

Dai shivered a little as he watched the morning traffic slowly ramp into rush hour. Being a rodent of exceptionally lean proportions, his dark woollen trench coat only did so much to keep the early morning gusts at bay. He pulled his phone out to briefly look at the time - 07:17. He put it away and placed his flight case down next to him. As far as first impressions on the first day would go, he was off to a good start.

The streets about 20 minutes ago had been generally quiet, but had presently grown louder as the drone of engines, horns and passing vehicles became more and more frequent. Dai watched the buses and taxis pass as he occasionally checked his surroundings.

“Bright and early. Good to see you again, Dai!”

The rat turned around to see a white-haired eagle walking towards him enthusiastically, holding his left wing out as he approached. Dai recognised him quickly as one of the higher-ups who had interviewed him a few weeks prior. The eagle greeted the rat, giving his hand a firm hold and an enthusiastic shake.

Dai smiled and gave a nod in acknowledgement.

“Hello Mitch, great to see you too. Thanks again for this opportunity, I’ve really been looking forward to getting started.”

Dai picked up the large, silver flight case, making headway to follow the eagle towards the entrance to the office complex. Mitch looked across as the pair walked.

“Traffic wasn’t too bad I hope?”

“Traffic was fine! It was a little hairy, but that’s just me not being used to driving in the city yet. I’ll get better.”

“No doubt, mate. Don’t worry, I give it a week before you’ll be cursing at the cyclists like the rest of the city’s commuters.” He pushed open the large, glass doors into the entry lobby. Dai followed on until the pair reached one of the lifts, just to the right of the reception desk. An aged speaker chimed as Mitch hit the call button and the two metal doors parted, rolling slowly aside to allow the two to enter the cosy lift.

“What floor?”

“Six.”

Dai pressed the labelled button with a free finger and it lit up – “0-60 MARKETING”. The doors rumbled closed as the lift began its slow ascent, eventually chiming once more as the “6” on the display illuminated with an incandescent light. The pair walked out to a small reception area, complete with a small seating or waiting area

and welcome desk. Mitch walked right past and swiped his key card to access the offices beyond. "Here, let me get that for you."

Dai slipped through the door and followed on down another set of corridors until they reached another door, with the label "Delta Team". As the pair walked in, the lights in the ceilings flickered on, one by one with a quiet "ping!" illuminating the small office space.

"Here you go, I'm afraid Nami may not have cleared a lot of her stuff out before she left and unfortunately she only left the keys to the drawer with us last thing on Friday. If you come across anything you may find useful in there though, then help yourself. Otherwise, the shredder is in finance next to the photocopier. You all right to just fill out your paperwork and drop it by my desk when you're done?"

Dai set his flight case down next to the desk and looked back with a thankful smile before taking a seat, wheeling himself in and shaking his coat off.

"Of course. Hopefully it shouldn't take too long. I'll give it a read over too, don't worry."

"Excellent, of course if there's anything you need explaining you can-" he was interrupted. A dull, continuous buzz could be heard from the eagle's trouser pocket. He pulled out an expensive looking smart phone. "Sorry, excuse me." He brought the phone to his ear, pacing over to another set of desks as Dai began reading through the papers, flicking through to look at any Ts and Cs.

"Oh come on, does it have to? I have my new starter right here with me now, I can't just... All right, fine. Make it first thing. Thanks. Bye."

Dai observed the tail end of the conversation, a little perplexed. The eagle walked back over with a pained expression as he quietly slipped the device back into his pocket. "Sorry about this Dai, but one of our clients has arrived early for a meeting with the department heads. We're sort of on damage control with them right now so I can't afford to duck out... When you're done with your contracts, do you mind filling the time by sorting through your desk a little? We may be a couple of hours."

"Yeah, please go ahead. Do what you need to do. I'll take care of this stuff. Might take me some time to get my computer properly up and running too."

Mitch nodded in agreement, doing one last check over of his pockets to ensure he had everything before he began to pace towards the door, reaching into his pocket for his phone once again. "Thanks, I should be back around 10 or just after. I'm sure someone else will be nearby if you get completely stuck. Take care." He headed out the door, closing it causing a decisive "clack" as the handle returned to its resting position. Dai turned his attention back to the papers, looking around at the empty office that now seemed to hum in a peculiar, white noise backed stillness.

He finished what he needed to on his paperwork, scribbling his signature onto the dotted lines at the end and then left the documents on his superior's desk to review upon his return. Dai's attention turned to the keys on top of his drawers. He clicked the lock on the drawers open with them, and rumbled the largest one open. What looked like multiple years of forgotten papers and knick-knacks greeted him. "Heh... Guess she was here a while."

He picked up a handful in both hands and set them onto the desk in front of him to search through. Out of date employee handbooks, style guides for all kinds of different companies and countless other stray sheets. He placed a second load onto the desk and his eyes perked a little.

On the top of the pile was an outdoor venue brochure, the cover of which featured an image of an elaborate looking stately home in the country which the rat recognised almost straight away – "Sudd Valley Park? Huh. Who knew?"

He flipped the cover open to have a closer look inside. Sudd Valley had been one of his favourite haunts during the holidays whilst in high school and university, especially for the theme park portion of their park. Dai was immediately gripped by the content of the publication, using much different language than he was used to reading from the park, as well as detailing the kinds of packages they could offer for show producers. Comprehensive, detailed stage set ups and equipment costs seem to stretch on for pages at a time, followed by a wealth of promotional venue photography. He leaned back in his chair and flipped through it a page at a time, already looking forward to taking it home with him to read through more closely and then put on his shelf with the rest of his collection of old theme park oddities.

### *Flop*

As he turned the next page, something fluttered from the brochure out onto his lap. It was a single sheet of folded A4 paper, quite badly creased. Maybe used as a makeshift bookmark many years ago. He opened it up to put it aside in the 'to-shred' pile, but then stopped himself – Some details caught his eye. It looked like some sort of casting document, complete with the potential talent's name, a profile photo and what looked to be a lot of empty boxes headed with "Agent Details". Something about the one in the photo seemed oddly familiar somehow.

The sheet was discoloured and a little hard to read in places, but the photo was at least visible enough to get an idea. It depicted a dragon girl, most likely in her 20s smiling enthusiastically. Somewhere, Dai had seen her before. He searched his memory to try and remember, but nothing. He looked down the sheet, but couldn't find much to hint where she could have come from. The second page covering her work history had apparently been lost. Not even the name rang any hints for him.

*"Sorwen: Gwen"*

The office had begun to bustle with a little more activity as more members of Dai's new team came in and made themselves known. First was a teal Hummingbird with impeccably kept wing feathers, shortly followed by a stern-faced, but ultimately soft spoken Doberman. Each of them cordially welcomed him as they passed, and set themselves up at their desks to begin their daily tasks: The petite hummingbird sat working on a Photoshop project whilst the Doberman reviewed some monthly charts. Dai's desk was also now clear of clutter save for a few things that he'd opted to keep hold of, at least for now.

"Sorry everyone."

Everybody in the room looked up as Mitch walked back into the office, already possibly looking spent for the day. The meeting evidently hadn't gone as hoped. "Update: The people from Axis continue to be bell ends. It looks like the project won't be going much further, but at this point it's probably better for us to just pay them off for the time right now, cut losses and be done with them."

The two veteran team members just rolled their eyes at the news, almost half expecting the outcome before returning their gazes to their monitors. The hummingbird near the door released a small sigh.

"Well, at least that's a headache I don't have to worry about anymore. Listening to their bleating secretary every morning was driving me up the wall. What killed it in the end?"

Mitch took a seat at his desk in the corner, looking over the various pieces of signed paperwork as well as other various bits that had been left for him. "None of the campaigns we were running seemed to be yielding the numbers they wanted. I guess something we'll take away from this is we need to be better at expectation management, after all their audiences were limited at best."

There was a general ripple of murmurs of agreement from around the room as he picked up the pile of papers. "And by the way, thanks for the contract, Dai. You all seem to be acquainted now too which is good. At least, you guys haven't scared him off yet, eh?"

"Shhhh... The day is still young!" the Doberman teased.

Dai swivelled in his chair to face the room. "Yeah the guys have been great. I just need a hand setting my system up and I'll be good to go I think." Dai reached for the creased piece of paper from his desk. "By the way... Can I run something by you all? Not really work related, just to satisfy my curiosity."

Mitch looked up. "Yeah? Shoot."

Dai got up, bringing the battered casting sheet over. "I came across this, but it's driving me nuts trying to figure out where I've seen her. Was she on TV or something?"

Mitch leaned forward and had a look at the picture as it was handed to him.

"Um... Honestly, no clue mate. Sorry! Guess you found this when clearing your desk out?"

"Yeah. For whatever reason it's bugging the hell out of me, but that's fine. Thanks for looking!"

"Wait, hold on..." The Hummingbird hopped up and joined the small huddle, looking at the sheet closely. After a few seconds of looking a little confused, recollection kicked in. "Ohhh I think I remember her now." She handed the sheet back to the rat. "She wasn't on TV I don't think, but she was involved in a tour project SciFi Nexus over in Edenbridge had us promoting some years back; Future Zone Live or something? I remember Nami getting super excited about the project back then when it landed in her lap, anyway."

Dai raised his brow in surprise, and then looked back to the picture with sudden fascination. "Wait, as in..."

"I think you mean Industrial Zone, Bett? And they're still running it, you know." came the doberman's voice from across the room. The sound of the name made Dai gulp subtly, and could swear he could feel his brow burning just a little.

"Oh, yeah yeah yeah! That was it! The project was Nami's baby some years ago. She co-ordinated some of their talent and scouted venues for promotional photos or something like that to use on social. Did you go to any of the events? Maybe you saw her there."

The rat could only shrug in response initially. He was preoccupied tentatively looking back to the sheet, almost feeling as if he was now holding some kind of sacred parchment. Knowing it was related to *that* show made it feel all the more heavy for some reason. "Oh... No I don't think I ever went to any of those. I couldn't afford it at the time. Definitely wanted to though! Maybe social media is where I saw it then. Thanks though!" he chipped; momentarily forgetting he'd been asked.

The hummingbird smiled and returned to her desk. Mitch similarly smiled whilst looking back to his monitor. "Well, glad that's one mystery solved! Now, about your computer system. Either Max or Betty will get you set up with an account on the online system." Dai flashed a brief thumbs-up. "Thanks Mitch." He sat back down to enter his login details.

"Oh yeah Dai, before it slips my mind, don't forget to shred that thing before you leave today."

Dai looked back to him quickly and responded almost instinctively. "Shred?"

"Yeah. It's an old project and it's got personal details written on it so we can't keep it. Just drop it by finance later when you get a minute and they'll do it for you."

Flipping it over, Dai saw what he meant: Some contact details, scribbled in biro for an unknown name at SFN, but perhaps most grippingly, an Email address simply labelled with the heading "Gwen".

Dai gave a subtle nod in response. "Yeah, no problem. I'll get that done now."

Dai stood up to head to the finance office as guided, quietly slipping from the door before heading down the corridor, turning the corner. Just before he headed in through Finance's door, he looked at the sheet once more closely. There was no denying that his curiosity was burning with intensity, but whether or not it was strong enough to violate company policy on his induction day was another question entirely...

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The clattering of keys searching for their lock signalled Dai's return home for the day. It clicked open, and quite exhausted from the day's induction tutorials and the gridlocked commute, Dai gradually pressed his way into his porch with his shoulders. His weighty silver flight case lead the way in as it bumped against the doorframe, making an unpleasant knock as it collided. The rat fumbled around on the wall until he found the large light switch. He patted it on to cast light onto the modestly sized hall. He turned and closed the door gently behind him, locking the door shut once again. He called up the stairs just in front of him.

"Anyone home?"

A little surprised at a lack of a reply, he opened the door immediately to his left to look into the living room. Much like the hall it was completely dark, with only a crumb-laden plate being the only clue of any activity. He put his case down by the door before kicking his shoes off to walk through.

"Ruri? Hello?"

He flipped the light on and saw a small sticky note resting on the table. He peeled it from the wooden table to read.

"Welcome home! Called in late to cover sickness. Back around 10!"

He smiled as he took note of the small heart scribbled at the bottom, being used to this happening frequently before putting the note back. Ruri was frequently called upon during her days off to help out, and often found herself unable to say no when the store needed a hand. He opted to close the door to the living room before

removing his coat, hanging it on the hook next to the door. He picked up the unwieldy flight case as he carried it up the stairs to his office. He walked in, dropping the case once again with a dull thud.

Dai swivelled his chair to face him before taking a seat, rolling back a small way as he dumped his weight into it. He jostled his mouse and heard the welcoming whirr of his computer as the screen flashed back into life to greet him. He took a moment to rest.

In the moments of quiet, his mind cast back to where he stood in the corridor at work, staring at that document that had ended up distracting him for a lot of the day. That memory drifted into the image of watching the coffee-stained sheet turn to meaningless white confetti as a diligent otter slipped it into the finance department shredder with an aggressive, motorised whine. Dai could recall that unusual sensation of passing a moment of no return. That memory then gave way to the feeling of introspection – Had he done the right thing?

He reached into his pocket and pulled his phone free, unlocking it before swiping to open his photos. It turned out that sheet had indeed invoked a little delinquency in the normally regulation-ruled rat as he looked at the three photos he'd quickly taken whilst nobody was looking, just before he'd acted on Mitch's instructions: The profile photo, the dragon girl's supposed name and finally her supposed Email address. He chose to not dwell on his misdemeanour as he tucked his chair into his desk to set to work.

"So. Just who *are* you, Gwen Sorwen?"

He was quick to get clicking and immediately headed to his primary search engine. He put his first thought in immediately.

*'Gwen Sorwen Industrial Zone Live'*

His page populated with a number of interesting links. He clicked over to image search, and was instantly greeted with countless thumbnails from what he could only assume was from the live events he'd heard so much about. He clicked on the clearest looking one he could find, and a video site loaded into his browser.

A video recorded with a phone showed a large hall of people sat before a dark stage, complete with dry ice flowing out over the edge. What looked like green neon accents highlighted the edges of the familiar "I" and "Z" in the centre of the stage, surrounded by dank looking set-design. An assault of crowd audio blared through Dai's speakers as a heavily edited voice over a P.A system came on mid-sentence, overpowering it all. The camera shakily zoomed in on a large screen above the darkened stage, completely blurring as the camera searched for focus. It soon found it as an overexposed yellow wireframe of a lion was found. It was instantly familiar.

*“Still. I suspect that the probability of there being some capable recruits amongst you all is at least... Let’s see...”*

The video was overwhelmed by a flurry of generic computer sounds as a bright green glow trained over the crowd before cutting out suddenly.

*“...Marginally higher than the usual suspects I end up having to handhold through these types of things.”*

The crowd surrounding the camera holder laughed in response as the large face cleared his throat to address the room once more.

*“You may be inexperienced, and our regular outpost master Alex may be trapped back at the core IZEP facility, but I... R.O.B have, after an arduous 2 minutes of searching, have been able to recruit a most capable replacement that can match his skills and expertise. Please welcome your guide: Outpost Warden Gwen Sorwen!”*

The stage suddenly lit up with bright lights, detailing the numerous slowly rotating fans on stage, as a large, energetic pink dragon in a black T-shirt bounded out to centre stage to wave to the crowd.

Dai looked back to his phone, then back to his computer screen where Gwen could be heard thanking the audience and detailing the set up of what was to come. The picture he’d snapped and the dragon he saw on screen were a conclusive match. He’d found her! He watched on in interest.

“So R.O.B! You’ve already scanned our volunteers! Who are your chosen recru-“ The video cut out as the player reached the end, leaving a flattering shot looking into the recorder’s lap, much to Dai’s disappointment. He scrolled down to see only a few comments of people who had found the video, happily proclaiming that they were there, and one more that seemed a little longer than the rest.

*“So perfect they got Gwen in to present! She was a great laugh in series 2.”*

Dai wrinkled his brow, leaning in a little as he read the comment. Series 2? As in... Series 2 of the show? That warranted further investigation.

He hurriedly typed a new search into the video site and scrolled through the various compilation videos until he happened upon the first one he found that was longer than the rest; one that had been apparently been uploaded as a less-than-legal upload some years ago; one that the studio had seemed to have missed taking down; one that had been saved into his favourites for the best part of 10 years.

“WKNX - Industrial Zone S2E1: Games”

He clicked it, and the video started. The wrinkles in his brow flattened as his eyes widened in shock.



“...Holy fuck. Are you serious?!”

It turns out the video was most serious. There in amongst a pale blue rabbit, a small black-haired chipmunk and an outgoing looking jaguar was the somewhat timid-looking pink dragon girl again. The familiar face of Alex stood there talking to each of them whilst Dai just sat and watched in stunned silence. Almost as if he had his answer as to exactly where he'd seen her before aggressively slapped across his face. He scanned ahead through the video in chunks. A clip of her squirming under a deluge of blue and yellow slime was soon playing as he uncomfortably reviewed those moments he'd frequently watched as a mid-teen.

“...Unbelievable.”

Dai could feel his brain currently cycling at a speed he'd previously never thought possible. He blinked slowly as he collected his thoughts, resting back in his office chair. He couldn't deny that his burning curiosity from the day had been satisfied, but he equally couldn't deny it had left him with a curiosity stronger than when he'd first seen Gwen's picture. He gulped what pride he had down his throat, looking back to his phone at the final picture in the set he'd taken. He had dug this far; he may as well see how far the warren went.

Dozens of difficult minutes passed as he slowly typed. The time was repeatedly punctuated by him nearly closing his Email client out of embarrassment. Gradually, it filled with the content of a new Email. It was ready.

Dai's mouse hovered over the small blue “send” icon but then almost out of compulsion read his words completely through from “Dear” to “– Dai” one more time. Who knew how his words or indeed this out of the blue message could be taken or if this address would even work? His words certainly read cordially enough, but there was still hesitation to his progression.

At best, he may wind up with a short, polite reply declining to comment. Realistically he was probably sending these carefully chosen words on a one-way trip to an old Email address that had long since been consigned into the Internet void or directly into somebody's spam box. Worst-case scenario, he'd be blocked on the spot and become fodder for angry friends to send him hate mail for the next few days - His mind drifting frequently to the thought of the latter.

After one more compulsive read, he hovered his mouse over the button and closed his eyes, fighting that familiar yet potent force that prevented him doing what most would do without a care.

“Click”

He opened his eyes cautiously, and watched the small pop up bounce into view in the corner.

*“Message Sent”*

It was up to luck now. He released a sigh and flopped back in his chair. He hung his head over the back of his seat slightly, causing him to stare at the dust bunnies hanging from the ceiling.

“Well... It was worth a punt I guess.”

He craned his neck back down to his screen, and felt his heart skip a little when he noticed nothing new in his inbox. The expected report of a failed delivery was nowhere to be seen.

“It’s gone... Somewhere.”

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Dai shook his head as he looked down to the list he held in his hands. His lips remained tight as he braced onto the long, metallic handle he held onto for stability. Despite pouring over everything for the past few hours whilst on the ride, and indeed most of his spare time over the past 3 weeks, he still didn’t feel remotely prepared for what was to come. Indeed, the rat had even wondered at times whether this trip was relevant at all, given how much about the subject he thought he already knew.

Dai perked, almost jumping as a long, loud squeal could be heard beneath his feet and the subtle, but persistent vibration dulled to nothing. Through the narrow train window he could see the name of an old-fashioned station roll into view: “Orlonthorn”. He’d arrived. He hurriedly shoved the sheet back into the closest pocket his hand could find, undoing any previous effort to keep the sheet looking tidy.

### **DOOR UNLOCKED**

A long buzzer alerted the passengers to depart. Dai pressed the large, square button to the right of the door, and stood back as it slowly rolled away with a pneumatic hiss. He stepped out onto the platform before ducking to the side to avoid being swept up the stairs by the throngs of commuters. He fumbled his wallet out; hurriedly scanning through its various pockets until he found what he was looking for – His train ticket.

The wave of people had thinned, and he followed the last of the stragglers up the stairs towards the main passenger concourse, his ticket tightly clutched between his fingertips. He slipped his ticket into the gate, only to stop abruptly as the machine rejected it with a defiant beep. He took it out and slipped it back in to try again, only to get the same, piercing sound. He sighed, a little frustrated. A bald-headed lizard walked across behind him to survey his ticket, checking it over.

“Yeah, you’re fine. Just stand back for me.”

Dai did as instructed and the gate eventually swung open.

“Thank you, sir.”

He stepped out onto the main concourse of the large ticket hall as he searched around for the correct exit.

“Out the gates, look for the orange news stand, turn left, door for the bus stops.” He recited to himself, racking his brain to ensure there were no key steps he’d omitted. He looked up to a large clock above the departures board, but instead of trusting it, pulled his phone out to check the time. A large unopened envelope greeted him on his home screen with the words “From Gwen”. The timestamp had put it about 20 minutes ago.

“Damn it...” he muttered under his breath as he unlocked his phone to check the message in a hurry.

*“Hi Dai, will be waiting be waiting by the bus stops when you get in. About 10 minutes away now. Ring me if you get lost.”*

Dai fumbled the device back into his pockets, completely forgetting to look at the time like he’d initially intended, realising he was probably already late.

“Look for the news stand, turn, door for bus stops.”

After a brief search, he found himself outside by a long row of parking spots for buses. He surveyed the various crowds of people, still not quite knowing who he was searching for. He almost jumped when he felt a buzzing against his leg. He pulled his phone out again immediately. He held it to his ear, pensively.

“Hello? Is that Gwen?”

A perky female voice sounded through from the other side, “Hi, it is. I think I can see you. Can you just turn around to the... Yup! Got you! Hold on...”

Dai turned and very quickly caught sight of a short, lightly-hinted-pink dragon girl walking towards him on her mobile phone. She was wrapped up warm to protect against the chilly autumn air in a simple, but warm looking coat. She raised her free hand in a greeting wave, weaving between the various pedestrians.

“Ahh! All right!” Dai put his phone away as the two eventually came together.

“Hello Dai! I’m Gwen, I hope your journey over wasn’t too hard.”

The rat stuttered some words out, quite unready to be thrown in quite so quickly. "Yes! Likewise! Um... I mean... I'm Dai! It's wonderful to meet you! Thank you ever so much for waiting for me. I'm afraid I really wouldn't know where the first place to go would be in this town."

Despite the alphabet soup that had been presented to her, Gwen gave an understanding nod. "Well, I vote we head somewhere less crowded. There's a good coffee shop not too far from here. It'll take us past some of the sites of the town along the way. You said you've seriously never been outside of Anglia?"

"N-no. Not once. It's... Well. It's a lot to take in."

"Don't worry, this is an old haunt for me so I can point out a few things. Shall we?"

She gestured the way ahead, the rank of bus stops running out to join a main road running along a river. The two exchanged basic pleasantries as they both wandered down the road, over a short river bridge before eventually heading out onto the main high street. It turned out that the pages Dai had read online were right. Orlonthorn was definitely well presented with its untouched building designs, with the various high street chains seeming to organically dwell within the time-forgotten shop fronts. Despite the beauty of the cobbled streets and timeless architecture, he found it difficult to remain focussed on one specific thing. He continued following along until reaching the large establishment, landmarked by a swinging sign depicting a steaming mug. Gwen pushed the door open, and Dai followed quietly inside, the warmth of the shop a welcome change to the sting of the cold outdoors as he shivered the cold sensation away. Gwen stepped towards the back of the queue.

"You might want to grab us a table. What can I get you?"

Dai looked back to her in surprise, as he joined her where she stood, "Oh no, no. I don't expect any of that, you're already going well out of your way to see me today. I can buy for myself."

Gwen could only stifle a chuckle, rolling her eyes at his words. "Oh hush. You've already probably spent more than you need to just get here. It's fine, really."

Dai nodded a little shakily in hesitant agreement. "Ok. In which case... Would a white hot chocolate be ok?"

"Sure. Snack?"

"Millionaire's Shortcake?"

"No worries. Right, I'll be over in a minute."

The rat ventured into the curious café and spotted a neat table by the window with padded chairs. He sat facing the queue to watch as Gwen ordered drinks, exchanging pleasant conversation with the counter staff. Dai simply sat there, trying to process exactly what was happening. He partially questioned if what he was doing was really happening at all as he watched. He'd less than an hour ago met with somebody he had seen years ago on his dream television show; someone whom he had gone through the effort of researching and contacting and somehow exchanged a long chain of emails with; someone who was now somehow buying him drinks.

Dai's eyes subtly opened wide when he saw what she was carrying back to the table. She set the tray with their drinks down, taking her own mug and plate first. It was tall, and topped with what looked like an Everest of whipped cream, marshmallows and chocolate dusting. It certainly looked good, whatever it was. Dai followed suit with his own mug and plate. She sat opposite the silent rat who struggled to say as much as a "Thank you."

She wriggled herself free of her coat, showing the snug woolly jumper she had on beneath. "So, go on. Tell me more about yourself. It sounds like it was one heck of a story, just us getting to this point." The dragon quizzed, as she set about pouring an additional sachet of brown sugar into her mug.

"Yeah, I guess so..." Dai set about breaking his caramel biscuit into smaller pieces. "Well, I'm Dai. Hello! I think most of what's important has been covered in my Emails. It's so crazy to think about everything."

"I'll say. You say you found one of my old casting sheets at your work?"

Dai nodded quickly. "In my predecessor's filing cabinet, yes. Whilst I was clearing her old stuff out would you believe? I didn't believe it when everyone said what the project was! I definitely was less vocal about my enthusiasm at the time. It was my induction day and... Yeah."

An uncomfortable silence fell over the table as Dai's words simply ran out of steam.

"It's weird how this stuff works out, isn't it?" Gwen said quietly.

Dai nodded hastily. "Yeah... It's certainly something!"

The dragon brought the drink on its saucer into her lap, taking the long spoon to begin taking digs at the cream that crowned her drink. "So, what would you like to know? I've clued myself back up on as much stuff as I can."

"This is all still so strange to me. I'm still trying to process it all really. I did... Prepare..." He patted his jacket down, trying to find the sheet he'd hurriedly put away. Eventually, with some sense of urgency brought out the long list of questions that he'd spent the past week carefully putting together. "Well... Let's start with

Industrial Zone, I guess.” He glanced at the first line at the top. “How did you get onto the show?”

“It wasn’t really anything special. I’d seen the first series on television, scoped out the website and they were advertising for the second series when I looked. I filled in my form, sent it off and hoped for the best. Sure enough, I was chosen and turned up for filming.”

Dai had barely finished sipping his drink before he heard the silence, indicating the dragon had already finished. He put his mug back down, a little flustered. “Ahh, I suppose that’s by the book. Interesting!” He looked back down to the sheet again, finding the second line as Gwen watched him with a raised eyebrow. “Was there anything fun about the application process?”

Gwen swabbed more of the whipped cream from the top of her drink. “Well... Mainly just standard questions and disclaimers about appearing on the show really. I think there were maybe one or two questions about me personally and the one where it asked me if I could nominate anybody to get messy on the show. Other than that, I only seem to remember one brief telephone interview where they could get a read of me as a person.”

Dai could feel the bewilderment creeping through, almost increasingly with every single one of her words, almost as if she was feeling just as confused about her situation as he was. “That’s fair.” He nodded, again having been interrupted mid-snack. He consciously chose not to reach for his sheet for a third time, feeling the awkward tension in the conversation almost becoming tangible.

*Silence.*

“Dai, is everything all right?”

Dai swallowed, feeling very much locked to the seat he was apparently lounging in. He rapidly became acutely aware of every little tic he must have been displaying for Gwen to see, from how much he was blinking to every mistake in his speech.

“Fine, I’m just fine. I’m Sorry. Just trying to string words together.”

She went on, stirring her drink as she watched him, thoroughly unconvinced. “Ok... Just checking.”

*Silence.*

Gwen uncomfortably gave a small scratch just below one of her horns, shifting a little in her seat. She watched Dai sip his own drink, befuddled as to whether she should be feeling sorry for the rat or not.

“What’s your favourite game on Industrial Zone, Dai?”

The rat looked up, and much to Gwen's relief he seemed to have a genuine look of curiousness in his eyes, not dissimilar to that of a child.

"My favourite game..?"

"Yeah, what is it? I'm a huge fan of The Shuttle myself."

Still nervous, Dai met Gwen's eye contact. "I'm... I really like it when they show The Ride, or The Slime-u-Lator or whatever they ended up calling it."

Neatly tapping her spoon on the rim of her mug, Gwen gave a small smile, "That's a really fun one. It's a shame they don't use it slightly more often, huh?"

Dai slowly emerged more into the conversation as Gwen took the lead, "Y-Yeah, it's such a pretty set piece, and they get the delivery of the gunge just right on that one."

She gave a warm nod, allowing Dai room and time to find his footing in the conversation once again, "Yeah they sure were masters at their craft! And I really did enjoy getting the chance to try it out too!"

The warmth was well received as Dai seem to sit up a little, getting increasingly engaged, "I really did love the shuttle too. That was such a great tension builder, especially seeing the rest of the team scramble as the time ran low. You get so into it when you're watching."

"Having been on the receiving end of that thing too, I can tell you that it definitely set the pulses running! For everybody involved."

"I'm sure, and the payload you got was unbelievable!"

"Believe me, there was times when I was convinced it might not stop!"

Gwen looked to Dai with a mischievous expression, much like she would in her stage appearances. She clapped quietly to get his attention as she brought her hands together, "Ok, quick fire questions now Dai. Go! Silicon or R.O.B.?"

Dai shuffled in his seat as the sudden sound came as a surprise. After a brief moment, "Definitely R.O.B. He had so much more to him than Silicon."

"Agreed, but I definitely have a soft spot for Silicon. The Pod or the Mixer?"

"The Mixer."

"Me or Alex..?"

Dai was one breath away from answering, but had to stop himself, giving out just a long breath that turned to laughter, "You can't expect me to answer that!"

Gwen couldn't help giggling to herself, "Ok fine, that was more of a trick question anyway. Ok, Trivia time! Alex's last name was..?"

"Redwolf."

"Where was the show originally filmed?"

"WKNX, Edenbridge."

"Very Good..." She fired a curveball Dai's way with a cunning smirk, "My first gunge in Industrial Zone was..?"

"The Shuttle! Well, technically The Orbital Maze or The Cube, but you know what I mean."

Gwen's rested back in her chair, taking care not to spill her drink, rather impressed and how quickly the rat was giving out correct answers. "Wow, I'm not the only one who's been revising I see..."

Dai gave a smile as he hunkered a little in his chair, trying to disguise his embarrassed laughter, "I do love the show! Also I had some pretty empty Fridays back then... Heh."

"I'm definitely keeping you in mind if I ever find myself on a team quiz show."

Dai was sure that was probably just a token gesture, but couldn't help but grin at the invitation regardless, "Heh, I'll try to keep my diary open!"

Both of them sat quietly laughing at the idea as the both took respective sips of their drinks. Dai quietly piped up, "Also Gwen, thank you so much for that."

"What for?"

"You know... Making things less awkward. I was lost there."

Gwen waved the compliment away modestly, "Ah, think nothing of it. I've had stuff like this more than a few times with certain contestants on stage. You'll be surprised how up for things people can get once you can get through, so you're fine!" She sat back, feeling a refreshed take on the meeting. "Now come on," she said with renewed energy, "I'm sure you have plenty to ask. I'd love to hear what you've got."

Dai gave a more positive smile in return as he modestly brought his hands together to rest them in his lap. "Ok then let's see... What about your team? I bet you had a friendship for life after going through something like that together?"



Gwen looked up expectantly, “You mean Electra, Rach and Cleo?”

The rat nodded, seeing her softly recollect, waiting for the news on any of their new escapades. “Spending that much time together must have brought you all together as friends.”

Gwen’s warm expression didn’t change, but the shaking of her head caused Dai’s smile to fall, “Sorry to disappoint you, but we’re maybe not as close as you’d think. We all went out for dinner together after recording and all met up for Electra’s birthday not long after that, but I’m afraid since then there’s not been much.”

Dai’s neutral mouth fell to a slightly solemn frown, a little forlorn at the news. “Oh... Not even by Email? Or anything?”

He was pleased to see that she was still smiling throughout the subject, reassured that it wasn’t all negative. “We’re all still friends! Just distance and life kind of prevents us from having a proper catch up. I mainly keep up with what they’re up to on social media now. I occasionally get tagged in stuff by Rachel maybe once a month and I still get passing conversations from Electra every now and again! The only real outlier is Cleo, but I think that’s namely down to her new career as a TV actress. I like to think she still remembers the time fondly though.”

Dai thought back to around the time of the show, trying to think where she might have appeared since, but being unfamiliar with the current television trends, struggled to have anything of note come to mind. “At least you’re all still on good terms. I hope you can cross paths again one day.”

Gwen enthusiastically agreed, “That would be fun! We have been long overdue a catch up, so I’d definitely welcome it if it were to happen if the stars aligned!”

“Kind of leading on from that, what are you mainly up to now? I know you said in your Emails that you’re working on some novels?”

“Oh!” Gwen laughed, not expecting the topic to turn up, “Yes, pretty much! I doubt anything I do will make it big, but it would be really nice to have a few books in shops. Selling enough to keep me ticking over would be excellent.”

“What kinds of stories do you like to write?”

She spent a few moments choosing her words, maybe apprehensive to say too much, “I’ve always been a fan of romance as a genre, so it would be wonderful to actually get something productive from that creative energy. I’ve got a couple of things on the go!”

“I hope you can. I’ll keep an eye out whenever I can! Feel free to let me know if you make it to print!”

She nodded quickly, "If it happens, I'll give you a heads up!"

Dai stretched in his chair, taking a larger drink from his mug. "I hope that Industrial Zone Live does well for you in the mean time though."

Gwen did smile, apparently relieved to be leaving the subject of her novels behind for the time being. "I expect I'll keep going with that even if I were to become successful as an author, the shows are a ton of fun. It's not a world-changing amount I get from it, but it's enough for me to get by comfortably in the summers. After all, I get all my living costs and such catered for which is a bonus."

Dai spent some time swirling his hot chocolate, looking into it as the darker streaks spiralled, "Absolutely, I'd never give up something like that unless I had to. You're absolutely living a huge dream of mine there."

"Oh? Heh, well... It's definitely a neat thing to bring up in conversation, and I do love the show and the guys who help run it so I'm happy to be doing what I do!" She tipped the last of her hot chocolate away, replacing the saucer and mug onto the table once more. "Have you been to any of the shows yourself?"

Dai gave a smile, but shook his head as he finished the last few pieces of his biscuits, "Ah, no I can't say I have yet. Maybe one day!"

Gwen looked at him with widened eyes, the news coming as genuinely unexpected, "Ah, that's a shame, and quite a surprise to hear actually!"

Dai continued to look down to his plate, idly picking up the final few crumbs of his biscuit as he continued. "Yeah, well... Money, travel costs, someone to go with... It all adds up in the end."

Gwen's brow wrinkled with suspicion, maybe detecting some evasiveness to his answer. "Uh huh..." She took a moment, before following up innocently, "Just something I've been curious about too. Just about you."

The rat picked his mug up in a relaxed manner, "What's that?"

"You absolutely love the show, don't you?"

"Of course! It's one of my favourites of all time!"

Her smile grew as Dai's face lit up happily, "I gathered, and I can see it! My question to you Dai, is did *you* ever apply?"

Dai paused, and looked across with a confused look in his eyes, "Apply?"

"As in, to appear on the show?"

“Oh! No! No, no, no.” Dai put his mug back down before opening both hands in front as they shook side to side, almost to shake the question off, “I never got that far. I mean I was only about 14 at the time when it dropped.” He returned to his neutral resting position. “I was far too young to even consider applying.”

Gwen’s head tilted as she leaned in, inquisitively, “But Industrial Zone ran for a good few years on TV before its run ended. You must have been old enough eventually, at least towards the end?”

*Silence.*

“I know, but I was still living with my folks at the time and...”

“And what?” she playfully asked.

*“I couldn’t...”*

The dragon folded her arms as she continued to look at him, trying to comprehend the enigma he was presenting. “Ok... So maybe you missed the boat there, but what about the live shows? Those are still going and I just know you’d really enjoy them. I’m just... Really surprised you’ve not gone out to check it out before if you’re such a big fan. I might even be able to help you with tickets if money is a struggle.”

Dai hurriedly put the offer to bed, “No, that’s quite alright. I’m perfectly happy just enjoying the show from home.”

*Silence.*

Gwen moved in with an earnest tone, “...Really?”

Dai seemed to become a little defensive in his tone, “It’s not for lack of wanting to, trust me.” Dai paused, his tone becoming a lot more guarded, “I mean... I absolutely wanted it. Dreamed about it even.”

Gwen looked a little taken aback at the shift, Her brow wrinkled, as her playful interrogation seemed to take a more serious turn. Stuff had suspiciously jumped back to where they’d started. Despite the unexpectedness of it all, she felt that she’d probably made headway to breaking through yet again. “I’m sorry for keeping on but... I’m just confused. What stopped you from applying to the show?”

“I don’t know...” The rat’s eyes remained unfocussed; looking almost through the table he on the surface seemed to be staring at. “I suppose when you think about what my parents and friends would have thought, the wording on the form of how unlikely you are to get chosen when you apply and all that, and it just... I don’t know. You find yourself stuck back at square one a lot.”

“But it’s just a game show, admittedly a really great one, but it’s not a huge deal even if you don’t make it on.”

All Dai could do at this point was stutter out as his train of thought rapidly began to careen off the rails. “I know, I know, but... Everyone would just think it’s incredibly out of character for me. Who knows what could happen.”

The statement ushered in an uncomfortable feeling stalemate, the only thing breaking the silence was Dai uncomfortably fiddling with a metallic zip pull on one of his chest pockets. Gwen’s head tilted a little. “...I had an inkling before, but now I’m sure.”

Dai looked up, the quiet tinkle of his zip stopping immediately. “Sure? What do you mean by that?”

“Forgive me if I’m wrong Dai, but let’s see...” The dragon leant back in her seat, folding her arms. Her delivery was frank and direct, if a little slow. Psychiatrist Gwen was apparently in session. “A clear hesitation to talk about the subject, an almost encyclopaedic knowledge of the show I’ve been on, you’re oddly jumpy about the idea of actually participating and finally... you’ve travelled I don’t know how many miles out of your own pocket to a city you’ve never visited to meet somebody who you’ve only had brief contact with via Email. All just to ask me some questions and have coffee?”

Dai just sat uncomfortably in place, frozen as she looked at him directly. He was left very much the deer in the headlights of her stare. He could only blink momentarily with his mouth slightly open.

“Look... Dai, I’m sorry that this bothers you so much, but I’m willing to bet you another hot chocolate that there’s more to this for you than just a passing interest. I’ve come here ready to be open and honest with you, and I just think this whole conversation will be a lot easier for us both if you could just be honest with me too.”

A few tense seconds passed. Dai’s eyes seemed frozen, like he’d been caught with a bloody knife at a crime scene. He broke his eye contact to look aside to the window feeling a burning embarrassment latch onto his mind. His hand took a tight hold of his collar as he fiddled. “...It was that easy to see, huh?”

“I guess it was a little. I mean, I can tell you’re harmless and mean well, but you’ve got to understand that you’ve kept your cards suspiciously close to your chest, and you’ve not exactly been the best at keeping a good poker face.”

She rested back into her chair keeping her arms folded. She looked at him with a slightly hurt look in her eyes, but was still relieved to hear the admission and was looking forward to a more open conversation.

"I.. I understand. Look I'm terribly sorry for wasting your time. Th-thank you for coming out and meeting with me." Dai shakily swallowed after croaking the sentence out, still refusing to make eye contact. He patted his jacket and slid his chair back to get up. Everything had been a mistake. Maybe his return ticket would still work this early in the day.

"No-no-no Dai, wait."

He stopped his progress, and the rat's eyes met Gwen's once more as she addressed him. She'd moved forward, almost in an attempt to stop him as she read the unblinking uncertainty in his eyes. Gwen's own eyes had lost the questioning look that had been fixed upon him just a few moments ago. She took a slow breath and sounded a lot more thoughtful in her approach as her tone softened. There was even a slight sigh as she read the apprehension in his gaze. "Oh Dai, I'm awfully sorry. I honestly didn't mean to put you on the spot. At least, not in that way."

Dai slowed his movements, and continued to watch her silently as she continued.

"I just... I was a little thrown off. Everything is all right. It really is."

The rat very quietly worked up the courage to speak once again. "Are you sure?"

She nodded kindly in response, a growing look of concern etched into her brow. "Absolutely. Trust me, if what I think is going through your mind right now is anything like what I think it is, then I promise it will get easier to talk about. I'm not going to bite."

Dai tucked his chair back under the table and looked back to her, still with a little unease. "I hope so. You've already done far more than I was expecting in agreeing to see me... I really don't want to have wasted your time with all this or give the wrong impression or whatever."

Gwen continued with her more gentle approach, sensing the rat was responding positively to her empathy, becoming slightly more at ease. "Hope so? I know so. I'm guessing that you haven't talked about this kind of thing with many people?"

Dai remained deep within his shell, finding it in him to nod whilst retaining uncertain eye contact, "Yes. Certain people know, but it's not often this kind of thing gets spoken about. Not out loud, anyway."

Gwen returned the gesture in understanding, having apparently seen it all before. Dai took a drink from his mug, polishing off the rest of his cocoa almost as if to try and relieve some of the lingering awkward atmosphere. It was Gwen who finally broke the silence.

“You know Dai...” With a small blink, Dai looked back. He was sure he could feel a gulp roll down his throat as he prepared. “You remind me a little of how I was just before I applied.”

Dai raised an eyebrow, a testament to his disbelief. “For real?”

“For real.” She responded, “I was terrible talking about this kind of stuff, so I get it completely.”

Dai brought his hands around his mug. It was thankfully still retaining a small amount of heat, and warmed his hands with a pleasant feeling glow. Dai had tucked his chair back in.

“So I suppose I should ask this right now, just to make sure we’re on the same page.”

“Yes?”

“So... Messy stuff. Gunge, slime or whatever? You don’t have to go into any detail if you don’t want but...” Dai’s volume lowered yet again. “Is it a case that you’re like me in that you... *like* it? Like... In that way?”

“Well, I think the fact I kept going back to my summer job for so long is... Well, I think it might be a bit of a clue!” Dai watched as he caught the dragon sheepishly looking to one side. “Maybe quite a big clue now that I think about it... Heh...”

Dai couldn’t see much of a hint, but the tone implied she was blushing beneath her apparent comfort. He felt the tightness in his shoulders loosen just a fraction as he began to relax a little more himself. “Yeah I know just how that kind of love for something is crippling at the worst of times. Especially when it ends up stopping you from realising your dreams; as bizarre as those dreams might be.” He let Gwen finish the few fleeting crumbs on her plate. “I’ve got to know though. If you were so nervous about it, however did you get up the courage to actually apply and end up on the show?”

“Thinking back...” She rested back into her chair as its leather squeaked into its new position. “I honestly think I had an itching curiosity that I simply wouldn’t be able to scratch in any other way, at least not in the same way anyway. I expect if I had ended up on any of those old shows when I was 7 or something like that then maybe I wouldn’t have gotten to where I was at the time!”

Dai could sympathise, especially thinking about how many of those kids probably just returned to their normal lives on the playground. “You must have been buzzing so much when that confirmation came through. I don’t even know what the first thing I’d do if I’d been chosen for a show like Industrial Zone. Do you remember when you found out?”

An abashed grin slowly painted itself across the dragon's face. "Tell you what, it was one hell of an interesting afternoon at home."

"What happened? I guess you must have still been living with your parents back then?"

"I was, yeah." She paused briefly whilst she racked her memory. "I told Dad first. In fact I think I told him minutes after I applied. He was really excited at the idea. In the end it was mostly him who ended up talking to the studio during the selection process, as I wasn't old enough to do it completely on my own. I told my Mum not too long after him, but it took a little longer for me to get up courage for that."

Some concern crept into Dai's voice. "Oh? Was she less keen?"

"Don't worry, she was fine with me going on; at least in the end anyway. At first, I think she wrote the whole idea off. That it would end up as something that would just fall through eventually on its own and that would be that. However once the studio started calling through she became increasingly more nervous about the whole idea. She was never mad about the whole messy trope on TV. I think it must have grossed her out too much."

Dai conceded. "That's believable. There's definitely no shortage of shows that probably made me feel similar. Like, remember all those shows where they brought a random audience member to do really high adrenaline stuff? Or get locked in a room with their biggest fears?"

Gwen's eyes opened wide and clapped, pointing with an amazed smile. "Peril!!! I remember that one! Yeah I suppose that would be kind of similar."

Dai couldn't help but instinctively laugh with a surprised chuckle, "I'm impressed you remember that! Nobody else I've asked does."

Gwen shrugged a little. "I mean it wasn't really my kind of thing, but it had its moments."

"So going back to your Mum, I suppose it's kind of like... Being scared of heights, but knowing your child wants to go skydiving on that show?"

"Ha!! I'm definitely stealing that analogy." She said with a playful point. "I mean getting covered in gunge is hardly the same as leaping from a plane, but yeah, she wasn't shy to voice her disdain for that kind of TV whenever it came on either."

"That's too bad... At least my parents were largely indifferent to it. And what about afterwards? How were they then?"

"Dad was as you'd expect. Wouldn't shut up about it for weeks. Mum kept that in check the best she could though, especially when he kept bringing it up at dinner. All

the subsequent stuff came after I'd moved out, so I'm not sure. I'm sure dad scours the listings every week though for more 'dirt' to tease me with."

"Wait..." Dai leaned forwards, "Subsequent stuff? You mean the live shows?"

Gwen shook her head with a smile. "Not exactly, though that did come eventually. I'm sorry for not mentioning it before, but I've actually ended up on a few different shows to get slimed."

Dai's head tilted, giving her a questioning look. "How many is a few?"

"Uh... Including non-Industrial Zone stuff..." It took Gwen a moment, as she seemed to count out some imaginary somethings on her fingers. "Four. I think?"

Dai's mouth fell open, his brow rising almost comically in surprise. He leaned in, "My god, I didn't realise you were quite that heavily involved with the show!"

Gwen gave a long giggle, not quite expecting the reaction. She wiped her eyes as she calmed herself down. "Well, not involved with the show per-se, it's part me having so much fun each time, and part me not knowing how to say no when they ask me! It's not been as a normal contestant though; it's usually as a visiting guest. They must have just taken a shine to me!"

Dai couldn't help but feel a little jealous as he hesitated a little, but didn't let it bother himself too much. "I'll say... Your run on that first episode of series 2 is my favourite episode for a reason! You were such a fun team to watch. No wonder they kept asking you back."

Gwen looked a little flushed at the compliment as she looked aside just enough to not look at Dai directly out of embarrassment. Despite the slight burning in her cheeks, she couldn't help but smile from ear to ear. As Gwen looked back, she noticed Dai looking at his phone a little intently, occasionally glancing around him.

"Is everything ok?"

Dai put his phone down hastily, almost as if he'd been caught at his parent's dinner table. "Oh, I'm sorry! Everything's fine. I'm just conscious of how long we've been sat here without eating or drinking..."

Gwen looked down to her watch, which was met with a small gasp to see their quick coffee meeting had already taken them into the dying moments of the morning.

"Oh god, has it been that long already? All right, we should head somewhere else. Did you want to maybe see some sights or do some souvenir shopping?"



Dai did a sweep over the table, collecting his phone again and putting it away. “I’d love that. I’m always a sucker for local trinkets. Then lunch? There’s still some stuff I’d love to run by you.”

“Yeah sounds great. There’s meant to be pretty good pub not far from the museum I’ve heard great things about. We can head there.”

After rather hurriedly gathering their belongings, they both stood up and headed towards the door following one last sweep of the table for their belongings, before saying a short, but pleasant “Thank you.” To the baristas, a clink joining the ambience as Dai left a tip in the jar on the counter on the way past.

The door to the café closed behind them as they stepped back out into the crisp autumn air, and their table became vacant. A member of the shop’s staff soon tended to it, sweeping the few stray crumbs away into a sheet of paper that had been left on the table amongst the other forgotten litter that had been left; before it, populated with Dai’s well prepared typed-out questions was swiftly sealed into a bin bag.

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Midday had come and gone as Gwen lead the way through the aging town during their walk to get some fresh air. After stopping into more gift shops and small markets than either of them could care to count, they eventually both arrived at the pub that Gwen recommended earlier in the day, and were once again shedding their coats to take a seat. Dai slipped his bags of shopping down by his seat as the wooden chair creaked with his weight. He reached to the centre of the table to check the large, somewhat yellowed and sticky menu.

“I’ve really got to come back here for a holiday some time. This place has way more history than I gave it credit for.”

Gwen did the same, before putting the menu down again without so much as a quick glance. It seemed like she already knew what she wanted.

“That’s why I love it so much. It’s oozing with history, but it gets forgotten about in favour of places like Edenbridge just because it’s smaller and not the capital. It’s perfect for a quieter, slightly less tourist-y experience.”

Dai agreed as he gave a nod, keeping his attention on what was available on the grill menu. After a quick trip to the bar to order, the dragon and the rat sat face to face once more, and had their meals in front of them, steaming appetisingly. Dai and Gwen were quick to tuck in.

They’d made some headway into their respective meals, Dai opting for the burger of the day. It looked almost comically tall with all the various extras he’d requested to be put into it. Gwen had opted for the locally sourced fish, which looked to be a much more manageable meal. The hot chocolate and treat had kept them both

going until now, but the gaps in their stomachs were impossible for the pair to ignore. They went to work at their respective plates in a satisfied silence, both concentrating solely on the delight of a good meal. It wasn't for another ten minutes that the silence was disturbed.

"Dai, are you feeling any better?"

Dai looked up from the burger he was struggling to hold together, "How do you mean?"

"You seemed quite spooked before."

Dai tucked his chair a little, feeling a slight wave of embarrassment that thankfully subsided quickly. "Oh, yes. I'm sorry about that. I'm definitely feeling better. What about you? I hope I haven't made you feel uncomfortable at any point."

Gwen's relaxed position in her seat didn't seem to shift. "It's nothing I'm unfamiliar with, I just had an off moment so try not to worry about it."

Dai had taken a couple of bites, before putting the hulking stack of patties, cheese and sauce back down, wiping his digits on his napkin. "You all right to pick up stuff again? There's still lots I'd love to know."

She smiled, happy to see Dai at ease again. "Hit me!"

Dai took a sip of his lemonade, putting it back onto the table with a contented sigh. "So let me set the scene. It's your first filming day for your episode, and you arrive for the days filming. These things are almost always slogs of a day. How did you manage with getting through it?"

Gwen smiled back to him as she focussed on spearing individual pieces of the batter that were crumbling under her fork, "Pretty easily! It was so much fun that it was honestly over before I knew it."

"Really? Did they give you a lot of breaks?"

"Not really. We had a break for lunch, but apart from that we were at it all the time either playing the games or getting briefed. It was pretty intense stuff."

Dai took a moment to think, then feeling his brows rise, almost as if realisation on something was taking shape. "I read an interesting bit of trivia online, maybe you can confirm or debunk this..."

"Oh?"

"I read somewhere that Industrial Zone's early turnaround schedules were silly quick. Like, I heard that they were able to shoot a whole 20 episode series in less than a month? You think that's true?"

Gwen tilted her head slightly, possibly a little curve-balled by the question.

"Honestly, yes I absolutely think that's plausible. Why do you ask?"

Dai perked a little in his response. "Just hearing about how intense filming was just made me remember it. TV sets are crazy places; you can barely find the time to blink let alone rest when the cameras are rolling. But if that's true, then they must have shot everything in your episode... In a single day?"

It was Gwen's turn to raise her brow, realising what the rat was getting to. "Oh, yes! It just seemed so natural to me at the time given how everything was handled on the day. Why? Does it normally take much longer?"

Dai nodded quickly, trying to hold himself back from completely nerding out in front of her. "Usually that's the case, especially for longer shows like Industrial Zone. A lot of game shows have it easy because there's just a single sound stage and set where you ask a bunch of quizzes and move on. The moment you start throwing in multiple sets and activities it becomes much more complicated, especially in the case of a show like Industrial Zone where there's also the H&S risk that messy stuff has."

Gwen simply nodded taking it all in. The explanation seemed to be spreading a look of fascination across her face. "I... I suppose I never even considered any of that."

Dai picked at his fries one by one, dunking them in the pot of tomato sauce he had at the side of his plate. "I hope that it wasn't too intense for you and the team. It sounds like it must have been completely exhausting. It must have been such a long day."

"It was actually less than you might think." Gwen brought one of her hands to her chin, looking at nothing in particular as she tried to think back. "From what I remember... I think I was dropped off around 7:30 in the morning, met the girls and Alex at 8 for the brief they had to give us, and then we were recording for the rest of the day. I lost track of time during it all, but we were out of the studio by around 7:00 in the evening, with enough time to go for dinner with everyone afterwards."

Dai washed the fries away with another sip of lemonade. "I still find that unbelievable... And you say you weren't exhausted or fatigued at all?"

She laughed in response. "Once I hit the pillow I was zonked, don't make any mistake there! But the day ended up being much more manageable than you'd expect."

"So what do you think that's down to?"

“Excitement, adrenaline, and a good breakfast mainly!” she laughed again, adjusting in her chair. “But there’s something else I’m just realising. I think we were only able to do so much in so little time due to how efficient the whole thing was being run. They somehow made it so easy and effortless.”

Dai eyed up the remaining scraps on his plate. “That sounds like a production shoot of dreams. Hiccups almost always happen during recording that would push the schedule back. I guess when something unexpected happened they just ran with it?”

The dragon gave a nod in agreement. “Uh-huh, without a doubt. I expect those unexpected moments are how they... Uh... Got their best material.” she cleared her throat, looking to the side with a shifty look in her eyes. Dai thankfully seemed unwise to the display. She continued, “Speaking of that, I completely forgot that cameras were on us most of the day. It felt more like an exercise day than a TV set for most lot of the time.”

Dai’s interest was piqued once more. “Now that’s interesting... Because that’s how Industrial Zone started life, right? Industrial Zone: Sanctuary Zero?”

Gwen similarly perked up at the name. “Oh you mean that escape room in Edenbridge! It’s always been on my bucket list to try that place out. Aren’t they making more of those soon?”

“Yeah. The demand for nostalgic experiences is shooting up now, so it’s amazing to think how ahead of its time that place was.” Dai smiled, recollecting his excitement when he first discovered the place for himself, “You see escape rooms and places like that springing up almost one a week now.” Dai sighed with a contemplative tone. “It’s crazy to think that Industrial Zone was one of the first ever pioneers of that kind of thing.”

Gwen smiled softly. “Yeah.” She picked up her glass, getting more engrossed, “I bet it was the proving ground for the TV concept too.”

“Go on..?”

The dragon took a long sip of her own soda. “I can’t remember who I heard it from, but I think one of the guys who founded that place ended up on the show’s creative team as a consultant or something.”

A moment’s silence passed as Dai pondered the implications. “That... would explain a lot actually...”

The dragon’s brow lowered, intrigued. “Like what?”

“It was another silly internet rumour I read on a message board some place.” Dai explained. “The story goes that some execs from WKNX visited it back in its early days as a wrap-party kind of thing and that got their creative juices going. Actually...”

That reminds me..." Dai fished around in his pocket, and brought his phone out to look something up. Gwen leaned over to try and see as Dai's face lit up as he found what he was searching for. He turned the screen around to show her.

"Yeah, here we go! Here's an early pic of it when it first opened."

Dai's screen showed an old Internet archive site, with a distinctly early-internet page embedded within, filled with various broken thumbnails and default fonts. Despite the page's poor state of functionality, the aged website was headed with an old photograph showing an enthusiastic group of 20-something year old girls in black T-shirts, beaming excitedly in front of the attraction. The logo behind them caught the dragon's attention. "Oh yeah! It was just called 'Industrial Zone' right at the start, wasn't it?"

Dai turned the screen back to himself, scrolling down to see what else he could find as he continued on. "Yeah... I guess WKNX must have bought into the company and got the rights to make the show, and the experience ended up updating later down the years to better differentiate it."

Gwen's eyes scanned upwards, deep in thought. "Thinking back, having that team involved with the show staff would explain the efficiency thing on the show too..."

Dai put his phone away, looking genuinely confused. "It would? How?"

"Think about it. For a venue like that to do well, they need to keep a good, constant stream of people. It's no use if they can only put through a few people a day."

Dai's eyes opened as he thought. "Wait, you mean..."

"Yep," She quipped with a point in Dai's direction, "At peak, that place is running up to 3 sessions a day: One in the morning, one in the afternoon then one more in the evening. In between all those they have to reset the whole thing to make it look pristine AND keep it safe for the players too."

Dai's smile grew again, as did Gwen's, both feeling satisfaction at cracking their self-set riddle. "Of course... It was probably so streamlined because they just adapted the procedures from the escape room!"

Dai idly fiddled with his fork, "They had such a good winning formula. What a fantastic thing it is though."

Gwen polished off the last scraps of food from her plate, leaving only a few crumbs of batter dotted around. "Yeah. I've not had a chance to try it myself yet, but I feel like I should if just for the history of it."

Dai leaned thoughtfully on the table with his arms. "I'm so glad places like that exist for those who are brave enough though. I mean, if I hadn't done as much digging

into slime as I had and done it on my own time, I'd probably still be trying to 'gunge' myself with shampoos and soaps in the bath like when I was small."

Gwen's hands almost immediately slapped onto the table. Dai almost jumped at the sudden display of activity, as Gwen seemed unable to hold herself back. "Wait. You did that too?!"

Dai was almost taken aback by her outburst. He probed immediately, "What do you mean 'too'? Don't tell me you..."

"Bath stuff was pretty much my first hint of what it's like!" she interrupted, apparently getting visibly more excited in her chair in each passing moment. "Especially with those kid's scalp soaps that were really funky colours."

The rat could only sit in place in a frozen, stunned position. He blinked back to her, almost flabbergasted. "I don't believe it... I mean, that makes me feel a lot less awkward about it now, but come on!"

"Are you serious?" She slowed down gradually, getting her composure back. "Ok, it's uncanny as hell to hear someone else did it, but I wanted to try getting messy so much growing up. Bath time was pretty much the only chance I had."

It was Dai's turn to get into things. He felt virtually no barrier holding him back from spilling everything he'd seen. "Tell me about it. I mean hell... I was always looking for stuff my parents wouldn't miss that I could use in the bath. Shower gel 'gunge' bubble bath 'pies'... I'm sure I had more."

Gwen nodded with the list, apparently getting even more into the conversation, "Did you ever go as far as using any actual messy stuff?"

The momentum seemed to hit a roadblock as Dai slowed down again. "No... Not whilst growing up anyway. I'd have been *ended* if my parents had walked in and saw me. Though I did experiment once or twice as a teenager with what I could find in the kitchen. Kind of unsuccessfully."

Gwen quietened her approach, "Why? Were you caught?"

Dai shook his head quietly. "Thankfully no. It was just... It wasn't the set up I really wanted. Such is the turbulent nature of the developing teenage mind."

Dai fell quiet for a moment, and the dragon's mouth lost its smile. She blinked as she sensed a little pain in his memory. "I understand. I'm sorry that it didn't go as you hoped."

The rat was keen to press on regardless, "Don't worry, I got there eventually, but that wasn't until I'd moved out and could properly experiment in my own space. What about you, Gwen? If you're ok to share?"

“Honestly, outside of the experiments I got up to in the bath or shower with those soaps, nothing. I had to wait until my appearance on the show for that.”

*What?*

Dai’s eyes began to squint, almost in disbelief at what he’d heard. “Shut up... You’re telling me you were baptised by fire?!”

Gwen gave an unknowing smile, “Oh, um... Yes. By the Shuttle to be exact.”

*No way...*

“I mean there was those other games at the start where I got hit with it in passing, but The Shuttle was when I got it proper for the first time ever.”

*That’s not fair!*

Dai bit his tongue before he uttered, “Lucky thing...”

“What about you Dai? Do you remember your first gunging? Proper one?”

Dai blinked away the instinctive thoughts from his mind, bringing himself back to the now. “Oh, very clearly. It didn’t happen until very recently. Last year in fact...”

Gwen rubbed her hands together in glee, “Oooh, let’s hear...”

Dai could only sheepishly grin, caught in an embarrassed pause. “It wasn’t too grand an affair. I had been talking to a friend who was into messy stuff not far from me, and we just set a little something up. It taught me so much.”

Gwen leaned forward with a genuine interest in her eyes, “Oh? Like what?”

The look rather disarmed him, “Set up, doing it safely, and of course I finally got to feel what getting gunged feels like.”

“That’s so great! So what do you think?”

“Well, I can see it’s loved for a reason! Gunge is just... unique. Seriously there’s nothing much else I can say there without maybe sounding gross. There is one thing that I definitely don’t like though...”

Gwen remained riveted, but tilted her head at the news, “Oh? What’s that?”

Dai’s shoulders almost fell away, like he’d given up on holding a heavy load of shopping. “Doing messy stuff is so much work!” Gwen could only laugh as she immediately empathised, but kept quiet for him to continue. “I knew it would be

work but God, it's like pyrotechnic display! You do all that prep and safety stuff for hours, put on a short display then take hours putting it all away safely again."

Gwen's head rolled back as she felt immediately thankful she was never responsible for cleanup on any of her shows. "Oh jeez yeah... Those studios were so lucky to have all that kit on standby to clean stuff up afterwards. Friends and me have done stuff outdoors before, but thankfully we had some isolation, so we didn't have to worry about wrecking the place indoors. We just hosed off the area afterwards."

The rat folded his arms as he thought out loud, "My real dream is to end up with a wet-room one day. Then I can get messy and clean off in the same space with no collateral. Even then though..." He sighed, rolling his eyes, "I still find that gunge ends up places you thought impossible."

Gwen's brow lowered, recognising yet another familiar dilemma, "Right? We've got our stage pretty much protected against it by keeping it in the gunge tanks and covering the main play areas in non-slip, but even then it still finds its way into the crowd and the dressing rooms somehow."

Dai's hands rose to his cheeks as he suddenly remembered who was sat in front of him. "Oh crap, I completely forgot about the live show... Shows how much attention I've been paying."

She could only giggle at Dai's sudden realisation, "It's ok! We just got swept up in everything."

Dai recollected himself. "So... How did that come about?"

"Much like my subsequent appearances on the show really, but truth be told it was a bit of a last minute thing for me. I was brought on quite late in the process."

"That's completely fair. I mean I find this stuff fascinating as you can guess. So you obviously present the show, but what exactly is that comprised of?" Nodding, Dai let Gwen take the reins to the discussion.

"I suppose it could be described as being the show's 'Alex'. I'm there to do the presenting, move the show along, clue up the contestants and commentate during the games. It gets hectic!"

She wasn't wrong. Having watched what few shows he could find online, there seldom seemed any time to rest. "That's what it looked like from all the videos I could find. It looks like you have a great time with it, you have just the right kind of stage presence."

"Thank you! It is a lot of fun!" Gwen was exuberant at the compliment as she bounced in her seat briefly, before settling down again. "The stage presence and that kind of stuff is just down to practice really. Unlike the TV show where it seems



to change up a bit every week, the stage show follows a pretty easy to remember format. Especially if you were to go to two different ones back to back, and they occasionally throw in some variety depending on where we're going."

Dai recalled exactly what she meant; the show definitely had followed a very standard format. "I've definitely been to other shows where it's the same, so I suppose that it gave you at least a somewhat comfortable routine to follow."

"Oh trust me, the show runners keep finding ways to surprise me! Like the time I was bait-and-switched at the end of the original tour..."

Dai's attention was immediately grabbed at what sounded like backstage gossip. He couldn't help but crack a smile as he quizzed further. "Oh? Let me guess, they got you into one of the games somehow?"

Gwen paused for a moment, finally letting go of her answer in a coy sounding voice, "Kind of~" She shuffled a little in her seat as she prepared to recall her tale, Dai listening intently.

"The first year, I was doing my normal routine demonstrating The Pod on stage. The usual way is that I'll be in the seat and then demonstrate the game using that big screen they have. This time... whilst I was demonstrating, what do they do?"

"I don't think you need to give me many hints as to where this is going..."

"Well..." Gwen appeared hesitant, but almost giggly, "It may be easier if I showed you..."

It was finally Gwen's turn to reach for her phone. After flipping through some files, the dragon smiled, "Ah, got it. Have a look!"

Dai took the phone as it was offered, and turned it to see a frozen frame, partially blocked with a large circle and a play button. He tapped it, causing the symbols to dissolve away and the frame to come to life. The image of R.O.B was fading from the screen, and the lights on stage were intensified to show Gwen addressing two teams of four, everyone already looking in a terrible state having apparently been doused in countless gallons of assorted messes already. The footage almost appeared to be filmed covertly, maybe from the side of stage, just out of view from the audience. Gwen's voice could be heard echoing from the booming speakers at the side of the stage, apparently summing up what the omnipotent computer had just presented them with.

"This is bad news, teams! So, we can lose one pod without too much trouble, but if we lose both then it's game over for us! Unfortunately, that means one of you guys is going to have to take the fall... I'm sorry Gina, Milo... Come with me to... The Pods!"

The dragon walked over as the audience behind the camera burst into excited applause, punctuated with some incidental, clashing metallic music as she made her way over. She gestured to one of two classic Pod contraptions that had been so famous as a lean kangaroo and a blushing armadillo followed behind her quietly. Dai remained quiet himself as Gwen continued to explain.

“The set up on these things is a little different from the regular pod back home, here’s what you do!

Gwen hopped into one of the seats as the screen above the stage showed a live camera feed for the audience to see, focussing on the familiar panel of scrambled symbols in front of her.

“We need a team member from each side to take to their respective pod, and using the console must try and pair as many symbols as possible within the time limit. Remember, no duplicates or you’ll be reset back to zero!”

The footage zoomed in as Dai subtly tensed...

“The team who scores the most will seal their pod, protecting them from... The oncomi-”

She didn’t even finish her sentence. Dai gasped with a wide-eyed stare as the pink dragon disappeared in an onslaught of beautifully marbled neon-green and blue gunge. The downpour practically fireworked its way off of her head as it scored a direct hit to her horned cranium. A loud scream of shock could be heard as it caught her completely by surprise; much to the delight of the audience who erupted into fits of laughter and hollers off-screen. The loud adulation lasted long after the eventual opaque cascade dripped to a stop, revealing the caked, shell-shocked face of Gwen, still sat there in her seat. Eventually she staggered up and out before putting her hands to her hips, much like a disappointed mother would when walking in on her children drawing on the walls.

“So... Unless you want *this* to happen to you, then... You know... Don’t lose!” She seemed to be stuttering through, as she tried hard to bring things back to the script. “And by the way, if that was you Susi... You’re going to pay for that!”

The camera suddenly flipped around as more loud laughter was heard from the crowd, the frame showing a well built grey wolf looking into the camera that gave a wink and a satisfied thumbs up. The clip finally ended on yet another shot of the sodden dragon, now taking a towel from a nearby stagehand as she continued to drip viscous strings.

Dai looked up from the device, ready to hand it back when he noticed the dragon on the other side of the table blushing a little with a welded-on embarrassed smile. He handed the phone back with a gentle smile himself to try and put her at ease.

“That’s brilliant... And you say they do that...”

“Every year... Yup. In a different way every time.” She took the phone, slipping it away into her handbag. “He’d set the whole thing up. So when he had to miss the tour in the next season, I thought I was safe.” She folded her arms with a knowing, but conceded smile, “But nope. That lovable doofus really set a trend for the rest of the crew with that one...”

Dai finally finished the last of his lemonade, putting the heavy pint glass down. “It’s brilliant to hear that the crew seems to have taken you on as one of their own. Did you get on with everyone all right?”

“When I was coming to the studio properly to rehearse, I was given a day or two to get to know the everyone. They’re all lovely people. One in particular, Susi... Turned out to know who I was already! He’d seen me on my first time on Industrial Zone back in series 2 and become a bit of a fan.”

“Oh! That guy from the video? So you ended up getting a bit of a heroes welcome?”

“That’s him, yeah. I got something so much better than just a warm welcome... But we’ll get there!” She looked up with a contented smile. “It turned out he was one of the set and prop technicians at Pine Hill! He mainly helped to make sure that all those devices worked properly first time every time whilst the cameras were rolling. He’d been drafted over from the Industrial Zone TV crew to help engineer some more portable ideas for contraptions that could easily be built and taken apart again to go from place to place for the stage show.”

Dai followed closely, thinking just how much prep would be needed to make such a complicated set up so mobile. “He did a fantastic job from what I could see. They capture the setting perfectly! And they come apart and go back together reliably too? That’s testament to his skill.”

Another smile curled at Gwen’s lips, “Uh-huh, I’ll be sure to let him know he’s done his job well! Susi is also responsible for some of my all time favourite experiences on the tour circuit.”

“You mean that gunging?”

“Well, that’s more part of the job. As a person, we gelled pretty great too!” She rested back into her chair, as the memories seemed to flash, frame by frame through her mind like an old-time projector. “We ended up coming up with all sorts of fun ideas for gunge devices during our breaks during rehearsals. It was great times.” She released a contented, contemplative sigh, “He even helped realise a bit of a dream of mine too. He managed to take one of my ideas and make it happen for the show!”

Dai leaned in, eager to hear more. “That late on?”

“I know! A dream come true, right?”

“How’d you manage that?”

“I’d brought up how one or two of the major Industrial Zone games had to be cut, as they couldn’t be adapted. So we ended up idly chatting over one lunch how we could downscale some of the games. That turned into an accidental brainstorming session and sure enough once he’d checked our budgets and inventory, the live show managed to get the shuttle!”

“Oh that’s fantastic! I mean that sounds like the stuff of dreams to be able to come up with your own gunge game and see it realised!”

“It was a surreal experience seeing it all happen. I now try to push for one new game from the TV series for the live show every season.”

“So I’m guessing that you two must still be friends?”

“Even better.”

She came forwards once again with a soft smile, turning her phone around to show her phone’s lock-screen wallpaper. There was Gwen and the wolf together sharing a quiet, comfortable moment of downtime together, the wolf’s arm wrapped snugly around Gwen’s waist. Dai’s smile grew to a grin as the nuggets of information slotted together.

“Each day I was at the studio, we just spent lunches together just idly chatting about whatever we wanted. Like... how we’d redesign The Hotseat or whatever. Then, on the second day, we exchanged numbers and after a while we started seeing each other. We’ve been together a number of years now.”

“Ahh! That’s so brilliant! I’m thrilled for you guys!”

“He definitely likes to keep me on my toes though... I think you can guess how.”

Dai jubilantly bobbed his head in agreement. “Say no more, I’m sure you have fun! But... I have to know.”

Gwen looked back to him with an expectant look.

“Have you gotten him back for it yet?”

A quick devious smile was enough to tell him all he needed. “Heh, don’t worry. I’ve had plenty of opportunities. Me and the others make sure of that.” She gave Dai a knowing wink. Dai’s mind filled in the blanks.

“Say Gwen... Did you want dessert?”

Gwen moved in, apparently eager. "I thought you'd never ask... I've been itching for one of these guys' sundaes for a while now. They make their ice cream in-house here."

Dai had flipped the menu over to look over the desserts, but had to look up at the news. "Well that's settled whether I'm getting ice cream or custard with mine then. Tell me what you want! I'll get them."

"Well, only if you're sure..."

"Completely. After all, I'd feel bad for you footing all the bill for coffee earlier."

It took all of a couple of moments for them to narrow their choices down, and for Dai to head up to the bar to place the order. Once again, the deliciously finished treats were set down before them both. A rich, almost meltingly sweet aroma wafted towards Dai's nose as he looked over the enormous plate of hot cookie dough and ice cream he'd been served, making his mouth water. Gwen's sundae looked to be just as ludicrous as her hot chocolate, topped with granules of coarse nuts and candies, accented with the almost reflectively shiny streaks of chocolate sauce.

"...I think I've died and gone to heaven. Thanks so much for this."

Dai laughed out as he watched Gwen's eyes seem to grow to what would have been a comically large size had the confines of her skull not kept them where they were. "Well what are you waiting for? Dig in!"

They both went to work at their respective stacks of sugar, seemingly forgetting the large meal they'd finished not long before. Dai broke his concentration.

"I still can't believe that Susi and the crew got you like that during that show. You telling me you had no idea?"

Gwen had dug beyond the whipped cream that topped her glass as she shook her head, being careful to catch any of the chocolates that fell from the side of her dessert with her finger. "Not a clue. When it happened I was so scared that something had gone wrong and we wouldn't be able to play the game! I was worried the crew might end up getting a bollocking for it, but thankfully that runner who came out to me let me know that everything was under control and we could go ahead as normal."

"Mm, I agree that must have been a worrying thing in the moment. Good thing you were able to shake it off so well though." He tore more of the soft, warm cookie apart as he topped it with a little of his ice cream.

“One thing that moment definitely gave me though was a new-found appreciation for Alex and just how good a job he did on the show. Unlike me, he didn’t have the luxury of knowing exactly where the show will go each day of shooting. Not only that, there really was nobody better at bringing people out of their shells than him.”

Dai was very familiar with the constantly changing nature of the show. Every episode he remembered seemed to have completely unique elements apart from the various staples. “Yeah he must work so hard to get it consistently delivered every time.” He addressed her directly once more, “And that last part... Is that out of experience?”

“I’ve seen first hand just what effect he has. Seriously, if you can then watch that series 2 episode back and compare how Electra is at the start compared to the end. She went from being terrified of everything to there being no mess too big in like... One game. No doubt Alex’s approach had a major hand in that.”

“Electra? Jog my memory, was she...”

“Blue rabbit. White hair.”

Dai’s memory honed in on whom she meant, “Gotcha. I’ll take a look later!”

Dai continued, keen to hear more. “But you do a fantastic job too. Even then though, I find it a little odd that Alex wasn’t really utilised in the live show at all. You’d have made a great double team.”

Gwen’s spoon clinked against the walls of her glass, smiling at the compliment. “Aww, thanks! I would have loved that, maybe we could both be team captains or something!” She momentarily put her spoon down, leaning over the table towards him. “Also, I’ve got some behind the scenes info that probably wouldn’t be well received if it got out, so you ok to keep this on the down low if I tell you?”

Dai did as she had, putting his spoon down. “Yeah absolutely. What is it?”

Gwen kept it quiet as she leaned in further. “Well, truth is that I was never meant to be the host of that show. It was always intended that Alex was to be the host of it from the very start.”

The rat’s eyes opened up in surprise, “No way... Really?!” He quickly put himself back in check, realising his voice had slightly raised in excitement. “That’s complete news to me!”

Gwen continued, “Yeah, the goal all along was to have him head up the live shows as well as the TV show, and he seemed up for it too. I think the thing that stopped that was SFN spreading out the production schedule for the series around the time it was all coming together, so he simply didn’t have the time for both.”

Dai nodded as he sat back, and they both started to work at their desserts once again. "You said earlier that you were brought in quite late on... Just how late on were you brought in?"

Gwen had returned to fishing out the various sweet treasures buried amongst the ice cream in her sundae. "It wasn't quite the eleventh hour I don't think, but it was late enough that they were sounding panicked when I got the call asking me to come for the meeting!" She quickly finished off her spoonful. "I was launching into doing some publicity photo shoots maybe a couple of weeks after I'd started, but I think they'd even gone to print with some of the earliest promotional stuff with Alex in it!"

The rat brought his hands together as he leaned back. "Ahhhhh... You know, that's probably when you were dealing with the guys from my company, but early stuff? Wow... I'm going to have to search for that when I get back to work. I hope I didn't throw any of it out by mistake!"

Gwen beamed back, "Be sure to send some my way if you do! Thankfully, my schedule that summer was open so I was happy to say yes."

"I hope you were able to get up to speed when you arrived. That still sounds like an incredibly crunchy timeframe to set you up for an entire tour."

"It wasn't the worst thing." She rested her spoon down once again. "Every show follows the same format and the presenter is only one small part of the overall puzzle. Everything else in the show was either finished or at the very least mostly there. Thankfully, Alex actually gave me a bit of a crash course on the Industrial Zone presenting style, as well as some amazing tips for how to connect with certain contestants, and that's virtually all that was needed! I also got a lot of coaching from the directors too to ensure I had the right stage presence and was working the crowd properly."

Dai followed the explanation with interest, fascinated to hear the process. "You definitely captured his spirit on stage well. I don't know if you've checked out the videos of the shows online, but commenters love you."

Gwen bashfully smiled down into her sundae before looking back to him, "I try not to read those things too much, but I'm glad to hear it!"

Dai sympathised with the position, opting to take the line of discussion elsewhere. "That was a global tour too, wasn't it?"

Dai was relieved to see Gwen snap back to her usual enthusiasm. "Oh god, yeah. We went everywhere. Most of the shows were this side of the pond of course, but we did venture overseas a few times!"

"Anywhere exciting?"

“The Kularin Archipelago. That place was *fantastic!*”

The place held some fond memories for Dai, just the memory of the pleasant breezes and rich heat of the Kularian sun being ample enough to warm him where he sat. “Oh wow you went there? I went there for a diving holiday years ago!”

“Then you’ll know for a start that the place is stunning. I just remember landing there. You remember how the runway is on a strip of reclaimed land in the middle of the sea?”

Dai nodded, “I sure do...”

“Well, stepping out from the plane into that sun and seeing that sea? I was blown away. My first thought was ‘Industrial Zone beach party? Hell yeah!’ They set the stage up on one of the beaches and we did it at night, so we not only got that, but I think that must have been one of the first shows I’d done where I wasn’t being hounded or shouted at for the entire duration of my time there. I’m so used to getting tripped up somewhere along the way and getting whipped by the venue organisers whilst getting ready for the show, but even when there were mess ups on our part, the folks there seemed to take it in their stride.”

Dai scraped the last of his ice cream from his plate, “Yeah talk about a place with its own pace and rules. Did that rub off on the show crew too?”

“Yeah! Well, at least it did for a week.” She seemed to daydream a little as she leant on the table, “God, I’d love to go back there for a holiday sometime when I’m not having to work...”

Both Dai and Gwen finished their desserts, causing the conversation to pause. The only things left in their respective dishes being crumbs and various streaks of melted ice cream. Dai rested back with a sigh, feeling suitably immobile from such a fill.

“That settles it. I’m bringing my wife back here. That was stunning.”

Gwen wiped her mouth with her napkin, feeling similarly full to the brim, “No kidding... Damn I’d heard this place’s ice cream was good, but wow. I think I need a minute!”

They both sat back in a satisfied silence, letting themselves enjoy the satisfaction for a good 5 minutes before either of them thought to move again. Dai moved first, once again reaching for his phone to check some messages during the downtime.

“Ah...”

“Is everything all right?”



“Yes fine, I’ve just spotted the time. I’m going to have to get a move on to the station before too much longer. My train home is in about an hour.”

Gwen quickly sat up and pulled her phone out to see for herself. “Why what time is- Oh cripes I hadn’t realised we were getting on past 5 already. Don’t worry; I can walk you back to the station. It’s not far, so we should still be there in plenty of time. We can just walk the food coma off.”

Dai gave an instinctive laugh as he neatened his plate, putting everything in its centre for the waiting staff to collect. “Thank you Gwen. Also, are you ok for a big favour just before we head off properly?”

“I’ll do what I can. What do you need?”

“Don’t worry, it’s not much, I can ask you outside.”

Gwen simply smiled in response as she gathered her things. “Ok.”

Dai and Gwen gathered their belongings, patting themselves down briefly before tucking their chairs back in and walking briskly towards the door.

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“And that nearly made the final cut?! Don’t tell me they didn’t notice it!” Dai interjected, raising his index finger as he and Gwen rounded a street corner, the pink dragon caught in a hysterical giggle.

“Oh trust me, they did in the end. Why do you think they placed the graphics on there instead of where it normally goes?”

“Touché... I suppose the show *is* post-watershed for a reason. And Alex was the one who spotted it?”

“If the stories the crew tells me are true, then he definitely saw it... I mean he was supposedly there when it was happening! I’ll have to grill him on that when I see him again...”

The two kept strolling as they happily joked whatever they could fill the time with on the walk. The conversation had drifted from fun substances to use in gunge tanks, madcap ideas for the various messy games they had thought up whilst they were small, the infamous “Industrial Zone Drinking Game” and everything in between. They blinked as two large rolling automatic doors slid aside, and they stepped from the biting cold of the outdoors across the threshold of pleasant heat generated by the heaters of the Orlonthorn Station ticket hall, right back where the day had started. Commuters had begun to bustle as the stark, orange glow of the winter sunset cast its unmistakable tint over the sprawling, echoing space.

“You still on track to catch your train?”

“Yeah,” Dai continued to lead whilst they got within eyeshot of the ticket barriers that lead to the various station platforms. They stopped briefly whilst Dai recovered his return ticket from his wallet, “I’ve got plenty of time to spare.”

Gwen gave a nod, “Dai, there’s one more thing before you go. I think I should ask you; for your own sake if anything.”

The rat looked up, a little apprehensive. “Yes?”

He was quick to stand down as he saw Gwen’s smile that he’d come to be familiar with. “Please, do check out the live show when it goes to Anglia next, and go on... Put yourself down as a volunteer contestant.”

Dai’s silent smile fell away into an open mouth and remained that way in a moments pause, his tongue momentarily caught. “Do you really think I should?”

“Well... I’ve always thought that it’s never too late to have fun and to work towards a dream if you want to. After all...” She looked at him, and gave another knowing wink and a telling smile. She leaned in towards one of his large ears and quietly finished, “And between you and me, you never know who might read and like your application.”

Dai could only find it in him to beam in return as Gwen withdrew, standing before him for the last time. “Well, travel back safely Dai, and maybe hopefully, I might end up seeing you when we’re out the road again! It was great to meet you. Keep in touch!”

Dai gave a thankful nod in appreciation. “Let’s hope so! Thanks, Gwen! It’s been a pleasure. Hope to see you!”

The two exchanged a very brief parting hug before the turning and heading in opposite directions.

“Bye!”

Dai slipped his ticket through the gate, pulling it free once it had popped from the other side. The weathered, grey gates swung open immediately with a whirr. He looked back over his shoulder to see the lobby doors trundle shut, and the dragon walking back towards the bus stops. He pressed on, up onto the main bridge, then down onto the platform where a conveniently empty waiting room was ready for him. He sat himself onto the unpleasantly cold, perforated steel seat.

*“The next train at PLATFORM 3 will be the 18:14 service to ANGLIA CITY. Passengers travelling beyond the Anglia Border, please use the FRONT of the train, and have tickets ready for inspection. Thank you.”*

Dai opened his wallet to ensure his citizen’s card and ticket were nestled safely, before closing them away and returning the bulky wallet to his pocket. He pulled his phone out to see the time. 17:57 – Still plenty of time.

The transition between the waiting room and seeing the Caledon countryside blurring past the window seemed to be a blur in itself. The sun had just about disappeared over the silhouettes of the hills in the distance. A sense of slight bewilderment and confused but hopeful ideas had apparently kept him on autopilot up to now. The infrequent ‘click-clack’ of his train rolling over joins in the rails had provided ample white noise to zone out to.

As his conscious returned, he looked to his phone that he apparently had kept in his hands. Instead of putting it away, he unlocked it. He tapped his photo app and watched the most recent photo he’d taken inflate to size. He blinked and studied it with the hint of a smile curling at his lips. The edge of Dai’s arm could be seen down the left hand side of the picture. In the centre were him and Gwen sat there together, each pulling a silly face in a parting selfie the two had taken just after they’d left the pub, their faces illuminated with the brilliant winter sun.

Some seconds later, he clicked the application closed. Feeling his heart race a little for what must have been the umpteenth time that day, he tapped his Internet browser, and saw it fill the screen with his familiar search engine. He began to type.

*“Industrial Zone Live 2115”*

He tapped the first link at the top. A dark looking website greeted him with the picture of a surprised young male chinchilla raising a fist triumphantly through a curtain of clear, green slime. Scrolling down further, he found the link he’d been hoping to see.

*ANGLIA SHOW TICKETS*

He tapped it and perused the proceeding screen to survey prices, and beyond that... a highlighted disclaimer partnered with a small tick-box and text entry field. Its words set the rat’s mind ablaze with a cacophony of possible outcomes.

*“This show includes the chance to be selected to compete in one of the two teams on stage. If you would like to be considered, and are prepared to get messy on stage, please tick this box. Write us a short passage to tell us why you should be chosen!”*

There may have been a time for thinking it through before, but several years of that had already come and gone. Dai’s mind had finally been made. It was time to be in it to win it.