

# There's No Place Like Home

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The crowd's roar was almost too much for the stadium to contain. The air itself was vibrating. Like a pressure cooker, the squeals seeped out of any cracks in the walls and into the outside world. There was no rhythm, no rise and fall. Just one continuous rumble and scream.

The stadium looked like the coliseum. Several coliseums actually, stacked on top of each other. Looking from the outside one would see an impossible, wooden skyscraper that stretched into the clouds. From the inside one would think one had fallen down the well of a giant.

This monstrous building was made of wood and stone, just like its inspiration. But instead of the traditional wooden planks and marble blocks, it had modern oak chairs with velvet padding. Each chair even had a lever for adjustable height. There were a quarter of a million of these seats, and the crowd had filled every one.

The people were old, the people were young. There were people of all races and all genders. They were an uncanny, perfect representation of what people could look like. The only pattern that they made, was the silver and green colours they sported in their clothes and in paint on their faces. That, and their uncontrolled revelry.

But all of a sudden, the crowd's roar turned off. Not a whisper was left. Every spectator now stared down towards the stadium's ground where a five-metre tall curved ramp stood.

At the very edge of the ground, a vehicle, more monster than truck, faced towards the ramp. *The Conqueror*, as they called it, was the definition of overkill. It was taller than the ramp, and nearly as wide. Iron squares layered over its body in a patchwork of armour. Instead of wheels it had two iron pylons functioning as rollers. Instead of a bumper bar it had an electric utility pole cut in half and welded to the front. It was form over function, and it didn't have much form.

The truck revved, nearly shaking itself apart with vibrations. The iron squares wobbled and several fell off. The ramp remained inanimate, but somehow it looked scared.

With a bang of a god-only-knows concoction of diesel, petrol and unnamable things, the car shot off like debris from an explosion. Dust clouds erupted in its wake and immediately obscured the view of hundreds of people in the crowd. They screamed in blind passion regardless. The roar of the entire crowd fired back in the air, but it found a fair fight for territory with the thundering sound of *The Conqueror*.

The truck smacked into the ramp and rocketed into the air. It spun and twisted with surprising control. Like a bedazzled Indian elephant, its elegance was a match for its brutality. It climbed higher and higher, surpassing the top of the first coliseum. It didn't want to stop. Gravity had lost sight of the truck and was frantically trying to find it again.

There was a bang. And a little red object shot out from a hidden hole underneath the stands. As

the car reached the peak of its jump, the object passed into the front compartment and out the other side, before exploding into dazzling flares of silver and green. The fireworks spelled out a single word. *DAVE!*

The truck finally listened to physics and began to fall back down to earth. It twisted itself in a way that didn't seem to obey the laws of angular momentum. Like an olympic diver, it angled directly down before landing at the perfect location. It hit the ramp at just the right spot and shot away along the ground, before thundering to a stop.

The crowd exploded to their feet, the noise reaching another level yet again. They raised their arms up and down so fast it looked like they were trying to fly away. It was the best day of everyone's life and they were beginning to lose control of themselves. One woman was so touched by emotion, she grabbed an elderly man standing next to her and kissed him on the face. Dozens of people followed suit, making out with their neighbours on the spot. Several spectators proposed. They hadn't planned to, it just felt appropriate at the time.

Underneath the stands, dozens of cheerleaders, dressed in a golden uniform and holding green pom-poms the size of beach balls jogged onto the ground. Upon reaching the truck, they surrounded it in a ring and began a chant.

"Dave, Dave! He's so brave! Let's all rave coz he's our fave!"

They stood around the truck for a whole minute, waiting for the man called Dave to show his face. But nothing happened.

Slowly, the door swung open. But no hand had pushed it. Several bolts rolled out of the open door and dropped onto the sandy floor. They had been shaken loose from the jump, unhinging the door.

The crowd cheered at seeing a response. The cheerleaders screamed in delight. Pom-poms rose in the air. Several of the cheerleaders fainted at the thought of even seeing the man they called Dave. But when the first three cheerleaders stepped up to the truck and peered inside, they were stunned by what they saw.

With his knees tucked up on the seat and his hands hugging his own chest, an old man with a bald head and a white beard hung his face over the wheel, sobbing.

"Stop it," he seemed to be speaking to no one but himself. "Please. Just stop it."

The cheerleaders exchanged confused glances, they slowly lowered their pom-poms, unsure of what to do. Eventually, they retreated back and hid in the ring with the rest of the others. Their sense of unease began to spread to the rest of the group. Even the crowd had noticed something was wrong. The stadium was now only filled with a light buzz.

Then there was a fizzle.

It grew into a crackle.

The dust that was still hanging in the air from when it had exploded in the wake of the truck whisked around into a small vortex. Small sparks of electricity snapped inside. Then there was a pop, and the dust disappeared. In its place stood a short, purple haired woman with a purple purse and red heels.

The first thing she noticed was the ring of cheerleaders surrounding her.

She made a cheesy grin. “Oh my! All for me?” she laughed at herself. Then she looked at their pom poms. “Oh no. My design was *silver* and green.”

She reached into her purse, and removed a long, thin, purple remote. Then, pointing it at the cheerleaders she pressed a button. In an instant, their golden clothes turned into silver. At the same time they also froze in place like mannequins. The entire buzz of the stadium cut off into nothing as the entire world seemed to freeze.

Dio, unperturbed by the still-life people around her, turned left and right, unable to see the hulking tank.

“I’m behind you, Dio,” cried out Dave.

Dio turned around. “Oh. There you are.” She spotted Dave inside the truck, his eyes still shone with moisture.

“Oh no,” she said. “It’s that bad?”

Dave dropped his head onto the wheel. The truck rocketed out a blast that would flatten a forest. Dave barely seemed to notice, but Dio leapt back, falling onto her backside and out of her heels.

“Eeeee!” she said.

“Sorry, Di,” said Dave. lifting his head off the wheel only as much as needed to stop the horn. His body remained drooped over in a horrible posture.

“I just don’t *feel* anything anymore,” he said.

Di gathered herself from the floor and wiped off the dust.

“Oh that’s okay,” she said. “There’s nothing wrong with you.”

She grabbed onto the frame of the truck and, after a couple of failed attempts, hoisted herself up and sat in the passenger seat next to Dave.

“Did you want to go to the station for a break?” she said.

Dave sunk his head below the dashboard, nearly touching his nose to his thigh.

“Yes,” he mumbled.

“Your wish is your fairy godmother’s command,” said Dio.

Then she winked and pressed another button on her remote. Dust swirled around them, creating another vortex. After a few zips and zaps, a crackle and a pop, Dave and Dio disappeared into thin air.

The stadium began to move again. Everyone looked around at their surroundings with confused expressions on their faces. After several seconds, a cheerleader turned and glared at another cheerleader next to her.

“I told you we weren’t real.”

Dave paced back and forth inside an open, purple room. He was deep in thought. Dio lounged back on a purple chair, perusing through an assortment of files underneath her purple desk.

Everything in the room was purple, save for a window which looked out onto a small, blue planet. Small that is, as far as planets go.

“Were there not enough fans?” Dio asked as she rifled through her papers.

“No, no it’s not that,” said Dave. He stared straight forward as he walked around.

“Oh. Here’s a good one.” Dio lifted out a file and laid it on her desk. “Dream Planet?” she said. “Theme parks and arts festivals. I’m pretty good at roller coasters. I once designed one called The World Serpent, it circled the whole globe. All the retirees loved it-”

“I don’t really like heights,” Said Dave.

Dio tilted her head. “But you launched twenty metres in the air all the time on Daredevil Destination.

“I was just trying to... impress the cheerleaders.”

“Dave, they’re programmed to be impressed.”

“Yeah I know. That’s the thing...” David sat down on the floor and crossed his legs like a school kid. He was sixty seven years of age.

“It doesn’t mean anything anymore,” he said. “I didn’t earn any of it. I never learnt how to drive like that, I don’t even know if it’s possible. I mean, can turning the wheel really change the angle of a car in midair?”

Dio just smiled and kept quiet.

“It was all the truck,” continued Dave. “Or the planet, or however it is you make it happen. And the people, they’re-”

“-Fully realistic, semi-biological automatons,” Said Dio. “They react as naturally as their brains tell them to. It’s not a lie. They may not be real people, but they react as they genuinely want to. Their personalities are just... tailored.”

“Yeah. But they don’t feel real. At least not anymore.”

Dio frowned. “Hmm. Maybe you need a bigger changeup.”

She leant back down behind her desk. Once out of view, her frown changed to a sly smile. She took a moment to clear it from her face before standing back up with another file.

“What about Beautiful Bay?” she asked.

“No.”

“Hedonistic Harbour?”

“No.”

“Gluttonous Glacier? The Serene Sea? Marvelous Mountains? ”

“No.”

“...Pleasurable Paradise?”

Dave blushed. “No. That’s not for me. Not at my age.”

“Well, what option do you want?” Said Dio.

“It’s not about the options. It’s, well it’s this whole charade.” He paused, and stared out the window at the little blue planet.

The smile crept back onto Di’s face. Her hand moved underneath the desk and hovered over a bright red file labeled *Operation: There’s No Place Like Home*.

Dave looked at Dio. “Am I- Am I able to go back?”

“Go back?” said Dio, she raised her eyebrows. “To Earth? I have no idea. I’ll have to check.”

She rifled through the documents aimlessly, holding onto the file she had already selected.

“Let me see... Let me s- ah, maybe this one,” she pulled out the red file and slid out a sheet of paper. She blew on it, as if dust would spring off, but it was squeaky clean.

Dio spoke with an exaggerated surprise. “It seems there is such a protocol. But it’s very peculiar I have to say. Why would you ever want to go back?”

Dave stayed silent for several seconds. He kept staring at the planet, his brain ticking. Then his face softened and his shoulders relaxed. He turned to Dio and spoke.

“I think what I really need is-”

“-*family*.” Dio covered her mouth with her hand. She had only whispered, but she had only meant to think.

“Did you say something?” said Dave.

“No.” Replied Dio.

“Oh,” said Dave.”I thought you did. Well anyway, what I really need is my family and friends again. The ones that are still alive that is. Even if they aren’t perfect. I think I could even reconnect with my son, if we can forgive each other.”

“Oh that’s so amazing.” Dio stamped the file without looking down at her desk. “No one’s ever done that before,” she whipped out her remote and scanned it over the file. “That’s really so beautiful,” she punched several buttons on her remote and it dinged in response. “You’d be willing to give up your very own, purpose built, retirement planet just to live with your family again? Even if you don’t get a refund?”

Dave turned away from the planet. “I don’t get my retirement fund back?”

Dio ignored him. “So you’re telling me that you’ve come to realise that relationships can’t be manufactured. That they can only be built between two people with agency?”

Dave was disarmed by the question. “Yeah, I suppose.”

“Are you telling me that both the struggles and the effort that is required to build a relationship are necessary for the relationship to have meaning?”

“Er. Yes?”

“And that although the people in your life may have hurt you, it is better to forgive than forget.”

“...Are you sure this hasn’t happened before?”

Dio pressed a button on her remote and a pole shot out of the ground next to Dave. A big red button sat on the top.

“Well if you press that button, you can return to your regular life,” she said. “It’s such a brave thing to do, I have to say.”

“Oh,” said Dave. “Well...”

“Unless you want to go back to Daredevil Destination?”

Dave flinched. The cheerleader’s chanting echoed in his mind. “No, no. Here I come, Earth.” He smacked the button. A vortex of dirt began to spin around him. “I’m going to say hello to my son again.”

After a snap and a crackle, Dave vanished.

No sooner had he disappeared than Dio’s remote began to flash. A recording began to play the frail voice of an elderly woman.

“Dooee, my lovely dear. This Pleasure Paradise is not working out for me. I want to ask you a few things about perhaps seeing my family again.”

Dio grinned. She wrote a new line on the file, *New quarterly expenses - Dave: 0\$*. Then she walked away from her desk and pressed her remote. A new vortex materialised around her, this one was made from sand.

Moments before teleporting away she clicked her heels together and chuckled.

“There’s no place like home”.