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"HERE is the situation. I currently have two fingers wrapped around your throat. I bet you want to ask, Why is that important? Well, I'll tell you. I have a special ability that allows me to manipulate electricity. The strength of the charge I release depends on a number of factors. Ten, to be precise. Essentially, the number of fingers that I have in contact with a surface at any point in time. With me so far?"

Zero nodded.

"Excellent. Right now, with two fingers, you should be feeling mild discomfort and a little current flowing through your body. If I were to apply another, however..."

The man pressed a third finger against Zero's throat.

Instantly, Zero felt a charge course through his body. His muscles contracted painfully and his teeth jammed together with an audible click. A rush of electricity passed through his brain, rising in intensity as if an invisible dial were being turned up from one to ten.

The man removed his finger and Zero felt his whole body go limp.

"You will have experienced muscle spasms and brain freezes with three fingers. Now, if I were to use four fingers—"

"Don't use four fingers!" pleaded Zero.

"Smart man. Four fingers would be the point of no return. We would be talking about a heart attack. So now that I have your attention, I want you to listen very carefully. Nod to me if you understand."

Zero nodded once more. His gaze fell on a tomb in the center of the room, and he blanched. He hoped he wasn't going to end up alongside his current occupant.

"Music to my ears! Now, I am going to ask you a few questions and I want you to answer as truthfully as possible. If I get even the slightest impression you are lying to me, I might just have to fry your brains. Understood?"

Again, Zero nodded.

"Are you in league with Lenoir?" the voice demanded.

"I don't even know who that is!"

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"Good. Are you quillux?"

"A quillux?" Zero asked, confused.

"Foul demon creatures that take the shape of children until they sneeze and become fourteen-foot-tall beasts that can punch holes through reinforced Plutonian concrete."

"No, I'm not a quillux."

"You're not private detective sent by my ex-wife to—"

"No I'm not!"

"Alright, alright, just checking. You know you can never be too careful in my line of business!"

Zero heard him sniff the air.

"What's that smell?" the voice grunted.

"Draxlaxian blue cheese."

"Well, it smells like death's underpants. Now you listen here, I'm going to release you, but I want you to remember the feeling of my fingers across your throat. Know that my ability is not just effective when I touch things. I can zap things from a distance too."

Zero felt the man's hold relax, and he stumbled forward, clutching his throat.

He turned to look at the man and started.

Zero was staring at a tall creature the size of a bear and covered in white fur. It had a snout like a pig and two canines that jutted out from under its lower lip. It had deep-set yellow eyes with piercing blue irises, like the little crystals mined on the surface of Neptune 4. It wore a black-and-white striped shirt like a prisoner.

The creature barely registered Zero's shock. It began to pace with his hands behind its back, mumbling things under its breath.

"What mess have you found yourself in Wander ... I don't have much time ... How will I find a worthy successor...?"

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A thought dropped into Zero's mind.

"You're the one who arrived in the whizzer!" he exclaimed.

The beast stopped pacing and looked at him.

"Perhaps I am. Why?" asked the beast.

Zero stood up straight and cleared his throat. This was an excellent opportunity to try out his new sales pitch.

"Perfect, because I came to help you. I own a rescue company, see," said Zero, beaming. He held up his backpack as if that would settle the matter.

"A rescue company?" asked the beast.

Zero nodded. "That's right. Zero Worries. We specialize in assisting stranded space travelers."

Zero fumbled inside his coat and pulled out a tattered flyer. He made a vain attempt to smooth it out and then handed it to the beast.

"Have ever heard of Bobby Adjanke?" asked Zero.

The beast shook his head.

"He was a bank robber. He crashed out here while running away from the space force. I helped him get some disguises and a phone call to his associates. What about Linda Maloune?"

The beast shook his head again.

This was going badly. Talking with the beast was like adding milk to a cup of black coffee that never grows lighter. He was a black hole impervious to Zero's commercial arguments and natural charms, but Zero did not despair.

"It doesn't really matter. What matters is I offer three tiers of services: Scorpion, Viper and Komodo. With the Scorpion option for 30.99 berries, you get the standard rescue, food, and drinks package with a five-minute phone call to anywhere in the galaxy—toll charges apply. The Viper option gets you all that and a tour of the

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Ifanabe temple as well as a three-day pass that exempts you from muggings by the Desert Bunnies and having your whizzer ransacked for parts. Now with the Komodo option—my personal favorite—you get all the above, plus whizzer repair and maintenance, daily massages, unlimited access to the Goober, a VIP visit to the City of Children, disguises, and legal representation.”

Which was not technically true. For legal representation, he depended on Jim McCray, an old hermit who used to be a member of the intergalactic Bar Association and now worked for the Space Mafia. He got cursed by one of his clients (a space witch) after he lost a case, and now spent most of his days thinking he was a Plutonian bullfrog. His availability was hit or miss.

The Komodo option was the best value for customers, but Zero’s least profitable option since it involved outsourcing a lot of the work. Not to mention the criminal exposure. Dirty Bottoms was a Desert Bunny who would often extort Zero in return for his services, but he did cook incredibly well.

“How much would it cost for you to be quiet?”

Zero did some rough calculations with his fingers but stopped when he caught sight of the beast’s fiery gaze.

“Just kidding, boss.” Zero chuckled halfheartedly. “For you, I can do that for free.”

“Good. Do you have any food?” the beast asked.

A customer request! This was something Zero could work with. He opened his knapsack. The beast watched him hungrily as he pulled out packets of food.

“How much?” asked the beast.

“2.99 berries...”—the beast held his thumb and his index finger a few inches apart, a spark playing in the space between—“but I’ll give you these as a free sample,” Zero added quickly.

“How nice of you,” he said, taking the packets from Zero.

“Anything to make a customer happy,” Zero replied, laughing hollowly.

It would be hard for Zero to ever save enough money to pay for his Saba guild

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applications under these circumstances. He made quick calculations in his head and reasoned that he could get by with offering two packets for free. But the beast had collected five packets of Komodo jerky and half a dozen cricket snacks. Zero sighed as he pictured his profits dwindling.

The beast helped himself to the packets of food with a ferocity that made Zero flinch. Zero knew a lost cause when he saw one. He sighed and was turning around to leave when he noticed a briefcase leaning against the entrance and a small pyramid-shaped object that had fallen out of it. As Zero got closer he saw it was black but had intricate Thunderbolt designs on each side. It was scratched and chipped from years of usage.

Zero turned and looked at the beast, who was popping cricket snacks into his mouth, packaging and all.

“Sir, I think you may have forgotten this—” began Zero as he reached down and grabbed hold of the pyramid. His hand felt as if it was being welded to it. Zero watched with growing amazement as caterpillars of light crawled across his hand. He winced as he felt a current enter his skin and flow up his arm like magma sluicing through his veins.

There was a blazing flash and Zero was blasted backward as if he had been shoved in the chest by a space troll. He collapsed on the floor.

Zero’s skin prickled with sweat. He clutched his right elbow with his left hand. His arm felt like cold vapor was blowing through his bone marrow. He looked up at the beast and found his confusion mirrored perfectly on its face. The two yellow orbs of its eyes grew big like the lights of an oncoming train.

The beast stared at Zero as if seeing him for the first time. He looked from the pyramid to Zero and back again several times before rushing to Zero’s side.

“Your arms,” the beast commanded. “Show me.”

Zero held them out.

The beast grabbed his right wrist and peeled back his sleeve.

Glowing on his forearm was a strange symbol.

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It was in the shape of an oval, and showed a planet with orange and purple streaks and a thunderbolt at its center. Around the planet was a great ring.

A Kobasticker.

Somewhere outside the temple there came a rumble that quickly turned into a roar. The building shook, causing sand to trickle down from the ceiling. Then, as quickly as it had started, the chaos stopped, leaving the temple eerily quiet.

"We don't have time. It must be him. He must have followed me to this planet," the beast said urgently. "Go! He must not find you here!" He pushed Zero toward the hall.

Adodo, E. (2022). *Children of stardust*. Norton Young Readers, an imprint of W. W. Norton & Company.