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LUKE WHO'S TALKING



My brother is a superhero, and *I* am my brother.

Somewhere on the way back from a parallel Earth, Zack and I had swapped bodies. My eleven-year-old mind was in his fourteen-year-old body, and vice versa. I shuddered at the thought. I didn't even like wearing his hand-me-down trousers, so to think that I was in his actual skin? *Yeuch*.

I stared at him – *me* – across the floor of the tree house. I'd never seen myself like this before – mirrors don't tell you the truth, and my Evil Twin had better hair. (Side-note: lots of people have cousins who live in a different part of the country; I have a superpowered twin



in another dimension. Also, a cousin in Birmingham). I looked myself up and down. My Spider-Man T-shirt was as amazing on me as expected, but I didn't appear as tall as I'd hoped and I was definitely on the skinny side. Moreover, at that moment my face was pinched with concern, but I put that down to Zack.

He was frowning at Zorbon the Decider, representative of the High Council of Frodax Wonthreen Rrr'n'fargh, mysterious bestower of superpowers, and the garishly purple-costumed alien who'd landed us in this body-swap horror story. We'd travelled home from another universe together on his interdimensional bus earlier that afternoon. During the course of the journey, Zorbon had shrunk from the height of a basketball player to something approaching R2-D2 proportions. He explained that crossing dimensions could do strange things. No kidding.

As Zack glowered and Zorbon gave his best all-knowing expression, I realised for the first time that the unfortunate situation had thrown up one very interesting consequence. In all the fuss it had almost slipped me by. If I was Zack, then that meant...

"I have superpowers!"

I heard my brother let out a long groan. He could complain all he liked. I had more important matters

to attend to: I was desperate to try out my new-found abilities. First I'd go with a bit of telekinesis, then maybe I'd telepathically sneak into Dad's head and discover his secret Christmas-present hiding place, after that definitely some flying—

"They're not yours," Zack snapped. "They're mine."

"You didn't even want them in the first place," I reminded him. "They're in the right hands now. Technically they're still your hands, but I'm in control." I wiggled my fingers to demonstrate.

"Well, we've all seen what happens when *you* get powers."

He was referring to Stellar, my Evil Twin. And yes, it was true that he had made some questionable decisions while using his powers, but that didn't mean I would.

"Just don't muck about with them," Zack added despairingly.

"Should I even pretend I'm going to pay attention to that?"

I had superpowers. Finally! Sure, it wasn't exactly the way I'd hoped. Along with telekinesis, telepathy, flight and the rest, I had gained terrible dress sense and a one-sided longing for my neighbour's big sister. But still, I was in the body of a *superhero*. My greatest dream had become a reality. When Zorbon first visited the tree



house I had missed out on becoming Star Lad and my world was thrown into confusion. Today, the natural order of things had been restored.

I aimed my telekinetic power at a comic lying on the floor of the tree house and concentrated. “Up, up, up,” I mumbled. But the comic didn’t move. I didn’t give it a second thought. A minor teething problem at most.

What I needed was a mission. Something to test my new abilities.

That was Zorbon’s department. From what Zack had told me of their meetings, whenever Zorbon visited he always left a hot, spicy clue to what lay in store. Kind of like a trans-dimensional pizza delivery guy. Usually Zorbon hung around just long enough to tease this world-shattering threat before scarping. But today Zack wasn’t giving him a chance to get the slightest mystic prophecy into the conversation.

“Can’t you do something?” Zack pleaded, his voice – my voice – rising to a squeak of horror. “You must be able to change us back.”

“THAT IS BEYOND MY POWER,” Zorbon said. “HOWEVER, THE EFFECT IS TEMPORARY. YOU WILL RETURN TO YOUR OWN BODIES. IN TIME.”

“But when exactly?” Zack asked.

“HARD TO SAY,” said Zorbon.

“Try,” Zack insisted.

Maybe *this* was the mission. Body swaps happened a lot in comics. There were rules. “Presumably there’s some sort of fabled object we can go on a quest for that will reverse the effect. Y’know, a mysterious old lamp, an ancient stone, a fuzzy sweater?” The other two looked at me. “A *magically imbued* fuzzy sweater, of course.”

Zorbon shook his head gravely. Well, that was a poor show – what kind of curse didn’t have a fabled object to undo its effects? But just when it seemed as if the outlook was all doom and gloom, Zorbon raised one thin eyebrow.

“SOME SAY A REVERSE MAY BE TRIGGERED THROUGH STILLNESS AND SILENCE.”

Zack tutted at me in disgust. “No chance then. You can’t sit still for two minutes and you can’t keep your mouth shut for two seconds.”

Hanging out with my Evil Twin I’d got used to being insulted by myself, so I didn’t rise to the bait. It was clear that, for now at least, we were stuck this way. I looked out across the garden towards the house, where Mum and Dad were busy inside. I may have been craving an implacable foe, but there were already two in the kitchen. (“Implacable” means cold-hearted and ruthless, and is



not, as my friend Lara believes, a word to describe teeth resistant to cavities.)

“What are we going to tell *them*?” I muttered.

The last time they’d seen either of us was during a rampage by a world-eating monster in the town centre at the weekend. I’d had to give them the slip, ducking out of a rescue helicopter during the emergency evacuation. By my reckoning that had been two days ago.

I felt Zack at my side. “They must be going out of their minds with worry.”

This would be the second time we’d returned home following a cataclysmic event, armed with a flimsy explanation for our absence. Once our parents got over their relief that we hadn’t been squished beneath a giant interdimensional sandal, they were bound to grow suspicious. And there’s only so many times you can play the I-got-bumped-on-the-head-and-suffered-temporary-amnesia card.

“THEY ARE NOT CONCERNED ABOUT YOU. AT LEAST, NO MORE THAN USUAL.”

“How do you know that?” asked Zack.

I narrowed my eyes in suspicion at Zorbon. “Yeah, what have you done?”

“I MERELY SUBSTITUTED THEIR—”

“Minds? Memories?”

“TEABAGS.”

“Come again?”

“IN YOUR LANGUAGE IT IS CALLED *THE INFUSION OF OBLIVION*. THEY WILL REMEMBER THE EVENTS OF THE LAST FEW DAYS BUT NOT YOUR ROLE IN THEM.”

“You drugged them?” Zack was outraged.

I was not so offended. A drink that made your parents forget what you’d done? *Yowzah!* “Got any spare?”

“THERE IS ONE MORE THING.” Zorbon pulled himself to his full height, which currently lay somewhere around my belly button. “IT IS VITAL THAT YOU PAY HEED TO MY NEXT WORDS.”

The air crackled with anticipation. Here it came – Zorbon the Decider’s Big Mystic Message. Would his latest forecast be up there with “Nemesis is coming”? We were about to find out.

“DO NOT LET THEM OPERATE HEAVY MACHINERY FOR TWENTY-FOUR HOURS.”

As far as uncanny prophecies went that was something of a let-down.

“Is that it?” I asked, not trying to conceal my disappointment. “What about the giant space lizards?”

Zorbon’s bald head creased with puzzlement. “I DID NOT MENTION ANY GIANT SPACE LIZARDS.”



“Exactly,” I said. “Where’s my Evil Horde? Army of the Undead? Come on, I’ve got superpowers now – I need a supervillain to battle.”

“Well, I don’t,” Zack sighed. “All I seem to do lately is avert one apocalypse after another. Honestly, I’d love a break from saving the world.”

I started to complain but it was no use. Zorbon wouldn’t be dropping another hair-raising adventure in our laps this time. After clarifying that he would also not be dishing out free samples of the Infusion of Oblivion, he announced his departure. He had to be on the other side of the universe by supper-time. With a swish of his purple cape he swept out. He may not have been leaving us with a mission but he could answer one thing for me.

“Keeping busy then?” I asked him.

Zorbon paused, one foot already out of the door. “YES.”

“Lot of Deciding to do, I imagine.”

“LOTS.” He turned to me. “I FEEL THE WEIGHT OF YOUR UNASKED QUESTION, LIKE A REFRIGERATOR IN THE WIND.”

He was right. Weird, but right. I’d been burning to ask him this particular question since we were introduced on board the 227 bus on the way back from my Evil Twin’s world. I didn’t waste any more time. “Here’s the thing.

Zack was a mistake, right?”

“Hey!” my brother objected.

“What I mean is, when you showed up here that first time to give out superpowers, you meant to choose me. Didn’t you?”

Zorbon’s frame filled the lower half of the doorway. A gust of wind caught his tea-towel-sized cape and it flapped around his shoulders. He gazed up at me, the stars on his chest pulsing. “ONE DAY, LUKE PARKER, YOU WILL COME TO UNDERSTAND.” Without uttering another word he turned on his tiny heel and left.

Un-ac-cept-able. That was no kind of answer. Unless... “So that’s what this whole Freaky Friday thing is about?” I shouted after him, shaking my fist at his departing figure. “Well, if you think by swapping lives with my brother I am going to experience a deeper and more sympathetic understanding of him, then forget it. I refuse.”

But Zorbon had gone. He melted into the xenon mist from whence he came. (You just disappear into regular mist, but when it comes to notable varieties of mist – like xenon, or eldritch – you can only return *from whence*).

“This is disastrous,” said Zack. He paced around the tree house and wailed. “I have exams in less than three months – if you’re still in my body, I’ll fail. Everything.



You're going to ruin my life."

My brain-box brother had just sat several mock GCSEs a year early – the real ones were up next. I ignored him and strolled out of the tree house.

"This reminds me of that time I borrowed Dad's car," I said, climbing down the rope ladder, which was a lot easier in Zack's body than it ever had been in my own.

"If I recall correctly," said Zack, stumbling down behind me, "you managed to reverse halfway along the driveway before veering into a hedge."

I waited for him on the ground, grinning at the memory. "Pretty impressive bit of driving, for an eight-year-old. One point three litres of diesel power – all mine to wield. And now this." I gestured up and down my temporary body.

Zack frowned. "Are you comparing me to a Fiat Punto?"

He missed his footing on the next rung, let out a cry and fell the last metre, landing with a thud. He grumbled as I helped him to his feet. "How do you manage to get through a day in this body?"

We crossed the garden and went into the house. Mum and Dad sat at the kitchen table, deep in discussion. Next to two empty cups of tea, a glossy brochure lay open before them.

"This is great. I never win anything," said Dad.

"Uh, don't forget you won my hand in marriage," said Mum.

"Yeah, that was a very odd scratch card."

Mum gave a cry of mock outrage and then Dad held her hand and I could tell that they were about to smooch. I coughed loudly. Mum turned at the interruption, peering at us with laser-sharp interest. "You two seem ... different. What's going on?"

For a second I was sure that Zorbon's fancy tea hadn't worked.

"We've swapped bodies," announced Zack.

I had to give him credit – it was an excellent response. Mum and Dad would never believe something that unlikely.

Dad sat up. "Like when Superman swapped bodies with Batman? Or when Superman swapped with the Flash, or Superman and Jimmy Olsen, or Superman and—"

He reeled off several more examples. This body-swap thing really did happen a lot to Superman.

Mum rolled her eyes. "Why do I even ask?" She drew our attention to the brochure on the table. "You're just in time to hear the good news – we're going on holiday."

"After everything that's happened," said Dad, "it'll



be good to get away for a few days. Let the dust settle.”

I knew exactly what he meant. On Saturday a thirty-storey mega-demon called Gordon the World-Eater had devastated the town centre. It was entirely possible that dust from disintegrated buildings still hung in the air after his rampage.

“But what about school?” said Zack.

Mum shot him a puzzled look. “Why the sudden interest in school, Luke?”

My brother had forgotten that he was in my body. He’d asked a question I would never raise. We were both going to have to look out for that pitfall. Thankfully, Mum let it pass. “I thought you knew – your school’s been closed.”

“Ofsted?”

“No,” said Mum. “Freeze-ray.”

She explained that a stray blast from Gordon the World-Eater had struck the school, transforming it into a massive ice cube. The official assessment was that the building would take a week to thaw out. Brilliant! However, it didn’t alter the dire fact that we were leaving town. That was unfortunate. Because of Star Lad’s presence, our hometown had become ground zero for interdimensional monster incursions and alien attacks. It would be just typical if another one happened while I

was away.

“But we can’t afford to go on holiday,” I said. “You put all our money into the comic shop.”

Dad nodded. “That’s the best part – the trip isn’t going to cost us a penny.” He held up a voucher edged in gold and began to read the curly script printed across the front. “Congratulations, Parker family. In light of the recent destruction caused to your town by the sudden appearance of a giant, angry interdimensional being, we would like to invite you to relax, recover and reinvigorate at the south-west’s most thought-provoking vacation destination. Over the coming weeks we hope to help as many families as possible from your neighbourhood to enjoy an all-inclusive, mindful mini-break at Great Minds Leisure Park.”

“Never heard of it.” I thought I knew all the major theme parks, but this one had passed me by. I took the brochure from Dad. Beneath the name was its slogan: *You Think You’re So Smart!* The “o” in “So” had been replaced by a logo, which at first I took to be two halves of cauliflower stuck together, but then saw was in fact an illustration of a brain. With a sinking feeling I flicked through the rest of the brochure. Ten minutes ago I had hoped to embark on a hazardous mission requiring my new superpowers. Now it looked like the only thing I’d



be embarking on was a boring car journey to a theme park designed for the kind of kid who loves crosswords and brainteasers.

“This place looks amazing,” said Zack with sickening enthusiasm. “Great Minds, here we come!”

2 PUGS IN HATS



“Fascinating,” said Lara, studying me intently. “You’re Zack on the outside but Luke on the inside.”

“You are like a delicious filling.” Serge sat close beside her on the floor of her bedroom.

We had gathered at Lara’s house, two doors down from mine on Moore Street, to hold an emergency meeting of the Superhero Covert Alliance Reaction Force (S.C.A.R.F.) and discuss the ramifications (which meant *consequences* and not, as Lara was convinced, little castles built to protect medieval sheep from rustlers). As well as being the word-mangling Lara Lee she was also Dark Flutter, one of only two superheroes in the world.

