

# CHALK

A Short Story by Louie Pronstroller

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Iridescent green droplets collected on the glass and streaked in wiggly lines down the lightly tinted window panes. It had just rained and the second moon was starting to rise drowsily above the cloudy horizon. The sky took on a pink lemonade orange glow as I spotted a few stars starting to peek through the velvety marshmallow fluff of pastel blue clouds.

**"I need ice cream."**

I was half-asleep and enjoying the scenic view from my window seat when a cold robotic voice hissed over the intercom. It repeated its demand for dessert after a few seconds of static.

**"I...need...ice cream."**

I was securely buckled into my seat since we were mid-flight.

I remained seated as I craned my neck around to check to see if any other passengers heard that irritatingly demanding voice...

Hmm.

How odd.

The cabin was quiet.

Too quiet.

I squinted into the dimly lit space.

No one else was here!

19 other seats remained empty, their puffy cushions encased in sterile tear-away white plastic sheets with shiny metal security belts neatly tucked into each armrest.

How did I not notice 19 other stops and 19 various organisms being dropped off this rocket?

Sure, one-way rocket flights these days were 99% automated, but you still had that 1% of human brain matter attached to your rocket pilot, the ship's biomecontroller.

Even with the sudden downpour of acid rain a few hours ago, I guess this was one of those exceptionally smooth flights.

But I'm still wondering why I'm the lone passenger.

**"I. NEED. ICE. CREAM."**

I replied out loud, "WHO is this anyway? And, what's with the ice cream? That hasn't been sold in this galaxy for decades!"

Static buzzed over the intercom, but there was no voice.

It sounded like "it" was thinking.

The static cleared its scratchy metallic throat. (If static could make such a sound...)

"*ahem!* Oh, human, you know what ice cream *is?*!"

A hint of incredulity and surprise crept into its tin can voice.

I replied in a matter-of-fact tone, "Of course. I practically lived on a diet of cookies, milk, candy bars, and cereal mixed into ice cream when I was a kid. I had a fun childhood."

I reminisced fondly of those sticky sweet memories of my sugar-loaded breakfast time. My reverie was immediately broken by a harsh buzzing.

The static grew louder and the intercom speaker emitted this audible grumble.

It squawked inquisitively, "What IS childhood?"

I raised an eyebrow at its question.

This was like explaining the birds and the bees to someone that never encountered birds nor bees. (Not to mention the creature's potential lack of knowledge about human-based symbolism...and let's not get into American slang...)

I replied to the machine, trying my best to explain, "Childhood is a human developmental stage where these young organisms learn new things about the world and learn about themselves."

The static made a new sound, "Awwwwwwk!"

I wasn't sure if it meant to say "OK" or if the word distorted a random sound.

The static went quiet.

I strained to hear. Dead silence.

“Hello?”

It didn't reply. No buzzing.

I HAD to find out where this tin can voice was coming from. In my world, you have a right to know who, or what, was asking you for ice cream.

I peered into the dimly lit room.

The cabin seemed empty.

No spaces were large enough for anyone or anything to hide. (And there was still no ice cream to be found!)

I needed to walk around to investigate further.

I unbuckled my seat belt, undoing the safety harness across my chest and placing the metal and nylon contraption into the next seat. I kept my parachute backpack on in case the rear doors automatically opened for the drop-off point.

I tried to talk out loud once more to persuade the machine into a conversation.

“Say we found an ice cream replicator, or a source for the ingredients to make ice cream, what flavor would you like to eat?”

The static whirred to life, crackling over the intercom.

It drew out a word, “Chaaaaaaaawwwkk...”

“Wait a second, chalk is not a flavor,” I responded as I made a *bleah!* face. I could only imagine how disgustingly unpalatable a cold scoop of chalk-flavored ice cream would be. Who would eat that crap. And, why chalk?

The machine replied, “No, no. It just SOUNDS like chalk. Not the taste...”

I heard it thinking.

Then, the realization hit me.

A lightbulb went on in my head.

It talks.

It speaks.

But it doesn't UNDERSTAND.

This voice must be coming from the ship's pilot, the biomecontroller!

It probably had a defective brain matter chip.

I walked up the aisle past a row of seats and slid open the door separating the cabin from the pilot's cockpit.

A heavy black fireproof curtain blocked my view. I held a fistful of dark fabric and pulled the material aside.

A creature looked up at me from an area next to the pilot controls and squawked loudly, “Chocolate!”

I looked straight into its eyes as it continued.

“The ice cream would *have* to be choc...choc...chocolate,” the creature excitedly stuttered, clearly enjoying the sound of the word.

I looked at it in disbelief.

No, it couldn't be.

No way.

I blinked my eyes and shook my head, visually digesting its form as my brain attempted to process what I was seeing.

I looked at it again.

And then, I SAW it.

The biomecontroller unit was clearly someone's weird science experiment.

It was a bird-like creature with two eyes on opposite sides of a large beak, tiny claws above and below its puffed out chest, two sets of wings and a fan-tail of sorts.

It had thin colorful straight swatches of colors lined along its beak, similar to a jungle toucan if you ran the colors of its beak through a digital printer. Its beak looked exactly like a lobster claw.

The texture of its body was what made it look so strange.

Instead of feathers like a bird, it had armor plating. The orange red scalloped shell of a boiled lobster served as its skin.

I've never seen a bioengineered toucan lobster before.

This was a first.

Was it a *toubster* or a *lobcan*?

I stared at it.

It stared back at me with its round comical googly eyes.

It said something.

**“Wake up.”**

Huh?

It repeated itself.

**“Wake. UP.”**

I rubbed my eyes and shook my head to clear the cobwebs out of my brain.

My eyes felt heavy.

I was awake, right?

I blinked and raised my head towards the lights.

Wow, was I just dreaming?

I'm back in the office at my desk with my computer screen flashing an ad of a rocket ship blasting into a pink orange sky with pastel blue clouds. My office chair was securely grounded in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

My co-worker Mike was looking at me.

I blinked groggily at him trying to get the sand out of my eyes.

Apparently, I fell asleep at my desk working on a presentation. This is what I get for putting in too many late nights at the office, disjointed caffeine-induced dreams about intergalactic space travel...and ice cream.

“Hey, sleepyhead, how was your nap? I'm glad you finally decided to wake up.”

Mike's wearing his orange red tie today, close to the color of freshly boiled lobsters. His desktop is decorated with photos from his summer vacation in Brazil. The largest photo shows a huge toucan perched on his shoulder as he's trying to feed a handful of cashews to it. I knew he would one day end up feeding his nuts to a bird...

Mike clears his throat and cheekily comments, “It would've been so awwwk having you sleep through the meeting later.”

I squint my eyes at him and reply, “What do you suggest I do to stay awake, Michael? Eat some ice cream?”

He smiles and says, “You must be a mind reader! I've been craving ice cream all morning...”

I cut him off, “Wait. Let me guess. The flavor you like is choc, choc, chocolate?”

Mike's eyes light up, “Exactly! How did you *know*?”

I grab my wallet and car keys from my desk and respond, “A little bioengineered toucan lobster told me.”

Mike stared at me with an amazed expression, “I didn't know you knew *toubster*, the ice cream craving toucan lobster!!!”

