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SPUDWIDDY'S INSIDE JOB

Lisa was in hospital with a peculiar illness. Unfortunately, the doctors hadn't been able to discover exactly what was making the little girl sick; and even though they had tried different medicines, so far nothing had worked. Lisa's mother visited her daughter every day and usually stayed for as long as she could; but there were things a mother had to do. "I'll be back as soon as I can, darling," she said as she was about to leave to go shopping, "But I could stay if you want."

"That's okay, Mum," said the little girl. "I've got Spudwiddy - he'll keep me company." She noticed her mother's frown and added: "I know you think he's just an imaginary friend, but he is real. He's too small to see, that's all. I'll ask him if he knows why I'm sick. He might even be able to fix it: he's very clever."

Her mother obviously didn't believe a word and said: "Alright, if it makes you happy. Just rest and I'll see you later."

Once the disbelieving grown-up had gone, Lisa said: "What do you reckon, Spudwiddy - could you do it?" When there was no reply, she scolded her friend: "I know you're there Spudwiddy. I can feel your tickle on my cheek."

"Sorry, Lisa," apologised Spudwiddy with a chuckle, "I was only tricking." Now, we have to make something clear about Spudwiddy. He is, as Lisa said, so tiny that nobody, not even she could see him; and, as she also hinted, he helps her to solve her problems. This time, though, he wasn't too sure. "You see," he said, "In the past I've told you what to do for you to sort stuff out, but I never actually did anything myself."

"So," replied Lisa, "Where's the difference now?"

"The difference," explained Spudwiddy, "Is that *you* can't fix this problem. Even the doctors don't know how; and I'm fairly certain that whatever's wrong is inside you."

"Fine," said the little girl quite casually, "Go inside me and fix it."

Spudwiddy shivered. "That sounds really creepy."

"Inside or outside," she assured him, "It will still be me."

"Hmm, I suppose." This was a big step for Spudwiddy to take, especially as he had only ever been on Lisa's outside. "What if I can't find out what's wrong with you? And even if I do, I'm not a doctor; I wouldn't know how to fix it."

"You worry too much, Spudwiddy," she said, "You'll think of something, like always."

At that moment, a nurse came into the room. "Hello Lisa," she said, "We're going to try some new medicine. The doctor believes it might do the trick." With the medicine on a spoon, she was approaching the little girl. "It probably won't taste very nice, but you must swallow it all down."

"Okay," she said to the nurse; then: "Right, Spudwiddy, here's your chance. Jump in the spoon and you'll be inside me in a flash."

The nurse frowned and glanced behind, but could see no-one else in the room. "Who are you talking to, Lisa?"

The girl smiled. "Spudwiddy, my imaginary friend. Don't worry. He's pretty harmless."

The nurse nodded knowingly and moved the spoonful of medicine towards Lisa's mouth. The little girl could feel her friend tickling his way over her cheek and onto her lip. Just as the spoon was about to enter her mouth, she heard Spudwiddy call out: "Yee-haa!" Then, because the spoon and the medicine with Spudwiddy floating in it were all in her mouth, his last words were muffled: "Yuck! This stuff is horrible!"

Once Lisa swallowed, he went down and down a kind-of tube, spinning and tumbling until he stopped falling and was... well, somewhere. Oddly enough, it wasn't dark as he had imagined it would be; and it was big. In fact, he found himself in a whole new world of strange shapes forming hallways and walls; and arches that quite possibly led to places other than where he was, which was still a total mystery. He was trying to decide what to do next, when a gruff voice said: "Halt! Who goes there?"

Spudwiddy jumped and turned. Behind him stood a tall, very round, orange-coloured lady wearing a helmet, holding a spear, and with a snarly look on her bright-red face. "Umm... Spudwiddy," he answered hurriedly because it was all he could think of.

"Don't know no Spudwiddy," grumbled the lady. She leaned closer to peer at him. "You're new in town, aren't you?"

Spudwiddy was becoming nervous. "Just arrived."

"What for?"

He figured there was little point trying to explain about the doctors not being able to find the right medicine, so he said simply: "I came to fix Lisa's illness."

The lady cocked her head and thought about that. "Who's Lisa?"

Spudwiddy was puzzled. "She's the person we're inside."

The helmet tipped as the lady looked up to gaze around the ceiling. "I always thought this was the Woyld. I didn't know it was the inside of a person. Nobody told me. Why wasn't I told?"

Following a huge sigh, Spudwiddy said: "No idea. And I can't believe you never knew you were inside Lisa. She's my friend, a little girl with an illness that no-one seems able to cure. I've come inside her to try and fix her problem, whatever it is..."

"Ah," cut in the lady, "Illness is something I do know about. We have to cure it all the time. Well, I don't personally. I'm just a Sentinel – that's a guard in case you don't know – but I do hail

from a long line of Armpart Lymphos.” She noticed Spudwiddy’s bewildered expression and said: “Forget about it. Just call me Nigel.”

Spudwiddy was even more confused. “But that’s a boy’s name, and you’re a girl.”

Nigel scowled. “Is that a problem for you?” she grated, tilting her spear towards him.

Spudwiddy gulped and swallowed. “Not at all... Nigel. Pleased to meet you. Now, you said you can cure illnesses.”

“Like I told you, Spidwuddy...”

“Spudwiddy,” he corrected.

“Whatever.” Nigel continued: “I don’t Wak illnesses as such, although I’d quite like to – that would be mega-smashing. No, my job is to guard the gateways and stop nasty, invading germs from entering the Woyld and doing rotten things. When I find one, I report it. You claim something’s making Lisa sick, but I never saw it, so it must be a really sneaky germ that got past me when I wasn’t looking.”

“That means it could be anywhere,” moaned Spudwiddy in dismay.

“It could,” agreed Nigel, “But Aunty Biddy’s family will be able to find it. Come on, I’ll take you to meet her.” Off they trudged through Lisa’s insides, along winding corridors until they reached an archway which was the entrance to Aunty Biddy’s room. “Knock, knock,” Nigel called through the doorway.

“Come in, Nigel,” a gentle voice sang from the room.

“How did you know it was me?” queried the Sentinel as she entered.

Aunty Biddy chuckled. “I’d know your knock-knock anywhere. And I see you’ve brought a friend. Have a seat and tell me what your problem is. You must have one, otherwise you wouldn’t be here.” Once the reason for Spudwiddy’s visit was explained, Aunty Biddy gave Nigel a note. “Take this to Aunty Betty. She’ll start the search for this sneaky invader. Get going the pair of you. There isn’t a moment to lose.”

Aunt Betty looked pretty much like Aunty Biddy, but then they were sisters; and apparently everyone inside Lisa was related in some way. “Mobilise the Teesters,” she instructed Nigel, “I think this is a job for Tulip, Tom and Tim. It’s about time they did something to earn their keep.”

Aunt Betty’s niece and two nephews were with a bunch of other Teesters. All were just standing and staring at nothing in particular. “They’re a bit dim,” Nigel explained, “And they have this funny idea that everything’s right with the Woyld if you don’t mess with it.”

“But, if they are that simple, will they be able to do the job?” asked Spudwiddy, rather concerned.

“With help, no doubt about it,” said Nigel with confidence. She pointed in turn at Tulip, Tom and Tim. “You, you and you – with me.” She had walked a few paces and turned to see the three Teesters standing scratching their heads, blank looks on their faces. “Dear, oh dear,” groaned Nigel, reaching out towards them. “Let’s all hold hands and stay together. Now, do what I do.” She indicated her boots and began to walk very slowly, “One foot in front of the

other, left, right, left right.” After a few tries they seemed to have got the hang of it. “Good,” said Nigel. “Now, stay with *me* and don’t wander off and get lost like you did last time.”

While they walked, Spudwiddy was amazed by the sights which were so different to the outside. Not knowing what an invader might look like, when he saw something ugly or what he considered to be yucky, he asked if it was what they were searching for; and each time Nigel said it wasn’t. “But I’d say we’re getting close,” she said, “There’s a bit of a commotion up ahead. I think one of the Beesters has been bumped by an invader. If it’s wearing the same colour pants as the Beester’s shirt, it’s in big trouble.” Closer still and Nigel was positive. “Yes!” she hissed with satisfaction; then she called out: “Hang on to it, Dendrik! We’re coming.”

Tulip, Tom and Tim were growing more and more excited as Dendrik dragged his captive towards them. He stopped. “Let me present Infector Beige. Now you’ve been introduced, you know what to look for. I’ll leave you to sort him out. I’m off. There’ll be plenty more Beige Bozos lurking somewhere. With luck another one will bump into me.”

As she watched Dendrik disappearing into the crowd, Nigel said: “No wonder they missed spotting the germs causing Lisa’s illness: they’re so beige, so ordinary you’d hardly notice them. Now, Spudwiddy, this next bit is really neat. Watch how we deal with invaders of our Woyld.”

Spudwiddy could only stand back open-mouthed as Auntie Biddy’s niece and nephews closed in on Infector Beige. “There’s only three of them,” said Spudwiddy, “Is that enough to do the job?” Nigel raised her eyebrows, meaning the question was soon to be answered.

Then something strange began to happen. The Teesters were multiplying as if they were laying eggs of themselves. It was like they were only one to begin with, then two, then four... “This is what we call divide and conquer,” explained Nigel. Before long, there were so many look-alikes of the Teesters that they almost covered Infector Beige. Then they had. “Now comes the Cop de Wak,” said Nigel. “I’d love to actually see what they’re doing to the Infector.”

“What *are* they doing?” asked Spudwiddy.

Nigel gave him a peculiar smile. “You really don’t want to know, believe me.”

The battle to win back Lisa’s health was long and hard-fought; but it was over at last and Spudwiddy was glad to be back on the outside again. “What was it like inside me?” Lisa asked.

Spudwiddy repeated Nigel’s words to him: “You really don’t want to know, Lisa.”

Just then, the doctor entered the room with Lisa’s mother, saying: “That new medicine we tried worked so well and so quickly that your daughter should be home in a day or two.”

When the doctor had gone, Lisa’s mother said: “See, darling: your imaginary friend may be good company; but when you are really sick, only a doctor can make you well.”

Lisa felt a tickle on her cheek and, so that her mother didn’t hear, whispered: “Thank you Spudwiddy for making me better. You did a great job.”

“No probs,” said Spudwiddy, “But I have to admit that I did have a tiny bit of help.”