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CAPTAIN CUTICLE AND THE SEARCH FOR KERATIN

MASON BELL



ALSO BY MASON BELL

SOPHIE MAE ADVENTURE SERIES

THE MOST MAGICAL BEGINNING

THE MOST SPECTACULAR TRAVELING BOX

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THE MOST MYSTIFYING POTION

GALACTIC FUN PARK SERIES

BOOK ONE

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THE GREEN MONSTER SAVES THE WORLD

THE ADVENTURES OF HUNTER REX

“Humor is mankind’s greatest blessing.”

-Mark Twain



A CLOSE SHAVE

Buttons and warning lights on the Salon's control panel flashed in time with the blaring alarm warning of oncoming space debris. Captain Cuticle winced as space rocks slammed into the hairbrush hatch protecting the ship's nose and scraped along the shower cap hull.

"On screen!" yelled Captain Cuticle.

Damage to the ship proved worse than he'd expected. The long journey to gather grooming supplies from Planet Earth turned disastrous as the thrusters attached to the ship's elastic band sputtered. The Salon twisted and spun as it hurtled to the planet's atmosphere.

Captain Cuticle retracted his lengthy eye nodes and focused on the small screen next to his captain's chair. Gravity boosters failed. His soft, orange hair fluffed as his spherical body lifted into the air and the instinct from centuries of space travel kicked in. One hundred fifty of his front legs paddled the air, pushing him toward Mullet, his trusty navigator. "Report."

"The Salon can't take much more, Boss. We've lost the port thrusters!" Mullet rubbed his eye nodes. "And the Auto-Land program is offline!"

"Can you maneuver the Salon to the surface manually?"

"Seriously? Hold on tight!" Fifty of Mullet's feet reached from under the black hair covering his body and slammed buttons on the control panel—his eye nodes darting to each boulder that dinged the ship. "And a debris field. What luck! This is just like my training videos."

Captain Cuticle floated back to his chair and gasped at the tear ripped along the vintage shower cap hull's blue and white flowers. To make matters worse, the strip of white elastic near the thrusters was stretched out.

A burning raced along Captain Cuticle's suction tube mouth. He shrank his eye nodes under his hair to keep from upchucking the Keratin supplement he'd slurped for breakfast. Supplies of the protein ran low, and he

needed to keep it down if he were to survive this journey.

Daredevil Mullet twirled at his station, taking advantage of the anti-gravity within the ship. But when he lost control of his eye nodes, his breakfast of morning Keratin spewed to the haywire control panel.

“Brace for impact!” Cuticle yelled.

A mass of gray clouds hanging over the planet masked the high levels of humidity that breached the hull and circulated through the oxygen vents, poofing Mullet and Cuticle’s body hair into wiry balls that tightened around their chests.

“Dang! We’ll never make it, Boss!”

Cuticle’s legs clutched the leg-rest. A glimmer of gold and bronze along the planet’s surface had his third heart beating fast. “Land there. It has to be a mechanical port.”

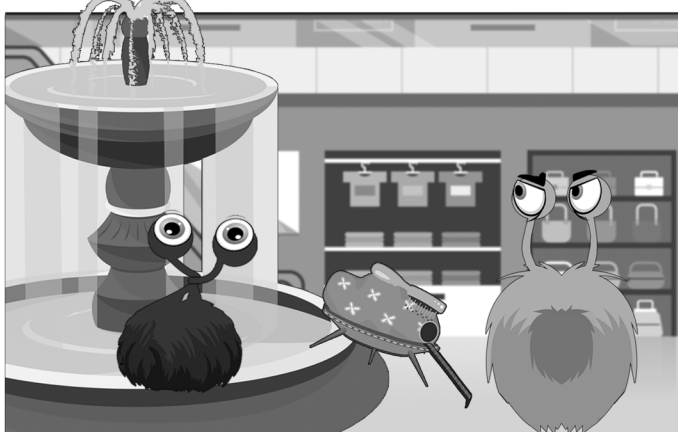
Mullet hooked a hundred legs from his backside to the control panel—five of which punched buttons. Tumbling through the planet’s foliage killed the view screen just as the Salon busted through the glass roof of the large mechanical port. The g-force threw them to the ship’s rear.

Captain Cuticle yelled through billowing smoke, “Mullet!”

“I’m fine, Boss,” Mullet said, heaving the last of his Keratin.

Captain Cuticle scrambled over the debris covering the Salon’s floor and manually popped open the hatch. A burst of frigid air flooded the bridge. “We need to get the station on that planet operational. It’s been centuries since a Fringian has visited the Earth.”

“We could just gather the items on our list and split,” Mullet said. “We don’t want to go missing like the last supply ship.”



THE BALD ONES

The hairbrush shielding the ship's nose slid upward over the hull—its bristles clearing the hair-tangling space debris from the hatch. A conveyor belt descended from the elastic band toward the uneven terrain. Cuticle studied the perimeter as the conveyor corrected its positioning along the horizon.

“That’s a good sign, Boss. Without a working conveyor, we’d be stuck here forever, far from Planet Fringe.”

“Earth is the ideal place to be stranded. Many explorers came before us and learned the ways of Human grooming, bringing back hair accessories that have benefited all of us.”

Captain Cuticle crawled along the Salon's conveyor, losing ten more of his legs before reaching the cold floor. Leg droppage on his home planet was a severe problem and the reason for his interstellar journey. Planet Fringe ran low on Keratin—a protein needed for healthy locks—and the King tasked him with finding a fresh supply.

“Where do you think we find the Humans?” Mullet asked, his eye nodes half protruding from his hair. “I’ve practiced a new greeting for this trip—”

Captain Cuticle pulled Mullet behind a sign tented near a stark white wall. Flags hung on the building's support beams, showcasing fashionable items similar to the hair accessories gathered and brought to Planet Fringe from previous supply missions.

Studying the Human civilization in his youth helped Cuticle identify them as he peeked around a cement wall. He took special note of their heads that bobbed as they wandered about. Hair grew only on their heads, but a quarter of them had sad, dead-looking strands—crisper than the time Cuticle's sister went on that perm binge.

Mullet crawled from the sign and scanned a Human preoccupied with his communication device. “I must’ve hit my head, Boss. This Human has lost all its hair. What kind of evil lurks on this planet?”

“Curious,” Cuticle said. “They live in a Keratin-rich environment and still continue to lose hair! We need to get a closer look. Perhaps the Keratin on this planet is tainted.”

Glancing left and right, Cuticle rolled into the Human foot traffic. Mullet never developed the roll technique used by the majority of Fringians, but his crawling proved quick enough.

Captain Cuticle took shelter behind a large, round column that stretched to the high glass ceiling. Sitting pods lined the walkways and, judging by the amount of youths piled in a single chair, had reached full capacity. Most played games on their devices. Others scarfed burnt food from the mall’s eating section on the second floor.

A sign swung in the breeze from the wall’s cooling unit.

“What does it say?” Cuticle asked.

Mullet parted his hair and retrieved his translator from the bag attached to his belly. Holding it to the text, it spoke. *Get Your Shopping Fix at South Fork Mall.*

“This is a Human shopping destination and not a mechanical spaceport,” Cuticle said. “Fringe’s information on this planet seems to be outdated. Mullet, enter the term *mall* into the records.”

A sign with sparkling letters hung on the door of a tiny Human shop, not even large enough for a pair of Fringians to raise a family. Mullet aimed the translator toward it. *Gorgeous Gals* came from the speaker.

“Over here, Boss! I’ve found something...disturbing.”

Captain Cuticle rolled under the gold and black awning and stretched his eye nodes to the dozens of hairpieces displayed in the window. Tight and wavy curls hung separate from the stick-straight hair, but all came in a rainbow of colors. Cuticle pointed to a yellow hairpiece with a high shine and richness different from the rest. “Is that a Fringian?”

“No way, Boss. Contact with the last supply ship broke centuries ago. The captain and crew would never survive that long on a hostile planet.”

Vibrations originating from the feet of an older Human in a blue dressing gown had Cuticle retracting his eye nodes. The female Human stopped at the hair stand and plopped into the black resting pod, looking over her dull locks in a small mirror. When the shop keeper approached, the Humans displayed their large teeth in what could be considered a cultural practice, completely friendly in nature.

“They communicate by vocal and gestural means,” Cuticle said.

“We should get back to the ship. Fringians or not, we can find supplies elsewhere.”

Cuticle’s hair stiffened when the stand owner grabbed the yellow-haired Fringian from the top hook. Pins plucked from her glossy lips slid around the Fringian’s legs, securing it to the sitting female’s head. The stand owner fluffed the Fringian’s perfect locks, covering the damaged parts of the Human’s hair. Cuticle cringed at the brutal display.

Mullet was right. They needed to get off this planet before they, too, were on the hook. But as Cuticle turned back for the Salon, Mullet’s shrill vocalizations changed his plans.

“Help!” Mullet yelled, wriggling in the stand owner’s grip. “Don’t let them pin me!”

The yellow Fringian was ripped from the Human’s head and tossed to the shiny counter, replaced by Mullet’s black strands. He gripped the female’s crisp roots, hoping to fend off the leg-piercing pins. And it worked. Mullet whispered to the female’s dried-out hair. “Hello? Do you understand Fringian?”

Both females flashed their white teeth in agreement, exchanging a wad of paper currency known to Cuticle as money. The female customer hurried from the hair

stand to the mall's walkway with Mullet clinging to her
scalp, begging to be rescued.



THE CHOP JOB

Rolling and dodging Humans oblivious to his presence, Captain Cuticle ducked behind a debris receptacle as Mullet disappeared into the doorway marked with a Human form. The ray of light streaming across the floor shrank as the door closed slowly enough for Cuticle to slide sideways through the tiny slit without losing a single leg.

The heavy door slammed closed and echoed off the small room's walls. Puddles of mucky water and bits of paper littered the floor. "Mullet? Where are you?"

"In the last evacuation unit. The stench in here is unbearable!"

Cuticle drifted over the floor's rubber bumps, choosing stealth over speed. The whoosh of swirling water echoed off the walls as the woman flung open the door and exited into the open area, where she washed her hands under a stream of water.

Mullet screamed at his reflection in the dusty mirror hung above the sinks. Sitting atop the woman's head like a gift bow wasn't how dreamed of living. He crept down her head, one leg at a time. But she tugged him higher on her crown, smashed his legs into her roots, and created a deadly mist with a blue can of hairspray.

"Nooo!" Cuticle screamed as the sticky spray split the ends of Mullet's hair. The few strands that had snapped off were callously wiped away by the irritated female.

A path from the flooring and up the sink's pipes gave Cuticle an idea. With a quick scramble up the slick metal, he dove into the female's bag where the metal can slammed into his eye nodes.

Mullet's sickly shade of green had the female gasping at the unseasonable color. Several of his legs ripped from his body when she tore him from her head and tossed him into her bag. Both Cuticle and Mullet bounced inside as she stomped from the evacuation room and back toward the hair stand.

"Mullet?"

“I’m good, Boss. Just need a little fresh air.”

Cuticle gripped the bag’s cloth lining and popped open the magnetic button, choking on the female’s odorous armpit as he scanned the terrain. The black shadow of her communication device barreled into the bag, knocking him to the bottom where a half-eaten bit of chocolate had melted into the creases.

The bag’s jostling stopped. Mullet stretched his eyes over the top seam. Both the angry female and the Gorgeous Gals owner crossed their arms, yelling about the *quality* of the hairpiece in question. Mullet dropped to the bag’s bottom and shook Cuticle like a rug over a banister. “Boss! You alright? We gotta get out of here.”

Bright florescent light flashed just before the bag flipped, dumping the two Fringians and a few candy wrappers into a cardboard box. Mullet stared at the floating black dots in his vision—his eye nodes stiff as a relaxer. “We are going to die.”

Cuticle gulped as he noticed the dozens of Fringians also trapped inside the box. Yellow ones were in the early stages of motherhood. Blue and purple ‘seasoned seniors’, near the end of their lifecycles, didn’t move. But it was the black Fringians that worried him. Middle-aged, they should have been vibrant and healthy. Instead, they carried dead ends and chunks of hair

broken beyond any magic a heavy dosing of Keratin could conjure.

“They’re not even breathing,” Mullet said. “And we’re next!”

“Not if I have a say,” a voice called from above.

Captain Cuticle’s eye nodes widened at the fabulous, golden-brown locks of hair that dangled over the flap. Few Fringians had ever seen such perfect hair at such a close distance. This meant only one thing—they had entered the great afterlife, Healthy Shine Valley.

“We have to get you out of this Damaged Box,” she said. “Nothing good ever happens in there.”

A rope lowered over the side, and Mullet stood at attention, waiting for Cuticle to scale the corrugated cardboard. “Ahem, Boss?”

“Navigators first,” Cuticle said, breaking his stare on the female Fringian.

Mullet latched onto the rope, climbing it with his even-numbered legs. The female Fringian tugged him over the rough edge. “Your turn, Cuticle.”

“How do you know my name?”

“My father made sure I could recognize the important Fringians. I’m the Most Luxuriant Princess Feather. Do

you have enough legs to climb up?"

Mullet shuffled his legs. "Sorry about the grease on the rope, Boss. You know I can't control my oils when I get nervous."

Cuticle bypassed the rope and kicked his legs, floating over the edge to the flooring next to Feather.

"How are you even here?" Mullet asked. "You're a princess and this entire spaceport is like a death trap built for Fringians!"

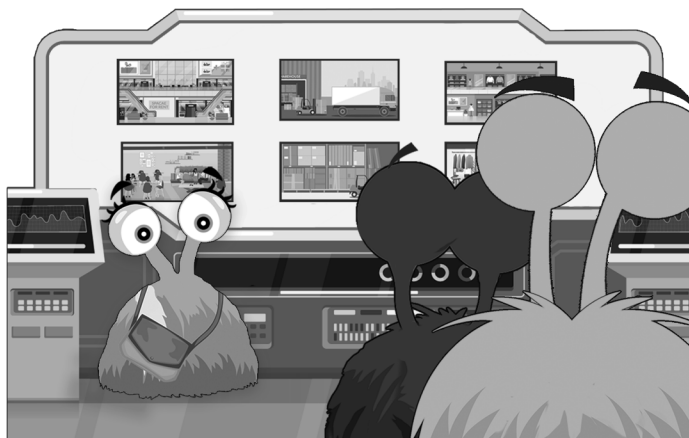
"Calm down," Feather said. "We're in the mall's back storage room and Humans rarely come back here this time of day. If I hadn't saved you from the Damaged Box, you'd have been destroyed."

"Destroyed?" Mullet winced. "What about the others in the box? Some are mothers. Are we going to save them?"

"I'm afraid you two were the only survivors today. Come with me."

"Not until you explain what is happening," Cuticle said. "The last supply mission to Earth was centuries ago, and now I find Fringians everywhere."

"I can explain, but it's complicated. You must come with me."



THE HAIR LAIR

Feather, Mullet, and Captain Cuticle rushed from the Damaged Box toward the back wall of the storage room. Cardboard boxes stacked to the ceiling had Human scribblings. Feather rolled ahead of Cuticle toward the end of a plastic pipe, where she flipped open the covering that flooded the space with strawberry-scented shampoo.

“Follow me down,” Feather said, climbing to the lip of the pipe.

“Where do you—” Cuticle scanned the boxes surrounding him. “Mullet?”

“Over here. I’m stuck!”

Cuticle rushed back to the Damaged Box where Mullet’s hairy body partially stuck to a strip of plastic stapled to the side. Tugging and grunting didn’t free Mullet—only dragged the box a few inches.

“Hang on,” Mullet said, pulling a pair of tiny scissors from the bag hidden under his hair. Cuticle stretched the sticky plastic and nodded. Mullet held a breath and whacked off a huge chunk of hair that left his perfectly trimmed ends jagged.

“It will grow back,” Cuticle said. “Be more careful and follow me before we lose Feather.”

Mullet ran behind the rolling captain until they reached the pipe Feather had slid down. Both Fringians propped their eye nodes over the edge and peered into the darkness.

“I can’t see a thing,” Mullet said. “And the princess went down there?”

“She wants us to follow her. How do we know it’s not a trap?” Cuticle asked. “She might be working with the Humans. There has to be an explanation of why she remains in this mall despite its dangers.”

“It’s not a trap. Princess Feather isn’t an evil lice bug, you know. I’ll go ahead of you and make sure the path is clear.”

“Pay close attention to your surroundings. Yell into the pipe if you get into trouble.”

Mullet floated into the chute and slid downward, screaming like a baby Fringian experiencing its first trim. Cuticle paced the chipped tile floor, waiting for Mullet’s signal. Minutes passed, and he peered inside the pipe. “Mullet?”

“Come on down. You got to see this!”

Floating level with the pipe, he laid inside and released his grip on gravity. Light turned to darkness as he slipped and swirled through the tube. His eye nodes peeked from behind his hairy body as his back legs scraped along the rough-cut edge, sending him into a bed of fluffy cotton balls.

Cold air gusted through the space and whipped Cuticle’s hair around his eyes. Mullet fought against the strong breeze as he floated above the captain. “This place is jacked!”

Cuticle bounded upright and blinked the itchy strands of cotton from his nodes. Mullet drifted through a small archway into a tall ceiling room bustling with Fringians. A large screen, like that in a spaceship, displayed secu-

rity footage from all corners of the mall. Control panels underneath resembled the ones from the Salon but had been worn down by constant use.

“What is this place?” Cuticle asked.

“We call it the Hair Lair,” Feather said, raising her front legs. “It’s the base camp for the Fringian Resistance on Earth.”

“Resistance to what?” Mullet asked. “Maybe I bumped my nodes too hard in the crash, but with all this technology, you should’ve been home decades ago.”

Feather squinted at the comment, then crawled toward a hologram of an older Fringian ship rotating on a black, glass-top table. “My team of Fringians and I landed on this planet nearly five hundred years ago. Much like you, we were sent to search for Keratin and to gather more hair combs and brushes from the Human population. We discovered they kept animals as pets—a substantial source of the protein. Our plans to take a shipload of animals back to Fringe would have provided a thousand years of Keratin.”

“Why didn’t you return to the home world?” Captain Cuticle asked.

“We tried, but because our locks are so similar to Human hair, they captured us by the hundreds, subjecting us to chemicals and hot iron rods that shrank

our numbers. We'll never forget those who perished in the name of beauty."

A black-haired Fringian approached Feather and whispered over a small, leg-held screen. Cuticle used the distraction to scan the details of the ship rotating on the table. While it looked familiar, it seemed the propulsion system was missing a few key components.

Mullet leaned to Cuticle. "Do you think those Fringians on the hooks are the victims Feather is talking about?"

"Those and more. We've always known that Humans are hairy beings, but with all the bald ones we've seen, it appears this information needs updating. Perhaps they have evolved past needing hair and have trouble growing it. This would explain why they supplement with Fringians."

"Exactly," Feather said. "Campaigns to encourage the Humans to accept baldness only succeeded among the males of the species—only a small percentage. Females use Fringians despite their ability to grow their own."

Captain Cuticle paced the floor, kicking up a layer of dandruff. "Hundreds of years, you say? Why not return to Fringe and save your numbers?"

"Keratin on this planet is more potent than we first realized. Fringians who use the protein have doubled in size, and with the extra weight, it is nearly impossible to

escape Earth's gravity. Our only surviving engineer hasn't been able to resolve the issue with our engines."

"Can I meet this engineer?" Cuticle asked. "My ship might offer clues to solve the problem."

"We've been waiting for the King of Fringe to send reinforcements. If I didn't know him so well, I might be offended. Arrangements can be made for you to meet with Dreadlock."

"Dreadlock?" Mullet gulped.

"Yes. He is our head engineer and one of our original crewmembers. No Fringian is as knowledgeable as Dreadlock."

"The sooner we are introduced, the better." Cuticle patted Mullet on the back. "Between the four of us, we should find a way home."



DREADLOCK

“Please excuse the crude nature of transportation on this planet,” Dreadlock said, steering the red, two-wheeled toy. “These mobile units are common among the Human young and are easy to replace when damaged. When we left Planet Fringe all those centuries ago, we didn’t think to pack ground transport.”

“They seem well suited for getting around the mall,” Cuticle said, despite finding the wobbly ride disorienting. Shopfronts with Human gadgets and clothing, meant to hide their gangly form, paraded passed like a never-ending display of poorly made items.

Rolling toward the Glorious Gals wig stand had Cuticle dropping a few more legs. “Stress is causing me extreme breakage. Do you have stores of Keratin back at the lair?”

“We have a large quantity. Keratin is everywhere on this planet. So much, in fact, that many consider it illogical to return to Planet Fringe and believe Princess Feather only wants to return to take the throne from her father.”

“Humans are using Fringians to cover their hairless heads. And with all the perms and dyes cutting off our lineage, it would be poor timing for a power struggle.”

“An outsider’s opinion, I think.” Dreadlock leaned right to change direction. “If you spent time in the local Fringian villages, you might think differently.”

“Fringians have their own villages?”

“Yes, but few know of their location. I bet even you don’t know.”

Blue and white flowers from a shop window had Cuticle hopping from the speeding two-wheeled transport. He pressed his eye nodes to the glass. “There it is. How did my ship end up there?”

“The security guard probably thought it was a toy. No big deal.”

Cuticle examined the hull of the toy ships surrounding the Salon, concluding the extensive use of fake metals and cheap screws would make none of those craft operational. Humans must be technically disadvantaged to consider the Salon a mere child's toy.

Dreadlock and Cuticle squeezed between the security bars and floated to the shelf where the Salon had begun collecting dust. A sticker with \$5 clung to the hairbrush hatch. Cuticle circled the craft for any signs of damage. "Here. The hull has a massive gash."

"Not a problem. What we really need is inside the computer system. We can scrap the rest." Dreadlock yodeled at the blue button. The hatch slid upward, but the conveyor walkway failed to appear. "I guess they don't make conveyors anymore. Makes sense, seeing that Fringians can float."

Captain Cuticle scanned the shop for the conveyor he knew his ship to have. And every Fringian, especially an engineer, knew a ship needed one to operate. Searching the fountain crash site for the part would be necessary.

Dreadlock hovered over the Salon's controls—his thousand legs working in harmony. Lights blinked, and the ventilation system hummed. "I can't believe this ship has automatic dryers and even a curling station."

“That’s not all.” Cuticle teared up as the red light from the scanner raced over his eye. A mellow tune of buzzing instrumentals and a muted yodeling came from the surround sound speakers, giving Dreadlock’s hair a little bounce.

“The oldies station!” Dreadlock said. “I like it. Captain Cuticle, you have amazing taste.”

Cuticle landed next to him. “What information do you need from the computer? Do you think it will be of help?”

“Your computer system is hundreds of years more advanced than our own. By salvaging parts from your craft, we can get our own ship working and finally escape this planet’s gravity. At least some of us.”

“Will you stay for the Keratin?”

“That’s a strange question. Why would I stay here all by myself? I have never been at the mercy of a ruthless species, and I don’t plan to start now.”

“As the head engineer, you’ll be the one to ensure everyone gets home safe. They couldn’t be in better hands.” Cuticle floated to his captain’s chair, lifted the console lid, and found his last Keratin pill. Down to a mere four hundred legs, he dared not wait any longer and find himself in the last-ditch effort of getting plugs.



HIGH AND TIGHT

Bubbling and splashing of water under the busted skylight grew as Captain Cuticle and Mullet cruised the mall in the wheeled transport offered by Princess Feather. Floating was always an option, but it was the slowest way to get around. And as Cuticle saw it, there wasn't time for sightseeing Earth.

"It was here, Boss." Mullet scanned the fountain's base. "We had a wonky landing, remember? The computer leveled the conveyor with the ground. Maybe the brackets at the top loosened, and the thing just fell off?"

"Fell off? We've steered that ship for centuries, and it has never given us trouble. You take the aerial approach.

Scan all the plant life and Human resting stations—even between the cushions. I'll search the planters and waste receptacles."

Cuticle peered over the edge of the fountain to the coins made of varying metals that shimmered in the basin. Money seemed no object to the Humans. And why should it be? Real fortune came from a planet's natural resources, like Keratin on Fringe. At least that was the case before mismanagement by the previous ruler.

"Coom 'ere!" Mullet said. A white stick hung from his suction tube, swirling as his saliva devoured the hidden end of the sweet treat.

"Are you in need of assistance? What is that?"

"A gwayp sucka."

Cuticle's long-layered hair drifted as he floated behind Mullet to the rippling water cascading over the fountain's top tier. A pile of coins hid all but the end of the Salon's conveyor. "What is it doing in here?" Cuticle asked. "And why has it been hidden?"

Mullet spit the sucker on a bulky, green leaf. "If I didn't know better, I'd think someone is trying to keep us here. Were prisoners! We can't stay here. No amount of Keratin is worth spending my days on a sweaty Human head."

Cuticle's first thought included moving the conveyor back to the Salon. But moving it would make him a potential nemesis, jeopardizing his and Mullet's escape from Earth. Floating back to the borrowed transport without the vital part easily convinced him of the need to find the culprit.

"Feather will help us," Mullet said. "She totally knows what to do."

"Not just yet. We have been here only three Earth rotations and are already struggling to return home to Fringe. Finding out why the culprit wants to restrict Fringians to Earth will be our first mission."

Mullet squinted. "What are you saying, Boss?"

"That we go with all the Fringians, or we don't go at all. Our culprit might be clever, but all the best-laid plans crimp under a little heat."



THE UPSWEEP

Rough sand kicked from Captain Cuticle's legs and hovered in the air briefly before rejoining the other granules of Beach Waves Park. Fringians wearing giant hats shielded their eye nodes from the sun's enthusiasm, lifting them ever so slightly to wave to Cuticle as he passed—a perk of being the only local celebrity out so early in the day.

Laughter from Fringian kids building sandcastles grew into shrills of fear. Fringian parents grabbed their young and rolled over the scorching sands seeking shelter under vibrant blue umbrellas along the coast.

The swollen, red hand of a giant bald Human reached through the clouds and snatched Cuticle, dousing him with tacky glue, and pressing him onto his hot, slick head!

Cuticle jerked from his nightmare. Sweat clumped his hair. Planet Earth and its contempt for the Fringians weaved itself into every strand of his being. His short time on this rock not only damaged his beloved ship but also put Mullet, and his lustrous black hair, in harm's way.

Slipping outside his quarters, he squinted at the bustling hub of Fringians hurrying from computers to drafting tables as they worked to support the resistance. Feather stood near the lockers, pulling the strap of an empty bag over her body. "Captain, did you sleep well?"

"I always sleep well," he said with a shaken confidence. "Are you headed out for official business?"

"Hardly. I'm allowed three mornings a week of free time, which is just enough to not go crazy in this place. Today I'm going on a recon mission. The Gorgeous Gals stand is having a sale—two Fringians for the price of one. What a dreadful practice! Why don't you join me in searching for survivors?"

"Of course. Anything I can do to help the cause."

Feather brushed past him, and her lavender hair oils worked the drowsiness out of him. She slipped into the Fringian sized elevator and stretched her eye nodes, insisting he hurry. And he did. “Ready?”

“Ready.”

“Hold on tight.” Feather leaned to the control panel inside the door. “Yodela-Yodeloo!”

Layers of cement and electrical wiring raced past Cuticle’s eye nodes as the box darted to the mall’s first floor. It stopped with a jerk. Feather’s even-numbered legs stretched for the ledge, and her odd ones gave her body a push.

Music from the mall’s hidden speakers was notably absent. But maybe its function coincided with the Humans, who were also missing. Cuticle squinted as they passed under a bright security light. “I can see why you go on missions so early in the day. But I’m confused about how the Fringians got captured in the first place. Our species is apt at hiding from most predators.”

“Very astute! I can see why you have your own ship.” Feather crawled past the wheeled transport and strolled through the tranquil space. “When our kind first landed, the state of the Humans’ hair appalled us. Brittle and

dull, it fell out in globs. Why did their hair act this way when they had so much Keratin?”

“So, you followed your training and offered to teach them proper hair care and brushing techniques?”

“We did. Fringians are compassionate to all life forms. But the Humans realized the oils from our own hair strengthened theirs at a faster rate. Instead of learning the skills needed for magnificent hair, they took to pinning Fringian’s directly to their head.”

“And the Fringians were okay with this?”

“Oh, no! We have tried to escape this planet for centuries, but our technology has failed. But Humans have a weakness—they must have complete control over their environment. We found safety in the uncomfortable outdoors, hiding among the other furry creatures of this planet.”

“And when the Humans noticed the yellow reproductive Fringians, they became valuable.” Cuticle said. “I have seen more of our mothers here than in a lifetime on Fringe. Dreadlock explained the villages are secret to all but the top members of the rebellion. If this is true, how do the Humans keep finding them?”

“If I knew the answer, we wouldn’t be so desperate right now.”

Feather crawled to the door of the Gorgeous Gals stand, tugged the handle, and winced at the small cry from inside a cardboard box tucked under the counter. In a very un-princess manner, Feather jumped to the tape and spat on the slick surface, melting the plastic and throwing the flaps open.

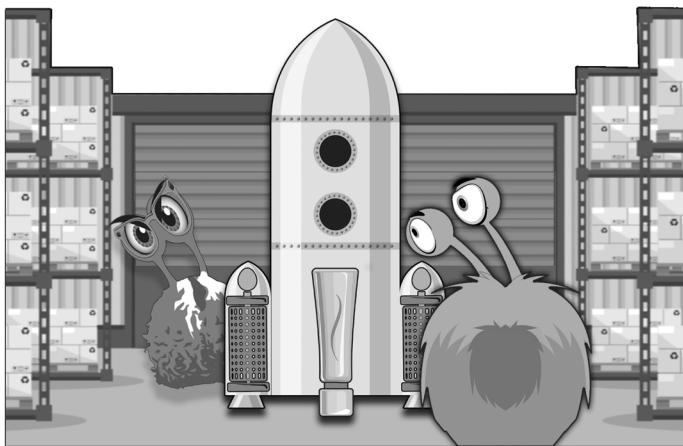
“Give me a hand, Captain.”

Cuticle peered over the cardboard’s edge where fifty or so Fringians, layered one atop another, were all tagged with a price sticker. A brilliant blue Fringian weakly lifted a leg toward the dim light streaming into the box. Cuticle and Feather lifted her to the cold tile floor.

“Out of a giant box of Fringians,” Feather said, “only one rescued.”

“Bless you, my friends,” the elder blue said. “How can I ever repay you?”

“You can survive until we get to the Keratin,” Feather said. “Come on, Captain. Let’s get her to safety.”



THE DIFFUSER

Fringians in different stages of Keratin malnourishment lay in recovery beds organized in a grid pattern, and from what Cuticle could gather, the beds were rarely empty. Younger patients slept along the outer border while the yellow and blue Fringians made the bulk of the middle beds, including the one Cuticle and Feather had just rescued.

Cuticle ducked behind a nurse's desk when Dreadlock strolled through the aisles, straightening a few blankets before his eye nodes stretched to examine a yellow patient fading in and out of sleep. A drip of Keratin attached to her leg would have her up and running soon.

Why was Dreadlock cruising the hospital? His purpose as an engineer was to overcome the planet's gravity, not playing nurse. But the thought would have to wait. Dreadlock leaned close to the patient and whispered into her pony-tailed hair. His shifty behavior left Cuticle with a sour gut.

"How's the computer coming along?" Captain Cuticle asked, floating down the aisle toward Dreadlock. "Will the technology from my ship help with the thrusters?"

Dreadlock startled, tripping over his legs as he hurried to the doorway. "We are very close. Excuse me while I get back to my work."

"Mind if I join you?"

"Mind?" Dreadlock glanced at the digital clock on the wall. "Of course not. Most certainly. Please come with me. Two brains are better than one."

"You seem a bit on edge," Cuticle said. "Do you know the patient?"

"Who me? Oh no, no! What I mean is you are here to save our species. Of all the worthy Fringians, it's hard to understand why I've been chosen to assist you."

Cuticle nodded, dampening his suspicion that Dreadlock might be responsible for the Salon's broken conveyor. The two Fringians floated up the steep incline of the

research floor to the space craft twice as big as the Salon.

“Meet the Diffuser. What do you think?” Dreadlock asked. “She’s a near-perfect example of first-generation Fringian space cruisers. She’s a beauty.”

“Definitely massive!” Cuticle said, taking in its towering size as busy Fringians shuffled in and out of the craft. Rollers stacked on the thrusters protected the Tube of Gel secured to the hull. Thin metal sheets covered the exterior and reflected light like a mirror. This older design, meant to reduce heat in the craft, led to navigation malfunctions.

“We no longer manufacture such craft. I’ve never seen one outside of history manuals. Does it run?”

Dreadlock’s eye nodes shuddered at Cuticle’s skeptical glance. “Well enough to get around the mall after hours. It’s the pull of gravity on this planet that has defeated us for centuries, but I’m certain the answer to this dilemma is close.”

The Diffuser’s schematics lay on display near the craft’s conveyor. Cuticle recognized the simple electronics as basic space flight technology, taught to him as a young Fringian, but Cuticle chose not to offend Dreadlock a second time. “Complicated system.”

“You might say. Many engineers have tried to increase the power to the drivers using various native gases and plant oils with no success.” Dreadlock shuffled to a panel on the wall. “In here, we store all the parts removed over the years. They could prove useful one day.”

Captain Cuticle glanced into the dimly lit room. “How far back does it go?”

“Very. We are talking about decades of ship parts. Have a look. It will intrigue even a futuristic space traveler such as yourself.”

Curiosity proved Cuticle’s biggest flaw. He started inside the room, and Dreadlock followed like a proud father. “You can see we’ve cataloged all the coils and evaporators here on the shelves. Screws and plastic bits fill these boxes. One never knows when they might need a barrette or two for clamping cables.”

Questions swirled in Cuticle’s thoughts, but a red light flickered near the end of the room, tearing his attention from Dreadlock. Rolling to the base of the light, Cuticle warmed inside. His hair roots plumped and felt more anchored to his body than they had in years.

A chilly breeze and the panel door screeched closed. The lock clicked. Cuticle rolled for the doorway and

pounded. “Dreadlock! Let me out. Mullet will be looking for me.”

“Not if I say you’ve fled the planet out of fear. You outsiders are all the same. You should’ve left well enough alone.”



TROUBLESOME ROOTS

A space traveler of Captain Cuticle's caliber had seen worse situations than being stuck in a room of spaceship parts, but he really didn't have time to play games. His legs felt for the light switch. A quick flick and the front half of the room came into view. Metal hull pieces lay in stacks against a wall near barrels of oil in dark and light hues. They smelled burnt—maybe recycled for another purpose.

But most interesting were the buckets near the front panel with *Keratin* painted on the outside.

Cuticle popped open the first lid, and just a whiff of the protein softened his locks. Ten buckets of the life-giving

elixir sat against the wall—enough to save Planet Fringe for another year. Now, if he could only escape the room and use the spare parts to repair the Salon.

A box of bobby pins and rainbow-colored hair ties from the lower shelf could aid in his escape. Captain Cuticle leaned over the box's edge and reached for a gold clasp, tumbling into the pile as banging on the door echoed through the room. "Boss? Are you there?"

"Mullet!" Cuticle squirmed inside the box of shifting hair accessories threatening to pull him in for eternity. "Can you get the door open? Dreadlock trapped me inside, and I think he is purposely stranding the Fringians on Earth."

The struggle on the other side stopped.

"Mullet?"

"I'm still here, Boss. This lock has a special marking that I've never seen before. I might have to find—"

Cuticle waited for Mullet to finish his statement—his pulse increasing with each silent second. "I have many tools in here. What do you need?"

"He needs my key," Feather yelled. "Only Dreadlock and I have a copy for this door, just like we are the only two who know where the Fringian colonies are hidden."

"Are you telling me—" Mullet said from outside.

“Yes, I am.” Feather dragged the door open and flipped her hair from her eye nodes. “I told Dreadlock the others knew the village’s location to give him a false sense of security. Until you showed up, he never slipped.”

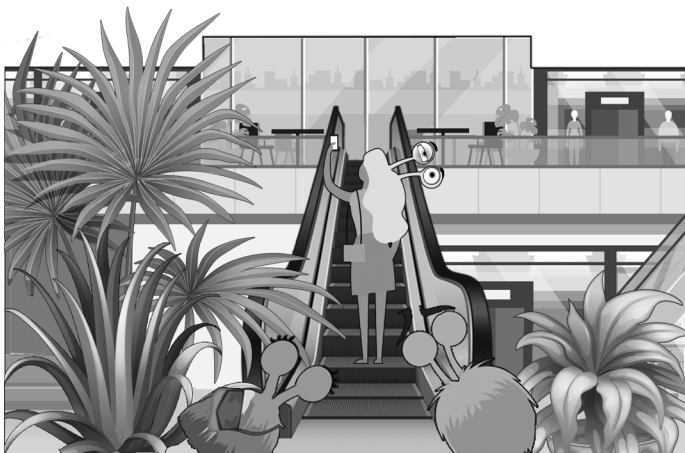
Cuticle shied away from the piercing lights reflecting off the Diffuser. “Did his misstep include the reproducing Fringian in the hospital ward?”

“It did! I might have given him the idea that she would not make the night. A sick Fringian is an easy target. But a special mixture of Keratin and a hairdryer had her up and bouncing in no time.”

Mullet’s eye nodes rose. “And she told you Dreadlock locked Cuticle in the room?”

“No. She was born in a village not far from here and doesn’t seem to know either Dreadlock or the captain.” Feather stared at the spacecraft that had brought them to Earth centuries ago. “He wanted to steal her away for the yellow offspring she carried, but Cuticle interrupted his plans.”

“He *is* the informant to the Humans.” Cuticle’s pacing quickened. “Based on his actions, he must suspect we know. We have to find Dreadlock and put a stop to this madness.”



COLD WATER RINSE

Several days passed since Cuticle had been locked in the storage room and not a single Fringian had seen or heard from Dreadlock. The mystery of the engineer's disappearance had two possible solutions. Either he had a secret room inside the Hair Lair perfect for hiding out, or the Humans with which he did business offered an escape.

Neither option was good for the Fringians, so they implemented Plan V and shut down the ventilation system to the lair, allowing a team of Fringians to search the tubes. But even the best idea to capture Dreadlock wouldn't stop the sweat rolling from Cuticle's skin to

the tips of his legs. His room had grown hotter than the Burn Spots of Mount Bleach. He needed fresh air, so he shot into the corridor, spotting Princess Feather.

“There must be something we can do to help the wild Fringians,” he said, pulling her aside. “Leaving them behind is not moral.”

“We can’t talk here,” Feather said. “Follow me.”

Around the corner and on the farthest wall was a small hole bored through the plaster. Light shone from the other side, along with the splashing of water, hinted that it might be a shortcut to the mall’s largest fountain.

Cuticle knew the place well after crashing nose-first into the water feature. They hid behind a droopy fern where Humans wouldn’t see them and Fringians friendly to Dreadlock wouldn’t overhear their conversation.

A Human taking a selfie on the escalator smiled into the void of her phone’s camera, blissfully unaware of the yellow Fringian clinging to her crown. It made eye contact with Princess Feather. With what looked like its last bit of energy, it raised a single leg that shriveled and dropped between the mesh of the moving stairs, most likely ground into dust.

“Our brothers and sisters are everywhere,” Cuticle said, pointing to the blue Fringian worn over a Human’s left eye.

“And so sick,” Feather said. “They are limp and lifeless. This entire mission has become a great tragedy—AHH!”

A drenching rain poured from the glass ceiling, puddling in the walkways and on tabletops. Red lights hung on every column and spun their warning along the white walls.

“Take shelter!” Feather ran for a dry spot under the stairs. “The water from the ceiling is treated with a chemical that strips the hair of oil.”

Frantic Humans ran for shop awnings and telephone booths with sliding doors—the drenched Fringians on their heads drooped under the water’s extra weight.

An idea to foil Dreadlock’s plans for oppression calmed his fidgety legs.

“If there was a way to recall the Fringians from both the villages and the mall, we could flee this planet. Mullet is a genius at fixing ships and using our technology on the Diffuser would get us out in a few days.”

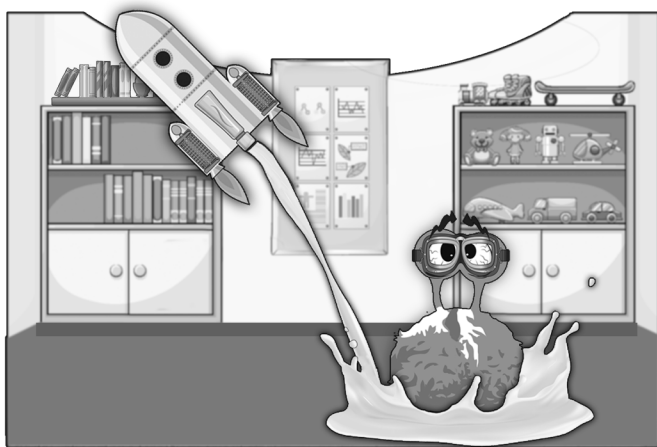
“But the Fringians are pinned down and too weak to break free.”

The instant shower set off by the smoke alarm stopped, and Cuticle floated toward the Hair Lair, his ends flipping upward as they dried. “I have a solution for their

weakness. Do you know Fringians familiar with the building's water system?"

"Nearly half a dozen. It's been our home since they built it."

"Have them meet me in the hangar. I will find Mullet and end this suffering once and for all."



GELLED

Feather placed the alligator clip back into the toolbox and floated to the toy shop's window. Humans with dozens of bags waited in the Gorgeous Gals' long line, gawking at the helpless Fringians stuck on display. It was a Human weekend—a frequent occurrence in which the native Earth species flooded the shops.

“Did the crew complete their mission?” Cuticle asked as he tightened the last bolt connecting the Salon's conveyor. “If they don't finish their assignment, this plan won't work.”

“All the buckets are in place like you wanted.” Feather floated very close to Captain Cuticle. “Do you really

have faith in this plan? We've been buzzed short so many times, it's hard to imagine success."

Cuticle's screwdriver disappeared into his hairline. "I do. The beacon on my ship is in working order, and Mullet says he will have the last chip installed in yours before the alarm sounds."

"Thank you for helping us. I wish I had moved on Dreadlock's treachery before today. I never imagined he'd betray his own species."

"Not all Fringians are so loyal. The Bangs of West Fringe pretend to agree with authority but rebel at the first hint of a gusty wind." Cuticle reached out a leg to comfort the distressed princess. "Don't be too hard on yourself. The technology you had to work with proved more a hindrance than help. You'll be glad to know the C is functional once again."

"That's a bit of good news. There's a herd of buffalo outside the building. One beast will provide Fringe with enough Keratin for a century."

"We should be able—" Cuticle rushed to the Salon's control panel and silenced the alarm. "It's a message from Mullet."

I HAVE THE DIFFUSER READY, BOSS.

MY GUESS IS WE CAN CARRY FOUR
HUNDRED
TWENTY FRINGIANS TO SAFETY. WE ARE
A GO!

“That’s all the space we need,” Feather said. “Is it time? Are you ready, Captain?”

“You bet I am. Soak ‘em!”

“Yodela-Yodeloo,” Feather yelled. Fringians at the predetermined checkpoints echoed the phrase until it circled the building twice.

Buckets from the storage room marked *Keratin* had been placed under the main water lines and when the ceiling’s sprinkler heads kicked on, Keratin mixed with the water dousing every living thing with the life-saving protein.

Fringians pinned and clipped to the Humans’ heads cried victoriously as the Keratin soaked their strands, mending their split ends by the second. But the Humans chased and grabbed for the Fringians who’d shed their bonds and dove to the floor.

“Sound the Beacon!” Cuticle yelled.

The Fringe Beacon played over the mall’s speaker system, blasting hope to all Fringians living within the mall. Healthy Fringians rolled in plain sight, while the

sicker among them crawled in the hidden spaces toward the Beacon. Hundreds more pushed the entrance doors open, flooding the mall with wild Fringians. As the Beacon continued, Fringians celebrated knowing the sound was their salvation that they'd never imagined would come.

The Fringians bravery encouraged Cuticle to jump into action. "They're coming. I must alert Mullet—" the grinding of a battery-powered shaver at the tips of Feather's golden hair stopped him in his tracks.

Dreadlock grinned, "We meet again."

"You threaten us with such a meager weapon?" Captain Cuticle laughed. "At least upgrade to a corded shaver."

"Why, of all the locations in this great big universe, did you have to choose My Planet for your *heroic escapades*?"

"Let her go, and I promise to tremble during your monologue."

"If you knew how many pathetic Fringians I've handed over to the Humans, you wouldn't say such things. Convincing Humans to accept Fringians was a near impossible task. Most Humans don't even like Fringe. It gets in the eyes and requires monthly trims."

“The Humans have their own hair. Why give them ours?”

“Does it matter? They wanted our healthy, silky locks, and I happily handed them over. I’d still be in business if you hadn’t undercut me. Princess Feather is my last hope. Royalty-grade locks are highly sought after. I’ll see you around, Captain Bedhead!”

Dreadlock’s smooth escape was ruined by Feather’s resistance. Half a dozen of his front legs drew back to kick her into compliance when a whirring echoed through the corridor, stopping him mid-way to the glowing red exit sign. “Is that? It can’t be.”

The Diffuser’s gentle hum grew louder until it hovered over Dreadlock, leaving him dumbfounded. He released his grip on Feather and she plunged to the toy shelf, where Captain Cuticle caught her and examined her for breakage.

“What is this?” Dreadlock gawked. “How did you manage to...I mean, the parts were pulled and stored?”

Mullet waved from the Diffuser’s navigation seat. Whirring from the ship’s base meant the Tube Gun was operational once again. Dreadlock froze as the lid twisted off and dangled by a chain. “A navigator is never to be underestimated! On your mark, Boss!”

“Fire! Fire!”

Engines roared, and a sloshing preceded the squirt of honey-scented gel that slicked over Dreadlock. The Diffuser's primary engine engaged, and the fiery burst of hot air hardened Dreadlock's hair into chunky strips that rivaled the strength of the Salon's hull.

"Everything alright here, Captain?" Mullet asked from the cockpit.

Feather and Cuticle glanced at Dreadlock, who lay stiff on the floor, unable to fend off the rat sniffing his new sweet-scented outer shell.

"It is now. Land down here. We have friends to save!"



FOILED

Withering Fringians sprung back to health and pulled off their pins of oppression, leaving behind the moist bathrooms and freezing office buildings, where the passing days tangled their hope of returning home into knots. Despite most never having seen the Diffuser, the prophesied Beacon made sure all could find their way.

“Here they come,” Cuticle said from the Diffuser’s viewscreen. “Open the hatch!”

The hatch mirror shifted upward, allowing the conveyor to maneuver flawlessly to the tiled floor. Yellow and blue Fringians drenched in Keratin rushed inside and huddled for warmth while Princess Feather opened the Diffuser’s emergency supply of little black combs.

Grooming might ease their fears. “Sit tight. We’ll be back home in no time.”

“Over there, Boss!” Mullet said from the bridge of the Diffuser. “There’s more.”

Dozens of Fringians rolled inside the building, weaving around and occasionally tripping the grabby Humans. The village Fringians drawn out of hiding by the Beacon stopped to hug their long-lost cousins, whose burnt ends and dried cuticles made them nearly unrecognizable.

“AHHH!” the fierce, red-lipped owner at the Gorgeous Gals stand screamed as her product ran for freedom. Long claws, painted a violent black, curled into weapons as her chest rose and fell dramatically with each angry breath. She chunked her high heels into a planter.

A deep blue weapon with a clear canister of green liquid on the end was swiped from the stand and brandished in her boney fingers. Teeth clenched, eyes squinted, she pulled the trigger. Suds blasted from the weapon, missing the Diffuser by ten yards.

MULLET PANICKED and smashed all the Diffuser’s control buttons. “It can’t be? How’d she—? That’s SLS!”

Feather buckled her seat belt nearly as tight as her determination to free all her kind. The Diffuser lifted off. “Sodium lauryl sulfate will damage our species beyond repair! If they dry out our follicles, no amount of Keratin will fix the frizz.”

“Mullet,” Cuticle said, taking the navigation controls. “Operate the spray bottle guns on Level Two. Diluting the suds will be our best chance to save more Fringians.”

“Yes, sir, Boss!”

Captain Cuticle dipped and swerved over the Fringians while Mullet blasted away their suds with the musty, week-old water. A river of shiny white foam streamed to the drains dotting the floor.

“WhooHa!” Mullet said. “We nearly got them all!”

“Hold tight!” Cuticle zoomed past the banners with Fringian-haired Humans and their blinding, super white teeth. “See that small group? You got them, Feather?”

“Affirmative, Captain!”

But Cuticle’s patience dyed when he spotted a herd of cowering Fringians being harassed by a balding man with a net. Cuticle slid the speed lever forward, dropping altitude fast. “Laces. Laces,” he mumbled as he

rammed into the man's feet, knocking him off balance while Feather zapped up the Fringian youths.

"Cuticle!" Feather stretched her eye nodes as the weaponized female returned with her soap gun. "Get us out of here!"

Captain Cuticle pulled back on the controls, looped back through the moist air, and punched the warp button. The ship jerked and smoked as it slowed. A wave of suds dripped down the view screen, but wipers cleared the dangerous chemical, giving them a good view of the sunglass stand in their direct path. Crashing was inevitable.

"What is it now?" Mullet ditched the spray gun and dropped under the control panel to wiggle a few cables and wires. "This ship is supposed to be suds proof." A sudden burst of the thrusters threw him into Feather's chair.

But the Diffuser sped along its downward trajectory toward the defiant stand owner, who lifted her weapon and aimed at the ship. Cuticle punched the yellow button, lowering the clippers housed between the thrusters.

"Steady! Steady!"

Buzzing thrusters shook the entire ship, reacting to the call for more power. Cuticle punched the on-screen

button, holding his breath as the Diffuser inched just over the miserable woman's flaming red hair. Circling back around, they found the woman sulking on the wet floor, rubbing the bald streak down the middle of her head.

Mullet's legs trudged against the Diffuser's g-force, using the grip tape on the floor for traction. He claimed the navigation seat next to Cuticle. "Hold on! It's gonna be tight!"

Fifty legs grasped the piloting control, sending the ship left toward the malfunctioning sliding doors that opened and closed continuously. Blinding sunlight watered their eye nodes.

"Don't forget the buffalo," Feather said. "Those creatures there."

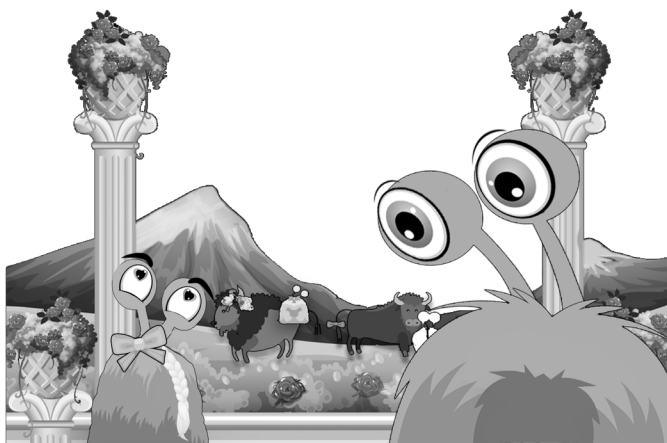
Captain Cuticle aimed the Shrink Ray over the giant mammals who cared as little for Fringians they did for Humans. "Which one do you want, Feather?"

"Those two rubbing noses. A mating pair would set up Fringians with enough Keratin for ages."

Cuticle flicked the green switch and a glittery light streamed from the hull onto the two buffalos, who continued to graze as they shrank to the size of mice. They traveled up the warm beam into the cargo hold

overrun with the broken and chemically damaged Fringians.

“Onward!” Captain Cuticle tugged the warp speed lever. The Diffuser stretched long, rubber-banding it out of Earth’s gravitational pull for the first time in centuries.



THE SPLIT END

A week of Keratin treatments and leg rubs left Captain Cuticle unsettled. Life on Planet Fringe was acceptable, but his heart needed the adventure of the stars and the undiscovered solar systems that beckoned him. But the Salon never made the journey back from Earth, prompting the King to compensate him with a new ship, the Stylist. Thought bigger and flashier, it wasn't the same.

Just over the balcony, Fringians celebrated their return home with close family and friends on the grassy fields. Centered within the hoopla were the two buffalo dressed in golden bows and treated with the Fringians' most

sacred hot oil, harvested from the Moroccan Fields north of the palace.

Princess Feather sashayed toward Cuticle, swishing her smooth hair, so the single braid laid flat between her eye nodes. “It’s great to be home again. My hair has never felt so soft. What do you think?”

“It’s different,” Cuticle said.

“What will you do now that Fringe has been spared from shedding?”

Cuticle cringed at the laughing Fringians who charmed and cuddled the poor buffalo into nothing more than mere pets. Feather had the same look, and there was no way he’d fall for that old trick.

“The future is far from here. Mullet and I dislike idleness.”

“You’ll have plenty to do. The King created a new position in the palace—Royal Buffalo Trimmer. The Fringian holding the title will join the royal court and report directly to me, The Most Illustrious Princess Feather.”

Her right eye node winked once.

Then a second time.

A third wink drew a tear.

“I think you got something in your node there,” Cuticle said. “As for the title, you’ll have to find another taker. Styling buffalo hair is best left to the professionals.”

Mullet skidded onto the balcony—his new spiked hair stealing the royal family’s attention. “Ready to go, Boss? The King told me about a planet in the Ombre sector that holds a promising new mineral for extra shine.”

“What are we waiting for?” Cuticle asked. “Would you like to come with us, Princess Feather? We make a good team.”

“I’ll pass. Being off world for so long, I can appreciate the slower pace of life here.”

“Until our next meeting,” Cuticle said, floating upward. “Hairs to you, Princess.”

“Bye, Feather,” Mullet said. “I’ll make sure we steer clear of Earth.”

“And keep your eye nodes on Cuticle. His curiosity will get him rolled!”

Thank you so much for choosing
Captain Cuticle and the Search for Keratin.

This book was a blast to write and
I hope you enjoyed reading!



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things,
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

IMAGINATION WAS THE INTERNET OF MY DAY.

OUR PARENTS SHOVED US OUT THE DOOR AND INTO
THE WORLD, LEFT TO OUR OWN DEVICES UNTIL THE
SUNSET, WHEN OUR BATH WATER WAS READY TO
WASH AWAY THE STINK OF OUR PRETEEN ARMPITS!

LONG DAYS OF ADVENTURE AND LIFE LESSONS WERE
SOME OF THE BEST TIMES OF MY LIFE AND THE
BIGGEST REASON I LOVE WRITING MIDDLE-GRADE
STORIES. IN MIDDLE-GRADE, ANYTHING CAN HAPPEN.
ANIMALS CREATE FANTASTICAL WORLDS AND KIDS
TRAVEL THROUGH TIME AND BECOME PIRATES!



CURRENTLY, I LIVE IN SOUTH TEXAS WITH
MY TURKEY, AND TWO CATS: FRODO AND FAT HOBBIT.
I'VE RAISED THREE SUPER ADORABLE ADULT KIDS,
BUT I WON'T EMBARRASS THEM HERE.
LOVE Y'ALL!

