

Chapter 15

Galaxy-Man found Stevie on Earth when she was just an itty bitty kitty. She was outside a convenience store inside a monster truck tire of all places. Galaxy-Man was sitting on a nearby cinder block eating a box of greasy fried chicken livers when he heard her woeful cry. She was hungry and dangerously thin; she was the runt of the litter and her mother had abandoned her. She was pitiful; her eyes were crusted shut and she crawled around inside the tire looking for her missing mother in vain. She wasn't expected to survive, but despite the odds, she grew up into a fat, healthy cat and Galaxy-Man instantly fell in love with her. He named her Stevie Ray after the late great Stevie Ray Vaughan, one of Galaxy-Man's all-time favorite artists. When she was a kitten, Galaxy-Man would take her everywhere on his shoulder. No matter where he happened to be, Stevie would be right there by his side, letting out the occasional mew. Even as a kitten, Stevie would accompany Galaxy-Man all over the galaxy on all of his crazy escapades. She was certainly one of a kind and truly irreplaceable.

Losing a pet is never easy. Stevie was Galaxy-Man's companion for 10 wonderful years. Wherever he decided to go in the universe, Stevie would be right there at his side. She had been with him on so many strange and wonderful adventures, things would never be the same without her. Stevie was more than just a cat to him, she was a friend, and their bond was just as strong as any human friendship could be. No one deserves to have his or her friend so abruptly taken away.

She was a lazy cat. She once slept in a milk crate for 30 hours straight. She couldn't catch mice, though she once brought Galaxy-Man a cricket,

which she was very proud of. She wasn't a picky eater. Galaxy-Man never once found a food she wouldn't eat. She was placid, but highly curious. She loved to smell things and crawl inside things for a snooze. She always found the strangest, most uncomfortable-looking places to nap. She slept in a bucket of Mega Bloks, a bag of cat food, and once on a pile of jagged rocks; she could sleep anywhere at all. She was quirky and a bit of a weirdo, but that was okay. Galaxy-Man loved her with all his heart. The hardest part is finding the strength to move on.

The following weeks were filled with tears and tissues, but his friends were right there for him every step of the way to try to cheer him up. After the third week or so, he had finally stopped crying. He reached a point where he didn't seem to feel anything at all. He reached a point where he had all but given up on life and had been in the bedroom for several days, too depressed to get up, too downtrodden to eat. Cherry was really worried about him at this point, so she got Hamilton and Cutty to come over to try to make him feel a bit better.

Hamilton, Cherry and Cutty walked into the bedroom.

Hamilton was holding a yummy sandwich in his hands. "Hey Galaxy-Man," he said, "I brought you a hoagie, buddy. I know they're your favorite."

Galaxy-Man's face remained blank and without expression. "I don't like hoagies anymore," he said in a low, monotone voice. "I only eat plain oatmeal now." His voice was gravelly as he didn't even have enough motivation to clear the morning phlegm from his throat.

"Oh," said Hamilton. "That's cool, Galaxy-Man. That's probably really healthy actually."

“Don't call me Galaxy-Man anymore. My new name is Pat Davis.” Everyone assumed that was his real name since none of them actually knew it. It wasn't his real name of course, but a name he felt reflected the new him. For all intents and purposes, his name was now Pat Davis.

“Is that your real name, Dad?” asked Cherry.

“No,” said Pat, “but that's what I'm gonna call myself now. Have a nice day.”

“Okay,” said Cutty, “if that's what you want your name to be, then that's what we'll call you.”

“Dad, I know you're feeling sad and confused right now,” said Cherry, “but I know just what's gonna cheer you right on up, buddy. Get ready to laugh!” She stepped out of the room and grabbed two cream pies she had placed on a table in the hallway. She walked back in and sneakily sat one on a night stand. She then tapped on Hamilton's shoulder, a pie hidden behind her back. Hamilton looked back and Cherry threw the pie directly into his face. She threw it hard and he dropped the sandwich he was holding in the floor.

“Ow!” cried Hamilton as he wiped the whipped cream from his eyes. It was all over his face: in his ears, in his nose, and in his hair. Cherry laughed heartily and even Cutty chuckled a bit, though she tried to hide it. Pat, however, didn't crack so much as even a 1 degree smirk.

“Came on, dude,” said Cherry, “it's funny, man.”

Pat had become an emotionless, blank-expressed robot and the only shred of a personality he still had was the fact that, even in his time

of such dark despair, a time he when no longer cared about the world around him, he still didn't remove his black sunshades. Perhaps he'd always worn them because in some way or another he was hiding himself from the world around him.

“It was pretty funny,” admitted Cutty. “Please try to cheer up, er, Pat.” But little did she know, Cherry was secretly holding the second pie behind her back. Cherry tapped her on the back and sure enough Cutty turned around.

“Surprise!!” yelled Cherry way too loudly. She threw the pie directly into Cutty's face with much more force than she needed to. Fresh cream splattered everywhere and Cutty staggered backwards until tripping over a the pie tin from before and falling on her butt.

“Dang it, Cherry!” shouted Cutty. “I got cream all over me!”

“It was pretty funny,” said Hamilton very in-your-face-ly.

Cherry giggled and dogpiled on top of Cutty. “Now there's a Cherry on top!”

Everyone started laughing, except for Pat of course, who was too busy being boring and uninteresting to care. He did do something that was unexpected however – he got up. It was the first time he'd gotten up in several days. Everyone hushed and watched to see what he would do. It was as if they were in the African savanna observing a wild tiger in its natural habitat. “I don't want to be an adventurer anymore,” said Pat. “If you will all excuse me, I'm going to go to the Social Security Administration office. I won't be mooching off of Hamilton any longer. It's time I grow up. Thank

you. Have a nice day.” He walked out of room and everyone was speechless.

Pat put on nice clothes: clean khakis, a tucked-in polo shirt and dress shoes. He no longer wanted to be weird. He wanted to be like everybody else. He walked out the door on his way over to the Social Security Administration office downtown. On his way, he saw Etsuka watering her lawn.

“Hello, Etsuka,” said Pat very formally.

Etsuka knew something was up. She looked at him wearily. “You're looking strangely nice today.”

“Thank you,” said Pat. “You were right. It was finally time I grew up. Thank you. Have a nice day.”

“Well I'm glad you finally realized how silly you were.”

“I'm glad to hear that. Thank you. Drive safe. Have a nice day.” His dialogue had become nothing more than a series of interchangeable pleasantries.

“Uh, thanks,” said Etsuka., still pretty weirded out.

“Thank you,” said Pat. A long and awkward pause followed, then it was off to town.

“Hey,” said Etsuka as Pat walked away.

He turned around. “Yes?”

“I heard your cat passed away recently. I'm sorry for your loss. I know we don't always see eye to eye, but I'm here for you if you need me, okay?” Her words meant more than she knew.

“Really?” asked Pat.

"Of course. I don't always like you, but I'm not a monster."

"Well... thank you. I appreciate that, Etsuka. Have a nice day."

Pat arrived at the Social Security building around an hour or so later. It was a boring beige building with no windows, not a happy-looking structure to say the least. Inside was a dull, drab room full of people who clearly didn't want to be there. Kids were crying, babies were screaming; no one there was remotely in a good mood. Pat walked to the back of a line of very bored-looking people. After 15 solid minutes, he had finally made it to the front desk. Behind the desk was an overweight woman with long acrylic nails who didn't seem to like her job at all.

"Name?" she asked in a bitter, no-nonsense sort of manner.

"Pat Davis," said Pat in a dull, low voice.

"Purpose?"

"I'm here to apply for social security disability benefits."

The woman looked very annoyed, like she'd woken up on the wrong side of the trailer or something. "You have to fill out this form, sir." The woman handed him a thick stack of papers on a clip board.

Pat found a place to sit down and he filled out the form. It was a long form so it took almost 35 minutes to complete. It was mostly questions asking whether or not he were Hispanic. He then stood back in line so he could hand the woman the form. He waited in line for another 15 minutes or so before he made it to the front desk.

"I have filled out the requested documents, ma'am," said Pat.

The woman was very upset about the way Pat was talking to her. "Why

you talking to me like I'm a damn robot!? You think just because I work at the Social Security office I'm boring or something!? Sit yo Weekend at Bernie's lookin' ass down!"

"Okay. Thank you," said Pat as he returned to his seat, not a single emotion to be emoted.

After a grueling six hours and a half of waiting, a man walked into the room and called Pat's name. "Pat Davis," he called.

Pat was then taken into a room to speak with someone about getting his social security disability benefits for his crippling depression. It was a cold and boring office, nothing on the walls but abstract paintings that weren't very good quite frankly. There was a desk with nothing but a computer monitor on it and in front of it were two chairs. Things were brightly lit and so incredibly quiet that Pat could hear the blood flowing inside his ears. Behind the desk was a overweight man in a pinstripe suit. He had neat brown hair, thick black glasses and a graying goatee. He looked very clean and smelled of pricey cologne. The pricier the cologne, the worse it seems to smell. Let's just say he smelled like a very wealthy man.

"Hi, how are you?" asked the man with a smile. He stood up to shake Pat's hand.

"I'm okay," said Pat in a boring, totally uninterested voice as he gave the man the world's limpest, clammiest handshake. Pat's hands were icy like a doctor's hands, yet very sweaty. It was like shaking hands with a cold, dead octopus.

"My name is Jonathan Ginsberg. You would like to apply for social

disability, is that correct?" asked Jonathan.

"Yes," Pat replied. "Thank you."

"Well, basically there are three ways to do it. First of all, in applying for benefits, there's no cost to it. It's not something you can get in trouble for, even if it turns out your case is not viable. If you feel you're disabled, you should certainly go ahead and try. By the same token, understand the definition of the term 'disability' and that is you have a medical or mental health issue and has lasted or is expected to last more than twelve consecutive months or result in death. This condition needs to make it difficult or impossible for you to perform even entry-level types of work. If you broke your arm or contracted an illness that you are expected to recover from fairly quickly, that would not be grounds to apply for disability." He began looking over Pat's chart. "You are applying for disability due to your depression. Is that correct?"

"Yes," said Pat. "Have a nice day."

"Well, like I said, there are basically three ways to do it, but I'll mainly be going in to one and that is to go ahead and do it online. One way would be to do it over the phone, but it can be a complicated process. It used to be that the online system didn't work as well, but now it works pretty well. Social Security is now largely paperless, so I'm gonna go ahead and walk you through the process and then I'll take you over to a computer so you can get started. Most of the time you can do your application online. There are a few types of applications that you cannot apply for online so you'd have to call, but the system will tell you. I will tell you, when you apply online it's wise you print out the pages

as you go from page to page. It's difficult to go back once you clicked on next. You should go ahead and print the pages out as you go along so you'll have a personal record. When you apply for benefits there are a few things I think you should have on hand. First you need to have the date that your disability began.”

“Christmas,” said Pat in a somber voice, reflecting on Stevie's untimely death.

“Another date you need is the onset date. The date at which your disability wouldn't allow you to function and usually that's gonna be at the time your disability began or when you stopped working or anything like that. Now, the onset date can be changed later on, but try to make it as accurate as possible. Also when you apply you should have at least three diagnoses. You want to firm diagnoses. You could say, 'I've got irritable bowel syndrome' or 'I've got fibromyalgia,' but it's better to have a firm diagnosis from your doctor. For an illness like depression we can go ahead and arrange a consultation here for an assessment. And lastly, when you apply, you should have some kind of followup assessment every two weeks, sometimes three weeks, but generally two weeks. If you don't get a followup that means there's a problem and your file may have been lost or didn't get processed properly. You wanna go ahead and call back if that's the case. Once you apply you'll receive confirmation for benefits in about two weeks or so if you apply. Before you can start collecting your benefits you would need to make an appointment with a judicator who will catalog all your doctor's visits, evaluations and make sure everything is properly handled. Do you have any questions?”

“No,” said Pat. “Thank you. Make yourself at home. Have a good one. Goodbye.”

It was a long and very boring process that seemed to serve no purpose at all to the story. Pat had changed. He was no longer the adventurer he once was. It was sad really, to see a man once so full of life lose his wonderful personality. Losing Stevie absolutely destroyed him. He reached a point where he was too sad to cry, too full of sorrow to feel anything but. He could no longer laugh and nothing brought him joy. He wasn't suicidal thankfully. He blamed himself for Stevie's death and wanted to live and suffer so he sentenced himself to a long life of mediocrity and normality, never again to leave the planet, never again to journey beyond the stars seeking fortune. He had become Pat Davis.

On his way home he ran into Hamilton in the street who looked a tad out of sorts. He moved slowly and looked slightly confused.

“Hey, Pat,” said Hamilton. “I know this is gonna sound crazy, but I've got some killer basil that might make you feel better.” Pat had dug up Hamilton's basil garden awhile back and planted pot as a prank. Hamilton had no idea that the basil he had been growing was actually marijuana. “It smells like cat pee, but it'll make you feel good. I've just been watching the golf channel all day long and laughing my head off. I never knew just how funny golf was before.”

“The old me used to laugh at things,” said Pat. “Have a nice day, Hamilton. Take it easy. Drive safe. Goodbye.”

Pat then returned home. Inside, Cherry was watching ThunderCats on

TV. "Hey there, Pat," she said. "How ya doin', buddy?"

"I am fine," said Pat. "Make yourself at home."

"I kinda thought that maybe we could watch ThunderCats together. I know it's your favorite show."

"No, thanks. Cartoons are for children. Have a nice day."

"'Have a nice day?' I'm your daughter, silly. You're talking to me like I'm the lady at the bank or something."

"Thank you. The pleasure is all mine, ma'am. Have a nice day. Drive safe. Happy Easter. Goodnight." Pat walked into the kitchen and ate a sad bowl of very dry, very bland oatmeal and it was off to bed at the late hour of 7:30 pm. Cherry didn't like the new him at all. She didn't want to live in a world without her goofball dad.

Cherry flipped through the channels on TV. ThunderCats only reminded her of how things used to be and made her feel sad. She happened by a documentary about a tournament held on planet Mars every year called Battleon. It was nothing new, everyone knew about Battleon. It was an annual fighting tournament held to see who was the best fighter in the galaxy. This year's Battleon was apparently gonna be special though.

"...and the winner of this year's Battleon will be given the Sword of Masters as a grand prize," said a man on TV. The Sword of Masters was said to be the most powerful weapon in the galaxy and was kept safely guarded in Space John's private collection. The sword had powerful magical properties and only those whom the sword itself deemed worthy could even hold the thing. It was the stuff of legend.

“What a bunch of horse malarkey,” said Cherry quietly to herself.

“... winner of the tournament will then use the blade to battle the ultimate evil, the morpher,” the man on TV went on.

“That worm thing?” asked Cherry to no one in particular. Just how serious of a threat was this thing anyway?

The next morning, Pat woke up with an especially dull frown on his face and his eyes barely open enough to see. He was truly a pit of utter despair, a great big bubbling cauldron of mournful sorrow and dejected self-loathing. He barely found the strength to get out of bed. He stood up and walked out of the room to eat his usual breakfast of bone-dry oatmeal and lukewarm tap water with no ice to speak of. He walked through the living room and Cherry was wearing a goofy clown outfit. She had on a curly red wig, white face paint, her nose painted red, an oversized white tank top with big balloon boobs, and baggy cargo shorts. She was holding a pie in one hand and a seltzer bottle in the other.

“Surprise!!” she yelled much too loudly. She threw the pie directly into Pat's face with way more force than what was necessary.

Pat staggered backwards. “Ack!! he yelped in pain. “Where do you keep getting all these damn pies from!?” His eyes began to burn intensely as this pie wasn't made of cream at all. “What the- This is shaving cream!! Ow, it burns so much!” He stumbled backwards, rubbing his eyes in agony, not knowing where he was going. He backed up too far and tripped over a bag of pies in the floor and then fell through a glass coffee table, shattering it to pieces and leaving his hands cut and bloody. On the table

were Cherry's cherry-scented candles. The pies, being made of shaving cream, were highly flammable and Pat's face instantly caught fire. "Ahh!! My face!!" He flailed his arms around madly and ran around the living room screaming like the Wicked Witch of the West in the shower.

Cherry stepped over and put out the blaze with her seltzer bottle. Pat's face was deeply blackened and his hair was badly singed, but he was ultimately okay.

Cherry laughed guiltily. "Heh heh, got ya," she said with a big forced smile.

"You're grounded."

Chapter 16

Pat of course didn't have the will to follow through on his word. Cherry wasn't really grounded. He had become like a weather vane, pointing wherever the wind decided to blow. He had become a completely and utter pushover, an empty husk of a former man. The next day, Cutty and Cherry managed to convince Pat back on the Whomper with false promises of going to the stationary store to buy paper. In actuality, they were on their way to a strange new world in search of the third dongle. Cutty and Cherry both figured a good adventure would brighten the man's spirits. The only real reason Cherry wanted all the dongles was simply because she liked looking for them, and their quests to find them seemed to bring everyone closer.

Pat sat on the couch listening to a Jimmy Buffett CD on a stereo he bought with his own money. He sat with Cutty while Cherry piloted the Whomper this time, secretly checking the DongleDar every so often. Pat

only listened to Jimmy Buffet now. Alas, he had even lost his good taste in music. Pat sat eating a particularly dry bowl of plain oatmeal looking sad and thoroughly boring.

“Want me to put on some Maudeville, Dad?” asked Cherry. “You've been listening to *Margaritaville* for 45 minutes now.”

“No, ma'am,” said Pat, “I only listen to Jimmy Buffett now. Take care. God bless.”

“It's just... he has more than one song, you know?”

“Yeah,” agreed Cutty, “Jimmy Buffet has lots of songs. There's *Come Monday*, and *Cheeseburger in Paradise*.”

“No,” replied Pat, “I only listen to *Margaritaville* now. Thank you. Have a good one.”

“You don't even like margaritas, Dad!” snapped Cherry. “You used to call it 'faggot water,' remember?”

Pat just hung his head in doleful sorrow and went back to eating his bland gruel. “When will we be arriving at the stationary store?” he asked.

“Why? It ain't goin' anywhere!” retorted Cherry. In her mind, a rimshot played as she loudly giggled to herself.

The joke caught Cutty off guard and she let out a loud chuckle. Pat just looked at his cold, gray oatmeal, not cracking so much as even the slightest simper.

Cutty put her hand on Pat's thigh. “Hey, let's watch some cartoons,” she said as she grabbed the remote.

“I only watch the news now,” said Pat.

“Um, okay, let's watch the news then.” She turned on the TV. The Whomper's TV only picked up three channels because they didn't pay for any actual television plan. They just picked up the freebies. On TV there was the obligatory breaking news banner.

A newsman was on screen looking very fearful. “...ust received confirmation that the morpher has reached the size of a small house. Rich, I believe-”

“Jesus Christ,” said Cherry from the helm.

“It is being dubbed the Destroyer of Worlds and is expected to continue growing,” said the newsman. “The government has called for a total evacuation of the planet until the morpher dies of natural causes, as it possesses the ability to absorb the energy from gunfire or high explosives.”

“Oh my God,” said Cutty. The morpher was certainly becoming something horrific.

“Morpher's can survive in the vacuum of space,” said Pat. Occasionally his old self would bleed through and his excitement would shine. The prospect of a monster capable of devastating an entire planet excited him very slightly. He even started talking with his hands out in front of him. He did this whenever something really peaked his interest. “They can actually-” He caught himself and stopped immediately. He quickly grabbed the remote from Cutty and turned off the TV. He wanted no excitement in life. He wanted to suffer. “Thank you. Come again,” he said.

“Aw, man,” groaned Cherry, “I wanted to hear more.”

“Yeah,” agreed Cutty. “You looked so happy for a second.”

“Thank you. No thank you. Happy Holidays,” said Pat. He used pleasantries as a sort of defense mechanism. It's as though the real him wanted to come out but was trapped in a sea of niceties.

“I heard that the winner of Battleon is gonna battle the morpher with like, a magic sword or something,” said Cherry. “Isn't that interesting, Dad?”

“Have a good one,” said Pat.

They then reached a very peculiar planet called Wunga-Wunga. It was a planet where instead of plants, different types of hair grew wild all over its surface. It was once a sort of playground where scientists created all manner of strange and wonderful things. Cherry landed the Whomper softly into a wild afro bush. If that sounds odd, it's because it is. It was a pleasantly soft landing, like jumping into a big woolly sheep. What a wildly weird world Wunga-Wunga was.

“Wow,” said Cherry, “we barely crashed at all this time.”

Cutty looked out the window to find that they had landed in a huge black afro. “Looks like we landed on afroturf, guys.”

“Is this the stationary store?” asked Pat. “I need a new pack of college ruled.”

“Dad, don't get mad, but the stationary store was a cover up. We need to find all the dongles. I wanna know what happens when they're all together.”

“... Okay,” replied Pat, completely indifferent to the situation.

He just went with it like the weather vane he was.

“Hey,” said Cutty, “maybe if the glove really is some kind of super weapon, we can use it to defeat the morpher. That would be quite the battle, huh?” Cutty donned her green boxing gloves and readied her sword for the unknown.

“Like that'll ever happen,” said Cherry. “I ain't going near that thing. That's Beaverball's problem.”

They all stepped off the ship, crawled down from the afro and gazed out at the marvelous hairy world around them. The sky was deep purple and there were long bands of rust colored clouds that hung slightly askew. The gang had landed on a large bump on the side of the planet that was so massive it had its own gravitational pull, making the gang at an odd angle from the clouds overhead, which appeared to them to be moving upwards. They were in a large meadow of sorts, only instead of grass there was thick, wavy green locks of fabulous fur, lots and lots of fur; nothing but fur and the occasional afro for miles. The fur was soft to the touch and really pleasant to run your fingers through actually. The ground underneath, however, was pink and fleshy. It felt pretty strange, like they were walking on top of a giant scalp.

“Well this is... different,” said Cutty as the group contemplated their decidedly droll surrounding.

“Where are we?” asked Cherry.

“Wunga-Wunga,” answered Pat.

“Wunga-what?” asked Cherry.

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