

# GALACTIC FUN PARK

BOOK ONE

MASON BELL







The last traces of summer converted to memory as the digital countdown clock of Galactic Fun Park kept track of each fading millisecond. The guests meandered along the blacktop paths to the park's front entrance with ten minutes to closing, dreading the trek to their cars. After a long day of temper tantrums, exhausted children were tossed to mothers' hips in a bid to escape the intergalactic music that boomed from the speakers hidden behind trees and space props.

A thin gray squirrel named That One stared from the branches of an old oak tree. His boney paws clutched the bark as he scanned the walkway that led to the Interplanetary Arcade in Winner's Orbit—the northwest corner inhabited by the raccoons and their leader, the Bandit Queen.

His soft paws plunged to the wood slat roof that

protected the park's most extensive collection of pinball games from the elements. That One's eyes darted at the bright glow necklaces and battery-operated toys carried by the people treading the darkened walkway. He scurried down a post to the crane machine outside the door.

Beeps and thunderous music of arcade games rang in his ears as he squeezed through the crane game's back door. His heart fluttered at the comforting odor of the stuffed animals—similar to the cotton used to line his nest as a young squirrel. He dove into the middle and swam through the astronaut penguins and necklace-wearing giraffes. His cheeks ached from smiling.

The most elusive buck-tooth bear sat in the machine's corner. That One ripped the animal's felt eyeglasses sewn to its head and tied the flimsy spectacles around his face like a superhero mask, pulling the front close to his twitching nose. That One admired the new accessory in the sliver of metal tacked to the machine. *Like a glove!*

His claws dug through the colorful prizes, dragging him to the top of the pile. As he did most nights, he lay on his back, flipped his furry tail over his chest, and rested his head on his hands. His eyes darted at the passing guests, waiting for the next player to wield the Crane of Improbability.

A kid's sticky hand slammed on the outer glass. "Daddy, it's a squirrel. Can I have the squirrel, please?"

Rubbing his weary eyes, the dad dropped the awkwardly sewn bear to the pavement and reached for his wallet.

“You’d think this monstrosity of a prize and the twenty dollars it took to win it would be enough.”

The corners of That One’s lips curled upward just enough as to not be noticed. *Yes, that’s right. Try your luck and catch me if you can.*

That One’s pulse ramped as the claw traveled along the track lining the glass case, swinging under the flashing red and blue lights. The anticipation of being caught in the claw was the highlight of his day.

The girl flicked the handle left and right as the last bit of cotton candy raced through her tiny body. Her fingers spread wide and smashed the giant red button flashing next to the crane handle. A plunging tone blast from the speakers as the chain clicked lower to the stuffed animals.

That One’s eyes grew as the claw lowered inches from his torso. With a sigh, he clutched the crane’s metal teeth with his hind paw. As the claw lifted him to the air, his head felt fuzzy, and he held back giggles bubbling in his throat.

Hanging upside down, That One studied the girl’s expression, waiting for the sparkle of confidence guests wore when beating the challenging game. A smile beamed across her face, and she bounced with glee. *That’s my cue.*

The claw ran along the track to the drop point where the prizes were delivered. That One lifted a single finger, one after another. He dropped and waved his arms, chirping the official squirrel warning, delighted at the girl’s confused expression. Bouncing off a penguin’s beak helped him back-flip into the cushy heap.

“Did you see that, Daddy?” the girl screamed. “That squirrel is real.”

“Who? What?” The man shoved his phone into his pocket and grabbed her sweaty hand. “That was fun. Now it’s time to go.”

“But daddy—” the girl cried as her sneakers dragged from the machine.

That One returned to his resting position atop the animals where he waited for the next player. A sudden jerk of his tail had him scanning the pile. The firm pressure continued to tug, pulling him past the glass-eyeballed toys and out the back door typically used for loading the prizes.

A black-furred squirrel, a few inches taller than That One, tapped his paw on the cement. “What’re you doing?” asked Black. “You can’t play these games with the guests. It freaks them out.”

“You’re kidding, right? We do it all day, begging for popcorn and digging through their bags. I’d say they expect us to behave this way. Do you really believe those tired zombies understand a wild animal is trolling them?”

“You could get us fired. If Postmaster knew of your outings, we’d lose our jobs at Nutty Notes Delivery.”

“A squirrel can dream!” That One said. “Delivering to those rats in Eagle’s Tale is the worst. They’re always obsessed over funnel cake. Do you suppose if I tell Postmaster of my trials and hardships, he’ll make Tiny switch sections with me?”

“Don’t hold your breath. He’ll never give you Rover’s Landing after the prank you played on the cats.”

“Whatever. I’m sure the kitties have gotten over it. What harm is a little strawberry glaze on the fur, anyway?” That One jumped to the pavement and tucked the glasses into his messenger bag fitted over his shoulder. “Tonight, the big coaster has a short closing line. We can either stand here and argue or high-paw it to Landing for a bit of fun.”

Black gave him a questioning stare. “You promise to stay hidden this time? No running across the loading dock or playing dead on the tracks?”

“Sure, but only for you, baby brother.”

“I’m only a minute younger.” Black stood a little taller. “We can go straight to Moon Man. It’s only a ten-minute run from here.”

“Those roaches are crazy,” That One said. “They chant like brain-hungry zombies and turn on their own in an instant. Claiming Moon Man as their own started all this territorial nonsense. Do you remember when the roaches were helpful and intelligent—before they formed a collective?”

“I don’t think you can blame their behavior on them building a community. The cats and raccoons have done the same, and they seem normal.”

“Whatever. Going through Moon Man is out of the question,” That One said. “If it’s not the roaches causing chaos, it’s those tiny humans that chase us up trees.”

Black shrugged. “You have a point. Lead the way.”

Park employees dragged long-handled dust bins along the walkway, wishing the guests a safe trip home, unfazed

by the brothers who weaved through the sluggish sneakers heading for the front gate.

That One cut through the trees at the churros stand and crossed the border of Winner's Orbit into Rovers Landing, home to the Surveyor '98 roller coaster. They slid under the monster ride's fence, climbed the support beams, and perched on a wood plank with a magnificent view of guests being loaded and unloaded, which amounted to organized chaos.

A train filled with wide-eyed guests whooshed past the squirrels and stopped with a jerk in the station. The wild-haired riders tugged at their lap bars, their laughter and shouting drowning out the prerecorded announcement blasting from the speaker near the rafters.

*Leave loose articles in the cubes to the right.*

*Keep all hands and legs inside the car at all times.*

*No photography or video during operation.*

*Enjoy your day at Galactic Fun Park!*

Metal rails keeping the guests a safe distance from the ride's tracks swung open, and people rushed to their assigned seats and buckled their seatbelts. Groans bellowed from the train as weary attendants checked the lap bars, shoving the cushioned restraint deeper into the guests' stomachs.

That One searched the riders, deciding their level of comfort. "Him. Over there."

"No way," Black said. "His cheeks are still rosy, but the



boy in the third row is pale as paper. He's definitely gonna lose it."

That One reached into his bag and pulled out two raisins, popped them into his mouth, and chewed the gummy snack with a circular motion of his jaw. The mashed fruit slid from his tongue. He elbowed Black. "Who's that guy?"

Black leaned from the wooden dock and stared at the garden next to the exit ramp. A leathery-skinned man lifted a handful of dirt to his tongue, sampling the granules of sand and topsoil. "I don't know. I've not seen him before."

"Gross!" That One blurted. "What kinda human forages in the park's gardens?"

"He's searching for something." Black squinted as the man slunk up the ride's exit ramp like a cat stalking his prey—his eyes trained on the brothers as he pulled a net from his pocket.

That One waved his paws and grabbed Black. "We gotta vault! That man is ogling us like we're a couple of walnuts!"

"Good evening!" The Jenkins shouted as he strolled up the ride's exit ramp toward the suspicious man who stood upright and tucked the net back into his pocket.

All the residents of Galactic Fun Park were familiar with The Jenkins—the most visible park manager. But That One had learned his scent. Each morning before the park gates opened and released the flood of humans, The Jenkins took time to leave a few pecans for the delivery brothers.

“Good evening, Maurice. Have you found anything?” The Jenkins asked.

“You have a huge rodent problem, more than I’ve ever seen.”

“I was afraid you’d say as much,” The Jenkins said. “They’ve been out during the day, which is new. Do you think the increase in park attendance is to blame?”

“The more food those part-time workers neglect to clean at closing, the more the vermin populations will grow. I can thin the herds, and no one will be the wiser of your pest problem.”

“I don’t mind the critters so long as they stay in their place,” The Jenkins said. “They’d be an asset if we could train them to do tricks, like dolphins and bears in years past.”

The exterminator scowled. “Rodents are the least intelligent of all species. They eat their young and their own poo.”

“Yes. Well, I’ll let you finish with your estimate for pest control. Please call if you need anything.” The Jenkins walked a few steps to the loading dock but turned back. “Oh, and try not to draw attention from the guests. I don’t want them thinking we have a problem.”

That One’s nose twitched as The Jenkins shook hands with the ride’s driver sitting behind the cluttered control panel.

“Why would he hire that creepy man?” That One asked. “The Jenkins loves us squirrels.”

“I’ve been telling you the park is overpopulated,” Black said. “And those rats think they own the whole place. If

they'd socialized at night like everyone else, we wouldn't have a problem." The music from the speakers silenced, announcing the park was now closed. "We should get back to the office. Postmaster will worry, and he's way awkward when he's worried."

"Awkwardness is a state of mind," That One said proudly. "To each his own, my very normal brother."



**T**he five-foot statue of an American Bald Eagle sat at the entrance to Eagle's Tale and cast a deep shadow across the perfectly laid brick pavers. Filled with kiddie-sized rides and games, the park's southwest section's vast food droppings created a haven for the rat mischief who claimed and defended the territory.

Minister Balmore paced inside his hollow rock, situated a few feet from the statue. Reserved for the mischief's leader, it was the largest of the fake rocks in the section. Only a bean bag bed and a plastic cup of water filled the frugal leader's home, despite the abundance of food and animal comforts easily found in souvenir shops.

Munson sniffed the rock's doorway, knocked on the wall, and bounced into the room. A cheery smile raised his

very round cheeks. “Good morning, sir. Would you like to hear the daily?”

“Be quick about it. I have a ceremony to attend.”

“Of course, sir.” Munson cleared his throat. “The mischief has upped their food storage to prepare for the upcoming shortage and, as a result, many are already shedding weight.”

“Good to hear they are vigilant. How do the numbers look?”

“As of this morning, we’ve only thirteen Warriors on the roles. Our recruitment has been flat since July.”

“Bah!” Minister Balmore sprang to his hind legs and paced the sandy floor. “The mischief has lost its way. Only the old remember the days when humans hunted us for merely existing, and even fewer see the merit of serving.”

The pattering of paws and swishing of rat tails from outside the rock drew the minister’s attention. “Full crowd?”

“The largest this month, though it is offering day.” Munson tugged at his ear. “But I’m certain they are here for your speech, as well.”

“If recruitment to the Warrior Class does not improve, our position of leadership in the park will be questioned.” Minister Balmore’s nails scratched across the dirt as he exited the rock.

“Sir, might I—”

“Can this wait?”

“Yes, sir, but your paw?”

Minister Balmore balanced on his hind legs and exam-

ined the paw, flicking the loose bits of red paint free. “Yes. Thank you.”

Munson squirted a drop of paint into the thimble, and it rocked back and forth. Minister Balmore dipped his front paw inside, reflecting on his simpler life two seasons before the red marking sealed his fate as Minister of Eagle’s Tale. He lived a free-spirited life as a regular mischief member. His thirst for exploration peaked at early sunrise when the excitement and bustle of opening hour was around every corner. His breaking of nocturnal life irked the previous minister, who believed rodents should remain hidden from plain sight.

Early one Saturday morning, Balmore stowed away in the toolbox of his favorite ride mechanic, Bill. The older, hunchbacked man kept a strict schedule, making it simple for Balmore to hitch a ride and experience the park firsthand.

On that fateful day, Bill placed his dented and rusted toolbox near the Surveyor ’98’s instrument panel. He clamped his safety harness to the handrail, and his steel-toed boots carried him up the first hill to search for screws and sensors knocked loose by the previous day’s operation.

Balmore shoved the black electrical tape aside and jumped for the thrill ride’s glorious platform, where guests loaded the padded seats during open hours. He scaled the junk cubbies on the far wall that held guests’ drinks and hats, looking for crumbs and bits of string he could use back home. New hires working at the ride left it cleaner than usual, probably trying to impress the managers.

He crawled down the wood post to the parked train, accidentally stepping in a drop of wet red paint. It squished between and over his toes, drying much quicker than his decision to remove it.

Despite shoving the paw under his fur or carrying items to hide the paint, the news of his red paw spread like fire through the mischief. Many believed it a sign of his right to rule. Balmore rejected the overly formal position, but it had no bearing on the mischief's decisions to put him in charge.

"Sir. Sir?"

Minister Balmore snapped his head to a worried Munson.

"Your paint is dry, sir. Will there be anything else?"

Balmore scampered from the rock to the eagle statue used for formal announcements. The molded feathers along its back made for a quick climb. He balanced on his hind legs and walked along the eagle's nearly flat head, scanning the rats that lined the walkways and the hundreds more perched on trash cans for a better view. Most cradled bits of funnel cake in their paws, secretly nibbling when others weren't looking.

*Confidence. Confidence will rouse their loyalties.*

Minister Balmore strutted across the bird's head, waving to the cheering and hooting crowd below. He raised his paws, and the frenzied excitement became quiet with reverence.

"The summer months have produced record amounts of food, allowing our numbers and influence to grow, but this fantasy of feast and plenty will not last." Minister Balmore

adjusted his majestic headdress, made with two very stiff pigeon feet and several hawk feathers, a few colored with marker dye. “Bandits test our borders and defile our most precious temple, Space Dust Funnel Cake. Dare we lose our territory over inaction? Dare we cower into the shadows and live off mustard packets as our ancestors did? Who among you will brave the unknown and join the Warrior Class?”

Whiskers of rats drooped in waves along the crowd as they hid behind each other, no longer listening to the leader’s pleas for recruits. Rats hanging from shop signs jumped to the ground and inched away from the gathering. Clearly, today wasn’t the day enrollment increased.

“Sir,” Munson whispered from behind. “We have a problem.”

Minister Balmore nodded and turned back to the crowd. “Today, we offer our most cherished foods to the eagle. May it bring us health and prosperity. FOR THE GLORY!”

“FOR THE FUNNEL!” The mischief waddled to the statue’s base and left their offerings of funnel cake. Friendly greetings and nose rubs were cut short by the music that echoed off the souvenir shop walls, starting the countdown to park opening.

Minister Balmore and Munson retreated to the leader’s rock. “What is the news, Munson?”

“There’s a cat sighting on the eastern border. The Warriors are ready to deploy, sir.”

“The timing couldn’t be worse for us.” Balmore crouched as Munson switched the minister’s bird headdress for a simple green dome of plastic, once the inner seal of a



soda bottle lid. The skittish rat smoothed the fur under the sticky rubber band strap holding the headpiece in place. “Hurry back, sir. The park gates will open soon.”

Minister Balmore dashed to the Warrior rats lined up under fern branches. The glorious fragrance of fresh funnel cake offerings at the eagle statue had their whiskers twitching. Minister Balmore strutted past the Warriors, inspecting their purple and gold sashes for tears or discoloration. He nodded his approval. Though cartoonish in nature, the sashes stolen from gift shop bears remained their official uniform as replacements were easy to come by.

“Eagle’s Tale is our ancestral home and will remain so, long into the future. The cats of Rover’s Landing would take it from us in an instant. I say never! FOR THE GLORY!”

“FOR THE FUNNEL!”

Moss-covered stones in a nearby garden proved the first obstacle to victory on the eastern border. Each Warrior slid down the rock’s slick backside as Minister Balmore held back the stems of marigolds. The Warriors moved closer to the mesh cage of an outdoor light.

The comforting sweetness of sugar saturated the air. The Lieutenant, the highest-ranking Warrior, scaled the cage and found a sprinkled waffle cone in the path. He pushed it aside, and the company marched on their way. Ants covering and gathering the rainbow sprinkles resorted to biting the rats’ feet.

Minister Balmore smirked at the unfortunate insects forced to live like nomads, unable to secure a permanent

home like other residents. Within Galactic Fun Park's unique ecosystem, size made all the difference, and ants were too far on the tiny end of things.

Water droplets from the morning's sprinklers showered from the leaves. Minister Balmore signaled for the troop to stop. Their ears perked, and their whiskers stilled.

Like a sweat-inducing nightmare, the belly of a striped cat flew over the rats' heads, knocking Minister Balmore's hat to the dirt. The Warriors chased the feline, who scrambled behind a water fountain and crouched into a ball of shivering fur. They kept their toothpick weapons trained on the frightened cat, who seemed content not to move.

"Your fear is well placed, feline." Balmore strutted to the cat. "Where is the rest of your unit?"

It raised a trembling paw to the sky. "Shh."

Balmore glared at the garden's canopy as a thick, callused hand delved into the bush. Branches snapped as it fumbled around the dirt and fallen leaves before grabbing a Warrior from the mulch. The Warrior bit and squealed, but was no match for the giant human's opposable thumbs. Minister Balmore rushed to the bush's dead section and spotted several workers in uniforms standing on the black-top, staring blankly at the rat dangling by the tail.

"Rats!" Maurice said, giving the Warrior a shake. "This one smells like rosemary. It grows wild in the kids' section. Those vermin have to go. I'll show you how I want the job done."

Balmore's eyes grew wide. *Can it be? Have they sent exterminators into the park?*

“Excuse me, Mr. Maurice,” a tall, slender worker raised his hand, “but don’t they help the park? I mean, by clearing the garbage left in the bushes and balancing the ecosystem?”

“Yes, Ron. And thank you for noticing *I am* the head exterminator here. These varmints have overbred, and it’s only a matter of time before they attack the guests.” Maurice threw the rat back into the bush. “Being at the top of the food chain gives us the right over these creatures. Let’s move on to Winner’s Orbit and see what vermin we find.”

The extermination crew groaned as they wandered along the walkway. Several played games on their phones while others answered calls.

Maurice stayed near the garden and unzipped his bag, pulling out the spring-loaded rat trap, placing an old crusty cube of cheese on top. He shimmied the wood into the dirt for stability. Maurice wobbled to standing and limped to his crew, slapping their phones from their hands. “This ain’t free time. We got work to do.”

Minister Balmore’s whiskers scraped along the dirt as he sniffed the rancid cheese left behind. While the older rats in the intrusion did their best to pass on the tales of limbs lost to the wooden traps, the younger generations paid them no mind. The naïve rats only ever experienced safe release boxes filled with tasty treats. As a result, the more humane traps became hangouts for the younger, more daring rats, who expected release time to coincide with dinner.

“No one touches this cheese!” Minister Balmore

declared. “And release the useless prisoner. Everyone back to base!”

The Warriors snapped to attention and saluted the minister. Cautious of their intent, the cat slunk from the Warriors to the garden’s corner and bounced out of sight. The Lieutenant turned on his heel and led the group westward back to the safety of Eagle’s Tale.

Minister Balmore stayed behind and knelt to the cube of cheese. Strong chemicals wafted from the crusty surface. He rubbed his chin as the exterminators walked out of sight. *Do they consider us stupid creatures? I can smell their deceit.*