



To Merrily Trundle

(or "How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Art")

E.G. WOLVERSON

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YOUNG TARRON LET OUT A SCREAM OF PURE DELIGHT AS HE WATCHED THE SMALL, fluffy green creature waddle towards him. In contrast to the youngster's evident joy, the face of Tarron's mother contorted into a mask of contempt at sight of the... *thing*. In one swift move she pulled her young son from the shuttle's aisle and forcibly planted him in the window seat – *as far away as possible from that jumped-up little abomination!*

Fæ Spajj was more concerned with manoeuvring herself into her seat than she was about the chorus of disdainful looks being shot at her from the shuttle's humanoid passengers. As about ninety per cent of the known universe's occupants were roughly six-foot tall humanoids, it came as little surprise to Fæ that the Yenvel-Braxiatel shuttle hadn't been designed with Spadgewalkers™ in mind. By the time that the shuttle had entered hyperspace, Fæ had given up all hope of ever getting onto her seat and so she lay slumped in what would be most humanoid's legroom. The polished metal surface of the seat in front of her reflected back the one thing that she could never bear to see; the one thing that

reminded her of who she was, where she came from, and most important of all, why. Her appearance.

Two bright pink, chicken-like legs sprouting from a giant ball of green fluff comprised the organic part of Fæ's body, whilst two relatively large mechanical arms attached either side of her 'torso' freed her from a life of agonising helplessness, but aesthetically only contributed to her deliberately comical appearance. To add to her general malaise, the humanoid air was too thick for her to breathe comfortably and so an unsightly air reclamator adorned the centre of her face, set right in between her amusingly multi-coloured eyes.

What hurt Fæ the most was the meticulous cruelty of it all. Whilst most species could blame their deities for any physical or mental shortcomings, the Spadgewalkers™ had just one human toy manufacturer to blame.

The Spadgewalkers™ weren't the children of any god. They were the genetically engineered product of an unfeeling corporation; a corporation that created an entire race as a fashionable new plaything for rich kids.

A thinking, feeling, helpless play thing.

'The Spadgewalkers™ will merrily trundle into your life...' it used to say on the tin, but Fæ had never *merrily trundled* anywhere in all her days.

Well the time had come. *She would split more than an infinitive!* She would shatter the chains of prejudice and hatred that had bound her people for so

long. Too long had the Spadgewalkers™ been considered no more than a bad joke. The universe would recognise her people. She'd force them to.

She'd force them to on Braxiatel.

Open-mouthed, the Great and the Good walked slowly down the ramp of the shuttle onto the soil of KS-159, each and every one of them completely dumbstruck as they took in the sheer wonder of the tiny world on which they found themselves.

Dyoni's face took on a beautiful, childlike quality as she cast her eyes over the endless vista of exquisite architecture that seemed to fall off the very edge of the world. Suddenly, her peaceful visage was shattered by a particularly violent sneeze. The beauty that was hers so fleetingly fell away, replaced by a malevolent sneer. A sneer directed a little ball of green fluff being rolled unceremoniously out of the cargo hold.

Wincing with pain, Fæ used her artificial arms to help lever herself back onto her feet. Looking up the ramp, she saw the eyes of a human woman locked onto her, ablaze with righteous indignation. This was the very same woman that had caused Fæ to be thrown – literally – in with the livestock for most of the journey. Why should Fæ suffer just because this woman had a cat-hair allergy? How could Fæ be blamed because the corner-cutting geneticists who created her species used cheap feline genes in her make-up? At times like these, Fæ felt that her anger would consume her. Usually, a pre-programmed endorphin rush

would quell her rage, but no amount of genetic meddling could affect her ability to reason.

Drawing upon all the years of suffering bottled-up inside to give her the conviction to do what she had to do, Fæ looked up and met Dyoni's glare. As she stared straight into the woman's hateful eyes, Fæ promised herself that she would do what years of 'war' failed to do (well, the Spadgewalkers™ called it a 'war'; the humans tended to call it an *'aggressive product recall'*.) Patting her luggage affectionately, Fæ began to make her way slowly towards the Reception Area. *This had better work...*

Amongst all the hustle and the bustle in Reception, neither the guests nor Braxiatel's outrageously expensive security systems detected the two-foot high creature gazing out of the huge picture window. Had she been designed with tear ducts, Fæ would have wept. The largest finger on her three-pronged mechanical talon pressed ever so slightly against the deceptively thick magnoglass, her small kaleidoscope eyes spinning around and around in their sockets, unable to focus on any one thing in the magnificent tapestry of light that assaulted her poorly-attuned senses. Momentarily, her battered leather bag almost slipped from her rusty left talon and then suddenly, as if waking up from a dream, she tightened her grip on the bag and shuffled off towards the queue. Her resolve had never been stronger.

Whilst the galaxy's academic elite waited impatiently alongside the neo-post-modern art critics to have their loud, pink plasti-disc invitations checked (just so that they could get an exclusive peek at Osterling's lost – and to be fair, pretty unimpressive - manuscript *The Good Soldiers*; a recently unearthed and restored six hundred year-old 'retro' 64K computer; and a giant sculpture by Falkonus, built entirely from model railway engines) they missed a unique thing of beauty. It is not very often that one gets to see the silhouette of something lifted straight out of a young child's hapless doodling, juxtaposed with the picturesque view of the sun setting over Brax's ornamental gardens. And these people think they know art.

Certain beings in the seven galaxies would give their left leg to have the kind of unrestricted access to the Braxiatel Collection that Wolsey, Professor Bernice Summerfield's cat, enjoys on a daily basis. After seeing the portly creature limp about Brax clearly favouring its right hind leg, visitors to the Collection could be forgiven for thinking that perhaps Wolsey actually *had* sacrificed a limb in exchange for his wonderful privilege.

For his part though, the ageing tomcat was getting a bit fed up with the tiny planetoid. With a circumference of just ten miles, Wolsey had little territory left to mark and worse; no fellow felines to laud it over! However, one day something changed. The tabby tom suddenly seemed to find a spring in his lame

ol' step. He found himself holding in his tubby little gut, but he didn't know why. There was something in the air... a new sort of smell...

Satisfaction was a feeling that Fæ just couldn't get used to. For years she had known how it felt to be oppressed and to be afraid, and more recently how to love. And to grieve. The thought that her plan was proceeding so smoothly introduced her to this radical new emotion. For once, her usually solemn inside and her rather jubilant outside were in synch. All she had to do was follow this animal and let its plasti-disc collar open doors that are closed to even Brax's most distinguished guests.

Her extensive research of KS-159 had revealed that the groundskeeper, a Mister Hass, had modified the collar's built-in mass detector to account for this creature's apparent eating disorder. Thanks to her small stature and lightweight design, that little bit of leeway was all Fæ needed to be able to creep through doorways in the wake of the animal.

Pestered throughout by an attractive but pungent aroma, Wolsey led Fæ on the trip of a lifetime. Occasionally, the cat would glance back over his shoulder as if aware of the Spadgewalker™ on his tail, but Fæ took this to be nothing more than typical feline behaviour.

The more Wolsey led her around the small planetoid, the further thoughts of her mission drifted from Fæ's mind. She almost had to prise herself

away from the Hamlet; its thatched cottages seemed to be singing to her, inviting her in to rest in one of their comfortable, warm, fairytale beds. Even the sections of the Collection that lay in ruins as a result of the Fifth Axis' recent occupation had their own sense of grim romance – a natural aura of beauty and loss that Fæ knew all too well.

Clutching her bag close to her 'cheek', Fæ pulled up sharply as the cat stopped dead in front of her and cocked its head to the side. She suddenly realised that she had gone too far. She had allowed herself to merrily trundle right into the open air of the Garden of Remembrance. Totally exposed. Nowhere to run. She felt something that she hadn't felt since she was last yanked out of Anat's toy box, armless and defenceless. She was utterly helpless.

Heckles raised, Wolsey turned to face the source of that intoxicating odour that had been affecting him so strangely...

Professor Bernice Summerfield was having one of her 'what if' days, as she liked to call them. Often she'd simply sit and ponder on coincidence, fate, and just how long it would take before those bloody laughter-lines would once again rear their ugly head.

Benny would think about all the weird and wonderful things that she'd done in her life; how the man who just bumped into her could be the man she will marry... *next time*; how the bored-looking child in the *United Earth* football shirt could grow up to be the next Dupok, or the next Hitler.

She'd just heard on the grapevine that First Minister Lin Zee of Shrug Zal Minor had launched a merciless neutronic strike against his neighbouring planet. Millions of lives extinguished in the blink of an eye... and last Tuesday the man responsible was sat on the table behind her, casually sipping a ginger beer milkshake in *The Caretaker's Cottage* as she tucked into her full English. She'd thought nothing of it at the time - seen one militant, art-loving quadruped, seen 'em all!

Still, Benny thought, some things you can be absolutely sure you've never seen, even when you've been de-aged and had your natural lifespan trebled. Things like a two-foot green **M&M** with chicken legs, robotic arms, and an exhaust grill in the middle of its face being **assaulted** (to put it politely) by your pet cat...

The sight of Fæ , who had had her arms removed by security and was being forced to wear a bag with two tiny eye-holes because one visitor had objected to 'the criminal's public nudity' drew a crowd of masochistic busy bodies.

Fæ 's tiny heart was beating frantically; she feared not for herself, but for the safety of her bag, the safety of the precious sta-

Well... at least at first. As the huge imposing figure of the infamous Ms Jones, Chief Administrator of the Braxiatel Collection, bore down upon her, Fæ feared for **everything**. She could see the mouth of the stern, grey-haired woman

moving but she couldn't hear the words. She couldn't hear a thing. She was too frightened.

After all she had been through for it to come to this. The difficulty of leaving New Swindon (the only place in the known universe where Spadgewalkers™ can be free); to get past Braxiatel security; to go through such indignity with that damned Lion, Wolsey; and now this – face to crotch with the personification of fear!

From the chain around her neck, Ms. Jones slowly and precisely lifted her horn-rimmed glasses to her eyes and looked Fæ up and down with disgust.

'And what have you got to say for yourself?' she spat.

Fæ may not have caught the words but she understood the harsh tone.

The onlookers gasped as a deep, booming, synthesised voice emanated from the exhaust of the small, unassuming Spadgewalker™. Oddly, the voice had the twang of an old cockney bootshine.

'Miss Jones, 'onest, I never meant no 'arm. I was just tryin' ta get this stat-'

In all her life, Fæ had never seen a life form able to open its eyes so wide and change the hue of its skin so quickly from pasty white to warm rouge.

'MISS!' Ms Jones yelled incredulously.

As Benny idly stroked the unusually relaxed Wolsey, she noticed a tiny leather purse lying on the ground close to where she'd seen him with that cute little

fuzzball thing. Intrigued, she retrieved the tiny object and then spent an inordinate amount of time trying to open the curious little thing. Eventually, it came open and its contents crashed down onto the stony path.

Benny leaned forward gently with all the skill of a 25th century archaeologist, and as she carefully examined the quite childish attempt at woodcarving she noticed a tiny inscription on the base. Luckily, that Ferutu weapon didn't forget to de-age her eyes. As she read the words she felt a heartstring break.

* * *

With great composure, Fæ raised her glass and saluted her audience, each and every one of their turncoat mouths singing her praises.

The forty foot holoimage of her naked 'face' gave way to that of Professor Bernice Summerfield, the woman that the media were hailing as the '*saviour*' of the Spadgewalker™ culture.

Benny smiled for the cameras. She could get used to this. The odd News Documentary pales in comparison to this little media circus!

The Holocams eventually faded, and Benny addressed the crowd with an enormous sense of pride.

'To be honest,' she began, 'there have been numerous attempts to breach Braxiatel's security to steal from the Collection, but never to add to it!'

The audience laughed gently, just as they were supposed to. There really is something to this, Benny thought to herself.

She held up the small, battered wooden statue of a Spadgewalker™ that she had retrieved from Fæ 's small bag just days before.

‘Seriously though, we are deeply honoured to accept this. The *Dæspa’jonssen*, carved by the late Spadgewalker™ freedom fighter Mæ c Spajj, will be placed on permanent exhibition in the Grand Trianon as a testament to the resilience and the fortitude of those like Mæ c and Fæ Spajj. Those who have lost so much because of... well, because of us. Because of humanity’s ignorance and pig-headedness. Fæ , you have honoured us with this kind gift, and even more importantly, with your forgiveness and friendship.’

The holocams panned towards Fæ who was merrily trundling her way up the aisle towards the exit. Her eyes moistened as the Receptionist *cum* Security Guard *cum* Usher held the door open for her. ***A Human holding a door open for a Spadgewalker™! Who would have ever thought it? Now Mæc can finally rest in peace.*** Fæ turned towards the stage and smiled at Benny before walking through the opened door into a new future for her people.

Finally, the holocams zoomed in on the *Dæspa’jonssen* itself. The audience quietened as they solemnly read the inscription upon it. The words of a soldier. The words of a husband and a father. The words of an artist.

The words of a toy.