



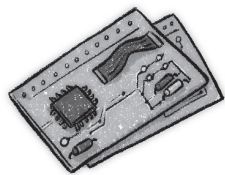
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Sunday Roast

Sometimes it's so hot it makes your teeth squeak. You know, that wooooozy, squooooozy feeling of a scorching sports day, or the inside of a school bus in summer or a kangaroo's pocket. When everything is slow and sleepy, your limbs are as floppy as daisy chains and your hair wilts. Thinking becomes about as easy as stapling wet caramel to a hedge.

Well, right at that moment Leonora Bolt and her best friend, Jack, were much too flaming warm. That's because they were crammed inside a homemade steam room that Leonora had recently built on Phoenix Beach (which was on



the southern shore of her tiny home, Crabby Island). Using her amazing inventing skills, she'd recycled an old garden shed, installed a hot-rock stove and cranked the thermostat up to about eleventy million degrees. In addition, she was making them both wear double-layered duvet suits and tinfoil hats.

'Leo, I feel *strange*,' said Jack, who was sitting beside her on a bench in the cramped wooden hut. He tugged at his knitted scarf, his face glowing like a furnace. 'Can we . . . can we take all this stuff off yet?'

'Not quite,' Leonora murmured, flicking a river of sweat from her brow. 'Just got a few more observations to make.'

The air around them was so thick you could practically cut it into slices and serve it for tea. The little stove next to them hissed and fizzed. (Building your own steam room and sitting inside it dressed for Alaska is clearly a very silly



idea. Like swimming in chicken soup or pole-vaulting a volcano. Zero stars. Would not recommend.)

Leonora continued to scrawl in a notebook on her lap. After a few more moments she looked up, her face bright with ideas.

‘Snack?’ she offered, whipping out a plate of red-hot chilli pepper and mustard crackers from beneath the bench. Jack rolled his eyes.

‘Ugh, I’m not eating those. Can’t I have a drink?’

‘Hmm?’

‘I’m sooooo thirsty. You got any water?’

‘Oh, right.’ Leonora put down the snacks and picked up *Desert Survival for Dummies* with her spare hand.

‘Well, it says here that in extreme heat you could dig a hole and drink the puddle at the bottom. Or squeeze a tree root and suck the juice from that.’



‘Ugh.’

‘And on the space station, I heard they purify and drink . . . you know . . .’

‘What?’

‘They recycle water from, the erm . . . *the bathroom.*’

A look of realization dawned on Jack’s flushed face. He jumped to his feet, thumping his head on the ceiling.

‘Right, that’s it. I’m out of here. I’m not your guinea pig!’ he squeaked, frantically removing layers of clothing. ‘And I’m not drinking any of *that!*’

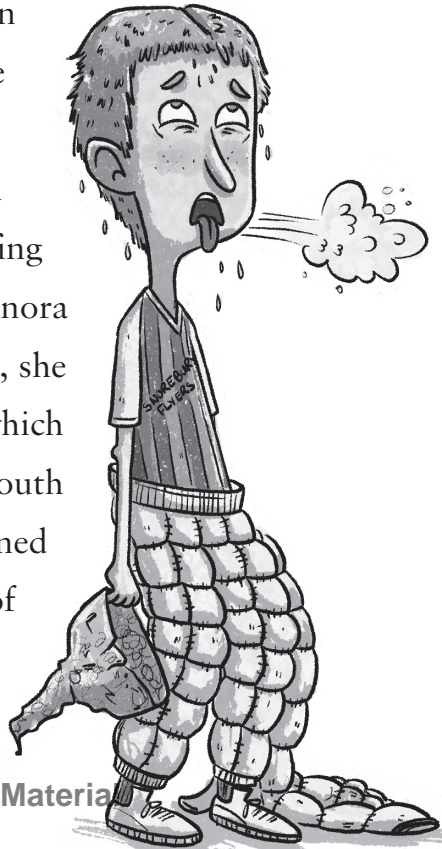
‘OK, sorry,’ said Leonora, raising her palms. ‘Obviously not. But, er . . . could you just stick another jumper on for an hour? You need to boost your heat tolerance.’

‘No way! When you said “Come over for a Sunday roast”, I didn’t think you meant we’d actually be the ones roasting.’



‘All right, let’s leave it there for today.’ Leonora sighed, clicking a stopwatch around her neck. ‘Experiment concluded at 12:42. Subject seems tired and is showing signs of . . . humour failure,’ she muttered, underlining the words in her notebook.

By now, Jack had flung open the shed’s flimsy pine door and was out on the beach in the pale November sunshine. He’d pulled his duvet suit down to his waist and was huffing the cold air. As Leonora clambered out to join him, she noticed that his tongue (which was hanging outside his mouth like a sheepdog’s) had turned an extraordinary shade of blue. *Not an expected reaction*, she thought,





feeling a twinge of guilt that was immediately elbowed out of the way by her curiosity.

'SQUAAARK!'

Before Leonora had time to examine Jack's weird-coloured tongue, a furry blur rushed from a nearby sand dune and into her arms. It was her pet otter, Twitchy Nibbles. In between licking her face with his fish-whiffy tongue, he made squeaking noises that Leonora recognized as a stern talking-to.

'All right, no more heat tests on Jack,' she said, scratching Twitchy's ears.

'Webby-paw promise. Padlock one, two, three,' she added for good measure. 'Or not until I get the sunbeds set up this afternoon, at least.'

Twitchy gave her a sharp look before



hopping out of her hug.

Now, at this point, you might be wondering why Leonora was attempting to bake herself and her best friend. Well, Leonora was a little girl on a very big mission. She was preparing to travel into the heart of the Perilous Desert – a brutal wilderness of plunging canyons and shifting sands, deadly mirages and venomous snakes. A blistering expanse of hot nothingness that makes Death Valley in California look like a picnic spot.

I know what you're thinking. If she needed a holiday, wouldn't Spain be less hassle? But Leonora didn't want a holiday. She wanted something much more important. She wanted to get her family back.

You see, until a few months ago, Leonora had spent her whole life trapped on the mini (but magnificent) wilderness of Crabby Island. It was a tiny speck of green land lost in the vast



blue seas off the mainland. Leonora had been brought up as an orphan. She had been adopted by her evil uncle, Luther Brightspark, at the age of three and kept far away from the outside world.

With no parents, no friends and no school, lonely Leonora spent her days up in a lighthouse workshop, building extraordinary inventions that her uncle claimed were ‘rubbish’. And, to be fair, he had a point. Most of Leonora’s gadgets *were* rubbish, because Leonora was a master recycler who made astonishing machines from the junk that she found washed up on Crabby Island’s shores.

But Uncle Luther was a thief. For years, he had been stealing Leonora’s inventions and sneakily selling them on the mainland, and because of this he had become ridiculously rich and famous. He’d also kept Leonora’s (very much alive) mum and dad hostage in a secret



place so that he could use their mighty brainpower to help him.

Despite his inferior inventing skills, Luther had tried to worm his way into a top-secret organization, the Society of Ingenious Geniuses (or SIG for short). He wanted to steal their research on human emotions, then use the formula to build a machine to control happiness and maybe (just maybe) create some joy for himself. Like I said, he really was a huge thief.

But Leonora had foiled all his ghastly plans to date. She'd stopped him from joining SIG. And then she'd sailed to the bottom of the ocean (in a submarine she made all by herself) and destroyed his undersea lair and his happiness-controlling machine too. Leonora wasn't sure if Uncle Luther had survived this last encounter. But she was sure that he'd sent her parents to a location somewhere out in the Perilous Desert. They were being forced to work



on more of his villainous schemes under the codename Iceheart. Leonora would stop at nothing to find them. And if that meant getting a bit hot under the collar, well . . .

‘The good news is you don’t have heatstroke,’ said Leonora, zapping Jack’s forehead with a thermometer from her tool belt. ‘See? Your temperature is normal.’

‘Yeah, great,’ he said, clearly still very dazed. ‘What’s the bad news?’

Leonora glanced up towards the lighthouse on the cliffs high above them. ‘Mildred said lunch is in nine minutes and thirty-three seconds. And by the smell of it, she’s cooked some kind of roast, er, thing.’

‘Bleugh – not again!’ Jack pulled a face.

For the next few minutes, they wriggled out of their padded clothes like clumsy escape artists. Leonora could feel the chilly winter air stinging her limbs.





‘Anyway, when are we leaving for the next mission?’ said Jack, finally shaking himself free.

‘I don’t know. Still no word from SIG. It feels like . . . maybe they’ve forgotten about me again.’

Leonora tried hard to keep the sulky tone from her voice. She remembered what the boss of SIG, Professor Insignia, had said to her only a few weeks before. *We’ll need your ingenuity to defeat your uncle, Leonora. You know how his mind works.* So what were they doing to find him, and her parents? Why was it taking so long? Every second felt like a cold eternity because she missed her mum and dad so much.

‘You know, if we’re really off to the desert, I’m gonna need, like, factor five squillion sunscreen,’ said Jack, inspecting his goose-bumpy arms. ‘Or I’ll turn into an actual beetroot.’

Leonora glanced at Jack. She couldn’t help



smiling. Her skin could burn in the sun, too, but his was a totally different matter. He was paler than a haunted meringue.

‘No problem! I’ve made you SPF 6000 sunblock from some old cream cheese,’ she said. ‘Plus a pair of “polar pants” by upcycling broken bits of fridge. Those should do the trick.’

‘Hmm, they sound . . . *great*.’

Just then, they caught another smouldering scent on the breeze. It was a dreadful smell, so bad you could pin a tail on it and gallop off to market – a stench like death itself had gone mouldy.

‘Come on,’ she said, feeling her appetite shrivel, ‘we’d better go and face the food.’

They picked up their sand-strewn clothes and turned towards the lighthouse. But suddenly a faint flapping of feathers could be heard in the far distance and a weird **HARRAAAAAAK HARRAAAAAAK** noise called across the

SUNDAY ROAST

waves. Leonora and Jack spun back round to face the shore. A V-shaped squadron of birds was flying towards them, gaining on them fast. Leonora felt all the breath leave her body.

‘Quickly!’ she managed to cry, grabbing Jack’s hand and yanking him behind the back of the steam room. ‘DUCK!’



2

A Lethal BURP

‘Those aren’t ducks!’ whispered Jack, squished behind the steam room, with Leonora plonked right on top of him. ‘They’re seagulls!’

‘I know that!’ Leonora mumbled, grabbing a pair of **stealth-viewer sunglasses** and peering out as far as she dared. The birds were flying low across the water, approaching like an arrow. Her heart galloped. Seagulls could only mean one thing – *Uncle Luther*. He’d used them to spy on her for years, hiding cameras round their necks to watch her, keeping her imprisoned on the island. But had he survived their deep-sea showdown after all? Was he coming back?

