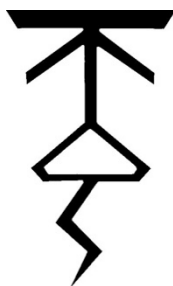


*Inside myself, a precious thing,
filled with all that makes me me.
Alas, it's locked, I've lost the key,
and can't visit my memories.
Now that they're gone, I can't recall.
What was there to miss at all?*

-Author Unknown

PROLOGUE



They were all just kids. If you remember anything, remember that. They weren't the sons of wizards, or the daughters of super spies. They weren't mutants, or aliens, or secret princesses. No, they were just ordinary, average kids who really should have been in bed 'cause it was a school night, but instead they went out and saved the world anyway. They were the agents of the Kids Imaginary Defense Squad.

What's that now? You say you've never heard of the Kids Imaginary Defense Squad? Well, no, no you wouldn't have, would you. That's because of the Forgetting. You should already know all about the Forgetting, but your parents forgot to tell you. Or rather they forgot to remember to tell you. Actually, they forgot to remember that they forgot what they previously thought they could never, ever, possibly forget.

Get it? No? Ok, how about this: there are things adults used to know, but don't know now; and things that kids know now, but when they grow up won't remember that they ever knew. See?

I'm just making things more confusing. Let's start with the basics.

Bogeymen are real. So are elves, fairies, snipes, monsters-under-the-bed, bigfoots, dragons, and, of course, pocket penguins. If you haven't seen at least one of these, then you aren't looking very hard, because they're everywhere. But when kids see one and try to tell their parents, their parents don't believe them. Their parents say annoying adult things like "quit making up stories," or, "there's no such thing, now go back to bed," or, "that's nice dear, why don't you go play outside while your mom and I finish putting together this dresser." I mean, there could be a fairy sitting right on your uncle's nose and he wouldn't even notice. It's enough to make a kid scream!

But it's not your parents fault. It's just that they're grown-ups. And of the many, many peculiar things that happen to you when you grow-up, the most peculiar of all is that you stop being able to see mythical creatures. Not only that, but you forget that you ever saw them in the first place. That is called *The Forgetting*. In a grown-up's mind, bogeymen and bigfoots and snipes and the rest are just pretend things – nothing but "kids' stuff."

But kids know better.

There are many advantages to being an adult. Adults are bigger, and stronger. They get to stay up late and can eat ice cream for breakfast if they want to, and they know a whole lot. They know how to do fractions and cook spaghetti and drive cars and make websites and build spaceships and even light fireworks without burning the whole house down. After years and years of school and life and work, they know just about everything.

Or at least they *think* they do.

And that is their greatest weakness.

Adults know so much that not knowing something terrifies them. That's why, if they don't already know the answer, they pretend like the problem doesn't exist. If they can't pretend away the problem, they just say "it's impossible," and move on to some problem they do know the answer to – like how to change the

batteries in the remote control. They get so good at ignoring problems they can't solve that, before long, they forget that there was a problem at all.

Not your parents of course. I'm sure that they really do know everything and would never ignore a problem. But other adults? Well, there's a reason bogeymen are still around causing trouble.

Which is where kids come in. Kids may not know much, but there is strength in not knowing. Instead of ignoring the unknown, they investigate it, learn from it. When those unknown things create a problem, they come up with a solution. There is no such thing as impossible to a kid, only things that haven't been done yet.

The same thing goes for the supernatural. Both kids and adults fear the things that move in the shadows, but it's kids that don't look away. Maybe that's why, when it comes to defending the world from magical creatures, it was a group of kids that stepped up to the fight.

You see, way back, a long, long time ago, even before your parents were kids themselves, a group of extremely brave boys and girls decided they had enough of bogeymen and elves, and fairies, and snipes, and monsters-under-the-bed, and bigfoots, and dragons, and pocket penguins, and all the other things that seem to constantly pick on kids. They decided to fight back, to defend all kids everywhere from the things that go bump in the night.

I'm sure you're thinking right now, "how did a bunch of children fight supernatural creatures? How would they even know how to?" To which I say:

They didn't know. But they found out.

The kids peered into the shadows and learned about the creatures that lived there. They quickly realized that to defeat all the scary monsters in the world they would need to be stronger and faster and smarter than any kids ever.

They were too weak. So, they trained until they were stronger.

They were too slow. So, they ran until they were faster.

They weren't smart enough. So, they studied hard to get smarter.

When that still wasn't enough, they put their imaginations to work and invented ingenious devices to help defeat the bad things. It was only then, after all that work, that they were ready to fight... and fight they did.

They decided to call themselves the agents of the Kids Imaginary Defense Squad, KIDS for short. The very first members of the Squad were an amazing group, they were brave and cunning and had epic adventures that someone should really write a story about, but I'm afraid their story is not this story.

No, this story came later.

I know, I know, talk about a bait and switch, right? I get you all ready to hear one story and then I announce I'm going to tell you a different one, but I promise you, this story is even better. It's got action and adventure and spy gadgets and flying hover jets. More importantly though, it has Wesley. And Alora. And Charlie and Orion and Julia and Baqer and Tristan and Sasha and so many others. It has my friends, and theirs is a story worth telling.

And I'm the only one left to tell it.

My friends all grew up. They're busy working, and raising families, and telling their kids "there's nothing in your closet, go back to bed." Like all grown-ups, they forgot. They don't remember the monsters. They don't remember the adventures. They don't remember being heroes. To them, it's all just kids' stuff.

Well, I remember the kids' stuff. I remember their stories. And before I forget, I'm going to tell you, because every good story deserves to be remembered.

PART 1



CHAPTER 1

*A Visit from the Bogeyman*

“There’s no such things as monsters.”

That’s what his mom said, and Billy knew that his mom never ever lied, not even once. So, he believed her. She tucked him in and kissed him on the forehead and told him that she loved him very much. He believed that, too. Then, Billy’s mom turned off the light and told him that he was a Big Boy now and Big Boys weren’t scared of the dark.

Billy wasn’t so sure he believed that.

But as his mom shut the door, Billy tried really, really hard to be brave and go right to sleep. He heard a creepy sound, but told himself, “that’s just the wind.” He thought he saw something standing in the corner, but thought, “that’s just a shadow.” He noticed his closet door was cracked open just a little, but decided that his mom must have just left it open when she took out his laundry.

Or wait... did she?

Wasn't the door closed just a minute ago? He could swear it was. But why was it open now? He was vexed – which was a word he just learned earlier that day that means “to be worried over a difficult problem.” He thought it was a very fitting word for the situation, as he was very worried and the problem with the door was quite difficult.

Clearly, he couldn't go to sleep with the door open. That would be crazy. He thought about getting up and closing the door himself, but surely whatever left it open was lying in wait to eat him if he got too close. Besides, his mom had just tucked him in and he was all warm and cozy.

He could call for his mom to come close it for him, but she might get mad and not make him chocolate chip pancakes in the morning and he would have to eat oatmeal instead. Billy hated oatmeal.

No, being eaten alive is bad, but having to eat oatmeal is worse.

So, Billy laid there in bed. Vexed. He stared at the tiny crack in the closet for seven whole minutes that felt almost exactly like eight whole hours, until he finally came up with a plan. He rolled over and grabbed his Sergeant Smash action figure. The Sergeant was the most famous and bravest and most highly-decorated warrior in Billy's entire toy collection, and Billy knew he was the man for the job.

“Okay Sergeant,” he whispered so that parents and closet monsters couldn't hear. “I have a very important mission for you. If anything comes out of the closet, you have to protect me. Okay?” The Sergeant couldn't answer, because he was a toy, but he was honored to be chosen for such an important assignment. He let Billy know this by staying very still and not saying anything. “Good,” said Billy, and he tossed the Sergeant onto the floor to stand guard.

Even with the intrepid Sergeant keeping watch, Billy kept his eyes on the closet, looking for any sign of danger. But soon his eyes grew heavy, and slowly sleepiness began to beat out scarediness. Before long, Billy was asleep. And in his sleep, he dreamed.

And in Billy's closet, a bogeyman¹ named Ralph sat... and waited. He waited because it wasn't time yet.

In Billy's dream, he was a pirate king on a flying ship. He'd had this dream many times before. It was a good one. Billy had already saved the pirate princess and bested Bad Max in a watermelon eating contest, and was just about to get to the part where he won the big race riding his loyal pet T-Rex, Chompers. It was the very best part – and the very best part was exactly what Ralph was waiting for.

That's because bogeymen are aura thieves, and auras are always best when the kid is having a really good dream.²

Bogeyman Ralph was careful not to make a sound as he slowly opened the closet door. He was careful not to rustle the hangers as he stepped out of the closet, and careful not to step on any squeaky parts of the floor as he crept closer toward sleeping Billy. Ralph was not careful, however, when it came to avoiding

¹ Bogeyman looks like it should be pronounced BOH-gee man, but it's really pronounced BOOGIE-man. The reason for this is very simple... the English language is sometimes very silly. It's best you learn to accept this now so you can survive English class without your brain turning into jelly.

² What is an aura? It's the very essence of a person, a kind of glowing light that you can't see, but you know is there all the same – like when a TV screen is black, but you still know it's turned on. Have you ever seen someone from across the room and instantly known that you would be best friends? That's because you're sensing their aura. Even though we can't see them, we each have one, one that is beautiful and colorful and uniquely our own. Unless, that is, a bogeyman comes and snatches it away.

ever-vigilant action figures. He hadn't seen Sergeant Smash laying on the floor, valiantly guarding Billy's bed. Sergeant Smash would say that's because he didn't want to be seen. Well he wouldn't so much say that, because Sergeant Smash couldn't talk, but he would imply it by the way he lay there perfectly still.

The point is, the Sergeant performed his duty brilliantly. Ralph fell for the trap, stepping on the toy soldier and triggering the Sergeant's Realistic Kung Fu Chopping Action™. And chop he did, hitting Ralph right between the toes. The pain was so incredible that Ralph did the one thing he knew he absolutely couldn't do – he made a noise.

And that noise was a scream.

And that scream was loud.

Bogeyman Ralph's scream was so loud that it startled Billy awake. He sprang up in bed and nervously scanned the room as he grabbed firmly onto his blanket, ready to dive beneath it should he spot anything scary.

But there was nothing there.

Bogeyman Ralph was gone.

A little-known fact about bogeymen is that they are very, very fast. Even when he is hopping around on one foot because he's just been savagely attacked by a six-inch army man equipped with real kung-fu chopping action, a bogeyman can still move faster than most people can even see. For instance...

QUICK LOOK TO YOUR LEFT!!!

Didn't see a bogeyman, did you? Well that's mostly because there wasn't one. But even if there was, by the time you turned your head to look, he would have already been gone.

Which is why, by the time Billy opened his eyes, sat up, and looked around, Ralph was nowhere to be found. Billy started to think that the scream he heard must have just been part of his dream, possibly one of the pirates getting eaten by Chompers. He was about to try and go back to sleep, but then he noticed the

with a golden aura. It grew brighter and brighter and brighter still, until Billy's glowing head lit up the whole room. Billy's aura got so bright Bogeyman Ralph had to squint to see, and that made Ralph very happy indeed.

"Ooh... this is a good one," Ralph said, as he took a big, deep breath, sucking up Billy's aura. And as Billy's aura grew dimmer and dimmer, Ralph's horn lit up brighter and brighter, shining with a sickening purplish-orange hue known as the color blech.³ Unable to move, unable to scream, Billy felt the feelings of happiness, of goodness, of wonderfulness, all leaving his body. He was left only with a feeling that is hard to describe. Adults would call it melancholy, but that's only because adults love to come up with big, silly words to describe things that really can't be described. If you asked Billy how he felt he wouldn't bother using a big fancy word, he would just sigh and turn away and say, "you wouldn't understand."

Just as Billy's aura was dimming and flickering and nearly gone forever, a thing happened. It was a thing that came out of nowhere. It was a wonderful thing. A thing that, had Billy not had most of his aura stolen, would have normally made him cheer and clap and scream, "woo-hoo!"

And that thing was a dodgeball.

And that dodgeball smacked Bogeyman Ralph right in the nose.

Really.

Really.

Hard.

Ralph jumped back with a roar. He was startled. He was furious. His nose really, really hurt.

³ The name "blech" was given to the color by a particularly unpopular Crayon Color Creator who designed it as part of his "colors to make your parents sick" collection. It was not a very popular collection as it turns out parents are usually the ones who pay for crayons.

“*WHO DID THAT?!*” Bogeyman Ralph bellowed, as he looked around wildly for his attacker. But no one answered.

No one was there.

The ball, having accomplished its mission, rolled across the floor and came to a rest in the corner of the room. Ralph eyed it suspiciously. He walked cautiously toward the ball, looking around to try and spot another attack. “I’ll find you, you sneaky, cowardly sneak,” he growled.

When he got to the corner of the room, Ralph warily leaned in to get a better look at the evil thing that had assaulted him for no good reason. Noticing some writing, he gingerly picked the ball up. Ralph was a better reader than just about any bogeyman alive, which is a bit like saying he was the fastest snail.

What I mean to say is, Ralph could not read well. But if he tried real hard, and squinted his eyes just right, he could make out the words.

“L-look at the ball,” he read aloud. Ralph looked at the ball. It was red and round and otherwise entirely unexciting. He shrugged his shoulders and read on. “N-now look at your th... thuh... hm.” Ralph struggled with that last word, which really wasn’t his fault. It’s a tough word.

“Thumb!” Ralph announced excitedly, “It’s thumb!” And he looked at his thumb, but he didn’t see anything strange, just his normal, beautiful, wart-covered thumb. He started over, with a bit more confidence now, “look at the ball, l-look at your thumb,” and then kept reading, “for a big sc-scary mon-ster, gee your dumb.” Ralph smiled with accomplishment at having read the whole entire... wait. Did that ball just call him dumb??

Bogeyman Ralph snarled his most severe and menacing snarl at the ball. Never had he been treated so rudely by an inanimate object. He was pondering how he would get his vengeance, and was leaning toward maybe eating it, when he heard a loud whistle behind him. Ralph turned to see who was whistling and...

SMAP!

Another dodgeball hit him right in the face.

Ralph leapt up and spun toward his attacker. He scowled and growled and rubbed his poor, doubly-hurt nose. Standing in front of him, looking cool and confident, was a 12-year-old boy wearing a sleek, shadow-grey uniform.

His name was Wesley.

“I didn’t want things to get ugly, but it looks like you already are,” said Wesley, which was a very mean thing to say, but you must remember that Bogeyman Ralph was an evil monster who stole children’s auras so it’s probably okay that Wesley was a little bit mean to him.

Ralph roared and leapt at Wesley with amazing speed. He was nothing but a blue blur with claws and horns and rotten teeth. But Wesley didn’t flinch. In fact, Wesley didn’t move at all, not until Ralph’s massive hands were inches away from snatching him up. Then, without betraying the least bit of concern, Wesley shifted his weight. He turned his hip into the charging bogeyman, and ducked ever so slightly. Ralph found himself flipping through the air before slamming headfirst into the wall, his horn piercing deep. Ralph leapt back onto his feet, tearing a huge gash in the wall.

Normally, Billy would have been terrified of getting in trouble for his room being wrecked, but he just sighed, laid back in bed, looked up at the ceiling and thought, “mom just doesn’t understand.”

Meanwhile, still in the middle of the fight Billy was ignoring, Bogeyman Ralph noticed his horn had cracked. Through the crack, Billy’s misty, golden aura slowly seeped out. Ralph touched his wound tenderly and snarled his second most severe and menacing snarl at Wesley. He kind of regretted wasting his best snarl on that ball, which probably hadn’t even appreciated the level of snarliness it received.

“Aww, bogeyman get an ouchie?” taunted Wesley, which again wasn’t very nice, but that’s okay because bogeymen aren’t very nice.

Bogeyman Ralph growled and threatened, “When I’m through with you kid, I’m going to pick my teeth...”

Wesley interrupted, “You’re going to pick your teeth with my bones, make a suit from my skin, and use my skull as a mop bucket... blah blah blah. You know for such a stupid species you guys sure make a lot of speeches.”

This wasn’t Wesley’s first time fighting a bogeyman, and he had found they weren’t all that creative with their threats.

Ralph, though, had thought it was going to be a very creative and threatening threat, and was furious at the interruption. Enraged, he lunged at Wesley with a roar.

Deftly, Wesley grabbed Ralph by his furry wrists, planted a foot in his belly and fell backwards, launching the bogeyman into the air. Ralph slammed upside down against another wall before sliding down and landing headfirst on the floor, his horn shattering. Billy’s aura burst out of Ralph’s broken stump of a horn and gathered in a cloud above the broken bogeyman before darting back into Billy. With his aura back, Billy leapt up in bed. He looked at Wesley. He looked at the defeated bogeyman. He looked at the complete and utter mess his room was in.

And he threw his hands up in the air in excitement. “That was awesome!”

Ralph shook his head painfully and looked frantically at Wesley. Then to the closet. Then back to Wesley.

He made his move.

Ralph charged like a rampaging gorilla toward the open closet. Wesley deftly pushed a button on his watch and shouted, “Now, Charlie, now!”

Ralph looked behind him to see if Wesley was giving chase, but he hadn’t moved. Maybe he was letting him go? Ralph turned

back to the closet, relieved. He was almost there. He was going to escape! He was going to go home, and he was going to wait for his horn to heal, and then he'd be back, and then he'd get revenge. He'd pick his teeth with that kid's bones and... and....

His thoughts of vengeance were interrupted by a loud boom outside Billy's open window, followed by the dramatic entrance of a giant hand-shaped sticky slapper, which struck Ralph's back with a loud gooey smack. For a moment Ralph struggled, stretching desperately for the closet door. But only for a moment, because just as quickly as it burst in, the sticky slapper snapped back out through the window with Bogeyman Ralph in tow.

It was over.

An awestruck Billy stared doe-eyed at Wesley, watching as the 12-year old secret agent collected his dodgeballs. "Was that the bogeyman?" Billy asked.

"Yeah, kid, but he's gone now"

"Who are you?"

"I'm Wesley, your imaginary friend. Sleep tight kid."

"Please, don't go," begged Billy, still a little shaken from the whole having a scary monster make his head glow and steal all his good feelings and destroy his room thing. Wesley sighed. He was always more comfortable with the fighting evil creatures part. Dealing with the emotional aftermath was harder.

"Don't worry, kid, no more monsters." Wesley smiled softly at him as he grabbed a KIDS Monstr-O-Meter⁴ from his belt. "But if you get scared, just push this button," he said, showing Billy the gadget before plugging it in the wall.

⁴The KIDS Monstr-O-Meter is a gadget that combines the utility of a nightlight with the sophistication of an advanced biometric scanner array keyed to the unique chemical signature of supernatural creatures. It can successfully detect even invisible creatures and won the Sleepy Daddy seal of approval five years in a row.

With a press of the one and only button, the Monstr-O-Meter flashed twice and a soothing voice chimed in.

“Scan complete,” said the sweet, soothing voice. “There are no monsters present.”

Billy smiled. “Cool!”

“If the meter finds anything. We’ll come running,” Wesley said reassuringly. “Now go to sleep. It’s a school night.” With that Wesley leapt out the window, disappearing into the night just as Billy’s bedroom door swung open. Standing in the light of the hallway was Billy’s mom, and she was not happy.

“What was all that racket young man?!”

“Mom! It was so cool! The bogeyman came and wouldn’t let me yell and then my imaginary friend came and he beat up the bogeyman and...”

“What on earth are you talking about?” Wesley’s Mom asked, interrupting his story like moms so often do. As she turned on the light and saw the utter destruction left behind by Wesley’s battle with Ralph, she gasped, “what happened to your room???”

“I just told you, mom,” Billy replied.

He had a bad feeling he’d be getting oatmeal for breakfast.



In the jump seat of Raft 42, Wesley took what he knew would be an all-too-brief quiet moment to rest his eyes. It’s hard enough to try and sleep when you just fought a mythological monster. Only a master agent could fall asleep while screaming through the sky at seventeen hundred miles per hour in an aircraft designed by kindergarteners and piloted by Orion Cordero (record holder for most hours spent flying while on fire).

Luckily, Wesley was the most master an agent could possibly be. Seven seconds later, he was snoring.

Twelve seconds after that, the familiar voice of KIDS dispatcher Logan Scully came over the radio. “Dispatch to RAFT 4-2. What’s your 20?”

Orion clicked a button on the dash and responded, “RAFT 4-2 to dispatch, we’re 10-49 to base with four Blue Meanies in tow.”

“Negative, 4-2, we’ve got a late-night snacker in Clyde, sending coordinates.”

“10-4. 49,”⁵ said Orion before clicking off the radio. Turning to Wesley, he asked. “you up for setting the record tonight?”

Wesley had managed exactly 18.3 seconds of sleep. It wasn’t much, but it would have to be enough.

“Let’s do it.”

⁵ You may have noticed that Orion and Logan’s radio conversation sounded a little bit like a math problem, and a lot like complete nonsense. That’s because, when on the radio, KIDS agents use radio code, in which different numbers mean different things. For instance, “20” means “location,” “10-49” means “I’m on my way, and “10-4” means “OK, I’ll do that.” My personal favorite, though, was 81-12, which means “an ice cream truck broke down and is giving away free ice cream.” I only ever heard it once, but that was a great day.

Some of you might know that radio code was originally created by police departments back when radios weren’t very good and it was hard to hear. But that wasn’t why KIDS agents use it. In fact, they can hear perfectly well on their radios, thank you very much. But they still use it, because they think it sounds cool. Never underestimate how important it is to a kid to be cool.

KIDS IMAGINARY DEFENSE SQUAD MANUAL

Part 7: Know Your Foe!

The Bogeyman

OTHER NAMES:

Al-Bu'bu' (Egypt), Baba Yaga (Russia), Babau (Italy), Bincho Papão (Brazil), Coco (Mexico), Diz (Azerbaijan), Dongolo Miso (Congo), Gurumapa (Nepal), Namahage (Japan)

INTRODUCTION:

Bogeymen are thieves in the night, stealing the auras from children while they sleep. You may not have heard of auras before, but they are very special things. They are the essence of what makes a kid a kid. Without their aura, children are doomed to grow-up without the ability to feel joy or wonder or even love. The school bully? That quiet kid that never plays during recess? They're just kids who had their auras stolen by bogeymen. Preventing this terrible fate is the primary mission of the KIDS.

Unfortunately, unlike with some other supernatural creatures, you cannot reason with a bogeyman. The only way to ensure that a bogeyman will stop attacking kids is to capture it, break its horn, and lock it away.

TRAITS:

Bogeymen look a bit like a cross between a man and a skinny gorilla, with claws, crooked teeth, and dense, fuzzy fur. They also have at least one horn, which glows bright when they've stolen an aura. They are incredibly fast and strong, and possess low-level magical abilities. They travel to our world from the Bogey-realm using portals, usually located in closets.

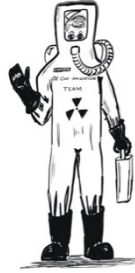
TYPES:

- Blue Meanie – The most common type of bogeymen. They can be identified by their shadow blue fur and a single horn.
- Lil' Greenie – A smaller variety of bogeyman renowned for their sneakiness and ability to throw their voice. Typically, this type has green-grey fur and a single, short horn.
- Red Rogue – A rare, possibly extinct bogeyman. The Rogue is notable for its ability to dodge, and for its horn, which grows from its chin. It has red fur and a fondness for hats.
- Big Boy – The most dangerous type of bogeyman. Big Boys are much larger and stronger than other bogeymen, though not as fast. They are colored similarly to Blue Meanies, but have two large curved horns and massive fangs.

STRATEGY:

The use of KIDS gadgetry is the preferred method of capture. However, should hand-to-hand combat prove necessary, Kung Pow is the most successful technique to counter their strength and speed. Focus on their horn, as breaking it weakens them and releases any stolen auras.

CHAPTER 2

*When Cooties Attack*

Back at KIDS headquarters, the Hangar was a flurry of activity as Raft teams returned from their patrols. Standing at the back of Raft 42, Wesley prepped his gear for storage, deflating dodgeballs and checking the batteries on his AttackPack. Meanwhile Charlie, Wesley's TechOp and best friend, prepped the BogPods for the Cell.

The last call Team 42 went on was a routine grab-n-bag operation. When they got to a bogeyman before he got the aura, Wesley didn't even have to leave the Raft. Just snatch 'em with the Sticky Slapper and they were on their way. In fact, the trip was only memorable at all because the kid they were protecting only had one eyebrow. Charlie was really weirded out by it and begged Wesley to get details, but Wesley thought that would be rude.

He was right of course, that would be rude.

Other than that, though, nothing else worth mentioning.

Oh, except for this one other thing...

“Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, your attention please!” Orion stood on top of his Raft like a preacher at the pulpit, addressing the other agents in the hangar. “It is my supreme pleasure to announce that by nabbing five, count ‘em *five* horn-heads in a single night, Agent Wesley and Raft 42 have achieved a new record! Let’s hear it for the conquering heroes!”

“Not so fast, loud mouth!” announced an unimpressed voice from the crowd.

The voice belonged to Julia, the brazen 10-year-old pilot of Raft 26, and with that voice came an overwhelming silence. The agents had stopped their clapping and zipped their lips. Everyone knew that it wasn’t smart to get on Julia’s bad side.

That she even had a good side was a subject of much debate.

The crowd parted like the Red Sea⁶ as Julia swaggered up to Raft 42. Close behind was Raft 26’s TechOp, Sasha, a frizzy-haired 7-year-old that could usually be found hovering somewhere near Julia’s shadow.

“Raft 26 got five, too,” Julia declared with a self-satisfied smirk.

The crowd ooh-ed.

“And one of ours was a Big Boy!” added Sasha.

The crowd ahh-ed.

“Yeah, right,” snorted Charlie, unconvinced. The crowd gasped. Did he really just challenge Julia? The surrounding agents took a collective step back, not wanting to get any Charlie juice on their clothes once Julia got her hands on him.

Charlie immediately regretted saying anything.

⁶ Some religions tell the story of a man named Moses who used a magic staff to move all the water out of the Red Sea, so that his people could escape. Julia didn’t have a magic staff, she was just really good at scaring people. Being scared has a way of moving people. This is fortunate for Julia, and very unfortunate for people that don’t like it when jerks get their way all the time.

“I mean... I just...” Charlie stammered as he tried to retreat.

Julia stalked toward him like a panther ready to strike. “Aw, Charlie, you’re so cute,” she said menacingly, sending a chill down Charlie’s spine. He tried to take another step back, but was trapped against the Raft.

“What are you doing? Stop right there,” he begged, but she crept closer and closer, wearing a terrifying grin. Charlie kept a wary eye on Julia as he felt around blindly for something, anything he could use to survive this. Maybe he could get his hands on a weapon of some kind, or a time machine. His hand found the latch for the utility box. If he could only... If he could just...

But it was too late. Julia threw her arms around Charlie, hugging him tight and kissing his cheeks again and again. He screamed.

“I can’t help it,” she taunted between her vicious and merciless kisses. “You’re just so adorable!”

“Cooties!” Charlie cried with the last bit of fight he had left in him. The boys in the crowd turned away from the horrid sight. It was the most vicious cootie attack any of them had ever seen. A young recruit named Grant couldn’t take it and threw up his dinner on Agent Evan, who in turn threw up his dinner on Agent Carter, who luckily had skipped dinner, but still wasn’t very happy.

Meanwhile, the girls in the crowd laughed harder than they had ever laughed before. They laughed at the hapless Charlie. They laughed at the boys overreacting. And they *really* laughed at Carter, the tragic tertiary victim of a six-year-old’s weak stomach. Every female agent in the Squad was just about doubled-over with laughter. All, that is, but one – Senior Agent Alora Champney.

It wasn’t that Alora didn’t find the whole scene very funny. She did, especially the way Charlie squirmed. That was hilarious. But Alora was tired. She’d just fought five bogeymen single-handedly, including a Big Boy, and she wanted to go to bed.

“Alright, that’s enough,” Alora said with authority. She didn’t shout. She didn’t even sound angry. Yet somehow, despite all the screaming and laughing and throwing up on Carter, everyone could hear Alora perfectly well, and everyone listened, and everyone stopped. The boys stopped screaming. The girls stopped laughing. Julia even stopped holding Charlie up over her head, dropping him whimpering to the ground.

All the agents stopped when Alora said to, not because they feared her, but because they respected her. They respected her because she’d earned their respect. By working the hardest. By being the best.

Or at least... almost the best.

Wesley always seemed to be just a little bit better. Alora would score a 99 on a test. He’d get 100. She’d run a race in five minutes. He’d finish in four minutes and fifty-nine seconds. She’d never show it, but always losing to Wesley secretly made Alora furious at him, secretly made her hate him.⁷

But today it was her turn. Today she won. She got the record, and it was Wesley’s turn to lose.

As he walked over to her, Alora couldn’t help but wonder what he was thinking. Was he devastated? Angry? Did he secretly hate her now as much as she secretly hated him? *He’s probably going to make some excuse, she thought, or say my record doesn’t count because three of mine were on the same block. Anything to save his stupid wounded pride; anything to try and make me feel like he’s still better. Because he’s got to be number one and could never admit that maybe someone else is better sometimes. He could never just say, “congratulations, Alora, good job.” Because that would be too darn decent! He could never just give me this one thing! What a jerk!*

⁷ Well, she mostly secretly hated him. But even more secretly, deep, deep down, there were other feelings that she wasn’t entirely ready to deal with yet.

By the time Wesley got to her, Alora had gotten herself good and worked up, and was ready to give him a verbal beat down. Sure, she smiled what looked to be a friendly smile, but the smile was secretly not friendly, not friendly at all. Secretly, she was smiling because she was thinking about how badly she was going to tell him off when he said whatever stupid, mean thing he was going to say.

“Congrats, Alora, heck of a haul,” he said with a friendly smile that actually was a friendly smile, because Wesley wasn’t aware that smiles could have secrets.

Alora’s friendly, secretly unfriendly, smile vanished.

Wait. What? she thought as she began to panic. He had just gone and said the one thing she was not at all prepared for him to say. Congrats? How was she supposed to respond to that? *It must be a trick*, she deduced. *He knew I was ready for him and so is pretending to be happy for me while really he’s trying to... trying to... um....* She couldn’t come up with a good reason Wesley would have for pretending to congratulate her. Which made Alora even madder.

“Jealous?” she asked, baiting him.

“I’m just glad to know there are five fewer bogeymen out there,” he said. Which was a very mature way for Wesley to look at losing the record to Alora – and that made her furious, Alora was darned if she was going to come in second in being mature.

“What a gracious loser you are,” she retorted. “Though you should be since you’ve had so much practice at it. And by it, I mean losing, because you lose. Like all the time.”

Of course, that wasn’t a very mature thing to say. Which meant Wesley just beat her again. Alora let out a frustrated squeal before turning to her RAFT-mates. “Come on, let’s go,” she ordered before stomping off toward the briefing room.

Sasha and Julia hustled to catch up to her, as the other agents followed murmuring amongst themselves about the epic weirdness they just witnessed.

Orion jumped off the Raft 42 cockpit and walked over to Wesley. “You sure know how to get under her skin,” Orion observed.

Wesley shot him a sly smile. “I know, right?”

Still on the ground in the fetal position, Charlie rocked back and forth, murmuring to himself, “so cold... so very cold.”

“Don’t worry, buddy, I called for a decontamination team,” Orion told Charlie, reassuringly. “You’ll be fine.” Then Orion leant in and whispered to Wesley, “You think he’ll be okay?”

“Eh, 50/50,” Wesley replied with a smirk. “Come on, let’s get to debriefing.”

“I heard that,” said Charlie weakly as his Raft-mates walked off, leaving him curled up on the floor, all cooti-fied. “Jerks.”

Soon Charlie heard the clomping of heavy boots as the three-man decontamination team hustled through the hangar. Once they made it to him, the smallest of the three, dressed in an official-looking white lab coat, knelt and examined Charlie for cootie damage. “Don’t worry, Agent, we got to you in time,” he said, before standing and turning to the other members of his team.

“Blast him, boys.”

The two other members of the De-Con team stepped forward, each dressed in HAZMAT suits and carrying what looked to be a fire hose connected to a tank on his back. Stenciled on each tank was: COOTIE SPRAY – EXTRA STRENGTH. In perfect sync, each flipped a switch on their hose’s nozzle. Both of their tanks started to glow, humming louder and louder as they charged up.

They took another step forward.

They pointed their nozzles at Charlie.

They put their fingers on the triggers.

Charlie’s eyes widened. “Maybe I could just...”

They fired.

CHAPTER 3

*The Right of Rotten Egg*

“Stupid girls.”

Charlie, covered head-to-toe in goopy, smelly, industrial-grade cootie spray, plopped down in the seat Wesley had saved for him. Wesley fought the urge to giggle at his sad-looking comrade.

“Looks like you got a fan club, Charlie,” Wesley said, pointing to the girls of Team 26, sitting a few rows away. The girls snickered as Julia blew Charlie kisses. Charlie folded his arms and sank back in his chair.

“Oh, shut up,” Charlie said, sulking.

The agents were all gathered for their end-of-shift debriefing, held as always in the massive amphitheater in the center of KIDS headquarters. They talked among themselves, mostly about Charlie’s brush with cooties and Carter’s need for a new jumpsuit, but a familiar clunk snapped them all to attention. In the front of room a massive steel door lowered to reveal a white screen. Silhouetted behind the screen sat the leader of the Squad, Mr. Dogie. When he spoke, agents listened.

“Good morning agents,” he said entirely accurately, as it was 4:38 am. “I am pleased and highly relieved to see you all back safely. Forty-six bogeymen were captured this evening, an impressive record, but I must single out a few teams that went above and beyond...”

Orion sat up in his seat, smacking Wesley in the arm. “Here it comes, he’s going to mention us.”

But Dogie never got the chance to praise Team 42, as a panicked agent burst in through the side door. It was Logan, the Squad’s dispatcher, and he came bearing terrible news.

“We missed one! I don’t know how...” he sputtered, breathlessly. Looking around the room at the shocked expressions, it took Logan a moment to realize he was interrupting Dogie. “I’m sorry, sir,” Logan said, lowering his head. “I’ll wait.”

“Go ahead, Logan,” Dogie said kindly. “What is so urgent?”

“There were just so many, I... I...” the young agent stammered.

“Calm down, son, what happened?”

“We missed a call. A Blue Meanie two hours ago in Martinez. 7-7-5 Mt. Kennedy Drive. Tristan Lyon.”

Without a word, Wesley grabbed his gear bag and started for the door. Followed closely by Orion and Charlie.

“Hold on, Wesley” Mr. Dogie cautioned. “We both know there’s no helping the child.”

“We owe it to him to at least find out what happened.”

Mr. Dogie considered the situation for a moment. “Very well,” he said, “but be quick. Sunrise is in an hour.”

Alora jumped up from her chair. “We’ll handle it, sir. Julia’s a much faster pilot than Orion.”

“The heck she is!” snapped an offended Orion.

Sasha offered her two cents, arguing, “they just want the record.”

“Enough!” scolded Mr. Dogie. “Thank you for the offer, Alora, but Wesley is the senior agent...”

“I claim Right of Rotten Egg!” Alora interjected. There was a collective gasp from the agents. Alora had just, on purpose, interrupted Mr. Dogie. No agent ever dared to do that. “I’m a senior agent, too,” she continued, trying her best to sound confident, “and I... I am invoking the Right of Rotten Egg.”

Wesley glared at Alora. This was a step too far.

At the front of the room, Mr. Dogie sat for a moment in contemplation before responding. “So be it,” he said, with a wave of his hand. “Let the best agent win.”

Alora and Wesley locked eyes. The race was on. Both bolted for the door, with the rest of the agents streaming after them cheering.

Well, almost all the rest.

Logan sprinted to the back of the room.

He had a job to do.



Logan burst through the doors of the control room and frantically began pushing the buttons and turning the knobs necessary to bring the control panel to life. Circuits hummed, lights flashed, and video monitors popped on. It had been almost two years since someone had declared the Right of Rotten Egg, and it was Logan’s first time calling the race. The pressure was intense.

He closed his eyes as he pulled the microphone close, taking a deep breath to steady his nerves. Calm and focused, he flipped a switch. The mic was on. Logan’s voice boomed over the PA system as excited agents streamed into the viewing room.

“Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, we have ourselves a race!”

The room was equipped with a huge wall of TV screens, each tuned into one of the security cameras mounted around KIDS headquarters. As 82 agents tried to squeeze into a room built for 20, Wesley and Alora sprinted into the first turn.

“Never in both of my years have I seen a Right of Rotten Egg held between two senior agents,” said Logan over the PA in his best announcer voice. “This should be one for the record books, folks.”

Coming to the end of the hallway, Wesley burst through the doors of the Nap Room, with Alora hot on his heels. The room was littered with KIDS recruits and support staff, sprawled out asleep on thick floor mats. Wesley gracefully negotiated the minefield of agents like a hall of fame football player, twisting, leaping, and gliding his way through the room.

Desperate to catch up, Alora wasn't quite so careful. She ran through the room like a freight train. She misjudged her steps and accidentally stomped on a sleeping recruit's hand.

“Ow! Hey!” yelped the young girl, but Alora just pushed harder. She was about to pass Wesley when Kyle from the kitchen staff rolled over in his sleep, catching Alora's foot and sending her crashing to the ground. She skidded to a stop, her face inches from security chief Tatsuo, who responded with a snore so powerful it blew Alora's hair back.

“And Alora's down!” announced Logan, to the cheers of half the agents in the viewing room, and the boos of the other half.

With a disgusted grimace, Alora hopped up and hurried to catch up to Wesley, who was already through the exit doors.

Outside the Nap Room, Wesley hustled down the hallway, sliding to a stop in front of the equipment rack. He grabbed a TechVest, and threw it on as he made his way for the cafeteria. Alora didn't even slow down as she snagged her equipment – a ThumpRope and her personalized BattleBelt, which she threw around her waist mid-stride.

Running into the cafeteria, Alora spotted Wesley mere steps from the exit. In one graceful move, she snatched a pie tin from a nearby rack, dumped the pie on the floor, and with a spinning leap launched the empty tin like a Frisbee clear across the room. It found its target, careening off Wesley's head and sending him crashing into a table.

Up in the control room Logan winced sympathetically as he watched the action on his monitors, feet propped up on the console. "I know there's no rule against it," he said, shaking his head, "but darn it, that was just mean."

Exploding out of the cafeteria, Alora sprinted across the upper landing and down the stairs into the training arena. Wesley stumbled out onto the landing, rubbing his head, still a bit dazed. Seeing Alora below him, Wesley flicked his wrist, sending a signal to his TechVest. In response, a blast of air from a tank on Wesley's back pushed a marbled-sized ball out of its hopper and down a tube running along Wesley's arm. The tiny ball fell out of the tube and stuck to Wesley's glove, where a small needle shot into the ball and inflated it to the size of a regulation dodgeball.⁸

Wesley tracked Alora as she raced through the training room.

He cocked his arm back, preparing to throw.

Pausing, Wesley licked his finger and stuck it in the air, checking the wind direction. Which of course was extremely silly since they were inside and there was no wind. But it looked cool, and that's what was important.

With the lack of wind verified. He threw.

But Alora was no rookie recruit. She had caught Wesley's reflection in the mirrored-glass of the nearby observation room,

⁸ In all the process takes .7 seconds from wrist flick to fully inflated dodgeball. Those not familiar with the technology might mistake it for magic, but those that know how it works know it's just really, really awesome. For more information, see Technical Document 33: TechVests.

and managed to dodge the flying ball with an impressive shoulder roll. Still running, she turned back to him, sticking her tongue out and wagging her fingers. That would teach him to underestimate her.

Of course, she probably should have learned not to underestimate Wesley.

You see, Wesley was never really aiming at Alora. He was just trying to throw the ball close enough so she would think she dodged it. Wesley had known Alora for years, and he knew that if she thought she dodged it then she would probably stick her tongue out at him. And if she was busy sticking her tongue out at him, she probably wouldn't notice the whiteboard that the training crew left sitting out.

And he was right.

She didn't notice. Not until it was too late anyway. Alora turned back just in time to crash face first into the board, so hard she flipped upside and landed hard, knocking the wind out of her.

"Oooohhhh!!!!" groaned the agents watching in the viewing room. No matter who they were rooting for, that looked like it hurt.

"Oh, the humanity!" howled Logan over the PA. "Where had the civility in sport gone?" Then, giving a smirk, "I don't know, but I hope it stays there. 'Cause this is fun!"

Back on the landing, Wesley made a split-second tactical decision. Instead of chasing after Alora, he turned and ran away from the training room. At the end of the landing he came to a dusty old ladder, which went way, way up, almost 50 feet, to the catwalk at the top of the hangar. Wesley began to climb.

"Up and up he goes, where he'll stop, nobody knows!" announced Logan. "Seriously, we don't have cameras up there so we've got no idea what he's doing."

Still splayed out on the floor from her collision with the whiteboard, Alora glared at Wesley as he climbed. She didn't know

what he was up to, but she wasn't going to wait around to find out. With an emphatic slap on the ground, Alora leapt to her feet and bolted for the door.

"I can't believe it, but it looks like Wesley might be giving up the race," offered a befuddled Logan, "Alora's just about to the hangar and Wesley is nowhere to be seen. Though I suppose after that stunt with the whiteboard, I wouldn't want to be anywhere near Alora either."

The senior girl's agent erupted into the empty hangar, charging for her RAFT. *Only a hundred yards to go*, she thought. *It's my race to win.*

From the look of things, it was only her race to run, too. Wesley was nowhere to be seen as she made the final turn toward her Raft.

"Only seventy-five yards to go!" announced Logan. "Now fifty! Ladies and gentlemen, it looks like we're about to have a new champion!" On his monitor, he watched Alora run out the last bit of the race, alone in the hangar. Except, wait. What was that? There, on the monitor, there was a... a... something. A very fast moving something.

"Hold on... is that?" Logan wondered over the PA. "Yes! Yes! It ain't over folks!"

"It's Wesley!" cheered a junior agent.

And indeed, it was. Twenty yards behind Alora and closing fast, Wesley hurtled through the air at incredible speed. He had thrown his belt around one of the power lines that connected the RAFT charging stations to the generators on top of the hangar, and was using it as an improvised zip line. Alora, hearing the commotion over the PA, whipped her head back just in time to see Wesley as he flew overhead. Letting go of the power line Wesley landed with a shoulder roll, and instantly popped up into a full sprint. Alora let out a frustrated cry as she raced to catch up.

“It’s going to come down to the wire,” declared Logan, “but with fifteen yards to go it looks like Wesley is going to make it to his Raft first!”

“Not this time,” thought Alora with wicked inspiration. Without breaking stride, Alora snatched the ThumpRope from her BattleBelt. Wesley was mere feet from the finish line when, with an expert flick of her wrist, Alora whipped the ThumpRope around Wesley’s ankles. Before he knew what happened he was on the ground, hog-tied.

With a hollow thump that echoed throughout the hangar, Alora slapped her hand on Raft 26. All was silent in the viewing room as the agents tried to process what had just happened.

“I did it,” Alora gasped, barely believing it. “I beat you.”

Freeing himself from the rope, Wesley slowly got to his feet.

“May the best agent win, and *I* did,” she said, getting more excited as Wesley dusted himself off. “Last one’s a rotten egg and that’s you. Wesley the smelly, stinky, dinosaur-brained, rotten egg.”

Putting his belt back on, Wesley couldn’t help but smirk a little as Alora continued to boast. “I won and you...” she stopped, noticing his sly smile with a sudden, deep-down dread. “Wait, why are you smiling?”

Wesley’s smile broadened making Alora even more nervous. “You lost, why are you smiling?” she demanded.

“Cause I have something you don’t.”

“What?” she sneered. “Body odor?”

Just then Raft 42 zoomed past overhead.

“My crew,” he said, just as a sticky slapper launched from the Raft, snatching Wesley and towing him behind as it sped for the hangar doors. “Good race, though!” Wesley shouted with a salute as Raft 42 disappeared into the night sky.

From out of nowhere, a rotten egg splatted on Alora forehead, the smelly yolk running down her face.

“But... but... I won.”

KIDS IMAGINARY DEFENSE SQUAD MANUAL

Part 5: Check your Tech!

Really Awesome Flying Things (Raft)



INTRODUCTION:

Aviation experts will tell you that the fastest plane ever flown is the SR71 Blackbird, which can fly over 2,200 miles per hour. They're wrong, but that's only because aviation experts have never seen a Raft. Or rather, they forgot that they saw them (but let's not get in to that again). The point is that Rafts are awesome. They can take off vertically, hover in place, have a cruising speed of over 3,000 miles an hour, and come in seven colors. Seven!

If the military had invented the Raft they probably would never let a kid touch it, much less fly it around their neighborhood. They'd probably say things like, "you don't have the proper security clearance," and, "you'll get the controls all sticky," and "how did you sneak onto our highly-classified military base?"

Luckily, the military didn't invent the Raft. Kids did. It was designed and built by the geniuses in the KIDS R&D Department.

STATS:

Top Speed:	Cruising:	3,012 mph (Mach 3.9)
	With Afterburners:	4,143 mph (Mach 5.4)
Engines:	(5) Kidified, thrust-vectoring P&W WhisperTech™ box fans	
Fuel Source:	Equal parts PopRocks™ and TurboSmash Energy Elixir™	
Weaponry:	(1) Sticky Slapper Grab-n-Go launcher (1) Sonic Defuser (2) Multi-Phase SonicSoaker Cannons (3) Defensive DazzleBubbler	
Capacity:	4 comfortably, 15 extremely uncomfortably.	
Cargo:	(6) Bogeyman Detention Pods (BogPods) (2) 36-gallon utility boxes (1) High-security, Pocket Penguin cryo-tube	

FUN FACTS:

The original Rafts were constructed from heavy duty refrigerator boxes, but after half the fleet was tragically lost to “sprinkler-related incidents,” changes were made. Starting with Version 2, Rafts have instead been constructed from 5/8” plywood Chief Raft Engineer Greg borrowed from his dad. He promised, though, that he’ll put it all back when we’re done using it. Version 3 added an audio jack and optional racing stripes.

CHAPTER 4

*The Yo-Yo Kid*

As RAFT 42 hovered silently outside the bedroom window, Charlie performed a routine scan of the house. The scan showed four people. Two adults were asleep in the master bedroom; one teenager was passed out in the living room snoring loudly with the TV on; and one kid, age six, was wide-awake and sitting up in bed.

“Everyone’s asleep but the kid,” Charlie said. “You’re clear for entry.” But just as Wesley went to leap out of the RAFT, Charlie spotted something on his monitor. “Wait hold on!” he cautioned. “There’s something else.”

“What is it?” asked Wesley.

“I think there’s still one in there,” said Charlie as he double-checked his scans.

“What?!” exclaimed Orion and Wesley simultaneously.

“No way,” said Orion, flipping up his visor and looking back at the video monitor, “it’s been two hours since we got the call, that thing should be long gone.”

“Well it isn’t. It’s still here,” Charlie responded, switching between data screens, “and it looks like it’s a Big Boy.”

“Wait. Go back,” said Wesley. He had Charlie stop at the infrared display. Sure enough, there was the unmistakable signature of a bogeyman, seemingly just sitting on the floor of the kid’s room. “He’s not moving. What’s he doing?”

“Maybe he’s eating the kid’s brains,” offered Orion.

“Can it,” scolded Wesley. “You know they don’t do that.”

“Yeah, well, they don’t just sit around in the corner either.”

The room belonged to Tristan Lyon.

His mom said so, although she did make him let Grandma Lisa borrow it when she came to visit on Thanksgiving. Tristan didn’t like letting her borrow it, and he made sure to remind her that everything in the room was his, and was right where he liked it. But in a misguided attempt to help Tristan, Grandma Lisa cleaned his room and put away all his toys, ruining everything. Now Grandma Lisa is only Tristan’s second favorite Grandma. Grandma Karen is first, even though her house smells like cheese.

After Grandma Lisa’s visit, it took Tristan months to get his room back the way he wanted it. Baseball glove on the dresser. Grass-stained pants hung on the door. Left shoe on the bookcase. Right shoe under a pile of dirty socks next to the empty hamper. At center stage in the middle of the room, Tristan’s favorite stuffed rabbit, Mr. T, locked in eternal battle with his Optimus Prime action figure. Everything where it belonged. Perfect.

Or at least it *was* perfect. Now there were two things that didn’t belong. One, a big, growling mound of fur that had been laying on Tristan’s stinky socks for the better part of two hours, and two; a glowing-stick-thingy that had just flown through the window three seconds ago, coming to a rest against Optimus’s right foot. Tristan didn’t much like either of them. They were messing up his room.

As Tristan glared at the invading glow stick, it slowly began to get dimmer and dimmer, until finally it wasn't glowing at all. Tristan breathed a sigh of relief. He was glad that was over. It had already been an all too eventful night, and he really wanted to get some sleep. His relief was short lived, though, because exactly 1.7 seconds later the glow stick got brighter again. Much brighter. And not slowly either. In fact, you could say it exploded, blasting green light into every corner of the room.

Temporarily blinded, Tristan dove under his covers just as Wesley dove through the window. "Great," thought Tristan, "now there's three things that don't belong in my room."

Wesley popped up in attack stance, ready to throw a dodgeball if anything moved. Nothing did. Hearing a low growl in the corner of the room, Wesley cautiously investigated. Once he got a bit closer he recognized the creature immediately – it was a Big Boy.

Big Boys are a special breed of bogeymen: bigger, stronger, harrier, just more beastly and ill-tempered in general. Instead of the small horn adorning most bogymen's heads, Big Boys have two massive, curling horns. These pair nicely with the three-inch claws on the tips of their gorilla like fingers, making pure, Grade-A nightmare fuel.

Plus, they smell awful; like a skunk who took a bath in expired milk.

It isn't at all uncommon for an agent that comes across a Big Boy to simply apologize for the interruption and run away really, really fast. What is extremely uncommon, however, is finding a Big Boy tied up with several yo-yo strings and laying on top of a pile of dirty socks. In fact, Wesley was pretty sure that this was the first time in the history of the Squad that any agent had ever seen anything like it. He leaned in closer to check to see if it was breathing.

“Let me go, or I’ll eat your pancreas,” the Big Boy snarled, causing Wesley to jump back a bit. Just a bit mind you, as Wesley prided himself on being impossible to startle. Actually, Wesley thought, I didn’t jump at all. I just performed a strategic realignment of posture in response to external stimuli.⁹

Focused as he was on trying to come up with a better sounding excuse for why he jumped, Wesley almost didn’t see the yo-yo hurtling towards his head. His years of training kicked in, though, and with the help of another “strategic realignment,” he dodged the spinning wheel of doom, which slammed into the wall with such incredible force that it stuck there.

Wesley grabbed the yo-yo’s string and pulled with all his might. Still holding on to the other end, Wesley’s attacker was yanked screaming through the air. Catching his foe mid-flight, Wesley slammed him to the ground and readied a dodgeball.

With a bit of relief, and more than a bit of confusion, Wesley realized he was pinning down the Big Boy’s 6-year-old intended victim. Wesley had to give it to the kid. Tristan was half Wesley’s size, but it was taking everything he had to hold him down.

“Monkey knuckles, kid.” Wesley chuckled as he deflated his dodgeball, “I almost...”

He didn’t have time to finish that thought, as Tristan used his free hand to launch another yo-yo, smacking Wesley square in the jaw. “Ow!” Wesley yelped as he snatched the yo-yo from Tristan and tossed it across the room. “Quit it will ya? I’m here to help.”

⁹ Which pretty much just means, “I jumped.” Adults tend to try to make themselves look better by using big confusing words to describe things that might otherwise make them look bad. Like how your grandpa will say he has “a receding hairline” when you and I both know he’s just bald. Wesley wasn’t an adult, but he was close, and he was starting to adopt their sneaky ways.

Managing to wriggle out of Wesley's grip, Tristan leapt up, grabbed another yo-yo from his dresser and spun quickly around, ready to attack. Wesley was a step ahead, and already had a dodgeball cocked and ready to fire. They found themselves in a standoff.

"Just hold it!" Wesley ordered. "I just told you I'm here to help. I'm not the enemy."

"I don't need anyone's help," Tristan snarked.

Wesley lowered his dodgeball, trying to calm things down a bit. "Well, unless your mom will let you have a pet you're going to need someone to get rid of big ugly for you," Wesley said, gesturing to the Big Boy.

Tristan cautiously lowered his yo-yo. He still wasn't sure about trusting someone who goes and dives into a stranger's bedroom in the middle of the night.

"Just chill out for a few seconds," Wesley said, trying to settle Tristan's nerves. "I'll get rid of ol' stink breath over here, and you can go back to bed. Okay?"

Tristan weighed his options. On the one hand, he really wanted to throttle the jerk. On the other hand, he didn't want to have to explain to his mom why there was a tied-up monster in his room. She would probably get mad and wouldn't let him have oatmeal for breakfast.

Oatmeal was his favorite.

"Okay," Tristan said, hesitantly.

"Okay. Good." Wesley said, relieved. It wasn't that he was afraid of this little, yo-yo wielding gremlin, it was just that he was exhausted and desperately wanted to go to bed. He tapped a button on the WatchieTalkie on his wrist. "Charlie send me a wire."

Tristan jumped as a plunger flew through the window and stuck to the bedroom door with a loud *SPLUNK*. He whirled to face the window, readying a yo-yo and set to attack.

“Just breathe, kid,” Wesley cautioned. “You’ll live longer.”

Wesley calmly walked over to the plunger. Tied to the plunger was a rope leading back to the Raft, and tied to the rope was a grappling hook. Wesley plucked the grappling hook from the plunger and attached it to the strings binding the Big Boy. With a couple of tugs on the rope, the Raft reeled in the grappling hook, pulling the Big Boy along with it.

As the Big Boy passed by, Wesley shot him a taunting grin.

“Yeah keep smiling, kid,” the Big Boy snarled, “I’ll see you again.”

“Not where you’re going,” Wesley smirked, unconcerned.

Once the Big Boy was out of the room, Wesley grabbed a KIDS threat detector and plugged into the wall, launching into the typical spiel. “These things never hit the same house twice, but if you get scared, just hit this button.”

“I don’t get scared,” Tristan said.

Wesley began to suspect that this kid might be missing a bit of aura. He took a small flashlight from his vest and shined it in the kid’s eyes. “Did that thing touch you?”

“No,” he replied, shielding his eyes. “Hey, quit it, will you?”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, as soon as it took a step from the closet I knocked it out cold. Never knew what hit it.”

Wesley wasn’t sure he was convinced, but also wasn’t sure he cared. He put away his flashlight. “Alright kid, get some sleep.”

With that Wesley leapt from the window, leaving Tristan alone to try and make sense of what just happened. He looked around. No bogeyman. No weird kid. Even the glow stick thingy was gone. His room was back the way he wanted it. Perfect.

Well, almost perfect. He looked at the hole in the wall from when he missed hitting Wesley with his yo-yo. His mom would notice that for sure, and then he wouldn’t get oatmeal for a week.

“Ah, crud.”

CHAPTER 5

*Yo-Yos Always Come Back*

The next night, the hangar was buzzing with excitement. Seeing two new records and a Rotten Egg race, all in one shift, filled the entire Squad with an enthusiastic energy.

Except for Wesley, that is. He was just exhausted.

After the late call, Orion had to fly Wesley straight home so he'd be back in time for his mom to wake him for a dentist appointment. No time for a nap. After the appointment, Wesley had school. Then a piano lesson. Then he had to walk the dog. Then homework. Then wait for his parents to go to bed so he could start his shift with the Squad.

Luckily, Wesley had been doing this for six years and was good at hiding it when he was tired.

Not good enough to fool Charlie, though.

"You look beat," Charlie remarked, speaking softly so no one else would hear. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," Wesley replied with a weary grin. He should have known he couldn't pull one past Charlie, they'd known each other

too long. He playfully feigned concern, “but you know, just as a precaution, why don’t you suit up and fight the super-strong, lightning-quick, giant-fang-havin’ monsters tonight.”

Charlie thought Wesley was being serious, and it terrified him. Charlie was one of the smartest agents in the Force and as loyal as they come, but he wasn’t a fighter. No, no. Wesley belonged in battle. Charlie belonged in the rear with the gear. To fix this, a nervous Charlie figured he would have to do what he did best: motivate.

“Man, you look great tonight, Wesley,” he praised, laying the charm on extra thick. “Well rested and full of pluck. Ready to hit the streets. A spring in your step. A hero’s aura about you.”

“Uh-huh,” Wesley remarked, raising an eyebrow at Charlie’s impressive attempt at self-preservation.

“I would venture to say that there has rarely, neigh never, been a more impressive specimen of Agent than Wesley Darrell Walsh.”

“Charlie?”

“Yes, boss?”

“My middle name isn’t Darrell.”

“It isn’t?”

“Get to your station, Charlie.”

“Aye, aye, Captain!”

Charlie didn’t hesitate, jumping into the RAFT and strapping himself in before Wesley had any more crazy notions of swapping roles. Wesley followed closed behind.

“Second star to the right and straight on ‘til morning,” Wesley said, quoting his favorite book as he buckled in.¹⁰

¹⁰ Wesley’s favorite book was Peter Pan, about a boy that never grows up and gets to have great adventures with all his friends forever. What someone considers their favorite book can tell you a lot about who they are... and sometimes what they fear.

“Say what now?” asked a confused Orion, who didn’t read many books.

“Just take us out, Orion.”



Raft 42 soared over the peak of Mt. Diablo and swooped down above the oak trees and buckeyes that cover the mountain’s northern slope. The scrubby woods gave way to hilly grasslands, and then to the suburban streets of the valley cities. They had names like Walnut Creek and Concord and Pleasant Hill and Pacheco, but from 1,000 feet up they flowed together into a great sea of lights. With Charlie wordlessly scanning his instruments for signs of supernatural shenanigans and Wesley quietly trying to catch a bit of sleep, Orion was struck by the incredible beauty and peacefulness of it all. Pristine silence.

Boring, horrible, pristine silence.

Orion couldn’t take it.

“Brace for evasive maneuvers!” Orion announced.

Charlie spun his chair around nervously. “What? Why?” he asked nervously scanning the skies for incoming attackers.

“Um... training?” Orion responded, pleased with himself for his quick thinking.

“Don’t do it, Orion,” Wesley warned.

Orion flicked a switch on the console, blasting Joe Satriani’s *Summer Song* through the RAFT’s speaker system. He gave Wesley a sly grin. “Sorry, can’t hear you.”

Wesley started to form a very well-reasoned argument as to why it would be a very, very bad idea for Orion to ignore a direct order, but it was hard to get the words out while pressed against the back of his seat as the RAFT accelerated and flipped into a barrel roll. Wesley decided to focus on not swallowing his tongue. He would deal with Orion later.

With a flick of his wrist and a pull on the stick, Orion sent the Raft into a steep inverted dive right into the hollowed-out hilltop of the Clayton rock mine. Laughing like a maniac, he rolled the Raft 270 degrees to the left and pulled on the stick with all his might. As Orion performed a few dozen high-G turns¹¹ inches from the ground, the Raft kicked up a cloud of dust and sand from the floor of the mine. As he looped round and round, faster and faster, the cloud began to spin and whirl and swirl until it resembled a tornado. Orion watched with awe as he made several more laps of the mine. He'd never made a tornado before. He'd have to add this maneuver to the Raft pilots' manual.

Charlie would have stared in awe at the Raft-nado, too, but he was busy trying not to throw up. It was a battle he was losing. On lap 37... he lost.

"I think I'm going to..." Charlie screamed before being cut off by the sensation of his dinner coming back up to say hi. He clapped a hand over his mouth to try and hold it in. Because he was a swell guy, and because he had no desire to clean Charlie vomit from his cockpit, Orion decided to give Charlie a hand. He banked right and threw open the throttle, blasting the Raft into the night sky... and forcing Charlie's dinner to go back down into his stomach.

It was by far the most disgusting feeling Charlie had ever known. Years later, when Charlie was all grown up and hand long since forgotten about being a KIDS agent, he would still remember the time he had to swallow his own puke. He wouldn't quite remember why, but he knew it was somehow Orion's fault, and it would still make him mad.

¹¹ In a "high-G" turn you're spinning around so fast that the blood in your body starts getting pulled down toward your feet and it feels like you weigh 300 pounds – kind of like it feels when your Uncle Matt thinks it's funny to sit on you.

That night in the RAFT, however, Charlie felt too sick to be mad. He held his stomach and tried to get himself together. He wouldn't have long, as Orion soon spotted an oil refinery on the shore of Suisun bay – with its magnificent maze of pipes to fly over and under and through. Orion bit his lip in anticipation and gripped the throttle. As *Summer Song* hit its peak and Joe Satriani's bubbling guitar wailed over the Raft's speakers, Orion pulled the stick right and pushed the throttle into high gear.

This will be my masterpiece, he thought.

Or at least it would have been. Orion's masterpiece was ruined before it could begin by Wesley, who yanked the stick back, shooting the Raft into the night sky, and away from the gleaming aerial playground.

Orion snapped his head toward Wesley, annoyed. No one dared touched Orion's controls. Not even the Senior Agent.

"What are you doing?!" he asked angrily.

"I said turn off the music!" Wesley scolded.

Orion swatted the music off. "What's the big idea?" he demanded.

Before Wesley could answer, Logan chimed in over the radio. "RAFT 4-2, come in, RAFT 4-2 what's your status?"

"That's the big idea, you numbskull," Wesley said. "Headquarters has been trying to get us on radio for the last two minutes."

"Well I couldn't hear them 'cause of the music!" Orion said, as if it were a perfectly valid excuse. He knew it wasn't, but it was the best he could come up with right then and he hoped maybe Wesley would just let him bluff his way out of it.

Wesley would not.

They stared at each other for a tense moment before the radio chimed again.

"RAFT 4-2, come in, RAFT 4-2."

“Sorry, I’ve got to get this,” Orion said with a disarming, ain’t-I-a-stinker smile. He tapped the button for the radio. “Go for 4-2.”

“Orion, where the heck have you been?” Logan sounded annoyed. This was mostly because he was indeed quite annoyed.

Orion stumbled his way through an excuse, “Sorry, Logan, we had some interference from the... um... the ionization of the... uh... flux capacitor.” It had been a rough night for the part of Orion’s brain that was supposed to help him get out of the trouble other parts of his brain had gotten him into.

“Yeah, well, we’ve got a 10-70 Bravo for you in Martinez.”

Orion breathed a sigh of relief. It seemed Logan was letting him off the hook. “10-4, what’s the address?”

“7-7-5 Mt. Kennedy Drive.”

“10-4, we’re...” Orion started to answer, but was cut off by Wesley, who snatched the radio from his hand.

“Negative, dispatch,” Wesley answered into the radio. “That call was handled last night.”

“Negative 4-2, fresh call,” Logan insisted.

Wesley was getting annoyed. “Negative dispatch, I handled it.”

“Negative 4-2 this...”

“Don’t negative me, negative you,” Wesley interrupted.

“Negative yourself!”

“Logan, I’m about to come back to headquarters and show you the meaning of negative.”

“Listen to me, you jerk. I know you were there last night. This one was picked up by the scanner.”

“You mean those silly nightlight things we leave kids?” Wesley said, surprised. “Those work?” He always thought the threat detectors were just cheap nightlights meant to make scared kids feel better. He looked at Charlie, who could only shrug. This was news to him, too.

“Just go check it out, Wesley.”

“10-4, 49.”

Wesley handed the radio back to Orion. “Take us in Orion,” he said, before adding, “and step on it.”

Orion smiled.

Charlie did not.

“Oh, not again.”



With the Raft hovering outside of Tristan’s window, Wesley stood in the jump door. He tried to assess the situation, but couldn’t make anything out through the glaring reflection of a streetlight. He turned back to Charlie.

“What we got?” he asked.

Charlie slapped the side of his monitor, frustrated. “C’mon you stupid thing.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Thing must be on the fritz. It’s showing a Meanie standing by the closet door and another by the bed.”

“Two of ‘em?” Wesley asked, surprised. Everyone knew that bogeymen always hunted alone. Of course, before tonight they never attacked the same house twice, either.

“Must be a ghost image, I’m not sure which one is the real one.” Charlie flipped through a couple of screens on his monitor, he spotted something unusual. “Huh,” he said, “they kinda’ look like Red Rogues.”

Wesley cocked an eyebrow. “Aren’t those just a myth? No one’s ever caught one.”

“Yeah, probably.” Charlie jumped as he saw something on the monitor. “The one by the bed! He’s got the kid! Go! Go! Go!”

Wesley didn’t hesitate. He dove into Tristan’s room and sprang into action.

Wesley spotted Tristan clinging desperately to the steering wheel of his racecar bed as a strange-looking bogeyman yank him toward the closet door. Unlike other bogeymen, this one was tall and lanky with short, well-manicured, red fur. Instead being on top of his head, his horn grew from his chin, making him look like he had a beard. And on top of his head where a horn should be sat a very stylish hat.

Wesley could hardly believe it, it was a legendary Red Rogue.

Wesley stopped for the briefest of moments, awestruck at seeing a creature he'd only heard about in stories. It made him feel like a rookie again.

A cry for help from Tristan snapped him out of it. Wesley leapt over and grabbed Tristan by the forearm. He planted his feet on the bed and pulled Tristan with all his might, but couldn't free him from the Rogue's grip.

"Ow!" Tristan screamed. He felt like he was playing tug-of-war with his golden retriever... only he was the rope.

Wesley used his free hand to throw a dodgeball, but the Rogue just swatted it out of the air like an annoying bug.

"Nice try, kid," the Rogue snarled, "but you're not fast enough to hit me."

Wesley threw another, which the Rogue easily dodged.

"What did I tell you," the Rogue started to say, before the ball he dodged ricocheted off the closet wall and hit him in the back of the head. Stunned, he loosened his grip, freeing Tristan, who ran to his dresser to grab a yo-yo.

"I might not be fast enough to beat you," Wesley said with a smile, "but I'm more than smart enough."

Enraged, the Rogue briefly weighed his options. Wesley readied another dodgeball as Tristan turned to throw his yo-yo. Deciding it best to live to fight another day, the Rogue snarled and leapt into the closet.

He was gone.

“Thanks,” Tristan said. It wasn’t a word he was used to saying, and it felt gross.

“Guess you needed my help after all,” Wesley said as he deflated his dodgeball and put it in a vest pocket.

Tristan resented Wesley rubbing it in. “Well, yeah, it’s not exactly a fair fight when they double team you like that,” he said, feeling the need to defend his toughness.

Wesley looked around to make sure he didn’t drop anything. “Sorry to burst your bubble,” he said, “but these always work alone.”

“Yeah and they never hit the same house twice, right?” Tristan pointed at the floor in the middle of the room where another Red Rogue was lying unconscious. Wesley couldn’t believe it. How had he missed a six-foot pile of bright red fur sprawled out in the middle of the room?

“So, are you always wrong? Or just most of the time?” Tristan smirked.



With the unconscious Rogue safely stowed away on the Raft, Wesley took a moment to check in with headquarters via his wrist-worn WatchieTalkie. Except that’s not what it looked like to Tristan. To Tristan, it looked like Wesley was standing facing the corner talking to his hand.

“Yeah, I know,” Wesley whispered. Tristan couldn’t hear the other part of the conversation. In fact, he wasn’t sure there was another part of the conversation. He was starting to think that maybe this was just a crazy kid who liked to hang out outside his window. “But I’m telling you there were two ... yeah the kids fine ... I don’t really think that’s a great idea... Mr. Dogie, I’m telling ya’... Yes, sir.”

“If you’re just going to stand around all day, I’m going to charge you rent.”¹²

Wesley ignored Tristan. He’d just received an order he wasn’t thrilled about. “Yes, sir, I understand,” he said into his WatchieTalkie.

With a sigh, Wesley turned to Tristan. “I’m supposed to take you in to headquarters.”

“What if I say no?” Tristan asked, suspiciously.

Wesley, shrugged and made his way to the window. “Your choice. If you don’t want to take a ride in a flying hover jet to a secret base filled with the coolest spy gadgets ever...”

Tristan thought for a second. He thought about his favorite stories, the one’s where heroes went on great adventures. Those stories didn’t usually start with the hero saying, “no thanks, I’d rather just stay home.”

Looking out the window to the star-filled sky, Tristan spotted his favorite star.

The second one to the right.

“I’m in.”

¹² Tristan borrowed this line from his dad, who used it whenever he thought Tristan was being particularly lazy.

