” Morphy said smugly.

“Riiight. That is, if you remember that part of the journey correctly. And I doubt that you do.”

“Why do you say that?” asked Viz.

“He says that because he's a jerk, and also because I seem to be suffering from what you call short-term memory loss. I suspect it may be because of something that happened during the journey, but I can't be sure.”

“Oh, how bad is it?” asked Viz.

“It's pretty severe. He can't even remember why he came to our planet.”

“All I remember is that I'm on an extremely confidential mission and my presence must not be detected at any cost. At any cost whatsoever.”

Viz felt a small shiver down his spine as he heard that even though there wasn't a hint of malice evident on Morphy's face.

“You still haven't answered my original question.” Viz turned to Chi.

“Ah yes. How do we manage without any staff, you ask? We manage because no customer has set foot in this restaurant for weeks. Not since that cretin, Lilly Legume wrote that scathing review of my restaurant in her 'Bestaurant Guide'.”

“Oh, how I despise that woman.” Chi added after a pause.

“But...if there aren't any customers, why did you hire me? How do I fit into all this?”

“Very snugly Viz. Very snugly.”

The Mission

“Send him in.” Goloxinout said to his secretary.

Goloxinout, or Pete as his friends called him, was in a cranky mood. The planetary elections were due in another millennium and it meant that he was forced to do some actual work again. He had twenty meetings lined up in the day and he wasn't looking forward to any of them.

“Good afternoon, Mr President.” the visitor said as he threw in a well practiced bow of courtesy.

“What is this about Xylon?” Goloxinout gestured him to sit.

“We still haven't been able to establish contact with General Wingo.”

“Ah yes, General Wingo...uh...where is he again?”

“It's been fifty thousand years to the day since he set out on his mission to Earth.”

“Right. Right. Th-aaat general Wingo. Of course. How does General Wingo like the place?”

“We don't know. We lost contact with him as soon as he left our atmosphere.”

“Ah. Hate it when that happens. So you want me to name a day after him? General Wingo day? It kinda rolls off the tongue, you have to admit...”

“All in good time Mr. President. But first, we must bring his mission to closure.”

Goloxinout groaned and braced himself. This was generally the point where Xylon gave him a long-winded 'briefing' and asked him to make a decision. Oh how he hated making decisions. He had become the president by religiously avoiding making them at every turn. They historically had a knack of coming back to bite him in the behind.

“General Wingo's was no ordinary mission.” Xylon paused suddenly.

“Go on Xylon, I'm listening. What was the mission about?”

“Unfortunately, that's almost all we really know about the mission.”

“All we know about the mission is that it wasn't ordinary and that it involved General Wingo going to Earth?”

“You must understand that this mission was commissioned during the Wizium administration, Mr. President. Most of the relevant records were a casualty of the Great Digitizing Fiasco of '89.”

“The one where they shredded all the documents before scanning them?”

“That was '88, Mr. President.”

“Ah yes, this was the one with the Unicorn, the barrel of gunpowder and the firefly.”

“And the banjo.” added Xylon.

“Yes, the banjo. Of course. I still don't understand why we're talking about this mission Xylon.”

“Well, there *is* one more thing that we've been able to find out. I've double-checked the information and there's no doubt about it.” Xylon added.

“What's that?”

“The only mission guideline that we could find explicitly states that if Captain Wingo doesn't return or contact us in another...”, he looked at his watch and continued, “...ten seconds, we are supposed to destroy Earth immediately.”

Their eyes darted to the clock on the desk simultaneously.

“Well, it looks like he isn't back Mr. President.” Xylon said as the hand ticked over the tenth time.

Goloxinout furrowed his only brow in deep thought. He liked to think of himself as a man of peace and wiping out an entire civilization always made him feel uneasy. On the other hand, if he acted quickly, he would be able to take a quick afternoon nap before the next meeting.

“Who can take care of this for us?”

“The Martians owe us a couple of favours. We can call them in.”

“Where do I sign?” Goloxinout asked.

“There, there and there.” Xylon said as he pushed an official looking piece of paper towards him.

“One more thing, Mr. President.”

“There's more?” asked an exasperated Goloxinout.

“The deadline for nominating the Lifetime Award For Excellence In Galactic Science is almost upon us. I've scrutinized the contributions and careers of all our eminent scientists and one name stands out – that of Kintonx Goulin.”

“Nominate whoever you please Xylon. I couldn't care less. Hang on...isn't he the time machine guy ?”

“He called it the Sinetransmorgodor – after his pet dinosaur, I'm told.”

“I've read about him. Did he ever remember how to make another one of those contraptions? Anyone who lays their hands on one of those would have access to immense power.”

“I'm afraid the memory loss caused by his journey to the future was quite permanent. He was only ever able to create one. And the whereabouts of that machine, despite extensive search operations that have been carried out in the last few centuries, are still unknown.”

What a pity that was, thought Goloxinout as he stared out to the view of the galaxy that his cabin afforded him. He could have used it to go back and cancel all those meetings.