

## **Roommates: Memoirs of the Hairless Ape**

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# **Roommates: Memoirs of the Hairless Ape**

by [Pokemaniacal](#), [TGWeaver](#)

## Summary

Roommates follows the story of a stranger in a strange land – a human named Mike, who moves into a new home populated by castoff animal people. Mike will try to make friends, forge bonds, and even investigate a mystery – all while searching for his place in this new world.

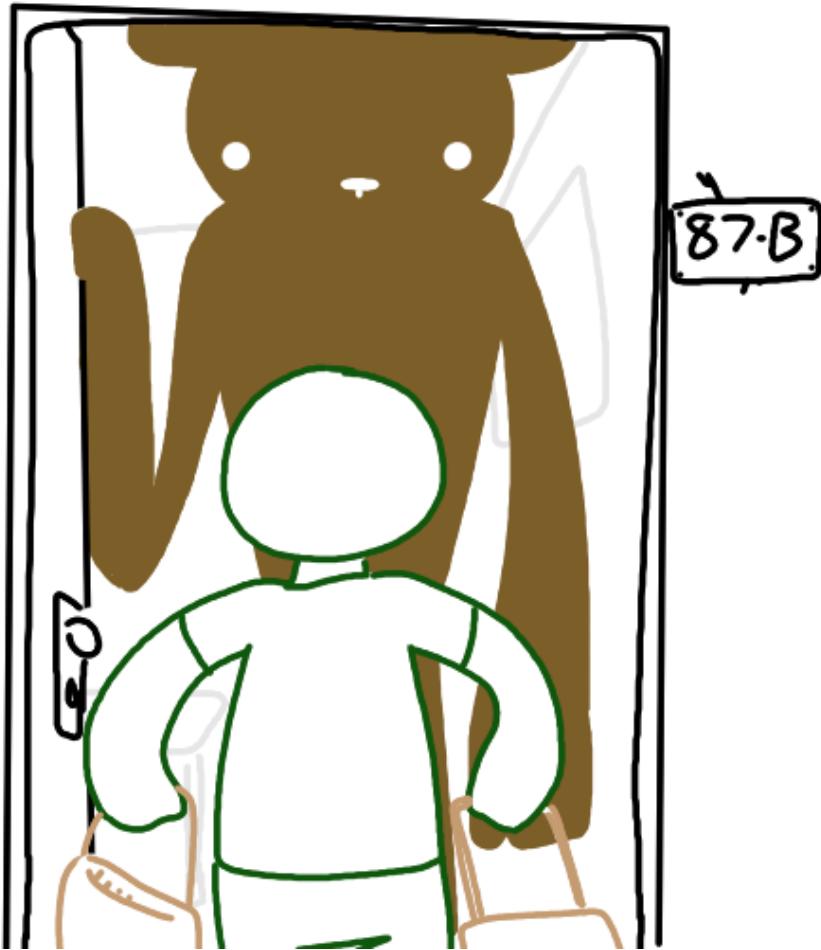
A slice of life story that's cozy, personal, and more than a little strange.

# First Impressions

## Chapter Summary

After a stretch of homelessness, a man named Mike finally finds a place to live, and meets his strange new roommates.

## CHAPTER 1 First Impressions



You drop your duffel bag to the ground, taking in the apartment block in front of you.

"This is the place," the landlord says, nervously adjusting his spectacles. "If you have any other questions, please don't hesitate to ask. Do you need any help carrying your things in?"

You glance at his pathetic, wiry frame -- this guy looks like he hasn't lifted anything heavier than a pencil in his life. His scrawny, stringy build consisting of almost negative muscle mass means he'd be more useful as a windsock than he would be performing any strenuous physical activity.

Besides, everything you own in the world has been condensed into a large duffel bag and a rolling suitcase.

"I'll manage, sir," you reply with a smile, much to his visible relief.

"Oh, good -- err, well, then, don't let me keep you."

The landlord scurries off to his dinged-up golf cart, and after a few tries manages to get it running again. Moving so fast as to almost be offensive, he's out of sight before you've even made it halfway up the stairs.

Once you're up top, you begin studying the apartment doors, counting them down until you make it to the one that you've been assigned: apartment 87-B. Parking the duffel on top of your suitcase, you straighten the shirt you've worn for three days in a row and the pants you've worn for four as best as you can before combing your hair back with your fingers. Might as well try to make a good first impression -- you get enough strange looks as it is. You try in vain to convince yourself that it's just because you haven't had a hot bath and a hot meal in a while, and not because everyone around you thinks you're some kind of hideous, deformed mutant.

Deep breath. You gently rap the doorknocker three times and practice your best smile. A muffled scream is audible from the other side of the wall, followed by stomping and what sounds like glass breaking. Hopefully it's just a television show.

"Mangle! Can you get the door?! **Maaaaannnnngle!!**"

After a solid forty seconds, most of which you spend fervently quadruple-checking the note given to you by the landlord to ensure that you are in fact at the right apartment, the door clicks open. A tall, lanky brown bear with a head that seems a tad too large for his shoulders answers the door. He's dressed in what appears to be a sportcoat that wants to be a tuxedo, with a glossy ribbon necktie and a top hat that's far too small for his head. The bear gazes at you with a calm, blank expression.

"Bonjour. Puis-je vous aider?"

You stare at him. What the hell is this guy on? "I -- sorry, um... hi, my name's Michael -- Mike Schmidt. I'm your new roommate."

He looks you up and down. "Comment?"

You frown slightly. "I'm sorry, I don't understand what you're saying."

He shakes his head. "Désolé, je ne comprends pas."

"English? Do you speak English? I don't -- are you okay?"

You can't possibly comprehend the weird alien gibberish this bear is trying to broadcast into your noise funnels, and it sure isn't helping your rising anxiety.

"Attendez," he says before turning back and heading into the depths of the apartment.

"Uh, do you need medical attention? Are you all right? Am I at the right apartment?" you call after him. He's got to be having a stroke; that's literally the only logical explanation. Concerned for this bear's safety, you gently step foot into the foyer. "Hello? Is anyone else in here?"

Moments later the bear returns with a curvy, half-dressed avian of some variety. You can't tell what breed she -- oh. Oh, god, she's missing her beak. Don't stare. You do your best not to look -- you're looking. Look anywhere but where her beak should be, don't look at the horrible scars.

You successfully divert your gaze from her beak.

"My eyes are up here, pal," she says as you stare lasers into her thong.

"Hi," you reply without looking up.

"Why do we get all the freakin' weirdos," she grumbles. "Thanks, Freddy. You can head back to the kitchen now, if you want."

He stares blankly at her, and she points down the hallway. With a hesitant nod, "Freddy" disappears around the corner.

"Sorry about that," the bird replies, forcibly tilting your head up with one of her wings. You nervously shift your gaze from her panties to the feathers on her forehead. "My name's Chica, I'm the apartment head here. That was Freddy. He's -- well, his doctor says he's got some kind of weird disease. I think he called it aphasia? Aphashing? Something like that. He says words, but they don't make any sense."

You breathe a sigh of relief. "Oh, good, so he's like that all the time. I was worried he was having an episode or something."

Chica laughs a little too loudly. "Oh god, I know, right? We called the emergency room the first time we met him. Took them hours to figure out what was wrong with him and I still don't think they actually know. He's a sweet kid, though. Sorry, what'd you say your name was?"

"Oh, I'm Micha-- uh, Mike Schmidt." You're still not quite sure you can make eye contact without staring at her horribly scarred mouth, but continuing to avoid it is only going to make it worse. "I'm your new roommate, I guess."

Chica nods. "Well, come on in, then, 'Micah Mykshmit'. I'm sorry to say that you won't have your own room. Given our limited accommodations, you're going to be Freddy's roommate. Unless you want to stay with Mangle, but I can understand if you don't."

"Just 'Mike' is fine," you say before she gets the wrong idea. "And, uh, Mangle? Just how many people are staying here?"

"Well, let's see," she says, counting off on her feathertips. "There's me and Freddy, Mangle, and of course Bonnie -- and she gets her own room. You don't go in with Bonnie at all, ever. Get that one through your head right now."

You nod briskly. So much for privacy, but you're still grateful. After all, the alternative isn't an option. Not again.

"Honestly, just anywhere to crash is fine with me. I'd sleep in a broom closet if I had to, as long as I had a place to lay a pillow and a blanket. Anything's better than the streets."

She sniffs and makes an unpleasant face. "Yeah, no kidding. You kinda reek, buddy. Look, no offense, but you're taking a bath before dinner. My sense of taste's already screwed up enough as it

is."

You smile wryly. Chica's frank -- rough around the edges might be a better way of putting it -- but at least she seems well-intentioned enough. You drop your things by the door for now before following Chica further into the apartment.

For the most part, your new place is pretty modern. Looks like it's not much older than maybe five or so years, and it's been well-maintained. There's a set of couches and two big, overstuffed chairs in the common area, and a television that's of a decent size with a small rack full of DVDs nearby. You grimace slightly as your eyes sweep the titles -- they appear to be mostly chick flicks and lowest-common-denominator comedies, but you figure now isn't a good time to air your inner film snob.

The common area is a fairly open plan -- the kitchen is right near the living room, and it appears to have a full set of appliances. Freddy's busily cooking something, and while you can't identify what it is, it does smell delicious.

"Over here's my room, and down the hall from me is Bonnie's room. If you need anything at all, come get me -- you can wake me up in the middle of the night if you have to."

You squint. From the way Chica's dressed, you're not sure what kind of impression to take from that.

"Your room is on the opposite side -- well, Freddy's room, but it's your room as well now," she continues. "Is that all right with you, Freddy?"

Freddy glances up from the cutting board. "Ce soir: rognons de veau sauce forestière."

She smiles back at you. "He says he doesn't mind."

Well, if she says so. You can't understand a lick of what he's saying, but you nod an affirmative and carry your bags into his room without objection.

Freddy's room is largely plain and inornate, with little more than a bunk bed and a few meager decorations. Two framed pictures hang on the wall next to the bed depicting scenic locations you'd know nothing about. Strange objects occupy a writing desk in the corner, none of which you can grasp the immediate purpose of. An artist's easel rests in the opposite corner from the desk, with a sketchy picture drawn on its canvas. It appears to depict some strange metal building -- or perhaps an enormous lightning rod -- that's shaped vaguely like the letter A, if it was an A on all four sides.

Lowering your bags, you take a moment to consider your surroundings, since this is where you'll be staying for the immediate future. Freddy's a complete enigma to you, but hopefully a benign one. With a shrug, you head back outside into the main room, where Chica's since moved over to the couch -- and she's not alone. Seated beside the large bird is a small, timid-looking waif of a blue rabbit. A lop, specifically. She's a frail little thing, wrapped in a one-piece dress that looks two sizes too big for her spindly frame. You find yourself idly wondering if she's related to the stick figure of a landlord outside.

The rabbit glances up at you and trembles slightly as you enter the room. "Hi," you say by way of greeting. "I'm Mike, your new roommate."



She doesn't stop shaking, slowly extending her paw to yours for a handshake. Her grip's weak even by a child's standards, and she pulls her paw away quickly like she's been stung. She whispers something aloud to you, but there's no way you could possibly hear her over the television.

"I'm sorry?" you ask politely.

She repeats herself twice, and you look to Chica for a translation only to find that the bird's already engrossed in a rowdy-looking sitcom.

"You must be Bonnie," you finally offer, sitting a fair distance away in one of the chairs.

She nods slightly, continuing to whisper to you and fumbling with the hem of her skirt.

"Educated guess," you continue hesitantly. "It was either that or Mangle, and, well, I figured because of your name..."

Bonnie gets up hurriedly, excusing herself from the couch and all but running for her door. "I'm sorry, was it something I said?" you ask nervously, but before you can get the words out Bonnie's long gone. Turning to Chica, she's either still ignoring you or she just genuinely doesn't notice, turning the volume up to just below thundering.

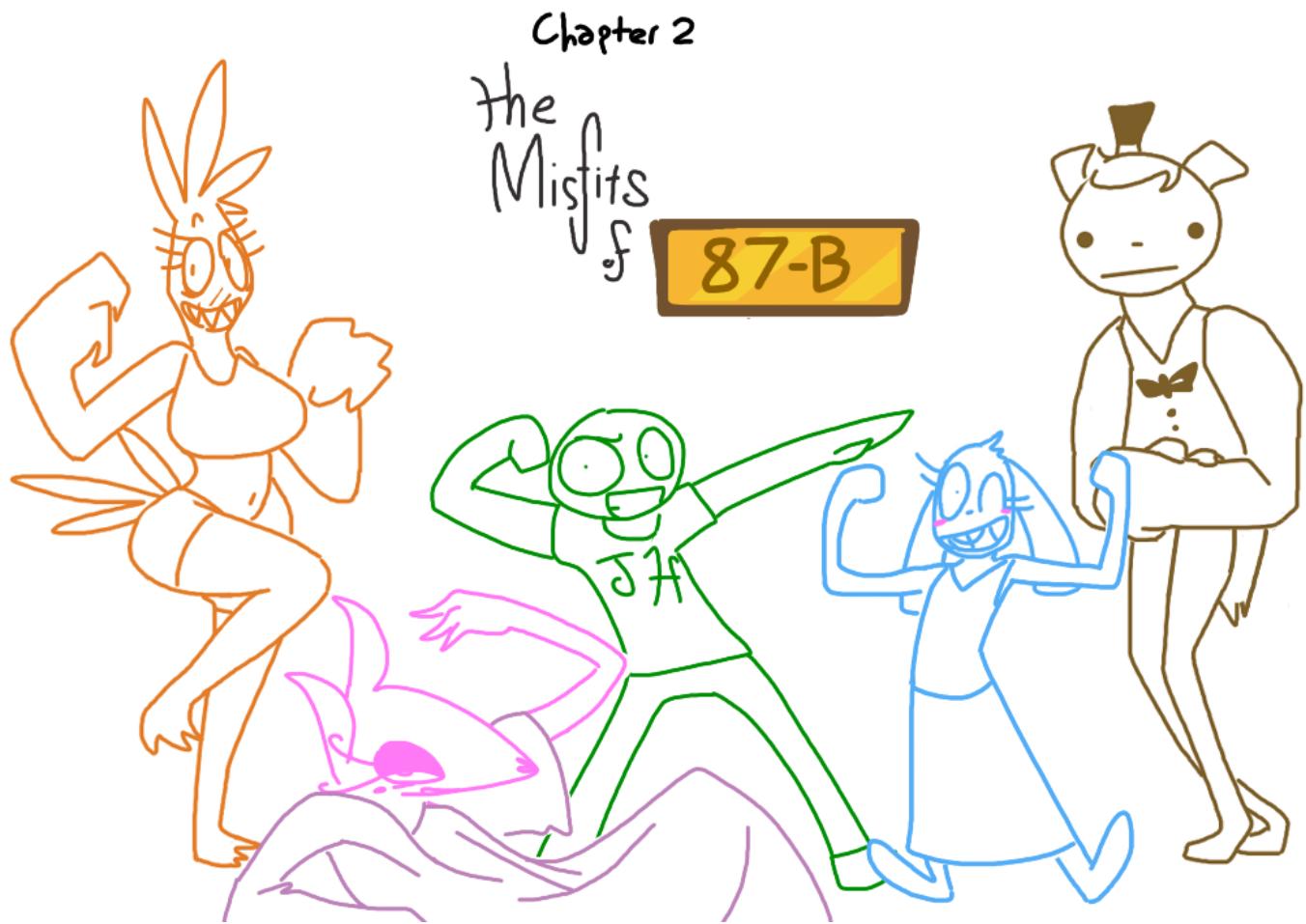
Glancing over at Freddy, still hunched over the kitchen stove, it appears the bear is holding a blowtorch in one paw while flipping a pair of welding goggles down over his eyes with the other.

What the hell have you gotten yourself into?

# The Misfits of 87-B

## Chapter Summary

Mike finishes his household's introductions and begins to settle in to his new home.



After unwinding on the couch for half an hour or so, you tear yourself away and politely inquire as to the location of the bathroom so that you can take a shower.

"If you don't have any body wash or shampoo, you can use mine until you get your own," Chica says, handing you a notepad and pen. "Whatever you need, put it on the shopping list. I can float you a loan for some basic necessities for the first month or so, but after that you're going to be expected to kick in for groceries and household goods, since we don't get much in the way of financial aid."

"That won't be a problem," you reply.

Chica peers over your shoulder as you scribble down the bare basics on the grocery list. For now you're not going to ask for anything fancy, since you can get whatever else you need on your own

time. There are several other items listed above yours in varied handwriting, but most of it's gibberish (hmm, guess who) and what little *isn't* is in such lavishly fancy cursive, you're having a hard time making out what it says.

"Okay, so shampoo, soap, deodorant, and a razor...?" She gives you a funny look at that last one. "I'd assumed you'd be trying to get most of your fur *back*, not get rid of what little you've got left."

You've grown tired of having to explain that you aren't, in fact, a gibbon undergoing chemotherapy. Instead you just smile and shrug, which placates her for now.

"Well, despite how absolutely *luxurious* we've made this place, most of what we've got here comes out of pocket," she says with a chuckle. "Disability only covers so much, you know? But hey, thrift stores and garage sales are great places to bargain hunt, if you're willing to swallow your pride a little."

You fish around in your pockets and press a crumpled-up twenty into Chica's wing. It's all the cash you've got until your next check arrives, but that's none of her business.

"I'm not a freeloader," you insist -- perhaps a bit more harshly than you intended, but a hastily-added smile gets the message across. She flinches slightly at your tone but recovers quickly enough, returning your grin with one of her own.

"Good enough for me, Mike."

After stopping by the room you share with Freddy for a change of clothes, you finally decide to indulge in that shower.

Like most of the rest of the apartment, the bathroom is neat and clean, albeit sparsely stocked. Of course, you can see places for improvement -- a medicine cabinet would be a nice start to clear up some of the various medications and cosmetics scattered around the counter. Actually, that's a fairly good point -- who leaves their pills on the bathroom sink?

You glance at the labels on the pill bottles and realize at least half of them belong to Bonnie. You're torn between respecting her privacy and sating your curiosity after that awkward encounter in the living room earlier, but eventually give way to being honorable. Even though you know nobody's watching you, you know how you'd feel if someone violated your privacy.

To that end, you make sure the door's locked -- kind of a dick move in case someone needs to use the toilet while you're in the shower, but you're well aware the key to successful co-ed living is establishing boundaries early. You're no fool -- you'll make it clear from the beginning how you operate so that you can avoid any future embarrassment.

Stripping down, you hop in the tub and turn the faucet. The water's good and warm and the pressure's stronger than any shower you've been in for the last several months -- way better than the halfway house ever had. You smile to yourself as you scrub your face, enjoying your good fortune.

In a rack hanging under the shower head are several different bottles of shampoo, all of which are labeled with permanent marker to indicate ownership. Chica's looks like it's a particularly potent rinse specifically designed for "feather shine" -- with aloe vera gel and some other sciencey-looking stuff to "reduce plucking urges".

*It does say it's shampoo, so you reason to yourself that it likely just has extra nutrients and crap to justify a higher price tag. You shrug and dump what you perceive to be a small amount in your hair, only to immediately regret the decision. This shit's got the consistency of tar. The more you lather it, the more soap foams into your face and eyes.*

"Oh, shit," you mutter, trying to scrub it free. You only succeed in making it worse.

Fumbling around on the rack, you grope blindly for anything you can use to try to scrape the film out of your eyes so you can see, if nothing else. A hand towel, a bath brush -- anything at all would be helpful. Eventually, your hand catches on what feels like a loofah. Of course, it's hooked on the rack and you can't seem to jerk it loose, so you back up to it and tilt your head to rub your face against it. After a good half-minute of alternating between chiseling this gunk off of your head and soaking under the hot water, you finally can see clearly again.

Turning back around, you suddenly can't find the loofah. Glancing on the floor and peering out of the shower to see if it fell out yields nothing. With a sigh, you finish up and hope nobody notices it's missing for now. Grabbing a towel off the rack above the toilet, you hurry up and dry off, then change. While you're combing your hair, Chica opens the door to the bathroom. Strange -- you could have sworn you locked it. Good thing you're already dressed!

"Oh, nice, you're finished already," Chica says, gesturing you out into the hall. "I want to introduce you to someone! Mike, this is Mangle, our other roommate."

A white arctic fox (or possibly a wolf, or a ferret, or a lemur, or something -- you still haven't really gotten the hang of this and you're too afraid to ask) plastered in garish amounts of makeup shoots a toothy grin at you from the room down the hall from yours.

"Oh, it's a pleasure to meet you, sweetie," Mangle purrs, extending a paw from behind the door as you approach. "Sorry, I'd come closer but I'm, ah, indecent."

"Nice to meet you too," you reply pleasantly.

You shake Mangle's paw, trying desperately to fight the urge to run back into the bathroom when you feel that it's soaking wet.

"Just washed my paws, darling. No need to look so surprised," Mangle adds soothingly.

"Ah, right, of course," you say, shivering a little.

Freddy steps into view behind Chica, bobbing his head politely at the three of you.

"Le dîner est prêt."

Mangle grins even wider, somehow. "Delightful! Well then, shall we eat?"

"You understood him?" you ask, not sure whether to be impressed or terrified, eventually deciding to split the difference. Mangle chuckles before disappearing behind the door, leaving Chica to roll her eyes.

"You get used to it," Chica shrugs before following Freddy into the kitchen.

The seating arrangement is admittedly weird. When you arrive at the table, Mangle's somehow wedged halfway out of an air conditioning vent up on the wall, deftly skewering things off of the table with a fork like some modern-day spear fisher. As for Bonnie, she doesn't even leave her room to come join the rest of you. That said, the meal itself is delicious. You have no idea what you ate, but Freddy offers a vivid and colorful explanation after you point first to it and then to him. The best you can gather, it's some kind of meat in some kind of sauce.

Mangle coyly refuses to tell you what Freddy said -- or maybe can't, and again, you really can't tell -- so you simply throw your hands in the air and try as well as you can to convey your gratitude to Freddy.

After dinner, you volunteer to help wash the dishes.

"Is that whole... thing normal?" you ask Chica when you're convinced Mangle isn't watching. "With the, uh, whole AC vent thing, I mean."

"Do any of us *look* normal to you?" Chica deadpans.

"Fair point," you mutter as you place the last of the freshly-cleaned dishes back in the cabinet before beginning to wrap up the leftovers.

"Don't put it all away just yet, Mike," Chica sighs, wiping her wings on a towel. "I'm going to fix Bonnie a plate and take it to her room. Since you're the newcomer, why don't you go pick out a movie for us to watch tonight? There're a bunch in the rack by the TV, and if you don't see anything that looks good, ask Mangle to put something on."

"All right," you reply.

While you're not much in the mood for a movie, there's not really a whole lot else to do around the apartment and you feel weird heading back to your shared room so early in the evening. After thumbing through the limited catalogue of DVDs at least three times, you narrow your selection down to films you'd be willing to tolerate. You haven't quite figured out Mangle's deal yet, so you're not about to turn over control of the remote so soon after getting it. Begrudgingly settling on a late 90s rom-com based entirely on the brevity of the running time, you unwrap it from the plastic shrinkwrap and load the disc into the DVD player.

Freddy takes a seat in one of the easy chairs with a book, while Mangle comes shuffling out under a heavy blanket and curls up on the floor next to the couch. Chica scoots through the common area with a tray of food and a glass of juice, headed for Bonnie's room.

"You guys can go ahead and start without me -- I'll be a few minutes," she says.

"I don't think we're in any rush," you reply.

Chica lets herself into Bonnie's room without even knocking. You hear a muffled shriek followed by Chica's laughter, and you feel a vague sense of vindication. It's not just you she does it to, then. You glance over at Freddy who's already absorbed in his book, then Mangle, who flashes you an eerie grin.

"Girls will be girls," the fox coyly hums.

You laugh nervously and busy yourself with pretending to study the back of the DVD cover so as to avoid having to make conversation. After a minute, Chica re-emerges from Bonnie's room with the bunny in tow, the latter carrying her dinner tray and looking decidedly bedraggled. Bonnie's fur is a mess and one of her floppy ears is standing up on end. You're pretty sure her dress is on backwards, but again, you smile and say nothing. Less is more, probably.

"Hi Mike," she squeaks (audibly, this time), sitting at the opposite end of the couch from you. Chica flops down between the two of you, kicking her feet up on the coffee table while Bonnie slowly picks at her food.

"Hi again, Bonnie," you reply very carefully, studying her out of the corner of your eye without saying anything else. When you're finally confident she's not going to bolt, you tap the play button on the DVD remote and settle in for what's likely to be a long evening.

## Bon Toast

### Chapter Summary

After a tiring first night in his new home, Mike gets to know his roommates over an unusual breakfast.



To your credit, the movie you picked was a hit with the others. Of course, you're not particularly surprised. They obviously lack the appreciation for fine cinema that you do -- alas, a burden you carry that seems more curse than gift these days. Nevertheless, you manage to somehow bolt even Bonnie to the couch for close to two hours, giving you ample time to study your new roommates while they're (mostly) distracted by the tube.

Chica, the particularly tall hen, is the one you've easily had the most exposure to so far (in perhaps more ways than one -- you seriously wonder if she even *owns* any pants). She looks and dresses like a college girl on spring break, but the way she was smoothly laying out priorities when greeting and introducing you reinforces her position as head of the household. While she doesn't seem the type to want authority over all her roommates, there's no denying she's good at it. Then again, that doesn't come as much of a surprise given the rest of the inhabitants of this apartment; they don't exactly set the bar high.

Her eyes are friendly and weary at the same time. Responsibility like hers likely gets tiring. No doubt it'd help to have one more self-reliant person helping out around the apartment, and you realize that position is going to fall to you by default. You desperately want to tell her that you're anything *but* leadership material, especially after what pushed you into this whole setup -- but then, maybe it's time for you to grow up a little, too.

Freddy's bizarre and eclectic, but what you can decipher strikes you as earnest. A stranger in a foreign land, not only in his speech but also his mannerisms and tastes. Nevertheless, throughout the course of watching the film you've noticed him get up and tend to things that have needed doing, such as taking care of multiple loads of laundry that clearly aren't his and neatening up after Bonnie's messes. He's eager to help, selfless, and very agreeable. Despite the language barrier between the two of you, you plan on trying your best to make friends with the poor bear.

The bunny, Bonnie, is a neurotic, unstable, manic mess of a girl. There's nothing about her that seems balanced -- from the way she walks to the way she speaks. You can see why she's on such heavy medication. Any time a character in the movie raised their voice or there was a loud noise, she seemed to practically retract into the couch, even going so far as to dive behind a cushion at one point when a car alarm went off outside.

She quivers like a leaf in a hurricane and eats like a sickly bird, going by the fact she finished maybe a tenth of the food on her plate. Her clothes are baggy on her stick-figure frame, and it's not just because she's juxtaposed against Chica who's almost hanging out of what little she's got on.

But out of all of your new roommates, the one who bothers you the most is Mangle, by far and away. You've seen enough movies to know how this goes. The flirtatious jokes and fluttery eyelids seem like a front for someone with a lot to hide. Halfway through the movie, Mangle irresponsibly offered Bonnie a glass of wine. Even though Bonnie refused, you noticed that no matter how many times she returned to her juice glass, it never *did* quite run dry. By the time the credits began to roll, Bonnie'd calmed down considerably from before. It's blatantly obvious to you that Mangle was discreetly "topping off" Bonnie's drink.

You find yourself more than a little off-put by this; on the one hand, Bonnie *very* clearly needs to relax -- on the other, it gives you insight into Mangle's character that stirs up long-repressed feelings in you. For now, you decide on the path of least resistance, vowing to call the fox out loudly and firmly should you catch it happening.

Bedtime comes sooner rather than later. Bonnie tries a few times to make small talk with you, but it's obvious that she's still too nervous even after a "soother". You generously make the excuse that you're tired from walking all day, knowing full well she's probably going to stay up for at least three hours talking to Chica. About you, maybe, given how much you've captured her attention for the evening.

Mulling it over, however, the thought doesn't particularly bother you. There's no telling what's going through her head right now, seeing as how even someone completely stable would be stressed by having a new person thrust into their household dynamic. You wouldn't blame her even if she *did* need to vent about your arrival, since her whole routine's likely been thrown off.

Slight correction. Everyone's routine, now that you dwell on it. This is as alien for you as it is for them. Moreso, really.

Throwing yourself on the proverbial grenade, you fall back on your time-tested strategy of smiling and evading.

"Thanks for having me, everybody, but I think I'm going to get some sleep," you announce.

"Oh, I can tell you're going to fit right in," Chica replies, raising her own wine glass to you in a mock toast. "Have a good night, Mike."

"G'night, Mmmmkie. Nice to meeting you," Bonnie hiccups from behind her pillow. As you begin to head off, you catch sight of the rabbit leaning over to Chica.

"Shica, you think he's -- mmm -- amanomin-cally correct?" she stage-whispers far, far, *far* too loudly to be subtle. Mangle cackles at this, winking at you as you pass by. Your stomach flip-flops.

"Mike, dear, sleep well. I'm right next door, just a hair's breadth away if you have need of any of my services," Mangle offers.

You don't.

Freddy stares blankly at you as you walk out of the common area, so you dip your head in his direction and pantomime laying your head on a pillow. He nods in realization and moves for the hall closet, pulling fresh linens and a pillow from a plastic bag inside. You follow Freddy to your shared bedroom, where he motions to the bunk bed.

"Lequel préfères-tu?" Not quite understanding his meaning but getting the gist, you shrug, and he pats the top bunk, inclining his head to you as if to seek permission.

"All right," you reply, nodding your head exaggeratedly to convey agreement.

Freddy changes the sheets on the top mattress, then drapes the blanket over it gently before handing you the pillow.

"Mettez-vous à l'aise."

"Thank you," you reply, which is a phrase he's likely heard enough times to understand the general meaning of. He smiles ever so slightly at you before he closes the door behind himself, leaving you alone. With little else to do, you climb the ladder and crawl into bed.

Despite not feeling too particularly tired, you're asleep not long after your head hits the pillow.

You stir as the beams of light filter through the curtains. Glancing at Freddy's wall clock, it's just a little after 6 AM. Still a bit longer than you're used to sleeping, but you figure you needed the rest. After all, it's the first time in a little over three days that you've woken up on a surface other than asphalt, covered in a material other than newspaper.

You're entitled to a little bit of comfort, right?

Freddy himself is already awake and presumably working in the kitchen. You notice the bathroom isn't occupied, so you dive for it and freshen up hastily before heading out into the kitchen to see if Freddy needs a hand.

"Bonjour," he says. You start to greet him normally, then stop yourself.

"B-bonshore?" you reply hesitantly, searching his face to see if you made sense. He stops what he's doing and glances up at you, a smile playing at the corner of his mouth.

"Bonjour," he repeats.

"Bon-jore," you try again, a bit more confidently. He decides this is close enough and points toward the kitchen clock's "AM" setting.

"Bonjour," he says before pointing to where PM would be. "Bonsoir."

You mime the pillow motion from last night. "Bonswah?"

Freddy ponders your meaning for a moment before he shakes his head.

"Bonne nuit," he says, repeating the same motion. Pointing to the PM slot again, he turns back to you. "Bonsoir."

You're not at all grasping this insane Martian speak, but that's not going to stop you from trying. You pull a piece of paper off of the notepad by the telephone, jotting down approximations of what you've been told along with what you think are fair translations. You'll get the hang of it yet.

After you try a few different ways to offer help with the kitchen, Freddy insistently motions for you to take your seat at the table, so you resign yourself to at least cleaning up a little. You meant what you told Chica yesterday and you're not about to let her catch you slacking off. You start with grabbing a rag from the kitchen and dusting Mangle's pawprints and makeup off of the chandelier. And speak of the devil--

"Good morning, boys," Mangle announces proudly, popping out of the air vent directly overhead the dining room. The vent cover bounces off the table and onto the floor, clattering to a stop like a manhole cover in an old cartoon. You're glad you relieved yourself before you came in here because if you hadn't, you'd definitely be doing so right now.

"Bonjour," Freddy replies without even looking up from slicing bread. As soon as your heart settles back into its usual spot in your chest, you stare up at Mangle with bewilderment on your face.

"Bon-- uh, I mean, good morning. What are you *doing* up there, Mangle?"

Mangle's eyes roll two complete rotations, as if *you're* somehow the weird one.

"I prefer crawl spaces. Helps me to get around more easily due to my, mmm, condition."

"Which is?" you ask, earning you an ireful stare.

"Don't be vulgar, Mike," Mangle chides theatrically. "A gentleman never asks and a lady never tells!"

"Which are you, then?" you reply, folding your arms.

"Well now you're just being rude, Mike." Mangle sharply glares at you, teeth gnashing almost imperceptibly. "I'll let you make it up to me with one of those pastries from the counter. Just toss it up here."

You sigh and pluck a scone from a nearby tray, gently lobbing it in Mangle's direction. A clawed paw darts out of the vent behind Mangle's head, spearing it in mid-air before retracting quickly inside.

"You're a dear. I'll be in my room, if anyone inquires," the fox angrily huffs.

"I somehow doubt that anyone will," you mutter, replacing the vent cover after Mangle thumps off into the distance. With a sigh, you finish wiping down the table, cleaning off the dust that was shaken loose from the vent.

"Good morning, Mike," Chica announces from behind you. She's a bit better attired this morning, wearing a pair of yoga pants and a cutoff tee. Following closely behind Chica is Bonnie, who hasn't even bothered changing out of her baggy nightgown. She murmurs something inaudible and flops onto the table, yawning loudly.

"Not a morning person, I take it," you comment, pouring her a glass of milk. As an afterthought, you add a silly twisty-straw from a packet nearby before handing it off to her.

"I love curly straws," Bonnie hoarsely whispers by way of reply as she sucks down the milk in the glass.

"Of course she's not a morning person. Not when she keeps everyone up until two AM," Chica playfully gripes, poking Bonnie in the side with a feathertip. "I don't think I've ever heard you talk that much. What did you *have* last night?"

"Just grape juice," Bonnie insists. "Is it starting to ferment? Maybe we need a new bottle."

"Anyway, Mike! Today we were thinking of going shopping!" Chica claps her wings together, which amusingly doesn't sound like a clap so much as the sound of two sponges plopping together thanks to her feathers absorbing the blow. "Our deposits were made this morning and we need to restock on a few toiletries as well as get you hooked up with stuff. Anything else you need? Socks, toothpaste, condoms, underwear? Probably could use some clean underwear, right? What size do you wear? Boxers or briefs?"

"Just the items on the list are fine for now," you reply, blushing at her frank and rapid-fire questions. There are a few personal effects you wouldn't mind having besides just basic toiletries, but you're not about to ask her to get them for you. "Actually, should I go with you? I'm totally free today and I don't mind going at all."

Chica shakes her head. "Nuh uh. Bonnie and I always handle the shopping, don't we, Bon?"

Bonnie's already face-down on her table mat, snoring. You gently tuck one of her ears back, only to nearly cry out in pain when it snaps forward on its own, slapping you on your arm with enough force to leave a welt.

"Right! Okay, cool. The stuff on the list. Can do," Chica says obviously as you clutch your stinging arm. "So! What's your deal, Mike?"

"My deal?" you choke. "Like, what do you mean specifically?"

"Well, I mean, I'll tell you yours if you tell me mine," she replies. "Or, no, wait -- how's that saying go?"

"I'm not... really sure I follow," you chuckle awkwardly. "Are you asking why I'm here, or...?"

"Something like that. Like, okay, I mean, how did you end up here? What's so terrible about you that you were forced into cramped, low-income housing with enough roommates to rival the average sweatshop family?" Chica suddenly snaps her teeth shut, rubbing her scarred lips slightly. "I mean -- hoo. Wow, that came out wrong."

"You're saying 'I mean' a lot again, Chica," Bonnie murmurs as she lifts her head back up.

"I know! I know! But it's just -- I wasn't trying to pry! Ughhhh, he's new blood and I'm just so curiooous!" Chica moans exaggeratedly, twisting her napkin back and forth in her wings.

Before you can reply, Freddy sets a plate of some kind of buttery, decadent-looking toast covered in cinnamon and powdered sugar in front of you, and you're not sure you've *ever* seen anything that looks so delicious. The bread tastes like it was coated in egg and pan-fried, and it's so rich that one piece feels like it's enough to carry you all day. So of course you'll end up eating four slices so you can hate yourself immediately afterward.

"Oh, it's good, isn't it?" Chica says as she voraciously tears into hers. Her partial lips and lack of beak means she has to eat with one wing under her mouth, since she doesn't seem to have much to catch the food with in case it falls out while she's chewing. It's simultaneously repulsive and fascinating, but you do your best not to stare.

Bonnie's not eating anything quite as rich as this strange, exotic, egg-enriched cinnamon bread. She settles for a bowl of cold cereal -- some cartoony kid's brand with marshmallows that have the same consistency and flavor as the packaging they come in. You notice her spending more time separating the marshmallows and the regular pieces from each other with her spoon than actually eating them.

"Um, well," you begin when Chica looks back at you expectantly. With a sigh, you decide on a very severely abridged version of your past. "Haven't been able to quite find steady employment since a work related injury I suffered about two years ago. I never finished school and most places didn't want to take a chance on me, so I eventually resorted to living on the streets and in shelters."

"Wow, Mike," Chica mumbles soberly.

"I finally won some money from a class-action settlement with my employer, so with a little money coming in I found my way here. Now I'm just looking for a steady job so I've got a plan B when the checks run out."

That's close enough to the truth that it's plausible, and Chica ends up buying off on it.

"And your skin? I mean -- sorry, your -- well, your lack of, um, fur?" she asks nervously.

You blink at her. This is the part you're still getting used to.

"I hate to break it to you, but I've always been like this," you chuckle.

"You poor thing," Chica murmurs, pulling your head into her chest.

"Okay, let's not do this," you gasp as she squeezes you tight, but she can't possibly hear your muffled voice.

"I'm so sorry to hear that, Mike! Ohhhh, the teasing must have been horrible when you were a kid. Man, that must've taken some real guts to deal with."

Coming from the bird with literal scars, you're not sure how to feel about that, so you just sort of laugh nervously as you try to wrench yourself away from her smothering chest. Eventually you pry yourself loose from her iron grip, wheezing a little for air.

Bonnie gives you a tearful gaze. "Mike, it's okay. You're still kind of cute. You can't help being broken like the rest of us."

Your smile's getting more forced by the minute. "So then, how about you, Chica?"

"Oh, crap -- it's almost 8! We'd better hurry if we want to get to the thrift store when they open. All the best stuff gets picked over by resellers," Chica announces. "Bonnie, go get dressed and meet me at the bus stop outside."

Frowning, you carry your plates to the sink as the girls race to leave the apartment. Glancing back at Freddy who's engrossed in the morning newspaper, you check your notes and then reason out what you hope comes across as a compliment.

"Freddy?" You point to your empty plate and then rub your stomach. "Bon, uh -- bon toast?"

He smiles back at you, tipping his hat slightly.

"Merci."

# A Girl and her Dog

## Chapter Summary

While out for a brisk morning walk, Mike runs into some of his new neighbors.



After breakfast, Freddy tends to cleaning the kitchen. Though he politely tries several times to usher you out, your sense of duty pushes you to try to help. Eventually, he realizes he can't shake you, and with the two of you working together, you've got the kitchen good as new within fifteen minutes.

Once finished, he heads for his room and takes a seat at his artist's easel, immersing himself in that strange drawing he's been working on. That leaves you with only one other option for conversation, and right now you'd sooner dive out a second-story window than spend more time in Mangle's presence.

You can't help but feel a little annoyed. Chica and Bonnie took off at warp speed the second you started to ask about their own lives. Whether that's intentional or not, you can't be certain -- but it felt like a dodge, and it stings more than a little after you bared yourself, even if you only told them a fraction of the truth. Maybe they don't trust easily, which makes sense for Bonnie. She's obviously, clearly, blatantly unwell. Chica, on the other hand, not so much. She seems reasonably normal, apart from her relative lack of inhibition and of course her facial injuries.

Maybe it's a touchy subject. Maybe you're just thinking about it too much.

Maybe you just need some fresh air.

The weather's a little chilly, so you rummage through your duffel and pull out your coat. With no money to your name until your next check arrives in a couple of days, you're grounded for now, but you're not going to let that keep you from taking a walk.

You head outside and down the stairs to survey the apartment complex. Now that you're better rested, you figure you might as well get the lay of the land. After all, if you're ever asked to run errands or pick up the mail, you need to know where the facilities and amenities are. Plus, as much as you're just reveling in the company of your new best friends, you've got better things to do than lounge around all day watching chick flicks and getting fat on breakfast pastries. You might have been thrust into this situation, but you're not about to become a shut-in like them.

You're getting your life back.

With no real direction, you begin walking briskly through the apartment complex, glancing around for signs of life. Maybe there'll be some other tenants nearby that can tell you a bit about the area. You *would* have been able to get an excellent feel for your surroundings if Chica had just taken you shopping in the first place, but for whatever reason they left you at home with the wolf-in-wolf's-clothing and the guy who can't speak a real language.

Frowning, you back your mental train of thought up a touch. That's unfair to Freddy, at least. You're sure he's trying his best.

"You can't help being broken like the rest of us."

As you walk along the sidewalk surrounding your apartment building, Bonnie's words continue to bounce around in your head. You're not sure what part bothered you the most: the implication that you can't help your situation, or the implication that you can't help who you are. Why should you apologize for who you are? Why should you pretend to be something you're not?

Or maybe it's that she compared you to the rest of them, like you're all in this together, somehow. As if you're one and the same.

"Broken like the rest of us."

Broken.

Where the *hell* does she get off even saying something like that?

Your foot twists out from under you as you suddenly stumble on the sidewalk. Looking down, you see a glass whisky bottle, long deprived of its contents. Something in you snaps. You furiously grab it by the neck and before you even realize what you're doing, you've already gone and thrown it as hard as you could possibly manage.

It sails through the air like a stone from a slingshot, exploding into dozens of shards as it makes contact with a trash can across the street. A rabbit girl walking a dog down the sidewalk cries out in alarm as the glass fragments scatter near her. The dog next to her takes off yelping and limping in circles, wrapping her ankles with its leash.

"Oh, shit," you rasp, realizing your mistake only too late. "I'm so sorry! Oh, god! Are you all right?"

You run across the street to check on the rabbit, pulling back in confusion when you get closer to her.

"Bonnie?" you mutter, rubbing your eyes.

"That's my name, don't wear it out," she announces blithely, not even bothering to look up as she focuses on untangling the leash from her legs.

The bunny girl in question is a good foot or so taller than Bonnie, but easily looks like she could be her older sister. She's every bit as electric blue as the rabbit you're living with, dressed in a white hoodie and track pants to match. Both of her ears are pulled back in a sweatband, and she's got a water bottle poking out of one of her hoodie pockets.

As soon as she's finished straightening out the leash, she brushes her sweatshirt off and turns to look at you -- only for her eyes to go wide.

"Oh my gosh, oh my gosh," she breathes as the two of you make eye contact. "**AAAAAH!** **HUMAN!**"

She lunges toward you, stopping just short of groping your face. Pulling her paw back, she starts to mumble to herself.

"No, no, remember -- personal space. C'mon, can't do this again in public..." The sheer amount of kinetic energy coming from this girl is real. As twitchy and erratic as your Bonnie is, this one's all of that cranked up to ten with none of the fear to hold her back. "Ooooohh ooh! Let me guess! Chimpanzee going for the look, right? Wow, that's dedication! Shaved and everything! Or is it laser hair removal? Or -- eww, not waxing, right?"

She makes a weird, twitchy face as the sentence leaves her mouth, and you find yourself equally repulsed by such a thought.

"Oh, I hope not, it really freakin' hurts," she continues excitedly, her voice cracking under the strain of her sheer enthusiasm. "Err -- not that I've tried, or anything. But ooh -- **OH MY GOSH**. Are you -- a **HUMIE?**"

"Haha, um -- actually, I, uh, well, I *am* a human," you reply nervously, gauging her face for a reaction. Her eyes light up as she leans in towards you, sliding side to side like some kind of mechanical scanner.

"Man, you're *really* really good," she giggles as she appraises you, paw raised to her mouth. You're not sure she's blinked even once this entire time. "You almost convinced me, but I can see a few of the tells."

Tells? What tells?!?

"Bonnie -- no, sorry, what did you say your name was again?" you ask politely. You can't possibly know two separate Bonnies that both happen to be bright blue rabbits. That'd just be weird and confusing.

"Oh, no, you were right the first time. I'm Bonnie -- well, that's sort of a nickname? Long story. Anyway, my real name's Bonbon, but my friends call me Bonnie for short."

How exactly is "Bonnie" any shorter than "Bonbon"?

She puffs up her chest, yanking up her hoodie to flash you her cartoon tee shirt underneath. It depicts a bunch of cartoon humans standing around in goofy poses, holding common items like coffee pots and calculators.

"Don't worry! I'm right there with you. What are your favorite human stories? As you can see, I used to be **HUGE** into *Human Rider X* until it jumped the shark after the second season. Now I'm binge-watching *Legend of Bob*."

Bonbon's eyes narrow as she shakes her fists in mock anger.

"The dub, though? Real freaking unconvincing! I just absolutely LOVE how you can TELL it's a cat trying to sound like a human. NOT! Like he'd have any clue what a human sounds like! I don't understand why they don't go with the ORIGINAL primate voice actors and then just do subtitles for the official release. Ugh, it's painful!"

You're through the looking glass now and you're desperately trying not to lose it laughing.

"Well, you've got me," you grin as she settles down from her tirade. "My name's Mike Schmidt, but please, just call me Mike. Nice to meet you, Bonbon -- in fact, do you mind if I stick with that? I've already got a friend named Bonnie."

"Oh, sure, I don't mind. If it helps you keep us straight in your head that works for me. Bonnie's kind of a common nickname, actually," she replies, absently counting something off on her fingers.

"Fantastic," you reply.

"Oh -- and this is my friend, Foxy," she adds, pointing to her red-furred dog.

Bonbon pulls her water bottle and uncaps it, squirting a little on Foxy's tongue. What a mess; the poor thing's got on a flea collar *and* a neck cone, and -- is it missing one of its legs? It appears as though there's a metal prosthetic at the end of its right front foot. Bending down to examine it, you double-take -- oh, god, is that a hook? Who the hell would give a dog a hook?

Kneeling, you pat the dog on the head in a non-threatening manner.

"Who's a good boy?" you ask with a gentle smile.

Foxy looks up at you as if pondering what you have to say.

"Young Lindy! Now there was a cabin boy. Gone ashore. 'You need a helmet', I told him," he finally replies, glassy gaze drifting as he starts to speak.

"Your dog talks?" you ask curiously.

Both of them look at you like you're high.

"Dog?" Bonbon asks incredulously.

"I'm Foxy, a mighty pirate!" he insists boisterously. "It's in the name! Firate Poxy. And now they're all down with the pox. Medicine, sure! That'll be a king's ransom."

"Aahh, well, sorry -- it's been a long, er, morning," you chuckle nervously, taking a step back. "I'll be completely honest with you, the leash and the harness and all that -- not gonna lie, the leash was what confused me."

She glances down at Foxy, rubbing her chin. "Oh, okay. I guess I can see how you'd think that. His friends asked me to put one on him when we go for our walks, so he won't be as likely to get run over by a car again." A-again?!

Foxy stands up slightly, wobbling a little as he does. He's so frail it's hard to imagine how he can hold himself together.

"When's lunch?"

"Not for a little while yet, Foxy. You just ate, remember?" she replies. She glances nervously at you then back at Foxy, who's attentively staring at a nearby mailbox.

His voice jolts, rising sharply with a toothy enunciation.

"B-BonbonnnnnnnnnNNNNN, when's when when when when's lunch?" he stammers at it, waiting patiently for a reply. After a few seconds of silence, he sheepishly flips the mailbox's plastic flag up, as if that was the reason he wasn't getting a response. "In yer own time, lass," he adds gently with a soft smile.

"I should get going. I need to get him back home soon." Bonbon pats Foxy's head sympathetically. "What apartment do you live in? Anytime you want to come over, feel free! I'm in 87-A!"

You blink. "No kidding! I'm in 87-B, so I guess the one right above you then?"

"Oh, wow!" She claps her paws, accidentally tugging Foxy backwards in the process.

"Oop, tide's comin'," he says, waving goodbye to the mailbox.

"Foxy here's in 93-B, so the next building over from yours. On good days for him, I like to get out and take him for a walk. Keeps him from going stir crazy. Plus, this way his joints don't lock up. You know how it is."

You nod as if this is the most normal thing in the world. For all you know at this point, it is.

"Sure, I totally understand you. Well, it was real nice meeting both of you guys. Hope to see you around soon," you offer, shaking Bonbon's paw.

"Oh, wow. It's smooth," she says, feeling and prodding the skin of your hand for an uncomfortable several seconds. "I didn't expect it to feel so -- so *smooth!* And soft! Wow. Maybe I should look into waxing but -- no, not again, not after last time."

She awkwardly shuffles her feet before looking back up at you and grinning.

"Well! Anyway, yeah, I'll see you around, Mike!"

"See you," you reply, tilting your head in befuddlement as Bonbon and Foxy take off, leaving you alone on the sidewalk. Of course, you learned really nothing about the area, but you did at least make some new acquaintances. Sighing, you turn and look back at the apartment building and begin to trudge back in the direction of your home.

Broken, huh.

# Relax

## Chapter Summary

Struggling to settle down and adapt to his new surroundings, Mike takes a stress nap.



For a relatively pleasant (even if chilly) morning, you're not really seeing many residents out and about in the complex as you walk back to your building. That's not to say the place is necessarily dead -- there are plenty of vehicles and other signs of occupancy. Rather, the tenants just seem to be minding their own business.

This has the unfortunate effect of rendering your fact-finding mission largely bust, since your only other option for information would be to visit the front office and speak with the landlord. And while he wasn't exactly what you'd call "rude", he also doesn't strike you as being particularly interested in idle chit-chat. The feeling's at least mutual, and thus you resolve to have only as much contact with him as is absolutely necessary.

At least the trip wasn't completely pointless. Bonbon was nice enough, if not slightly weird and more than a touch clingy. Foxy was... *interesting*. You wonder just what must have happened to him to leave the poor guy in such a state. Bonbon *did* mention something about him being hit by a car, but for all you know that might be the least of it with him.

As you arrive once more at 87-B, you pause halfway through turning your key in the lock, a thought beginning to take root in your head.

Bonnie's extremely neurotic. Chica's severely maimed. You're not sure what Freddy's deal is, except that it's serious, and the less said about Mangle the better. Bonbon's sociable enough, her single worst offense being terminally cheerful -- though she does have something of an overt infatuation with the idea of humans (which raises plenty of its own questions). Foxy's got too many problems to count and you've known him for less than five minutes.

As far as severe injuries and/or mental disorders go, you're at least five for six so far. Harsh as this may sound, you can't help wondering whether you've moved into low-rent housing or an insane asylum. Hell, even the landlord seems kind of kooky.

You throw the door open, hang your coat on a nearby wall rack, and lock up behind yourself. Walking inside the apartment, you spot Mangle out in the common area on the couch, covered in a blanket and talking with Freddy -- though the bear doesn't seem to have anything to say in response.

"Welcome back, Bonnie," Mangle croons.

You furrow your brow, looking to see if Bonnie's nearby. She's not.

"Uh, no, it's just me, Mike," you reply warily, but the fox is already back to talking to Freddy. At Freddy. Whatever.

You stand awkwardly in the foyer for a minute, but it soon becomes clear that they have their own discussion going on (however one-sided), and you know better than to try inserting yourself into it. Looking around the room for anything resembling a source of entertainment, you spot a small bookcase beside the TV set, stuffed full of paperbacks. You grab the first book that looks even remotely interesting and head for your room.

"Mind if I borrow this?" you throw over your shoulder on your way back to your room, not even bothering to wait for a reply.

Carrying your book up to the top of the bunk bed, you flop on your stomach, propping yourself up on your pillow. You flip the novel open and begin attempting to engross yourself in it. After trying

and failing to get invested in the story, you realize you're just skimming the same pages over and over again without actually absorbing any of the information printed upon them. Eventually just you toss the book onto the desk out of frustration.

The sound of repeated thumping overhead causes all the hair on your neck to bristle before you realize it's probably just Mangle moving through the vents. 'Just' your new roommate crawling through the vents like some sci-fi horror.

"Why can't I seem to relax?" you mumble aloud.

*Relax. You need to just relax.*

You yawn. Even though you slept heavily this morning, you're bored and -- if you're honest with yourself -- more than a little bit melancholy. It's not your fault you're here. You haven't done anything wrong. Turning your head away from the window, you glumly resolve that you'll just rest your eyes for a few minutes.

*That's it, just -- relax.*

You yawn, eyes slowly opening. Your nap did wonders for your mood. You didn't even realize how much tension you had in your back and shoulders, but now that it's gone, you definitely feel an improvement. Breathing deep, your nostrils fill to the brim with the sweet, therapeutic scents of lavender and chamomile.

It's much chillier now than it was when you laid down. Sleepily rubbing your forearms, you notice your skin feels soft to the touch -- almost buttery smooth. Huh. Just yesterday you were borderline chafing while walking around outside. Besides, you could have sworn you laid down fully-clothed, and yet you don't have your shirt. Well, that explains being cold.

Wait -- lavender?

Yeah, right! Try body odor -- you haven't had a shower since the previous night. All you did this morning was wash your face before breakfast. If anything, you should smell like sweat! With a start, you fully snap awake, nearly falling out of your bed and onto the floor. You catch yourself on the ladder with one arm halfway down, breaking your fall instead of your leg. Righting yourself nervously, you conduct a hasty examination of the room since you just know someone has to have been in here.

All of Freddy's things are neatly in order, and he's made a little more progress on his drawing -- but he'd been working on that when you left, so he probably hasn't been in here since you fell asleep.

The wall clock says it's half past twelve, so you were out for well over two hours. You're practically twirling around, bewilderment spreading through your body like a fever. The light from the window glints off of something, drawing your attention to the floor. Leaning down, you pick up a fairly oversized metal bolt, about an inch and a half in length. As you turn it over in your fingers, you try to figure out what it could have come from. Freddy's more of the artisan type -- not someone who appears to dabble much in mechanical things.

Looking up, you realize there's a vent cover directly overhead which is hanging just a little crooked. No wonder. A vent cover would need all four bolts to keep it firmly in place.

"Sloppy, Mangle," you growl as you put two and two together.

Grabbing your shirt off of Freddy's desk chair, you button it up quickly before charging out into the common area, where Bonnie, Chica, and Freddy have gathered around the table to eat lunch.

"Hey, Mike!" Chica says with a wave and a mouthful of salad. "We just got back a little while ago, but you were asleep. I bet you must be hungry after that power nap, huh?"

"I'm good, thanks," you snap in spite of the delicious smell of fresh food. Bonnie shrinks back a little in her chair, and even Chica seems taken aback by your harshness.

"Everything okay, Mike?" Chica asks warily. "You don't seem yourself." You resist questioning how she could possibly know what "yourself" is after just a day of knowing you, but you bite your tongue.

"Where's Mangle?" you ask pointedly. Your audibly growling stomach outs your previous lie. Not now, belly, you're trying to look righteously indignant!

Stiffening, Chica looks you square in the eye.

"Oh, boy. I was afraid of this. Let me guess, some of your underwear's gone missing?"

"W--what? No -- at least, I don't think so?" Damn it, now you're going to be up all night wondering about that, too. Running your hands through your hair, you gesticulate angrily as you continue speaking. "Just now, I woke up half-naked covered in some kind of -- fruity lotion or -- something, and guess what? The vent cover was hanging loose in our room. Small wonder who was in there."

Chica leans forward, paying rapt attention.

"Uh huh...?" she prompts, apparently waiting for you to continue the story.

You're flabbergasted. You look to Bonnie to see if she gets what you're talking about, but she's already halfway under the table. All you can see of her are her ears and a little tuft of blue fur as she quivers.

"Freddy, dear, I assure you I did nothing untoward," Mangle announces from overhead, poking out of the vent.

"Gah!" you sputter. "Mangle! So you were in my -- our -- room!"

Chica sneaks a glance upward at Mangle.

"Mangle, he seems really upset. And Mike, can you calm down a bit? You're scaring Bonnie. Deep breaths."

Mangle gasps, turning to Freddy. "Sweetheart, please! You know I'd never do anything to hurt Freddy or any one of you. Isn't that right, Mike?"

Freddy sips his tea with one paw, extending a platter of finger sandwiches to you with his other.

"Servez-vous," he says, waving the plate a little under your nose. Well, just one won't hurt. You snatch it off the tray, cramming it in your mouth while still trying to look stern.

Chica turns a little in her seat as Mangle reaches down and begins rubbing her shoulders.

"Now then, darling -- please, tell us what ails you," Mangle insists.

"Is it -- oh, okay, so I'm the only one here that sees something wrong with this." You glance around the room at the others, all of whom look either bewildered or nonplussed. All right, sure, blame the new guy.

"You're being obtuse, Foxy," Mangle chides. "If I've wronged you in some personal way, please, speak up."

Closing your eyes, you draw a deep breath.

"Mangle, were you in my room earlier?"

"I was," Mangle replies matter-of-factly. "On honest business, I assure you."

"Well, does your 'honest business' involve you touching me inappropriately while you were in there?" you reply, folding your arms.

Bonnie shrieks, springing up from under the table.

**"MANGLE!"** she practically screams. "What did we **SAY ABOUT THAT?!**"

Mangle sharply intakes air, growling at you with a feral snarl.

"On my honor, I'd *never* do such a thing! I'm appalled you'd even suggest that I'd -- I'd just... violate you...! Whilst you slumbered, at the peak of your vulnerability, no less! My goodness, I can't believe your lack of shame!"

You raise your hands, backpedaling.

"Whoa, no, that's not what I meant," you clarify. Bonnie's still quivering, her teacup rattling in her paws as she sloshes its contents on the tablecloth.

**"WHAT** did you mean, Mike? **What is it?**" she howls.

"Down, Bon," Chica says, patting Bonnie's shoulder. "Easy."

"Look, I just -- Mangle, did you break into my room and *massage* me?!" you blurt out.

"That's what he's mad about?" Mangle asks, exchanging funny looks with Chica. "You looked so exhausted and stressed out. I just wanted to help you relax!"

You realize that you're going to come out of this the bad guy no matter which way you approach it. Rubbing the bridge of your nose, you carefully take a seat at the lunch table. Bonnie's breathing heavily, jerking her head back and forth from you to Mangle, as if she's daring one of you to make a move.

"Mike, you've seemed to have it out for me ever since you walked in here. Now -- I realize I don't always make the best first impression, but how could you possibly think I'd have anything other than pure intentions?" Mangle sniffs, clearly offended. "Get your mind out of the gutter."

"Mangle, I appreciate the fact you're trying to make me welcome. I really do. I just don't really like being touched when I don't know about it, okay?" You can't believe you're having this conversation.

"It's -- we don't know each other nearly well enough for that. Just keep your paws to yourself, and we'll be fine."

Chica pats Mangle's paw with her own feathers. "No more massages for Mike, Mangle. I know you meant well and I think he does too, but clearly that's a no-no thing. Remember when we talked about Bonnie when she first moved in?"

With an overly dramatic sigh, Mangle shrugs, conceding defeat.

"Well, now that the glorious moment is ruined, I suppose I'll take my lunch tray to my room."

Your resolve weakens. "No, no, please -- stay, and have lunch with us. I'm sorry I... 'overreacted'."

Mangle looks to you first, then Chica.

"See? It's fine. That's how we are here," Chica insists, grinning and nodding. "We have problems but we work them out. No need to get hostile. Bonnie, stop hyperventilating."

"Very well, then, if you're sure," Mangle sniffs, dabbing an eye with Chica's napkin bib. "Let's eat, shall we?"

After lunch, Chica pulls you aside to her room.

"Oh no," you stammer as she drags you inside. "Chica, uh, remember what we were just talking about at the table about being touched?"

"Geez, Mike, you really *do* have your mind in the gutter. How long has it *been* since your last pipe cleaning?" She presses a feather to your lips as you blush. "I'm kidding. You don't have to answer that. Wait here."

Chica ducks into her closet, rummaging around for something. Between Mangle and her comments just now, you're so embarrassed that you're fighting the urge to bolt out of the room. Your cheeks are burning, but you already feel like you're on thin ice so you shakily stand your ground.

It hasn't been *that* long, has it?

While you wait for her to re-emerge, you sneak a look around Chica's bedroom. It's arguably the most well-decorated room in the house so far, even if it's a little eclectic. Mardi gras beads hang in heaps off of her nightstand lamp. Clothes are piled all over the floor. Posters of bands that probably haven't been popular in years adorn the walls.

None of the furniture seems to match, most of the pieces either being obvious thrift store/yard sale finds or whatever she could scrounge up when she moved in. Her bed's a little plain with just a headboard, but it does look rather comfortable with its bright linens and fluffy down pillows.

Hmm. Wonder if she stuffs the pillows with her own feathers, or if that'd be too weird?

Her dresser is covered in cute little knick-knacks and photos, most of which seem to be of her, other friends, and occasionally Bonnie. Studying them, Chica looks confident in every single one. They're all labeled cutesy things in flowery writing like "Summer Vacation '11!" or "At the beach with the girls!" One photo frame is tilted face-down, and out of prying curiosity you flip it up to see if it's of a former boyfriend or something else of interest.

It's a small photo -- the kind taken with an old-fashioned instant camera. In the picture, Chica's dressed in a work shirt and jeans, and it's dated a few years prior. She's in what looks like an arcade or amusement park, holding a tool chest. It's labeled "First day on the job!"

Noticeably, she still has her beak.

You blush a little as you examine it. She was quite attractive. Well, she still is -- uh, for a six and a half foot tall chicken lady, of course. There's just something about the glow on her face, the eagerness in the way she's standing and looking at the camera, tools in her wings like she's ready to just take on the whole world.

You hear the door creak behind you. You quickly flip the photo face down again, turning to look up at her as she trots out with a large shopping bag in her arms.

"Sorry -- I had Bonnie put things up and she felt the need to alphabetize my shoe rack. Anyway, Mike, I want you to understand something. What I'm about to tell you is serious business." Chica looks you boldly in the eye as she thrusts the bag into your arms. "We have a tradition in this household, Mike, and you're not going to be any exception. It's just how we do things."

She narrows her eyes at you, drawing close. You suddenly realize how much taller she is than you. You look more nervous than Bonnie does as you fumble with the bag, trying not to let her see that your knees are knocking.

"All right -- what might that, um, tradition be?"

"Every Wednesday night, we have a pajama party. Ice cream, popcorn, carryout food. Bad movies. Pedicures. The works, Mike." Chica pokes you in the chest, a smile playing at what's left of her lips. "You don't get to skip out on pajama party night. It's *huge* with Bonnie. If you try -- if you even *think* about bailing -- the punishment is dishes for a month."

You exhale visibly, fighting a smile of your own.

"Ah, well, that's a fate worse than death, to be sure."

"Damn right, Mike. Glad you came around to our way of thinking. We picked these up for you today since you didn't have any of your own. After all, you need a uniform to stand in attendance." She flicks your shoulder. "Improper attire at the pajama party? Bathroom detail for one week."

"I can tell this is serious business. Duly noted," you chuckle as you unwrap the bag. A three-pack of soft-looking mens' flannel pajamas greets you in just the most wonderfully garish assortment of plaid patterns. You smile broadly.

"Man, they're even in my size and everything. So how'd you know I didn't have pajamas? Do I just look like the type?" you ask, holding up one of the tops to your chest. Even not having been washed, it's *still* super soft. These are going to rock.

Chica puffs up her chest proudly, strutting over to the door and clicking it open.

"That was the easy part. Mangle looked through your luggage for an idea of your size and called us earlier today while you were asleep."

Your left eye twitches ever so slightly as you slink out of the room after her. You're still smiling, but it's much more forced now.

"Thank you so, *so* much," you manage. Chica slaps you on the back with a grin.

"Anytime, Mike."

# Panic

## Chapter Summary

As the household prepares for a shopping trip, Bonnie has a little morning trouble.



Nothing like a little money in your pocket to start your morning off right.

"Anyone up for heading to the bank with me?" you ask, proudly waving your stipend check to your housemates as you take your seat at the breakfast table.

"Hey, congrats!" Chica pumps a fist in the air. "Dinner's on you tonight, pennybags. Tradition and all."

"I thought that was just for family," you mock-complain.

"I hope you're not implying we practically aren't already, dear?" Mangle idly comments, swiping a strawberry from your plate with a deft claw.

"But isn't tonight our pajama party?" Bonnie murmurs, desperately fumbling with the lid on the jam jar before finally relinquishing it to Freddy -- who effortlessly pops it open for her.

"It is indeed, honey -- but we usually get takeout on pajama night anyway. Anyone up for pho?" Mangle asks, snagging another strawberry from your plate.

"Mangle, do you want me to make a plate for you?" you interrupt, side-eyeing the fox with a bemused expression.

"Your berries taste better," Mangle replies dismissively, licking the glaze from the strawberries. You decide against even dignifying that statement with a comment.

"Pho sounds good," Chica chimes in. "Or if you're not up for it, Mike, we could do burritos."

Freddy's usual placid smile twists into a sudden frown, his eyebrows scrunching up.

"La cuisine mexicaine est l'œuvre de démons et de barbares," he dramatically announces, chest swelling as he makes a sweeping gesture with one of his burly arms.

"That's a 'no' on the burritos," Mangle observes. "...decisively, it would seem."

"I gathered as much. I have no clue what he said, but I've never seen him that adamant." You pat Freddy's paw reassuringly, nodding to let him know his complaint has been registered. "No burritos, Freddy."

He visibly softens, and resumes buttering slices of toast for everyone.

"...merci."

"But yeah, pho's good with me if you guys are all up for it. There a good place around here to get it from?" you inquire, taking a piece of toast from Freddy and immediately handing it off to Mangle, who accepts it without a second's hesitation.

"Downtown, yeah," Chica replies. "They've got more than pho too, if you're into vermicelli and sushi and that sort of thing."

"Sounds like a date, then," you grin, gratefully accepting another slice of buttered toast from Freddy for yourself.

It's only been a few days since you moved into 87-B, but you're already starting to settle into a routine -- chores and all. Today's your turn to take the trash out, so while the others begin clearing the kitchen table from breakfast, you gather up the trash to be carted down to the dumpster.

"So is it just you and me, Chica? Or Bonnie, are you coming with us too?" you ask, tying off the plastic handles of one of the garbage bags.

"I -- oh, well, I wasn't planning on it," Bonnie croaks in surprise as she dumps her plates in the sink. "I haven't done my fur yet, and I need to brush my teeth. Too many things to do, ohhh. Yeah. I think I'll stay here."

"Really, Bon?" Chica asks, one eyebrow raised. "You sure you don't wanna get out of the house?"

"Huh. Sounds like you can get all that done in a few minutes, Bonnie," you add, rubbing your chin. "C'mon. You look fine, the weather's nice -- let's go!"

"Now now -- don't force her to go if she doesn't want to." Swinging down from the overhead vent, Mangle wags a claw at you. "Our little blue darling is more fragile than you think, Foxy."

"And I say she's got it together more than *you* think, Mangle," you answer back, patting Bonnie's head. "You have had your meds today, right, Bonnie?"

Rather than replying, Bonnie kind of hunches down in the middle of the kitchen, slowly clutching her paws over her head.

"Hey, come on," you try again, a little more firmly. "Did you forget to take them?"

"She's melting down, Chica," Mangle warns in a stressed whisper.

"I hear you, Em," Chica replies, literally tossing her plate to Freddy who catches it with expert precision. "Come on, Bon. Mike doesn't mean anything by it. If you don't want to go, don't go."

Bonnie's stammering awkwardly as she begins to rock back and forth on the floor in her odd, huddled-down position.

"Look, Mike -- I know you mean well, but those bottles on the bathroom counter aren't just for show," Chica says in a reprimanding tone.

"I'm starting to think they are," you reply evenly. "The layer of dust on '*those bottles*' is a quarter of an inch thick. I'm pretty sure I saw cobwebs growing on the ones with bright orange 'take twice daily' stickers."

By now, Bonnie's got both paws over her ears, and she's starting to hum to herself in what appears to be an attempt to drown the two of you out.

"I've only been here a few days and I'm willing to wager this check in my pocket that she hasn't been taking any of them," you continue.

"Is that a fact?" Chica turns her attention to Bonnie, looking down at her with a stern expression. "Bonnie, we've talked about this, haven't we? Please don't make me have to call the doctor -- because you know what'll happen if I do."

**"I'll take them!"** Bonnie suddenly howls, rolling side to side across the foyer. "I'll take my pills! Just don't take me **BACK** there! Not again! I can't **handle** all the **QUESTIONS!** So, *so many questions!!*"

You watch in surprise as she throws herself into a tantrum, kicking and thrashing around. In her flailing, she kicks over the shoe rack by the front door, sending shoes and slippers everywhere.

"I can't **stand** it!" she wails. "I can't stand **HIM**, I can't stand his -- his awful black **EYES** when he stares at me! I can feel them! I **CAN'T** keep putting up with it!! Don't send me back, Chica!!"

"Bonnie, please!" Chica gasps, trying to steady her.

Freddy brushes past you and gently heaves Bonnie to her feet, hugging her closely to his chest as she struggles all the while to break loose of his grasp.

"Du calme, ma petite," he murmurs in her ear while she continues to spasm.

"This is how we have to do it," Chica murmurs to you, gently whispering to Bonnie as she strokes the back of her head with her wingtips. "Just like this. That's it. That's a good girl -- get it out of your system, Bon."

"Panic attack?" you ask, gazing pitifully at the twitching rabbit.

Chica shrugs as Bonnie kicks weakly at Freddy's thighs. Already the bunny's struggling has slowed, almost stopped. She's tiring herself out.

"Kind of," she replies as Bonnie eventually gives up and buries her face in Freddy's chest, panting raggedly. "She goes through these phases. Some days she's up, some days she's down. Apparently what I thought was an up day turned out to be very, very down."

You think back to Bonbon's comment in the park about Foxy and his "good days", idly wondering if there's any similarity.

"All right," Chica says, taking a now-limp Bonnie from Freddy and princess-carrying her back to the kitchen table like a mother with an exhausted toddler. Freddy takes the opportunity to top up Bonnie's juice glass, adding another curly straw to it. Grinning, you flash him a thumbs-up, and he winks back at you. Once Bonnie's situated in her chair, Chica heads for the bathroom.

"Mangle, can you please?" she asks over her shoulder.

"I'm already on it," Mangle says, gently but firmly gripping Bonnie so that she doesn't fall out of her chair.

"We're going to start with the really important ones, since I don't think your stomach can handle ten pills at once right now on your skeleton diet," Chica says as she comes back with an armful of bottles. "Mike, you weren't kidding -- these things ARE covered in dust."

"Let me take them later," Bonnie moans. She tries to wrestle away, but Mangle's got her on tight lockdown. "I promise, I'll do it!"

"No more stalling," Chica snaps. "You're taking these pills right this instant, and don't you think I won't check to see if you cheek 'em. I'll hold your head under the water faucet to get them down you if I have to."

Quivering, Bonnie realizes she's beaten. In the end she swallows several pills and a cup and a half of juice in all, and every single time, Chica pries her mouth open and examines it with a penlight to ensure they went down.

"This is so humiliating," Bonnie mutters in between doses, chewing on the end of her straw.

"Did it to yourself, kid," Chica replies with a wry smile. "No sympathy from me, not anymore. No ma'am. We've talked about this until I'm as blue in the face as you are."

In spite of herself, Bonnie giggles a little as Chica ruffles her hair. You grin as well, relaxing slightly.

"And you ARE pretty blue," you add, joining in. "A very *pretty* blue, in fact."

"Oh, Michael," Mangle titters flamboyantly. "Don't tell me you're sweet on our dear Bonnibel! Why, I was under the impression that Chica was more your type!"

Mangle disappears into the air shaft with a grin, leaving you to blush, and Chica tries to stifle a laugh while she continues to lecture Bonnie.

"From now on you're getting your meds at every meal. I'm going to have Mangle mix them up and put them in your juice. If you don't drink every drop, so help me, Bonnie," Chica scolds. "We're getting them in you one way or another. You almost gave poor Mike a panic attack of his own just then."

"Sorry," Bonnie sighs, hanging her head.

You can't help but feel sorry for her -- she's clearly embarrassed and probably feels like the spotlight's on her. As you stand in the hallway watching her, an idea suddenly strikes you.

"Bonnie, how about some gelatin?" you ask, clapping your fist against your palm. "It's how my mom used to get my medicine down me when I'd have an ear infection or a fever as a kid. It mixes in so well, you won't even taste it. I promise."

Bonnie looks up at Chica who nods vigorously.

"Hey, there's a good idea, and I know you like gelatin. We'll get you some orange gelatin at the store while we're out."

"Lime," Bonnie sniffs. "...lime sounds good."

"Oh, lime? All right, we'll get some lime and orange. They actually taste good together if you mix them, but then the gelatin turns out to be brown. It doesn't look good, but the flavor's great," Chica muses, keeping the conversation quick and distracting. It seems the hen's already figured out where you're going with this.

"Yeah, we used to mix flavors all the time when I was a kid. I like lime too, so I'm all right with that. You know what's really good? If you put some canned fruit in there too, it gives it some texture."

"Oooh. Like ramen. You can add anything to ramen," Chica says.

"Uh. Right. Exactly," you add, gauging Bonnie's face to see if she's calming down. The cocktail of medication already looks like it's beginning to take effect, since her pupils are starting to dilate ever so slightly.

"It's quite the flexible meal, not unlike myself," Mangle adds from overhead, having returned with a hairbrush -- or would it be furbrush?

"Um, so, what sort of stuff do you like in your ramen, Mike?" Chica asks, nodding slightly to you as she takes the brush from Mangle. That's it, Chica -- keep the ball rolling with more small talk. Act like you don't notice it, and in Bonnie's mind it never happened. Get her mind off of herself and onto something else.

"Oh, all sorts of things. Eggs, hot dogs... shrimp, if I can afford it. Good shrimp, not the canned stuff. A little sriracha, you know. Ramen's great. You can do anything with it and it still tastes good."

"You like shrimp in yours? A kindred spirit. What really does it for me is imitation crab -- almost as good as the real thing and a fraction of the price. We have to be a bit penny-conscious here, you know," Mangle chimes in.

Bonnie hiccups slightly, leaning close to Chica.

"Oohh. Wow... little dizzy."

"It's okay, Bon. You'll feel much better soon," Chica says soothingly. "You know, it's a shame the 'instant' noodle cups actually take like four minutes to cook, though, because some of them have better flavor."

"Just as well, they're more expensive anyway. The stuff out of the packets is cheap, but you can feed four or five people for the price of one or two of the cups," Mangle says, gently dabbing at Bonnie's cheeks with a napkin.

The three of you continue inane discussion of everything from ramen toppings to songs you like for several minutes as Chica soothingly brushes Bonnie's fur. Eventually, Bonnie's almost completely back to 'normal' -- well, for a given value of normal, anyway. 'Subdued' is probably a better way of phrasing it.

"Feeling better now?" you ask hopefully.

"Yeah, I just... I get so worked up. Sorry, Mike," she replies.

"No big deal, Bonnie." You reach over and gently pat her arm with a smile. "I do need to get to the bank to get this check cashed, so if you feel like coming..."

You interrupt yourself, glancing up at Chica, who knows Bonnie's condition (and limits, and medications) much better than you do. She nods with a gentle smile, giving you the all-clear.

"If you feel like coming, you're more than welcome to," you continue. "And if you don't, nobody's forcing you. And might I just say, you look really nice today, now that Chica's taken care of that bedhead of yours."

"...maybe some fresh air would help clear my head," Bonnie finally manages at length. "I guess I'll go get dressed."

"I'll come with you," Chica insists. "If you're still dizzy, the last thing any of us need is for you to slip and conk your noggin on your closet door trying to get changed."

Bonnie giggles as she teeters into her bedroom with Chica helping her along.

"We'll be just a minute, Mike."

"Take your time," you reply as the two of them leave the room.

As soon as they're out of sight, you, Mangle, and even Freddy all let out a relieved sigh in perfect unison.

"Man, was I pressuring her that badly? I feel like shit now."

"You most certainly aren't the cause of her malady, dear, but you might have... flustered her, just slightly," Mangle hesitantly replies. "For someone as, ah, self-conscious as Bonnie is -- she doesn't hold up well to intense scrutiny."

"It didn't *seem* that intense," you quietly protest. "If she's not taking her pills, how is she going to get any better?"

Something kind of flashes in Mangle's eyes, though the fox remains quiet.

"What? What did I say?" you ask, scratching your head.

"Foxy, if you could be so kind as to pick up some facial tissues for me from the store, I'd be most appreciative. I've run out." Producing a floral-print change purse, Mangle begins thumbing through it to hand you some money, but you politely turn it away.

"That's not necessary. Nothing's too good for 'family,'" you say with a wink, inwardly savoring the surprised expression on Mangle's face as Bonnie and Chica return to the common area.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Mike," Chica says. "Ready to go?"

"So I'm guessing we don't have a car," you comment, finally slinging the kitchen trash bag that you were supposed to carry out earlier into the nearby dumpster.

"Nope. Our apartment isn't one with the garage option. There's actually only a few that do have it, but I don't think our building was designed that way. Some of the apartments were built more recently than others," Chica replies.

"All right. So we take the bus into town? I mean, I didn't, you know, get to go yesterday."

"Oh, you wanted to go yesterday with us? Why didn't you say something?" Chica asks obviously, helping Bonnie with her scarf.

You catch yourself from getting angry, and instead bite your tongue.

"Uh, to tell you the truth, you guys were in such a hurry I just didn't get the chance," you reply with a huff.

"Oh. I'm sorry, Mike," she sighs. "If I'm being honest with you, the thought never occurred to me. We were both in a hurry and just wanted to get going as quick as we could."

"Yeah," Bonnie adds. "We didn't mean to ditch you, Mike. I guess that was a little mean of us."

"Ah. Don't worry about it, guys," you reply, feeling better already, now that you know it wasn't intentional.

You and Bonnie tag along behind Chica, having to move relatively quickly to keep stride with her due to your notable differences in height. Fortunately, it's not too far to the bus stop at the front of the complex.

"To answer your question, yes, we take the extravagant, luxurious city bus." Chica puffs up her chest with mock pride, waving to the bus stop sign with a flourish.

"Glorious," you reply, clapping appreciatively.

"Actually, it's not so bad now that they reupholstered the seats for most of them. Just be grateful we don't have to ride the old butt-buster," she adds with a shiver.

"Oh man, crappy plastic seats, I take it?" You find yourself wincing at the thought of having to sit on hard seats -- especially this time of year.

"Worse. Metal. With hard edges," she replies.

"Criminal," you groan. "I'm imagining trying to ride that in the freezing rain, and I'm not liking it."

"We did last year," Bonnie stammers. "It was *awful*."

"No kidding," Chica replies as she turns her rear toward you. "My tail feathers used to be twice as long until 'the freeze'."

"What -- they froze to the seat?" You stare at them in horror. "Oh, god. That had to be miserable!"

"No kidding. Being plucked is all kinds of painful, not to mention more than a little degrading," she replies with a haunted look in her eyes, shivering slightly. "...ngh. Never again."

You take a seat at the bench where Bonnie's already flopped down, panting from the walk.

"Bon, I keep telling you, you NEED to get out and jog with me," Chica smugly insists, folding her wings. "Put some meat on those bones, girl!"

"If I get out and jog with you I'll shrivel up. If anything, I need to *gain* weight -- not *lose* it," Bonnie replies defiantly.

"Yeah, but you'll burn a ton of energy, and then come in famished afterwards! As it is, you don't expend any energy, so you don't eat anything." Chica looks at you like this is just the most obvious thing in the world. "Seriously. Have you seen her diet?"

"Hmm. I guess that makes sense," you muse. "Hell, I'll go jogging with you if you don't mind a slowpoke weighing you down."

"Not at all," Chica says enthusiastically. "We'll have you buff and trim in a month, guaranteed. You'll have a six-pack instead of looking like you just drank one."

You pat your stomach self-consciously.

"It's -- I'm big-boned," you lie. Obviously, by the look on both of their faces.

"You're chubby, Mike. Adorably chubby, but still chubby," Chica scoffs. "You keep shoveling Freddy's cooking down your throat without getting up to burn it off? We're going to have to roll you around the apartment in a wheelbarrow."

"He's cute, though," Bonnie smiles, poking your belly like a little kid who can't keep her hands to herself.

"Hey now," you chide good-naturedly. "You know, that's a good point, Chica. His cooking IS pretty good, but really, really rich. How does Freddy keep the weight off?"

"Are you kidding? Freddy benches like, 400 pounds, dude! Late at night, he sneaks out to the exercise room next to the leasing office when he thinks we're all in bed!" Chica busts out laughing as she spreads her wingtips about a foot apart. "Have you SEEN the size of his arms? The guy could pick up our refrigerator with one paw -- hell, I think he DID once when Mangle dropped a tube of lipstick underneath it!"

You sit back in quiet awe, finding new respect for the odd bear.

"That's really impressive. I mean, I get that he's a bear and being strong's sort of their thing -- but still, wow," you gush.

"Yeah. Good news is, Freddy might be jacked, but he's super gentle," Chica says, running a wing through her headfeathers. "The ol' stuffed bear wouldn't hurt a fly."

Conversation kind of peters out for a bit as the three of you patiently wait on the bench for the bus to arrive. Your lucky streak of clear, cool weather is likely coming to an end soon, so it's a good day for you to get some money cashed out so that you can float for the rest of the month. Besides that, you promised you'd help with expenses, and the fact you've had to subsist on the generosity of relative strangers up until now wounds your pride.

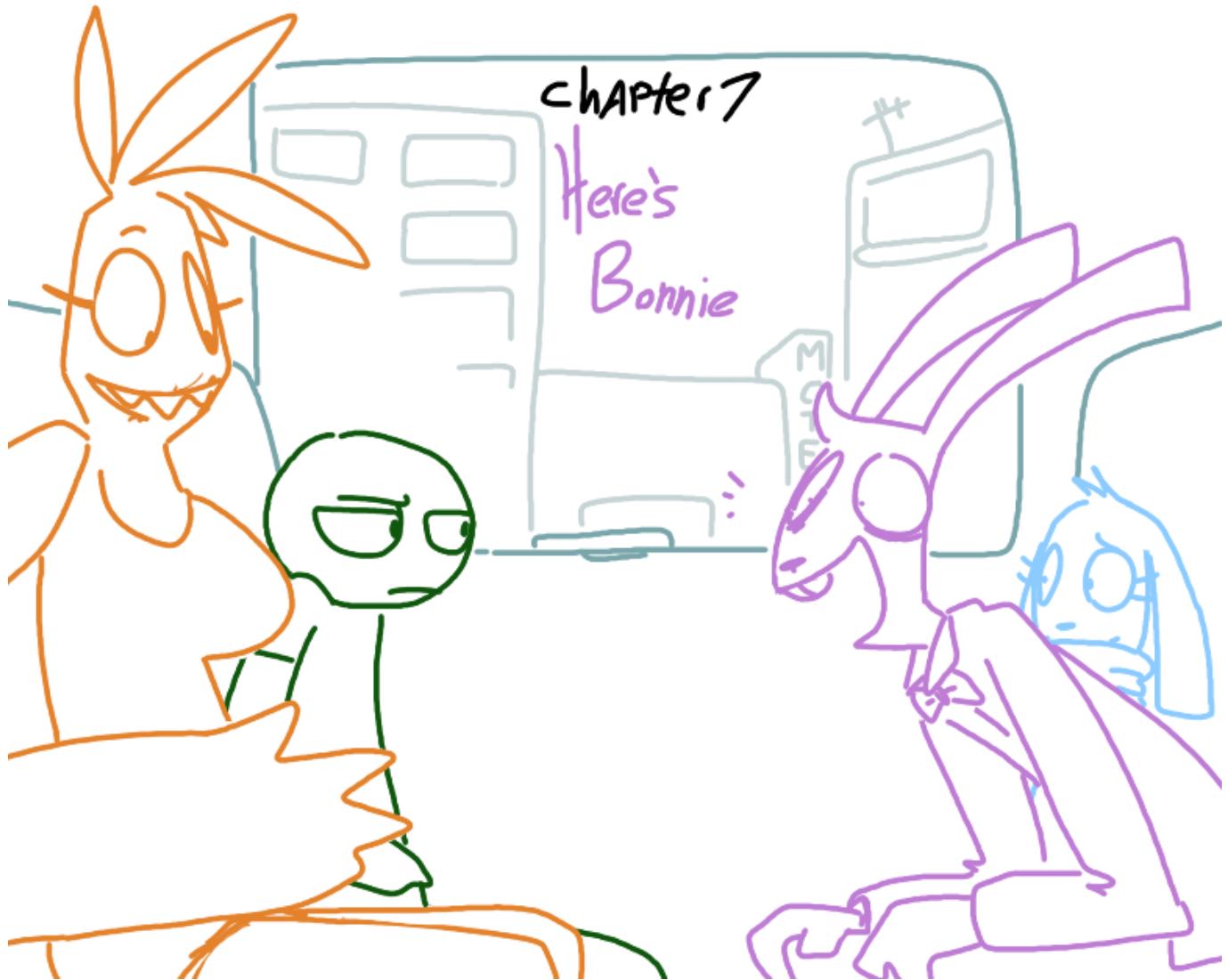
With a smile on your face, you study Chica and Bonnie, resolving to do right by these folks.

It's the least you can do.

# Here's Bonnie

## Chapter Summary

Mike takes a trip downtown with his roommates, and a particularly animated new acquaintance.



The sounds of heavy footfalls on the concrete sidewalk alert you to someone approaching the bus stop. Glancing up, you observe a tall, gangly rabbit dressed in a tweed coat and dress slacks sauntering up to your bench. Unlike the two bunnies you've met thus far, this one's a dusty purple and appears to be male.

"Well, would ya look at this motley crew," the rabbit says, snapping his lapels. "How are you folks doin' on this finest of days?"

"Hey, Bonworth! Good to see you up and around," Chica replies as she stands up to hug the newcomer. "Heading into town?"

"Right as rain," he replies jovially, slowly breaking the hug before turning to look at you. "Now say, I know li'l miss Bonnibel here, but who's this swell-looking fella? Put 'er there, pal!"

Without warning, the rabbit thrusts a huge, bulky paw in your face, nearly clipping you in the jaw. You reach out and shake it, trying not to wince -- he's got a grip like iron. This goofball's a hell of a lot stronger than he looks!

"Bonworth, this is Mike, our new roommate. Mike, this is Bonworth Carrington Rabbinson the 2nd," Chica replies.

"Kind of a mouthful, right?" Bonworth grins. "My friends just call me Bonnie!"

"Huh. That makes you the third 'Bonnie' I've met while staying here," you reply, rubbing your half-crushed hand.

"You know, I hadn't really thought about that, but now that you mention it..." your Bonnie comments, absently counting something off on her fingers.

"I suppose there are a number of us runnin' around," Bonworth chuckles. "If you factor in ol' Beanpole, then that should bring the tally of 'Bonnie's' I know of to four by my accounting -- including myself, of course."

Holy shit. Bonbon wasn't kidding -- this apartment complex is by no means suffering a Bonnie deficiency. It's almost enough to make your head spin. Still, considering the fact that not a single one you've met thus far is actually "named" Bonnie per se, it makes some level of sense if it's a common nickname -- sort of like how "Freddy" could easily be short for Frederick or Alfred.

Either way, you make a mental note to try to start referring to your own Bonnie by her full name a little more when you're around other Bonnies so that it doesn't get any more confusing than it already is. Oh, but then there's the fact that Freddy refers to things using "bon"...

"I'm happy to see you again, Bonworth." Bonnie -- *Bonnibel*, damn it -- says, giving him a brief and gentle hug of her own.

"Well, shucks, look at me, gettin' all the attention from the ladyfolk here," he breaks into a dopey smile, doing a little dance on the spot even though it's obvious he's not cut out for it. You watch as he teeters back and forth like a drunken sailor trying ballet for the first time, much to the girls' amusement and your own disdain.

"So where are you headed?" Bonnibel asks, giggling softly at the display.

"Well now," he smirks, rubbing his chin, "I was fixing to go hook our crew up with some victuals, seeing as how we're running low on groceries. How about you kids?"

"Mike here's got to head to the bank," Chica says, patting you on the shoulder, "and then we were thinking of doing some shopping and picking up pho for dinner later tonight. Mangle has a craving, it would seem."

"You know, Bonworth, I think there's a grocery store right by the bank," Bonnibel says, timidly raising her paw. "Why don't we walk together and catch up?"

"Sounds jake to me," he replies, snapping his fingers enthusiastically as the bus pulls up. "Oh look, there's our trolley now! All aboard, everybody!"

Ah, wonderful. Now you're going to be trapped in a confined space for God knows how long with a neurotic rabbit that just went code red on you not twenty minutes ago and a -- well, whatever the hell Bonworth is.

Your theory about having accidentally checked into an asylum is starting to feel like it's holding water.

The bus is packed with colorful commuters heading into the city for work, some of whom give you funny looks as you pass by. You resist the growing urge to announce to all the gawkers that you're not even the weirdest person in your group.

Despite the bus being nearly full, the four of you are able to find seating all the way in the back. Chica squeezes in next to you while Bonworth and Bonnibel sit opposite you. With both Chica and yourself occupying a small, narrow bench seat, it's more than a little cramped. You find yourself pressing up against the window to avoid shoving her off the bench. Good thing you're not claustrophobic.

"You're welcome to sit up here, Mike, if you'd be more comfortable," Chica comments, patting her lap with a coy smile.

You very briefly consider taking her up on the offer -- her feathers *are* quite soft, and she's, uh, well-padded -- but you know it'd ultimately make you LESS comfortable, especially since she (and/or Mangle) would almost certainly tease you about it later.

"I'll manage," you reply. "If I'm crowding you, let me know. Wouldn't want to be accused of manspreading or anything."

"Hah! Well, don't let me smoosh you either, though," she grins. "You know that Mangle likes the taste of your berries."

You turn bright red to the amusement of your companions and even a few of the nosy passengers around you. Even Bonworth blushes, jokingly pulling at his collar.

"Gee whillikers, sport! Sounds like you're quite the man-about-town. Should I take it ol' Mangle has designs on you?"

"I think Mangle has designs on everybody," you grouse, rubbing vigorously at your cheeks in a failed attempt to hide your embarrassment. "That comment was taken very, *very* much out of context and you know it, Chica."

"Mike, you gotta learn to laugh a little," she replies smugly, tossing a wing around your shoulders. "All that surliness is contagious. Pretty soon we'll be an apartment of grumps if you don't cut loose every once in a while."

"I am cutting loose. This morning at the breakfast table Mangle ate my berries and I didn't even--"  
More snickering from your companions. "Ugh. You know what, forget it."

"Well this sure is shaping up to be a lively little jaunt," Bonworth beams, straightening his bow tie as he turns to Chica. "So how's everyone doin' at your place? I still can't forget the last time I stopped by the apartment for that delightful brunch. If I didn't know better, I'd have said I put on six pounds just looking at it."

"That's Freddy for you," Chica replies. "Yeah, we're getting along just fine. Right before you walked up, I'd been trying to convince Bonnie here to go jogging with us since she needs to put on some weight. I'm afraid the first strong winter wind we get's going to blow her halfway across the parking lot."

"Might need to get her a leash like we have for Foxy," Bonworth replies, tousling Bonnibel's headfur. Foxy and Bonworth are roommates? That explains a lot, actually.

Bonnibel ducks under her scarf a little. "Oh, you guys," she says, blushing.

"Don't worry, Bon," you reply, giving her leg a friendly pat. "We won't make you do anything you don't want to do."

Especially not after that little freak-out earlier.

"Thanks, Mike." She's still blushing, but gives you the most precious little smile. It's hard to believe this was the same little spitfire that threw a hissy fit just moments before you left the house.

"So! Mike, tell me a little about yourself," Bonworth grins, smacking his thighs with his palms.

"I moved into 87-B about, what, about four days ago?" You glance at Chica, who nods. "So far, it's not bad at all. Uh, everyone's been really easy to get along with. I'm enjoying it here, for sure."

"Well that's dandy and all, fella, but that tells me zip about you." Bonworth raises an eyebrow.  
"Come on, give me the scoop! Where are you from? Any hopes and dreams? You like baseball? Go to the opera house? Ever won a sack race? Boxers or briefs? When's the wedding? You know, that sort of thing!"

You shoot him an icy glare at that last question -- and to your surprise (and comfort) even Chica cuts her eyes at him a little.

"All right, Bonworth, that's enough now," she chides. "I've got seniority when it comes to teasing Mike."

"Gee thanks, Chica," you huff as Bonworth cackles, clutching his knees.

"You weren't kiddin'! He really IS uptight," he smirks, his long purple ears swaying as he shakes his head. "You're way too easy, fella."

"I know, right? Isn't he great?" Chica giggles in agreement. You find yourself really hoping the bus stops soon.

"Honestly, Bonworth, I'm pretty much just an average guy who's just a little down on his luck right now," you insist, trying to steer the conversation back towards something resembling normalcy. "I

got laid off due to a work-related injury and ended up losing everything. I needed cheap housing, and so here I am."

"That's some tough business," Bonworth nods sympathetically. "I think you'd be surprised at the number of folks in our little neck of the woods who've been shafted at some point or another by the big cheese."

"At least I've got a roof over my head and food in my belly, thanks to everyone taking me in," you reply. "I really can't complain."

"Oh, I somehow doubt that." He gives you a lopsided smile. "You got too much fire in your eyes to be the complacent sort, Mike."

"What the hell does *that* mean?" you ask, before realizing all-too-late that you've fallen right into his trap. He and Chica both bust a gut laughing, and even Bonnibel can't help but giggle at your discomfort.

"See what I mean?" he says, wiping a tear from his eye. "Too easy!"

The Let's Humiliate Mike Schmidt Express eventually pulls up to your stop, none too soon. You're one of the first off the bus, filing out along with about half of the other passengers. As you step out onto the sidewalk with reddened cheeks and a bothered huff, an ample-bodied alligator -- or maybe she's a crocodile, you never could tell the difference -- sidles up next to you. Brushing a thick lock of her blonde hair back, she leans down and tilts her sunglasses slightly to look you square in the eye with a stern glare.

"Mmmm mmm. You best stop all that boudéin' now just cause you is honte, chil'."

"What?"

"I heard you back there poutin'. Whole crowd did. Them amis of yours, they care 'bout you. They jes' playin' with your temper. Sooner you put some water on it, the better."

"I -- I don't understand," you stammer nervously. It's one thing to be intimidated by an oversized chicken, but this -- this is a whole new level.

"Mais, I think you konprann jes' fine, pichouette." Turning on her heel, she walks off, her bulky tail swishing back and forth as she goes about her business.

"Whoa, Mike," Chica grins as she watches the curvy reptile saunter down the street. "You make a new friend?"

"I have no idea what that was about," you reply. "I think I just got a dressing-down by that crocodile lady."

"Wild. What'd she say?"

"Man, I don't know -- she was making about as much sense as Freddy. It wasn't a good talk, I'll tell you that much -- I get the feeling I pissed her off."

"Eh. Don't worry about it," Chica replies, nudging your shoulder. "Folks are strange all over. How about a soda or something?"

"Yes please, or maybe a beer," you reply, stumbling after her nervously.

"Mike, it's not even noon!" she cackles, slapping your back. "You act like that's your first time seeing a 'gator up close."

"It *was*, actually."

Bonworth raises a paw to his head, comically turning in place like a ship's lookout before snapping his pointer finger out.

"All right, pals! There's a watering hole not too far yonder with the niftiest ice-cream sodas," he says. "How about we wet our whistles before we part ways? My treat."

"Oh, you don't have to do that," Chica says. "We're fine with going dutch."

"No no, I insist!" Bonworth replies. "It's the least I can do after us bustin' poor Mike's chops all the way over here. Come on, fella."

You're not fond of letting others pay for you, but your settlement check's already mostly spoken for and you've got to stretch it across an entire month. In the end, common sense wins out and you accept as graciously as you can. Besides, a soda *does* sound good right about now, considering you haven't had any caffeine today.

As you follow your group through the bustling downtown streets, you find yourself idly taking notes in case you're ever here by yourself -- it's good to know what services and businesses are available to you now that you're starting to get back on your feet. The downtown area's clearly an older district -- large buildings built closely together en masse, apartments above restaurants and shops -- but despite the dated architecture, there's enough recent renovation to give it something of a modern accent.

Bonworth leads the three of you to an old-fashioned ice cream parlor. 50s-era pop art and posters adorn the walls next to photos of vintage cars and long-dead celebrities you've never heard of (across species you can't reliably identify), while a jukebox in the corner of the room churns out upbeat classic rock. You could easily see Richie Cunningham or Archie Andrews hanging out in a place like this. Apparently, it's still too early in the day for the restaurant to be hopping, and it looks like you're the only customers right now.

"I can see why he likes the place," you comment to Chica with a grin.

"It's a bit cornpone, isn't it?" she replies. "I've never been inside, actually."

"I have," Bonnibel timidly interjects. "...about a month ago, I mean. Their fries and lemonade are really good."

"Ooh, don't tempt me," Chica says, rubbing her belly self-consciously. "Fries are my weakness, but we practically just ate breakfast. It's too early for me to be gorging myself."

Bonworth taps the bell on the counter for service. A lanky, orange-furred tabby wearing an old-timey soda jerk's uniform shuffles around the corner.

"Well hey, look who it is! Big Bonnie and little Bonnie," he announces, propping himself up on the counter with one arm. "Nice to see you again, Bonworth. Who're your friends?"

"Hey, pal!" Bonworth says, shaking his paw. "Guys, this is Leo. You know the phrase 'service with a smile'? This was the guy they were thinking of when they coined it."

"Nice to meet you, Leo," Chica replies. "I'm Chica, and this is Mike. He's new to town."

Bonworth seems to know everybody. More and more you wonder if he's even capable of meeting a stranger. Leo shakes your hand and kisses the back of Chica's with a flourish. You find yourself fighting a frown as she titters girlishly.

"I'd love to say I'm all about the smiles these days, but my new boss has me bummed out ever since he bought this place. Total square, you dig?" Leo comments before glancing over his shoulder. "Err -- you didn't hear that from me, though."

"I get you," Bonworth agrees. "My old boss went through an unfortunate replacement, too. Food service is a rough gig."

"So what can I get you guys? Our special of the day is a hot dog and root beer float combo for just three clams. Hand-dipped, hard-packed ice cream and a 100% USDA beef frank on a poppy seed bun -- only the best quality stuff."

"I keep telling you, you should be in commercials," Bonworth says. "I just ate and I'm already hungry listening to that spiel! Quite the pitchman, Leo, yes sir."

"I'll definitely take you up on a root beer float. Aaaaand as for that wiener..." Chica glances down at you with a smirk. You roll your eyes, bracing for yet another crude joke, but to your surprise she takes the high road this time. "Nah, just the float for me, thanks."

Still, from the look on her face, it's obvious she knows exactly what you're thinking. Smugly grinning at you, she takes a seat in the dining room.

"Leo, I'd like a scoop of mint chocolate chip," Bonnibel says, standing on tip-toe to see the ice cream case a bit more clearly. "Thanks for treating, Bonworth."

"Aw, shucks. You're sure welcome," Bonworth says, blushing as she hugs his waist.

"How about you, Mike?" Leo asks, scooping up the ice cream. He wasn't kidding, it's hard-packed enough that you can see him putting some serious torque on the scoop to get it out of the bucket.

"Uh, just a Dr. Pepper if you've got it," you reply. "If not, whatever caffeinated cola's on tap."

"Dr. Pepper, huh? Can't say I've heard of that one, but we've got fizzy drinks of the cola persuasion aplenty," Leo answers. "Bonworth?"

Bonworth makes a show of thinking, tapping his chin.

"You know, you sold me. I'll have that combo, but box the frank up to go if you would please."

"Mustard and relish okay?" Leo asks as he hands you Chica's float and your own drink cup.

"I'd *relish* some relish," Bonworth replies, striking out an intentionally goofy, clumsy dance with a snap of his fingers. You can almost hear the corny laugh track in your head.

Leo chuckles as Bonworth nearly flips over onto his back, catching himself on a nearby chair.

"You're two left feet, Bonnie."

"Hah! You're tellin' me!" he says with a sheepish grin.

After enjoying your drinks together, your group parts ways with Bonworth so that he can go grocery shopping and you can hit up the bank. You waste no time in cashing your check, most of which you turn around and immediately hand over to Chica while Bonnibel's distracted watching television in the lobby.

"Dude, whoa, no. This is way too much for utilities and food," she whispers, looking down at the thick stack of bills. "Like, way, *way* too much."

"It's really fine. You guys took a total stranger in on a whim and did everything in your power to make me feel comfortable. Let me help out a little."

"Mike," she argues, her voice ramping up. "This is more than just '*a little*'! This is twice as much -- or more -- than any one of us contributes from our own checks to the monthly bills. Really, it's--"

Not wanting to make a scene, you gingerly press a finger to what's left of her mouth to quiet her, but she flinches back as you do. Giving her an apologetic smile, you hastily draw your hand back.

"Sorry. Sorry, I-- Chica. I'm a single guy with basic needs. I don't smoke, I rarely drink, and I don't have much in the way of hobbies. What am *I* going to do with this money?" You glance over at Bonnibel, keeping an eye on her. "Besides, until I'm back on my feet, I want to make sure I can help make things a little more comfortable. For all of us."

She's clearly torn -- you can tell the money would go far towards furnishings and helping out with some of the apartment's more specific needs. On the other hand, you see that same pride in her eyes that you're fighting in yourself -- that stubbornness that wants to bear the weight of the world.

And just like yours did earlier, her self-preservation forces her to cave.

"Well... thanks then," she murmurs, her face awash with embarrassment, relief... and something else.

You stand up to your full height and hug her tightly, turning a little as you do so that you don't make it look like you're trying to get a face full of chicken breast.

"No, Chica," you whisper back, "thank you."

# Movie Night

## Chapter Summary

Mike and his roommates gather supplies for the night's pajama party.



You pull away from Chica sooner rather than later, wanting to avoid making any more of a public spectacle of yourselves than you already have. She turns her head under the pretense of checking on Bonnie, though you catch her dabbing at her eyes a little as she tucks the money you gave her into her pocket.

"I, uh..." Scratching the back of your head, you smile sheepishly at her. "There's a couple things I need to get from the store that I didn't put on the list the other day. Can you and Bonnie kill some time shopping?"

"What kind of question's that? We're girls -- of course we can kill time shopping," she chuckles, slipping her scratchy, easygoing smile back into place. "What kind of store are you looking for?"

"Is there anything like a pharmacy or a big box store in the area?" you ask, running through your mental checklist. "I mostly just need some socks and some personal stuff like aftershave."

"Yeah, there's a big discount store that usually has everything -- if you don't mind off-brands, that is," Chica says, running a wing through her headfeathers.

"Sounds like just what I'm looking for."

"All right then." She thrusts her wings into her pockets, trotting toward the entrance of the bank, where Bonnie's still camped out by a mounted television set, eyes glued to an upbeat-looking children's cartoon. "Hope you don't mind a walk. It's a few blocks away."

"I'm told I'm chubby," you answer. "Some exercise'll do me good."

"Adorably chubby, I said," Chica insists.

"But still chubby, you clarified." You can't wipe the smirk off your face. "It was a point you felt the need to, you know, emphasize."

"Oh, hush, chubby," she jokingly groans. "Let's just get your socks or whatever. Come on, Bon! We're rollin' out!"

"Thanks for being patient, Bonnie," you offer to Bonnie as she tears her gaze away from the television, bounding over to rejoin you and Chica.

"No problem," she quietly replies.

On a whim, you pluck a lollipop from a bowl on the tellers' desk as you head out the front door, handing it to her. "Here you go. You know, for being a good girl."

"Oh, thank you!" She giddily accepts it, tucking it into the pocket of her jumper for safekeeping. "I wanted one, but I didn't want to ask."

"They're for everybody, Bon," Chica laughs. "That's the point of having them out in the first place."

"O-ohh," Bonnie says, face flushing. "Well, yeah. I knew that."

The three of you pour out onto the street, basking in the brisk afternoon air. Chica takes the lead, turning in place a couple of times to get her bearings before nodding to herself in satisfaction.

You walk together in silence for a while, taking in the sights and sounds of the bustling city. Bonnie makes little games of moving down the sidewalk, avoiding cracks and lines and occasionally jumping over the odd grate or manhole cover. If you didn't know better, she looks like a big-for-her-age kindergartener, between the jumper dress, lollipop, and even her mary janes clicking on the sidewalk.

"Are we back to having an 'up day'?" you whisper to Chica, gesturing at Bonnie as she merrily swings around on a parking meter pole.

"Hmmm. You know, I think it's going to be a very up day for all of us," Chica replies.

Your route takes you through what is clearly an older, more neglected and visibly dilapidated section of downtown. You can almost feel a vague sense of melancholy hanging in the air. It's as if this entire side of town has largely been forgotten about -- several of the structures nearby are closed or cordoned off with caution tape, foreclosure notices taped to windows fluttering in the afternoon breeze. Buildings that appear to have been abandoned halfway through construction stand next to shops that look like they could have been set locations for Hitchcock films once upon a time.

You're crossing the road when halfway down the street a broad, flat building with a bright marquee and darkly-tinted windows catches your eye, sticking out like a sore thumb in the middle of what could easily pass for a ghost town. Faintly, as if just at the edge of hearing, the distant sound of music drifts in on a cold wind. The hairs on your neck stand up, and you pull your coat close to keep from shivering.

"Mike, let's go," Chica calls to you from several buildings ahead as you tear your gaze away from the flashing purple and yellow lights.

"Yeah, coming," you shout back, hurrying on your way.

The discount store's nothing fancy -- a big warehouse-turned-store full of pallets and lots, most of which seem to be overstock or generic brands. For your needs (and your budget), however, this place is perfect. Per your request, Bonnie and Chica busy themselves in the housewares section, leaving you to relative privacy as you head through the store. You grab a basket from the rack by the front door and begin perusing the shelves to stock up on what you need.

Heading for the mens' clothing section, you decide your first order of business should be to replace your threadbare socks. You've only got a couple of good pairs right now -- and considering that you'll probably be doing a lot of walking, keeping your feet in good shape seems like a no-brainer. A sturdy pair of boots probably wouldn't go amiss either for when the snow undoubtedly kicks in a couple weeks from now.

After trying a few different pairs on, you find a set of boots that are comfortable enough you think you can live with them. It amazes you how many varieties of footwear there are for talons, webbed feet, paws, and so on while still catering to your approximate foot shape, especially considering that this isn't even a store that specializes in shoes.

One pair of boots and a bulk package of crew socks with the correct number of holes in them later, you make your way over to the next aisle. A few long-sleeved shirts are a cold weather must-have, and while you're at it maybe a couple new pairs of jeans as well. You're not exactly looking to put together a new wardrobe, but a fair number of your current things are ragged, and not in the stylish way.

"All right," you murmur to yourself, going over your mental shopping list. "Now what?"

On their recent shopping excursion, Chica and Bonnie did pick up some essential toiletries for you -- deodorant, body wash, and most importantly some shampoo that didn't feel like it was going to rip your eyebrows out. While you're covered on the basics, you've since thought of a few things you would like to have, such as a comb and a hand mirror, and also some more masculine shaving cream.

No offense to the girls, but their selection of "Spring Flower Fresh" isn't quite to your taste.

As you walk down the toiletry aisle, your gaze inadvertently falls on the mens' personal products. You're reminded of your second-day conversation with Chica in which she made that jab about your "last pipe cleaning", and even though you'd never admit it out loud, that was a pretty astute observation. Embarrassing as it is to think about, the condom you keep in your wallet surely expired long ago.

Even if you're not exactly planning on anything, you'd rather be safe than sorry. After all, who knows what might happen? You're a decent-looking guy, and there are obviously girls here interested in your "look" -- Chica *did* say you were "adorable", and you're willing to bet that the human-obsessed Bonbon would find you to be quite the catch. Getting lucky isn't out of the question, even if it's not at the forefront of your mind, so you might as well be prepared.

Glancing over your shoulder to make sure nobody's watching, you surreptitiously pluck a box of rubbers from the rack and skim the label.

"Holy cow," you mutter, instantly putting it back when you realize that the length and girth would be, er, roomy to say the least. You quickly paw through the other strange and unfamiliar brands, eventually landing on one that looks like it'd be an acceptable fit -- only for you to flip it over and see the brand name.

"Spud Sleeves': skins for... 'small fries'?" you sputter.

You flip the box of condoms at the shelf in disgust, not even caring that you just knocked over a whole row of products. Without even bothering to neat them back up, you storm down the aisle in a huff towards the back of the store, cheeks burning.

Guess that's just one more difference between you and apparently everyone else here.

Honestly, you don't even know why you bothered. It's not like you were going to ever hook up with anyone anyway, and especially not now given that metaphorical (and literal) shot to the 'nads. Everyone already sees you as a freak. Apparently in this world, you must be 'this tall to ride', and once again you're coming up short.

You can't help but feel sorry for yourself. You didn't ask to be dropped into an apartment complex full of crazies. You didn't ask for any of this, actually. You want nothing more than to get back on your feet and out of this hellhole -- but there's nowhere to run to. You never should have forked over so much of your stipend to Chica, but you just had to play the big boy in an attempt to impress her.

"Mike?"

You should have just saved your money diligently so that you can move into a better apartment, a normal apartment. One where you don't have to share a bedroom with a total stranger you can't even understand. Where you don't have creepy ceiling foxes spying on you, cracking lewd jokes all

the time about your 'twig and berries'. An apartment where there aren't neurotic rabbits prone to violent mood swings that have to be handled with kid gloves.

"Mike!"

An apartment where the one sane, truly likeable person that lives with you isn't making constant flirty advances at you, isn't just so infuriatingly cheerful and warm, isn't tricking you into thinking that there's a reason for you to get out bed in the morning --

From out of nowhere, Chica grabs you by your shoulders, lightly shaking you.

"Earth to Mike! You in there, dude?" she asks, chuckling nervously.

Snapping out of your reverie, you nod, looking up at her, discreetly wiping your eyes and nose on the back of your sleeve.

"I'm fine," you mutter. "Really, I'm good. I, uh -- I got what I needed, so I'm gonna go check out."

Bonnie peers out from behind her, wrapping her paws around your arm.

"Mike, you don't look fine," she whispers.

Yeah, Bonnie, because you're totally the expert on being fine.

"I'm okay. Just a little tired and cranky," you insist, faking a smile and a yawn. "Come on, we've still got to hit the pho place before we head home, right? I was thinking maybe we'd grab a couple movies for the pajama party tonight." Yeah, pity party, more like.

"Well, okay then," Bonnie says, exchanging glances with Chica. Much to your relief, they drop the subject.

Turning on your heel, you head toward the checkout lanes -- giving the toiletries a wide, wide berth.

"So that's two orders of pho chay, a pho bo vien, a filet mignon pho tai and a lemongrass beef vermicelli -- with two orders of spring rolls on the side," the cashier drones. "\$48.59. You paying cash or credit?"

You wince inwardly at Mangle's expensive taste. Fifty bucks for takeout dinner (even with two of the orders being the cheaper vegetable option) certainly puts a considerable dent in your remaining funds, and you still have to stop by the video store. You idly wonder if you shouldn't have just shilled for pizza this morning instead.

"Mike, at least let me pick up the dinner tab," Chica insists, reaching for her wallet. "Please."

"Nope," you reply, having recovered enough from your earlier fit that they're no longer looking at you like you've grown a set of horns. "I've already got it covered."

"Hey, you've done so much already. You're making me look bad." She's smiling, but you can tell her embarrassment is genuine.

"Let's not argue about finances in front of the nice man, dear," you smirk.

"Ha ha, oh **wow**. So that's how it's gonna be, huh." She covers her mouth with a wing, laughing incredulously as you peel two twenties and a ten off your thinning bankroll, pushing them across the counter. "You're a piece of work, Mike."

"Don't I know it."

Chica picks up a little extra for the tip jar, and as your group heads out the door loaded down with paper bags full of steaming hot food, you glance over at Bonnie.

"Hey Bon," you offer, "you want to pick out what movie we watch tonight?"

Excitement flashes across her face as her eyes light up.

"I can, Mike? I can pick? Really?"

"Sure," you reply, fishing around in your pocket and handing her a ten dollar bill. "Run get us a movie and a box of candy or two for yourself. Can't have movie night without some theater candy, right?"

Awestruck, she tackles you in a hug before skipping across the street to the old rental store.

"Hoo boy. Letting her pick a movie *and* sugaring her up in the process? Now you've gone and done it," Chica jokes as she watches Bonnie running from aisle to aisle through the window. "Whatever she chooses, I'm not responsible for it. That's on you, bucko."

Sitting down on a nearby bench, you plop your share of the bags in your lap.

"You think she'll be all right by herself?" you ask Chica warily, realizing that sending her into a store alone may not have been the best idea.

"You're the one I'm worried about right now, Mike," she answers. "You seemed real moody back there. Somethin' you wanna talk about?"

"Oh, you know..." You sigh, avoiding eye contact. "Finding out things about yourself that you don't particularly like."

"And that has to do with buying socks and jeans? You're not *that* chubby, Mike."

"Hah, no, no, nothing like that. It's a personal thing. I just -- I guess I'm feeling like a bit of an outcast. Sort of like I don't belong here," you reply, staring down at yourself.

Chica sets her bag down on the bench, lifting your head gently with a wing.

"And we're not outcasts? C'mon, Mike. I'm down a beak, Bonnie and Freddy've got all sorts of issues -- and you didn't hear this from me, but so does Em. Mangle, I mean." Smiling, she strokes the side of your face with her feathered thumb. "We're misfits, Mike. All of us. That's why we all shacked up in the first place."

"I'm sorry, Chica. I guess I'm just trying to kind of get my act together. I didn't mean to, you know -- get heavy."

"Neither does Bonnie. But it happens, and we deal with it when it does. Don't be ashamed of that, Mike. You can't help how you feel, only how you act on your feelings."

Leaning in close and putting a wing around your shoulder, she lowers her voice.

"And hey -- if we've done something to offend you, or you're feeling like an outcast *because* of us, then you tell me and I'll see it resolved before the end of the night. If you feel wronged, if you've been hurt, I need to know now. The sun doesn't set on anger in my house."

"No, Chica, it's not you guys at all. I promise," you insist.

She searches your face for several seconds before relaxing her grip on you.

"Then I'm holding you to it. I can't stress it enough -- pajama party's a huge, huge deal to Bonnie. It's kind of an 'anchor' for her, you know?"

"Message received," you reply. "I'll try to buck up. Thanks for hearing me out."

"Not a problem, Mike."

The remainder of the wait passes in silence as Chica pulls her phone from her pocket, busying herself with checking her text messages. Eventually, Bonnie comes back with a movie and two boxes of candy, handing you the change.

"You all set?" you ask her.

"Yeah! The guy in there was really nice," she replies, pulling out some sappy-looking musical from the plastic bag. You stifle a groan.

"Glad to hear it! Let's get back to the house," Chica announces.

By the time the bus sets you back down outside your apartment complex, it's getting close to early evening. Chica and Bonnie help you up the stairs with your purchases where Freddy's standing outside on the porch like a doorman.

"Rebonjour," he comments, accepting your bags. "De la cuisine vietnamienne? Ça sent bon."

"Nice to see you too, Freddy," you greet, nodding back. Even though neither of you understand each other, you feel like the sentiment is mutual. Glancing at the clock, you squint. "Wait, it's only 3? It really felt-- Well, what time does this shindig start? Feels a little early for dinner, still."

"Yeah," Bonnie comments. "We're not usually back so soon. Can we start a little earlier than usual tonight?"

"I guess we could," Chica replies, much to Bonnie's excitement.

"Yes! I'm going to go get a bath and get changed into my PJs then," Bonnie says, darting off towards her bedroom.

"While she's off, how about we at least neaten up the apartment a bit before we get going?" Chica says to you. "I can go knock out some laundry if you don't mind vacuuming the living room."

"Sounds easy enough," you agree. "Do you mind washing the clothes I got today? I'd feel better if they were cleaned before I start wearing 'em."

"Not at all! I don't blame you -- you don't have any idea what's on that stuff. For all you know some guy with fleas has tried a pair of pants on before you."

"Holy shit, what? That's a thing that can happen?" You stare at her, incredulous. "I didn't even *think* about that."

"Oh, sure!" she says, eyes wide. "Happened to me in -- gosh, what was it? Sixth grade, I think. I was shopping with my mom and I saw a blouse I liked at a store, and it turned out that it had lice all over it when we got it home. That's the first of two times in my life I've been unwillingly plucked."

"Freaking ouch," you reply. "I can't even imagine that. A cousin of mine got lice when I was a kid, and the worst thing that happened to him was he had to shave his head. I feel like he got off lucky."

"I guarantee he did. Man, I was miserable waiting for my feathers to grow back, *and* I still had to go to school. Wasn't a pleasant experience, I can tell you that much."

While Chica busies herself with gathering up the laundry, you pull the vacuum out of the closet and begin running it through the common area. Even Freddy takes a moment to grab an old-fashioned feather duster, running it over the furniture. Working together always gets the job done faster, and before long you've got the entire apartment looking beautiful and in order.

Chica's still busy in the laundry room and Bonnie's still in the middle of her bath, so you decide to join Freddy in indulging in a cup of pre-dinner tea. You're hardly a tea enthusiast, but it's a nice treat after having been in the cold weather all day.

"Oh, you're back? Welcome home," Mangle says from the living room vent overhead. "Darling, that tea smells simply heavenly. Chica, dear, may I trouble you for a cup?"

Freddy glances up at Mangle and nods, heading to the kitchen to refill the kettle.

"So, Michael -- did you have a pleasant time out? How's Bonnie doing?"

"She's doing a lot better, yeah," you answer. "And yeah, I'd say it was a pretty good time overall. We ran into a guy by the name of Bonworth -- you know him?"

"Oh, of course! Oh he's a lively character, isn't he," Mangle laughs. "We had him over for brunch not too long ago. Poor boy doesn't get anything resembling a good dinner over there, I would be inclined to wager. Too few cooks in the kitchen, to *mangle* a phrase."

You chuckle at the lame pun. "Ahh, that's right, he did mention that he'd been over here before. Stands to reason you two would know each other," you reply. "Sorry, I'm still trying to get the hang of there being three Bonnies around here, so I have no idea who all knows who."

Freddy hands the teacup up to Mangle who accepts it with a sharp-toothed smile.

"Ohh, thank you, honey. I've been busy all day and haven't once stopped for a break." Busy? Doing what? Now that you think about it, you really don't have any idea of what Mangle does.

"Oh, before I forget, I got your tissues. I couldn't remember what kind you wanted, so I got the normal ones for like a runny nose with the eucalyptus lotion stuff, and then just the plain kind. They're in my room in one of the shopping bags."

"Ah, eucalyptus. That's wonderful. Thank you," Mangle replies, blinking at you expectantly. "Err... do you mind retrieving them for me? The tissues, I mean. I understand that you might feel a touch uncomfortable if I head in there without asking."

It sounds more than just a touch rehearsed, like Mangle doesn't actually quite understand why you'd be uncomfortable in the first place, but is nonetheless trying to be polite.

"It's fine," you reply. "Help yourself."

"Oh, well -- if you insist." As Mangle tugs the vent cover shut, something clicks in your mind.

"Hey, Mangle?" you call out.

The vent cover flips open again, and Mangle pokes out nervously.

"Yes?"

"Thank you for asking," you say with what feels like one of your first truly genuine smiles of the day.

"Oh! Of course, Bonnie."

"Mike," you correct gently.

"Oh. Mmm, yes. Right you are."

Chica wasn't kidding about the pajama party being serious business, but you're starting to get the impression that it might not be exclusively for Bonnie's benefit.

She's been strutting around like a drill sergeant, barking orders the whole time. Freddy's the only member present not dressed explicitly in pajamas, instead sporting a silky dressing gown and loose-fitting slacks. He looks so distinguished that it's almost comical -- you're half-expecting him to pull out a box of cubans or a thick pipe and light up in the living room. Mangle, meanwhile, grins expectantly at you from behind the couch, wrapped formlessly in the bulky comforter from your bed.

"Mmmm. Pho bo vien, sooo scrumptious. The Vietnamese are surprisingly talented at the art of making a delicious meatball, and the broth is just exquisite." Glancing up at your dubious look, the fox giggles. "Oh, Mike, I hope you don't mind, but I was a touch chilly and your blanket's ever so soft."

"As long as it's back by the time I crash," you chide, shaking your head. Give 'em an inch... "Anyway -- I'm not sure I dig this bland vermicelli stuff -- it's like flavorless ramen. The beef's amazing, though."

"Mike, you're not in proper uniform," Chica warns. "Five-point deduction for forgetting your pajama top."

"It's warm in here!" you protest. "Mangle has the heat on, like, ninety degrees. You're lucky I've still got pants on!"

Chica folds her arms, scowling as she surveys the room.

"We're -- you *are* playing this up as a joke, right?" you ask.

Everyone -- Freddy included -- stares silently at you. You quickly wither on the spot under their gazes, lowering your bowl carefully onto the coffee table.

"Maybe I should just go put that on now, save us some time."

"Maybe you should just," Chica says militantly, playfully whapping you with the feather duster's stick as you grab your matching pajama top from the kitchen counter. "And be grateful I didn't get you the pajamas with the flap in the butt!"

"What a merciful dictator you are, ma'am," you snark, throwing your top over your shoulders as you hurry back to your designated position on the couch. "You're out of your mind if you think I'm buttoning this thing up, though."

"The panel will begrudgingly accept this outcome," she sighs.

"Yay!" Bonnie cries out from her cushion on the floor. "Oh, this is such fun!"

"Such, such fun," you grumble as Chica flops down next to you.

"Complaining is a ten-point deduction with repeated infractions punishable by bathroom duty for two weeks," she hisses.

**"Such fun!"** you enthuse hastily with only your most saccharine inflection. Bonnie beams up at you from her spot on the floor, slurping her broth. You feel like you're in one of those summer camp movies where the plucky kid protagonists get harassed by the power-tripping counselors.

Speaking of movies, the one you're about to watch (if you can even classify such a pokey-looking musical as a movie) is starting, and as the previews begin to roll Chica breaks character, smiling at you.

"An up ending to a very up-and-down day," she murmurs gently next to you.

Looking back on everything that's happened since this morning, you suppose you'd be inclined to agree.

# Misstep

## Chapter Summary

Mike and Mangle work on boundaries.



The sun's harsh rays rouse you once again from your slumber. With a yawn, you toss your blanket aside and begin climbing down out of the top bunk. As usual, Freddy's already up for the morning, likely in the kitchen preparing breakfast for everyone. As you eye his neatly-folded sheets on the lower bunk, you resolve to learn how to make up a bed as neatly as he does one of these days.

Today, however, is not that day. Reaching up to the top bunk, you lazily pull your blanket over until it's covering the front two-thirds of your mattress.

Yeah, good enough.

As you step out into the hallway, it would seem that your timing's perfect this morning -- for once, the bathroom's free and clear. A shower and a shave sound like just what you need to get your day started.

One hot, relaxing shower later, you wrap your towel around your waist and settle down in front of the mirror. It's been a few days since you last shaved, and the stubble that's been accumulating is starting to itch. However, before you can get started with your grooming, the vent overhead clicks open and your heart instantly rockets up into your throat. What's the point of even having a lock on the door?



"Mangle! Little indisposed here," you sputter, forcing yourself to calm down.

"Mike, dear, you're wrapped in a towel," your intruding roommate replies. "I can't see any, ah -- 'discreet bits'."

"Yeah, but I might *not* have been covered. Privacy, remember? Didn't we *just* have a conversation about this recently?"

"We're all adults here. It's nothing I haven't seen before, and certainly nothing for you to be ashamed of," Mangle smoothly replies, rewarding your frustration with a patronizing pat on the head. "Now would you please be so kind as to give me Bonnie's medicine from the counter?"

Your expression softens slightly. After Bonnie's panic attack, Chica insisted on switching her over to one of those calendar-shaped pill organizers, and it's made medicating the high-strung bunny a significantly easier process. Fetching the pill organizer from the counter, you pass it up to Mangle.

"Anything else?" you ask as you turn back to the mirror, fumbling with the cap on the shaving cream.

"Thank -- oh, for crying out..." Mangle groans theatrically. "Mike, you *obviously* don't know what you're doing! Here, let me help you."

Without waiting for an invitation, Mangle reaches down and swipes the razor from the counter.

"Yeah, no, I think I'm good here, Mangle." You furrow your brows, staring at the shaving cream lid. How the hell does this thing open? Is this a childproof cap? Who the hell puts a childproof cap on shaving cream? "Gimme my razor back so I can hurry up and shave -- someone else probably needs to use the bathroom by now."

"If you think you're just going to apply cold shaving cream to your face straight out of the shower without even properly lathering it, you've already proven you're a rank amateur," Mangle snorts. "Now pass me the canister before you hurt yourself, Bonnie."

"I've been shaving myself for years," you grunt, yanking at the shaving cream can's lid.

Mangle plucks the shaving cream canister from your hand, twisting the cap off flawlessly with a condescending smirk.

"I loosened it for you," you weakly protest. "Really though, Mangle. Just -- give me my stuff back. I've got this."

"I'll do no such thing. Every morning at breakfast for the last three days, I've been staring at that unsightly mess you've made of your whiskers, and it's almost put me off your food. If you *must* waste the good gift of what little fur you possess, you will allow me to at the very *least* ensure the job is thorough."

"I'm not bad at shaving," you croak as Mangle slumps forward out of the vent. "I bet I've got more experience at it than you do!"

"I very much doubt that, Chica. Now close your mouth and quit moving around -- I am in *no* humor for your shenanigans this morning."

Lathering up the cream, Mangle carefully begins to spread it on your face. Clutching your towel nervously, you try to distract yourself from the fact that you're being rubbed down in a confined space while half-naked.

Again.

By the same person.

Satisfied with the quality of the lather, Mangle holds your head steady with one paw while shaving your face with the other. You flinch slightly as the razor blade presses against your skin. Even though it doesn't hurt, something in you screams that this isn't okay. You're not sure what it is about

it that's really bothering you -- it's nowhere near as intimate as a massage, and what's more, you're fully alert -- but you find yourself fighting the urge to take off running down the hallway.

"Mike, for goodness' sake, *when* was the last time you moisturized your face with something *other* than water? You're destroying your skin!"

You helplessly stare upward as Mangle deftly and expertly swipes the razor back and forth across your face and neck. You don't dare speak, let alone move for fear of being cut. The process is taking far too long to be comfortable, despite the fact that it's still faster than you could have managed even if you'd hurried.

"Rinse and dab," Mangle orders after finally having finished. "No, Mike, not with hot water. Use cold water to close your pores."

You hurriedly do as instructed, grateful for it to be over.

"Now -- apply some aftershave lotion! It's essential, unless you want ingrown hairs."

"Got it," you murmur, fumbling around in the cabinet for some. You hand it upwards to Mangle without even attempting to apply it yourself, lest you be chastised for going against the grain or forgetting the double Watusi method or something.

"Good, you're learning already," Mangle mutters, trading your razor back to you for the lotion. Popping the bottle open, the fox gently begins working the aftershave into your skin. You squeeze your eyes shut, trying to distract yourself from the odd, tingling sensation.

"This is incredibly awkward," you mutter. "How much longer?"

"I'm already done," Mangle huffs, capping off the aftershave. "Now -- look at your face in the mirror and tell me more about your so-called 'experience'."

Opening your eyes, you take a look at yourself -- and realize that the difference really is like night and day.

"Holy crap," you breathe, awed. Your skin's baby-smooth without a single cut or nick. "You weren't kidding, Mangle -- I've been to barber shops that couldn't come close to this level of quality. You're incredible."

"Tell me something I don't know," Mangle chuckles. "I take great pleasure in being able to say 'I told you so' -- your skin will thank me, even if you do not. Now, go get yourself decent while I take care of our dear Bonnibel."

"Thank you," you comment, reaching up and tapping Mangle's nose playfully. "Really, seriously, thank you. You've got to show me how to, uh, 'properly' shave sometime. Hopefully when I have some pants on."

"Trade secret. But, I might be willing to teach you some proper grooming lessons in exchange for, ah, a small favor."

Uh oh. Mangle wanting a favor? Your mind instantly begins to whirl attempting to process all of the different ways this could spell doom for you.

"What sort of favor?" you venture cautiously, alarm bells ringing in the back of your head.

"Nothing inappropriate," Mangle reassures you. "Perhaps we shall discuss it after breakfast?"

"Hey, Mike! Dang, you look great today," Chica replies as you settle into your seat at the table. You glance down at the grease-stained tee you slept in, not having bothered to get fully dressed yet for the day in case you spilled food on your clothes.

"Mmm, what a surprise," Mangle dryly remarks in between bites of one of your waffles. Having recognized the pattern, Freddy's long since taken to just giving you a double portion of food. "What *could* be different about him?"

"Wasn't me. Mangle's one hell of a barber, that's for sure," you reply. "I mean, I thought the massage was good, but..."

Mangle's eyes light up, all pretense dropped. "Oh, you did? Oh, Freddy, that means the world to me!"

"Well, yeah. It was a fantastic massage. You know, for one that was totally unsolicited and incredibly invasive considering how long we'd known each other at that point," you reply with a smirk. "But I mean -- you know, I'd let you do it again. Like, when I'm awake. And only if Chica's watching so that you don't pull anything."

"No way in hell I'd be just sitting by, idly watching," Chica snickers as she forks into her food. "I'd be too busy enjoying one of my own and your ass would be off to the side fetching me a Mimosa. Mangle's massages are famous across the apartment complex -- you're lucky you got one at *all*, much less for free."

It's your turn to be surprised. "Whoa, seriously? Like, do you do it on the side for spending money, or...?"

"I'm *actually* a licensed physical therapist," Mangle sniffs, pivoting back to feigning offense. "They don't look it, but these are healing paws."

"No kidding," you remark. "That's kinda neat, actually."

Bonnie chooses this point in time to shuffle into the kitchen.

"Perfect timing," Mangle comments, beckoning the lop-eared bundle of nerves over to the table. "Come drink your go-go juice, Chica dear. Bottoms up!"

"Mrgagh," Bonnie mumbles, flopping down in her chair and letting out a huge yawn.

"You tell 'em, Bon," Chica replies as she pokes a straw in Bonnie's mouth.

After breakfast, Chica excuses herself to go take care of the household's monthly bills while Bonnie piles up on the couch to watch morning cartoons. You're halfway through helping Freddy neaten up the table when Mangle waves to you from the foyer duct.

"Oh, Chica? If you'd be so kind as to meet me in my room in just a few moments."

"Yeah, okay," you reply. "I'm going to go get dressed then I'll be right in."

"Err -- I suppose that's all right, but bring some of your best-looking shirts and tops," Mangle requests, head tilted as if pondering something. "Oh, and wipe the syrup from your chin, please. I need you at your best for this."

"Wait, multiple shirts? Why would--" you start to ask, but Mangle's already gone. With a shrug, you reach up and awkwardly wipe your mouth with a napkin before heading off in the direction of your room.

"Méfiez-vous," Freddy murmurs as you leave.

Somehow, you have a feeling you know exactly what he means.

"You want me to what?" you ask again, a little dumbfounded.

Much like its owner, Mangle's room is dolled up in a truly eccentric combination of aggressive pink-and-white decor. Faux painting covers the walls, while hot fuchsia fringe pillows adorn an otherwise pristine white bed. Everything is neatly organized and all of the furniture is painted to coordinate and complement the rest of the room, albeit flamboyantly.

Racks of clothing, hats, and accessories of all varieties are mounted next to Mangle's bed. A sewing table is set up in the corner of the room next to a large plastic tub full of bolts of fabric. Trays full of sequins, spools of thread and other craft stuff litter the floor nearby. An entire wall is dedicated to nothing but shipping supplies with rolls of tape and cardboard boxes piled almost floor-to-ceiling.

Eyeing you from under the comfort of one of those bizarre half-bathrobe, half-blanket eyesores you've seen on late-night television infomercials, Mangle grins.

"You'd be a natural at it," the fox purrs. "I also fashion my own collection of custom-made scarves and accessories which I market through my web store. You know, on the internet."

"I know what a web store is," you reply dubiously. "But scarves? Really? I thought you were a massage therapist. I didn't figure you for a, uh, clothing-making... person too. Is there anything you *can't* do?"

"Growing up, my skulk was insistent on learning trades and sharing our skills with one another," Mangle replies proudly. "Mother was simply the most talented seamstress, and I inherited a little of her skill with the thimble."

"That's neat and all, but why do you need me to model?" you inquire. "Can't you just use like a mannequin or something? Wouldn't one of the girls be better suited for this than I would?"

"Oh, they have helped me in the past -- with the feminine fashions. That said, I've received too many inquiries from my clients asking for my mens' designs to be modeled on something living -- you know these eclectic types. They have to see real flesh and blood. To wit, a live model. That's where you come in."

You try not to laugh out loud at the notion of Mangle of all people accusing someone else of being eclectic.

"As it is, I'm terribly, horribly swamped with the upcoming holiday rush. I have several dozen orders to get out by tomorrow morning," Mangle moans melodramatically. "My store was just featured as the 'shop of the month' on the network I sell through."

"Whoa. That's pretty cool, actually." You have to admit -- you're impressed. "Man, no wonder you were going on and on about keeping busy. I take it all those boxes aren't just for show, then."

"Surely you see my dilemma. Why, I would model them myself, but it's just too difficult for me to set the timer on the camera and then hurry to strike a flattering pose and -- ohh, please, Freddy! Be a dear! Just a few photos."

"How many photos are we talking here?" you ask.

"No more than twenty. Maybe forty -- sixty at the absolute most." Mangle looks at you with watery eyes and a nervous, pleading smile. "And, er, perhaps help me with the mailing if it's not too much trouble. I'll gladly pay you for your time."

"You don't have to pay me anything," you huff, shaking your head at the magic inflating number. "Just show me what I need to do."

"I insist, Mike. I'm not some -- charity case. Allow me to at least repay your service with one of my own -- the workman is worthy of his wage, and all that."

"You gave me the best shave of my life this morning and a massage the other day -- isn't that enough?" you ask.

"Not in the *slightest!* The massage was just my way of trying to get you to loosen up, and the shave was *far* more for my benefit than yours, believe me," Mangle shudders. "For now, please -- if it's not too much to ask, help me with the task at hand. I'm falling behind. Then we'll discuss compensation."

You try not to grimace. "All right. What do I need to do first?"

"Well," Mangle glances you up and down before pulling out a camera, "you can start by taking your shirt off."

"That the last of them?" Chica asks as you wheel yet another hand truck loaded with boxes outside for the postal worker to collect.

"Yeah, but I'm not gonna complain," you reply, wiping your brow. "At least slinging boxes is pretty mindless compared to modeling. Mangle had me posing with scarves, gloves, and belts for over two hours, and it all had to be done 'just right'."

"Ahhh, the dreaded modeling session," she chuckles. "Yeah, I've gotten roped into those too. Bonnie was excited about it a while back -- until she realized that her pictures would be on the internet, so she asked Mangle to pull them down."

"She doesn't like being the center of attention, huh."

"That's certainly an understatement," Chica sighs, trotting into the kitchen. "You want a soda?"

"Man, that'd be awesome right about now."

You gently settle down into one of the living room chairs while Chica returns from the fridge with a couple cans of root beer, passing one off to you before lolling out on the couch.

"Wait a minute," you mutter as you pop open your can, a thought forming in your head. "Why'd Mangle need me to model guys' accessories? Wouldn't Freddy have worked too?"

"I was wondering when you'd ask, considering I know Freddy's modeled for Mangle before as well," Chica laughs. "Maybe you were more the 'type' Mangle's clients want to look at?"

"Or maybe I've been played."

"Oh, don't worry about it," she says with a flippant smirk, "and honestly, if I were you? I'd be flattered Mangle thinks so highly of you."

Flattered isn't quite the word you'd use, but before you have a chance to ruminate too much further on the matter, a knock at the front door interrupts your train of thought. Setting her root beer aside, Chica starts to get up to answer it but you wave her off.

"I've got it," you offer, heading for the foyer. Upon opening the door, you're greeted by an enthusiastic blue bunny -- Bonbon, if memory serves.

"Oh -- it's you again! Wow, you look *really* soft today," she applauds, eyes wide and grin wider. "Makeup -- or some new method?! Ooooh! Mind if I have a feel?"

"...I guess? Just go easy," you reply warily.

"Yessssss!" she cheers before gently pinching each of your cheeks with her paws. Who does she think she is -- a grandma?! "Oooh, Mike -- this is *so* realistic! I don't know how you pull it off! Dude, you *gotta* tell me your secret."

"Well actually, I just got home from the groomer," you deadpan.

"Uh huh?" she says, rubbing the sides of your neck.

"Yeah. My owner said if I was a good boy, I could have a root beer as a treat." You give your soda can a gentle shake for emphasis, but your sarcasm's clearly wasted on Bonbon -- she's far more interested in scrutinizing the rest of your "look".

"Awww. You didn't do anything with the rest today, though? I can see your arm fur's already starting to grow back -- you need to stay on top of that," she prattles on obliviously, already having worked her paws down from your neck to your hands. "Or are you trying to go for a more show-accurate thing, like some of the 'realistic' stuff? I mean, I *guess* some humans *technically* have arm hair and all, but it's usually just for like big burly characters? It's not at *all* what I'd consider 'standard'."

"Sure, show-accurate. That's it," you answer with a roll of your eyes.

"Oop! I got so distracted I almost forgot why I came up here in the first place," Bonbon suddenly declares, peeling loose from you and barging straight into the kitchen. "Hey, Chiclet! You busy?"

"Nah," Chica replies with a raised eyebrow, not having bothered getting up from the couch. "What's up, Bonbon?"

"Chiclet?" you silently mouth at Chica with an incredulous, shit-eating grin. The resulting scowl on her face tells you everything you need to know. You file this new nickname away in the back of your mind for later usage.

"Okay, so -- this afternoon, you'll never guess who paid us a surprise visit," Bonbon says, taking a seat in the chair you were sitting in before you got up to answer the door.

"I'm listening," Chica excitedly props herself up on one arm, interest clearly piqued at the opportunity for fresh gossip.

"Mr. Fazbear," Bonbon returns with a flourish. Who?

"Really? What was *he* doing at your place in the middle of the day? Shouldn't he have been downtown, at the restaurant?"

"I know, right?!" Bonbon throws her paws in the air, sloshing a little root beer onto the couch cushions. "He comes over time to time, but *never* midday. Like, the guy's *married* to his job. He wouldn't call in sick if he coughed up both his lungs."

"Must have been urgent. Was he there to visit Peanut?" Also who?

"Actually, it's funny you mention him..."

The two of them continue conversing in what almost sounds like code, rambling on and on about people you don't know. You don't have anything to add to the conversation so you quickly find yourself growing uncomfortable just standing around. After a few seconds of awkwardly lingering, you quit eavesdropping and excuse yourself and wander down the hall toward your shared bedroom to indulge in a little peace and quiet.

Unfortunately, Freddy's in your room, sketching away at his easel at a feverish pace. Seems he's pretty into it. As you enter, however, he abruptly stops what he's doing to greet you. So much for hanging out in here -- you just get the feeling you'd be cramping his style, too. At times like this, you *really* wish you had your own room.

Once it becomes apparent that he's waiting for some kind of prompt from you, you shake your head to let him know you don't need anything. Nodding back at you, Freddy points to the clock, then moves his finger slightly -- a signal you've come to understand means he'll be starting on lunch soon. With a smile, you pat your belly appreciatively and give a thumbs up back at him before leaving him to his work.

Since Bonnie's napping in her room and the rest of your roommates are otherwise occupied, you decide that now's as good a time as any to check in on Mangle and see if you can be of any further help.

Standing outside, you hear the sound of typing coming from Mangle's room. You gently knock at the door a few times -- after all, you've been chiding Mangle on respecting your personal space lately, so the least you can do is lead by example. A moment or two later you hear a muffled "Oh! Yes, of course!"

Guess that means you can enter.

Pushing the door open part-way, you see Mangle wearing a pair of earphones while perusing one of the racks full of clothes, back turned to you. Tail swishing, the fashion-minded fox is humming a familiar tune -- almost sounds like some kind of classical music. Thinking about it, this is your first time seeing Mangle out in the open -- usually your reclusive roommate is crawling around in one of the vents or is otherwise obscured under a blanket.

"Hey Mangle! Do you need any more help with modeling or packing orders?" you call out, raising your voice in order to make your presence known. "Everyone else is busy right now, and so I was wondering if I might give you a hand?"

It soon becomes evident that you're not going to receive a response. With a shrug, you step inside and tap Mangle on the shoulder gently before stepping back with a polite smile.

"Hey, Mangle," you start again, "I just--"

The words aren't even halfway out of your mouth before Mangle whirls, screaming aloud and dropping to the floor, back arched and eyes full of blind panic.

"Mangle, you okay?!" Chica calls out from the living room.

"I -- I'm sorry, Mangle," you stammer, jumping back in surprise. "Didn't mean to startle you. Everything all right?"

Glaring at you in a mixture of horror and anger, Mangle scrambles to the bed, pulling down a blanket to cover up with.

*"Don't look at me! Get out! Get out right now!"*

"I didn't mean to scare you, I just wanted to know if I could help," you gawk, dumbfounded. Mangle wasn't dressed inappropriately, or at least you didn't think so. A loose-fitting pink chemise and a pair of cutoff denim shorts hardly qualify as indecent attire. Why the hysterics? "Don't worry, I didn't see anything, if that's what you're worried about?"

Still clutching the blanket close, Mangle slowly rises from the ground and stumbles forward, tearfully shoving you through the doorway. You nearly trip, almost spilling your root beer as you stumble backwards into the hall.

*"Didn't see anything"?! You've already seen **EVERYTHING!**"* Mangle sobs, mascara dripping like black waterfalls. You can't manage to get anything else out before the door is slammed abruptly in your face.

The last thing you hear from inside is the fairly distinct sound of a pillow being thrown at the wall -- followed by muffled, tortured weeping.

"What the hell was *that* all about?" Bonbon asks as Chica and Freddy help you to your feet.

"I don't know," you gasp, following everyone out into the foyer. "That was a Bonnie-level freakout!"

"Okay, Mike -- tell me what happened," Chica firmly demands, already in damage-control mode. "Start from the beginning."

Leaning against a wall, you pause to let your heart rate slow back down as you try to formulate an answer.

"I mean, you know all those racks of clothes and sewing supplies, right?"

Chica nods, intently studying your face.

"Well, Mangle was just standing in front of one with earphones on, and I just said hello, and asked if I could help, and then -- *boom*." You whack your open palm with your fist for emphasis. "It was like someone flipped a switch. I know I haven't been here long, but I've *never* seen Mangle act that way."

Freddy pats you on the shoulder gently while Chica folds her wings.

"Ce n'est pas la mort du petit cheval," he says with a sad smile before heading back to your room, presumably to return to his art project.

"Should I -- should I leave?" Bonbon asks, glancing down the hall at Mangle's bedroom door warily. "I mean, if you guys are going to get into something heated, I don't, uh -- I don't know if it's a good idea if I'm here. I don't want to get in the way."

"No, Bonbon, you're fine," you reply as the three of you take a seat at the kitchen table -- Bonbon to your left while Chica slumps down at your right. Something about this whole thing makes you feel uneasy, almost boxed in -- like you're being interrogated. Right now you're really wishing you'd just taken a walk instead.

"So you just went in there and Mangle freaked out? But you didn't see anything, uh, dirty -- right?" Bonbon asks.

"Mike, I told you the other day that Mangle has some -- 'issues' -- but considering how much you've gone on and on about privacy since you got here, I never figured this'd come up, so I've been putting it off..." Running her wings through her headfeathers, Chica seems to be struggling for a delicate way to phrase whatever it is she wants to say. "I've been waiting for an opportune time, but..."

"It's fine," you interrupt. "No need to hem and haw or get into anything you don't feel comfortable talking about. Give it to me straight, Chica. I can take it."

"Fair enough. I'll just make it simple, then," Chica says. "I don't really understand everything 'going on' with Mangle myself, but since we don't want this problem to come up again in the future -- remember the rule I instituted day one with Bonnie's room?"

"Yeah," you reply. "Nobody goes in with her, ever?"

"Right. I'm extending that one to Em as well now. Unless you're specifically invited in, you should probably stay out of Mangle's room."

"Well, that's the thing -- I never would've forced my way in. I thought I *was* invited," you reply. "I knocked and I heard what sounded like Mangle telling me I could come in, but now I realize it was probably directed at a pair of earphones."

"Wow." Bonbon leans over and pats your hand, though you can't help but wonder if it's not just an excuse to make contact again. "That's horrible luck, Mike."

"Yeah, shit," Chica frowns. "I dunno what to tell you, then. Sometimes honest mistakes happen."

Hanging your head low, you can't help but feel ashamed and more than a touch hypocritical -- this is the exact sort of thing you wanted to avoid happening to you, and yet here you are feeling like you've just violated Mangle's trust.

"Buck up, Mikey," Bonbon says, nudging your shoulder. "Mangle's a bit thicker-skinned than you think. You two'll be best buds again in no time!"

"Well, implying they were ever 'best buds' to begin with is a stretch," Chica laughs, ruffling your hair with an awkward smile, "but they have been getting along a lot better lately. It was really rough going between 'em at first."

"You know, I think I'm going to go for a walk," you finally manage, grabbing your coat.

"Ooh, that's a good idea. We'll come with you," Chica says. You start to protest, since they didn't pick up that you just want to be left alone, but if you've learned anything from your time with Chica so far, it's that she doesn't sway easily once she's made her mind up on something. You got a good taste of how forceful she can be during your first pajama night.

"How about we go hit up the gym up front?" Bonbon suggests. "I think we could all use the exercise."

"Great idea!" Gesturing to your jeans and winter boots, Chica nods. "Mike, why don't you go slip into something more comfortable and put your running shoes on. We'll go blow off some steam for an hour or so, and then come back and eat later. Sound good?"

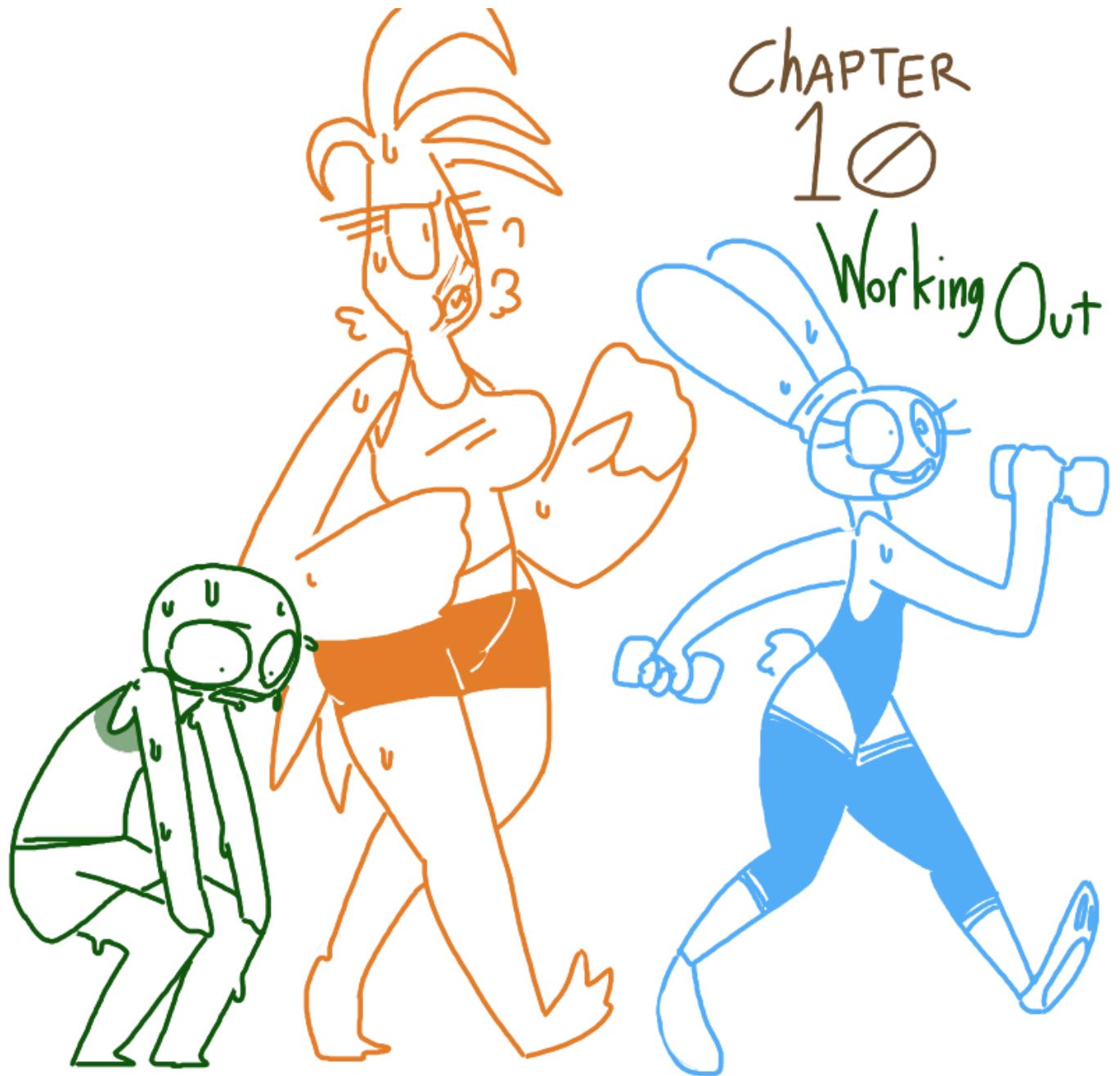
Casting one last glance in the direction of Mangle's bedroom, you turn back to them and force a smile.

"Sounds great," you lie.

# Working Out

## Chapter Summary

Still fretting over a recent incident, Mike gets put through the paces.



While the girls occupy themselves with getting ready for your impromptu group exercise session, you find yourself drifting through the complex's courtyard, taking a moment to unwind as you stroll in the nippy winter air. Snow's probably not far off now, and with it, whatever seasonal gift

exchange holiday this world celebrates. Fortunately for your rapidly-dwindling bankroll, another stipend should arrive just in time for you to at least buy a few cheap presents.

You find yourself fighting a wry smirk -- though you've only been here a week, you're already thinking about what kind of gifts your roommates might like. In a way, you suppose it makes sense -- it's not like you've got anyone else in your life to buy for anymore. Sure, you should probably try to do a better job of holding onto your cash than you have been, but the thought of seeing Bonnie's face as she rushes out to a pile of ribbon-wrapped boxes is too heartwarming to pass up.

Of course, if you're getting Bonnie a present, it wouldn't be fair to leave out Chica seeing as how she's been so good to you -- after all, she did get you those pajamas and she has welcomed you into her home. Though, if you're buying for two roommates already, you suppose you might as well pick up something for Freddy too, to show him your appreciation for sharing his room with you, not to mention all the delicious food. And heck, as long as you're doing that, you can't forget about

--

Ah. That's right.

Pinching the bridge of your nose, you exhale sharply. There's that feeling churning around in the pit of your stomach again. Despite everyone's attempts to console you about it earlier, you still find yourself feeling guilty -- and just a touch hypocritical -- after making such a big deal over Mangle violating your privacy. There's a lot of words you could use to describe the mysterious, fashion-minded fox, but "malicious" isn't one of them. The massage, the shave, the good-natured teasing -- before, it seemed creepy. Now you realize it's simply Mangle's way of trying to make you feel welcome too.

Taking everyone you've met so far into consideration, you can't really say any of these people have been anything less than friendly to you. The rudest person so far is your own landlord, and even then he just seems timid more than anything else. Besides, you yourself are a stranger in a strange land. Some of your mannerisms have to seem bizarre to them, too.

"Don't I feel like a heel," you mutter, kicking a nearby can as you shuffle down the sidewalk.

At the end of the day, honest mistake or not, you resolve to apologize to Mangle at the first opportunity you get.

After all, misfits have to stick together.

While you kill time in the courtyard waiting for Bonbon and Chica to rejoin you, you let your gaze wander around the complex in an attempt to get a better idea of your surroundings. Seems there aren't very many people out right now, and most of the apartment windows are curtained off or covered up, but one lone building across the street has an open window where a tiny red snout can just barely be seen poking out, looking around erratically.

Ahhh, there's Foxy -- looks like he's enjoying the fresh air. He seems to be saying something, but you can't possibly hear him at this distance. You smile and wave to him, even though you know he

probably won't notice you. To your surprise, however, not only does he see you, but he excitedly gestures animatedly at you with his hook and good paw. You realize now that he is in fact talking to someone, but unsurprisingly, there's nobody next to him. Carrying on a conversation with himself, maybe? Seems about right for --

...no, wait. Hang on.

Stepping forward into the street, you squint, trying to focus on his window. There's definitely something in there, but it's -- surely that can't be a person?

It's difficult to make out due to the lack of light from inside the room, but some immense, bulky figure looms in the darkness behind Foxy. Your only indication anything's there at all is a vague silhouette and a pair of pinprick lights glinting from the reflection of the afternoon sun. Contrasted against the silly, simple-minded Foxy, something about this image fills you with a crushing sense of dread. A shiver runs down your spine, and it's not because of the cold.

A large hand thickly bound in bandages reaches forward past Foxy into the filtered sunlight, slowly sliding the curtains to a close. Foxy peeks out at you from behind the fabric with one last cheerful wave of his hook before disappearing inside altogether.

"Sorry to keep you waiting!" Bonbon skips up to you, carrying three bottles of sports drinks in her arms. "Orange or lemon-lime?"

"Oh -- uh, either's fine, thanks," you reply distractedly. "I'll take whichever nobody wants."

"Nah, they all taste like salt water to me," Chica chuckles, plucking a lemon-lime one from Bonbon's paws. "The electrolytes are good for you, though -- keeps you from cramping up, you know?"

Taking an orange bottle from Bonbon, you quietly turn it over in your hands for a few seconds.

"Say, do you know if Foxy has a roommate?" you ask.

"Which Foxy?" Chica and Bonbon reply simultaneously.

Son of a bitch. How the hell does nobody else notice this?!

"Never mind," you sigh. "Let's go get our crunches done, or whatever."

"Crunches?" Chica gives you an incredulous smile. "Hah, you *wish!* Mike, you'd barely last on a recumbent bike in the shape you're in right now. We're starting you off light."

"Y'know, I might be chubby, but in the time I've known you, you sure seem to do a lot of sitting around on the couch yourself, princess," you retort, folding your arms.

"What'd you just say?" she replies with an exaggerated glare, leaning down to look you in the eye. "You, uh, you want to put your money where your mouth is, shortstack?"

"Sure thing, drumsticks," you fire back. "With all the guff you've given me about my gut, I can't help but wonder if all that fatty food Freddy cooks hasn't been going straight to your hips!"

You can practically see the steam coming out of her ears, and for a brief, fleeting second you wonder if you might have gone too far. Bonbon's hovering behind both of you, eyes wide and smile

wider.

"Oooh! Oooh! How about a competition?" Bonbon enthuses.

"Yeah, Mike, how about it? Let's see how far I can run your blubbery butt before you drop," Chica growls.

"Name your terms, Chica."

"All right -- thirty minutes on the treadmill, and if you're still moving, we'll go onto sit-ups. First one to cave buys ice cream."

"Half an hour of just walking? Too easy." You thrust your hand out for a shake. "How about something *actually* difficult, like lifting weights?"

"Are you sure you should make the wager be ice cream? Doesn't that defeat the point of exercising...?" Bonbon interrupts, only for both of you to pointedly ignore her.

"You're on, Schmidt," Chica affirms. Her grin is more than a little unsettling -- and not because of her scars.

You suddenly wonder if you haven't walked into a trap.

You walked into a trap.

"I gotta hand it to him, he almost managed to make it to twenty minutes," Bonbon observes from overhead as you sprawl out on the floor, wheezing.

Your lungs burn like you've been huffing asbestos, and every muscle in your body feels like it has the consistency of stretched-out silly putty. You never even made it to the sit-up portion of Chica's challenge -- the first ten minutes on the treadmill were a cakewalk until Chica dared you to double the speed. You considered crying foul when you realized all too late that her longer legs would equal longer strides, but nevertheless, you gave it your all.

Unfortunately, "your all" sucked ass, and now you're on the verge of crying as you lay on your side, trying to keep from moving into the light.

"How do those words taste, fatty?" Plopping down on a nearby bench, Chica playfully pokes you in the side with one of her feet as she unscrews the cap on her sports drink.

"I'm just catching my breath," you gasp, though it sounds more like a death rattle.

"Ohhh, Bonbon, you hear that?" Chica gleefully pants, a bit winded herself. "Three scoops of rocky road a-callin' for me. They're calling my name, Bonbon!"

"Three?! I mean, I'm all for sweets in moderation -- but I don't know how you can eat that stuff," Bonbon replies, wiping her face on a towel. "Keep gobbling down those calories and you're gonna wind up looking like Cheeky."

"Cheeky?" Chica deadpans. "As in the Cheeky that lives in 93-B? *That* Cheeky?"

You think you've recovered enough to sort of prop yourself up.

"Wait, Foxy lives in 93-B, right?" you ask.

"That's the one!" Bonbon chirps.

"I'm not that, uh -- rotund, am I?" Chica interrupts, looking down at herself. Standing up from the bench, she stares at a nearby mirror, wings on her hips. "Crap. My yoga pants *do* feel a little tighter through the waist, too... M-maybe just the one scoop -- and a waffle cone."

"Or maybe just tofu and water," Bonbon giggles. "Those are some birthing hips you got going on there, Chiclet."

"You know, just because you exercise a ton does *not* mean you're strong, rabbit," Chica snarls, whirling around in a flurry of orange, fangs bared and wings raised. You can tell she's trying to look menacing, but it mostly just comes off as hokey. "I'll have you in a headlock begging for mercy if you keep that kind of profane talk up."

"Mercy!" Bonbon mock cries, laughing so hard the other patrons in the exercise room are starting to stare at your group with bewildered expressions. Yeah, as if you nearly unconscious on the floor wasn't enough to gawk at already.

"All right, Chica, a win's a win," you wheeze, stumbling painfully to your feet and brushing yourself off. "C'mon, let's go get some ice cream."

"Well, not now," Chica protests as the three of you begin to filter out of the gym. "Uh, tonight. After dinner -- you know, as a treat. I mean, we haven't even had lunch yet. If we come in with ice cream, Freddy'll be some kind of pissed off."

Freddy, angry? You can't tell if she's joking or not, and you're not sure you want to chance it.

"Fair enough," you reply, following Bonbon and Chica outside. You're sore and stiff, but at least you can leave with your head held mostly high -- if nothing else, you gave it your best shot. As you limp down the road, you make a mental note to find some way to get Chica back -- just as soon as you stop chafing. Maybe something less athletic, like a movie trivia contest or something.

Yeah, that'll show her.

Bonbon almost begged off of having lunch with everyone until she realized you were having soup and salad, and then at that point you practically couldn't keep her away. Turns out that despite her lithe frame, Bonbon eats as much as Bonnibel doesn't, quickly downing two bowls of salad and setting to work on a third. No wonder they call it "rabbit food".

"See, Bonnie?" Chica says, nudging a sleepy Bonnibel. "I told you that you'd eat more if you just manage a little exercise. Why don't you go with us next time? Mike did and he had fun. Isn't that right, Mike?"

"I saw my life flash before my eyes," you mumble.

"I might," Bonnibel yawns. "These pills make me so sleepy. Hey, Bonbon, how's Peanut doing?"

"Didn't I -- oh wait, that's right, you weren't around earlier! Okay, so -- funny story! You know Mr. Fazbear in 93-A, right?" Bonbon wipes her mouth on a napkin.

Bonnie's yawn must have been contagious, because your own eyelids are getting a little heavy. A quick nap sounds awesome right now, so you politely excuse yourself from the table and head for your room.

As you meander down the hallway, you wander over to Mangle's room and linger by the door, listening for a few moments.

Nothing.

You contemplate knocking, but ultimately decide against it. Best to give Mangle a little time and distance. With a sigh, you head back to your shared room and gently close the door behind yourself before climbing into the top bunk.

When you wake up, it's almost six in the evening. Rubbing your eyes, you frown -- so much for a quick nap. It feels like you just had lunch even though you're only just now waking up in time for dinner.

After a trip to the restroom to relieve yourself, you make your way into the common area. Bonbon's long gone, leaving just Chica and Bonnie on the couch watching game shows while Freddy's engrossed in a book at the kitchen table.

"Hey, sleepy Schmidt! I was starting to think you were never going to wake up," Chica jokes.

"That workout of yours pushed me harder than I expected to go." You scratch the back of your head sheepishly. "Guess I really am out of shape -- what can I say?"

"Well, hopefully you're not *so* whipped that you won't be able to jog your ass down and get me an ice cream after dinner."

"I'm a man of my word," you chuckle. "Are we going to the soda fountain Bonworth took us to the other day?"

"Nah. We wouldn't be able to make it before they closed if we took the bus downtown," Chica replies, lazily twirling one of Bonnie's ears around with her wingtip. "There's a local mom and pop place about two blocks from here that's open till eight."

"Wait, we're having ice cream?" Bonnie asks excitedly.

"Yup, Mike's treat."

"Oooh. I think I'll have rainbow vanilla this time," she says.

"Hey, Chica -- any, uh, Mangle sightings?" you venture carefully, taking a set on the couch.

"Neither hide nor hair," Chica replies, more quietly. "I'm starting to get a little worried myself. It's not like Em to sulk like this."

You watch television with them in silence for a while. Well, mostly silently, unless you count Chica's occasional quips and Bonnie frustratedly yelling out answers at the clueless contestants every now and again. Around half past six, Freddy sets his book aside and gets up from the kitchen table to work on preparing dinner. Twenty minutes later, the four of you are seated at the table eating spaghetti and homemade meatballs.

Mangle, notably, does not show up to dinner.

By this time of night, the temperature's dropped considerably, so you bundle up before heading out.

"We must be crazy if we're going out for something cold in this kind of weather," Chica says with a laugh as she wraps Bonnie up in her muffler. "Tuck your ears in, Bon. We don't want you getting another ear infection."

"Ugh, for real -- ear infections are the worst," you agree.

"She was sick for a week last year during the freeze. You should have seen us -- we made quite the pair," she comments with a wistful smile. "We hated it then, but looking back on it, it was actually kind of funny."

"Oh, was that when the uh, 'incident' happened?" you ask, thinking back to what Chica told you when you went downtown recently.

"Yep," she replies, rubbing her tailfeathers. "Every now and again I have to reach back there and make sure I still got 'em."

The concession stand's a much simpler affair than the nostalgic, old-timey soda fountain Bonworth took you to. It's not much more than a small trailer in a department store parking lot with a few fold-up picnic benches out front for customers to sit at. A chalk sign with a hand-written menu hangs off the front of the trailer, listing common concession stand fare including hamburgers, french fries, corn dogs, and other junk food.

The owners are a pair of friendly, down-to-earth cats -- a violet-furred male and a bright pink female, likely siblings. Possibly even twins. Thinking back to Leo, you wonder if cats are drawn to ice cream places. Then again, you're standing next to a neon blue lop-eared rabbit and an enormous beakless chicken. In fairness, you're probably the weird one in this scenario.

While Chica and Bonnie place their orders, you take a moment to size up the menu.

"Mangle likes strawberries, right?" you ask.

"Loves 'em," Chica replies. "Get something that will travel well, though."

"Let's go with a strawberry shake then, and..." Your eyes flicker across the counter, falling on a case full of novelty oversized lollipops shaped like cartoon characters. "How about one of those? Which one's popular?"

"Ah, good choice! Candy makes 'em himself. Pink lemonade's my favorite, and easily our best seller."

"Perfect," you reply. "I'll take a pink lemonade one, then."

After paying for your purchases, you follow Chica and Bonnie back towards the complex.

"That was real sweet of you, Mike," Bonnie says as she licks her ice cream, smearing rainbow food coloring all over her muzzle.

"Hey, you're welcome," you reply.

"Actually, um -- I meant *that*," Bonnie says, pointing to the bag in your hands with Mangle's shake and candy. Well, as much as one can point while wearing a mitten, anyhow. "I'm sure Mangle will love it."

"You think?" you ask.

"Ah, quit worrying, Mike. Everything will be fine," Chica finishes her ice cream in just a few bites, tossing the cone's wrapper in a nearby trash bin as you pass by. "Em ain't the type to hold a grudge."

Shifting the bag around in your hands, you nod.

"Thanks, guys."

Arriving back at the apartment, you set the bag down at Mangle's door and knock twice before quickly retreating to the living room.

Bonnie excuses herself for the evening, thanking you again for the ice cream before retiring for the night. Noticing that it's just the two of you together on the couch, Freddy heads to his room as well, with a gentle nod and a knowing smile.

"Looks like it's just you and me now, Mike. How about a movie?" Chica asks. "Anything you wanna watch?"

"You know, Chica, how about you pick?" you comment, taking a seat on the couch.

"Oh, uh -- okay," she says, surprise in her voice as she gets up, thumbing through the DVD rack. After a few seconds, she produces another rom-com. "Um, how about this one then?"

"Works for me," you reply.

As she starts to load the disc in the player, the telephone in the foyer rings.

"Oop, hold on." Chica sprints over and picks the handset up off the cradle. "Hello?"

Almost immediately, her expression falters, and you find yourself leaning forward, suddenly apprehensive.

"Wait, here? There's nobody else that can -- are you serious?" Running her free wing through her headfeathers, Chica frustratedly stomps her foot on the carpet. "Marion, don't do this to me. Are you *absolutely* sure you don't-- What, you can't put her with--?"

Squeezing her eyes shut, Chica mutters something under her breath. Whatever it is clearly has her upset -- you're practically on the edge of your seat with dread and anticipation welling up inside

your chest.

"Of course. No, I get it. Fine. Fine, I'll -- I'll figure something out for Mike. You know what, though? You're waiving our rent for the month," she snaps, slamming the phone down.

"What's going on?" you ask, nervously standing up.

Turning to you, Chica holds your gaze for several seconds, her face a mix of frustration and remorse.

"Mike... how soon can you be ready to move out?"

# **Sprung**

## Chapter Summary

Mike relocates to a new apartment.



"Explain to me exactly why I have to move apartments again?"

"It's just a temporary thing -- shouldn't be longer than a few days, tops." Chica's wringing her wings and smiling at you in an almost pleading fashion, as if she's a frazzled parent trying to get a child to see reason. "And hey, if you want, you can come over every day and hang out with us. It won't be so bad."

"Why can't I just sleep out here on the couch? We're already, what, five adults crammed into a four-bedroom apartment? I don't see what difference that *one* extra person makes -- especially if it's just for a few days."

Letting loose a loud, frustrated groan, Chica begins pacing around the living room.

"Because Freddy's going to take the couch -- he's getting kicked out of his room too, and he's got more seniority than you do," she explains. "I don't think moving Bonnie *or* Mangle out of their rooms is a good idea at this point, and I certainly don't want to move the new tenant in with them."

"I don't mind if Freddy takes the couch. I can just sleep on the floor."

"Like hell. You might be the low branch on the tree, but I'm not about to make you sleep on the freakin' floor, Mike. Bonworth's place has an actual bed, you know. It'll be way more comfortable for you, I promise."

"I somehow doubt that," you argue. "I think I'd be way more comfortable here on the floor than over at his place. Besides, I'm used to having to bunk down in weird places--"

The sound of the front door creaking open interrupts your train of thought.

A tall, gaunt figure leans in from the doorway, frocked in a moth-eaten trenchcoat and ratty leggings, clutching a carpetbag tightly against her chest. Craning your neck to look at her, you think she *might* be a rabbit, but with the thick red scarf wound around her neck and the excessive bandaging covering almost all of her head (save for a few patches of yellow fur and what looks like an ear and a half) it's awfully hard to tell. Even from the common area, the smells of mildew, smoke, and detritus are so overpowering you feel like covering your mouth with your shirt just so you can breathe -- which says a lot, considering your own recent history.

"Very sorry... to be a bother," she wheezes with no small amount of effort as she shuffles inside. "Landlord said... no furnished apartments available right now."

Your heart sinks a little at the sight of the pitiful creature in front of you.

"You're not being a bother, Miss, uh--"

"April Marchand May," she manages. "Just April... please."

"April, March, and May? We could almost just call you 'spring' at that point," Chica comments with an amused smile -- only to cover her mouth with a wing when nobody laughs at the joke. "Uh, sorry."

"Please... forgive the intrusion," April murmurs, looking around from her spot in the tile entryway.

"Miss April, it's not your fault our assclown of a landlord doesn't have anywhere to put you," you interrupt, quickly covering for the obviously nervous Chica. "Hell, I'm in a similar boat myself,

having to share a room with someone else."

Chica shuffles awkwardly, nodding. "Yeah, the state of apartments here is... Well, I'm sure you don't need me telling you. Um, come on in, April."

"If it's okay, I-- need to clean up... change bandages," April mumbles, lowering her bag to the floor as she steps inside. As she makes her way through the hall, her heavy footfalls leave thick splotches of mud and silt all over the floor. "Oh... I'm sorry..."

"Don't worry about it -- nothing a mop can't fix," Chica says, waving it off. "You, um -- you need any help cleaning up?"

"...yes." April slowly backtracks, scuffing her feet on the entryway mat self-consciously. "I'm sorry."

"Please, stop apologizing," Chica forces a smile. "Bathroom's right there, just down the hall. Give me just a second and I can come help you."

April dips her head apologetically before turning and shambling slowly in the direction of the bathroom. Freddy passes by her in the hallway while carrying your bags. He nods politely to her before carefully placing your luggage by the front door next to April's own meager bag.

"Mike, I know you don't exactly care for him, but Bonworth's a really nice guy, and he could really use a hand right now," Chica says as Freddy instantly sets to work cleaning up some of the mess April tracked in. "You can survive on your own over there for a few days. I have faith in you."

"I'm not leaving, Chica."

Turning to you, she places her wings on your shoulders, firmly squeezing them.

"Not up for debate, Mike. This gal's going to be high maintenance, and at least at Bonworth's you won't be squeezed in, and I won't be worried about you. I'm gonna need you to be a big kid for me on this one."

The stern tone in her voice is enough to make you flinch first.

Picking up your bags from the floor, you look past Freddy and Chica to the end of the hall. Your gaze falls on the white paper bag still sitting on the carpet outside of Mangle's closed door, where it's now soaked in a puddle of pink condensation. So much for your peace offering.

"So that's it, then," you sigh.

"Oh, don't be so melodramatic," Chica says. "It's not like you're getting kicked off the face of the planet. I'll call Bonworth to let him know you're coming."

"Yeah. You do that," you mutter, closing the door behind yourself.

93-B, huh.

"Feels like it was just last week I was in this same position," you half-joke to yourself, reaching for the door knocker. Before your hand even touches it, however, the door swings open.

"Mike! Good to see ya, pal!" Bonworth beams with a mile-wide smile. "Come on in! Just fixed up some dinner a little while ago -- hope you like macaroni and cheese!"

"I actually just ate, thanks."

As you scrape your feet on the mat, Bonworth gives you what you assume is intended to be a playful pat on the back, though it feels more like being slugged in the spine with a baseball bat. You gasp sharply, dropping your bags on the floor as you try to catch your breath. Once again, you're reminded of just how deceptively strong he is.

"All right, gang -- everyone put some pep in your step, our guest's here!" he announces.

The floor plan looks much the same as 87-B's -- kitchen forward, common area to the left, hallway with bedrooms and a bathroom to the right. It's probably also a four-bedroom plan, and thus you'll likely be forced to room with someone again if there are four occupants here.

Where it differs from the previous apartment -- your apartment -- is largely in the overall feel. 87-B was cozy and warm despite (or because of?) its worn-in feel, but here, everything seems... well, "sterile" is the word that comes to mind. Stepping out into the common room, the furnishings are noticeably more plain. Instead of your apartment's patchwork couch and overstuffed chairs, multiple recliners are lined up in front of a big screen TV with a sofa acting as a "wall" to divide the sitting room from the kitchen.

Speaking of the kitchen, there's no sign of a table or chairs at all. A stand that holds folding TV trays is propped in the corner next to the sofa, and in place of the breakfast nook is a large bookcase full of movies -- a collection that could almost rival the size of your own back in the day.

"Ahoy, Mike!" Foxy hops off of one of the recliners and shuffles over to you. "Been a dog's age since I saw ye last. Last? Why, that be the captain's duty. Nary any respect for a captain who leaves the ship ahead of the ladyfolk. Ladies and little ones off first, that's the way of the sea. Bartley never saw fit for that, the scoundrel. Bailed off his ship first, he did."

"Bartley, huh," you chuckle.

"Bah! I always knew he was a rotten cuss." He growls, snapping his maw in the direction of some distant, invisible foe. "And real pirates don't need to cuss, being as it's impolite."

"Aw, good sign he remembers you," Bonworth observes cheerfully. "He had much to say about meeting you last week, pal. Foxy loves making new friends."

"Nice seeing you again, buddy," you reply, stooping down and giving Foxy a gentle hug. "You been keeping warm out there?"

He waves a hook around excitedly, slicing the edge of your shirt. You try to act like you didn't notice as Bonworth nervously covers his mouth.

"Aye, the waters be gettin' dreadful this time of year. I dare not leave me cabin for fear of pneumonia. Lost too many good men to the ice floes last voyage."

His gaze shifts a little, as if he's just realized something.

"Speakin' of, gotta go make sure the tins are full of rations. Can't be spending all our coin on snake tonics to fight the scurvy," he hurriedly announces before scampering down the hall on all fours -- or would it be threes?

"Scurvy? God forbid," you joke to Bonworth, who offers you a gawky smirk in return.

"Did someone say 'curvy'?" an unfamiliar female voice snickers from behind you.

You turn to catch a plump and rather well-endowed chicken girl with dirty yellow feathers exiting the bathroom. Her face is slathered with old makeup that looks like it hasn't been washed off in a couple of days. She's wearing a low-cut camisole and a lower-cut pair of ice blue panties, both of which she's mostly hanging out of. If you didn't know better -- and at this point, you're not sure you do -- she looks for all the world like a sleazier, heavier version of Chica.

"Damn, Bonnie! You didn't tell me Chiclet was sending over a *guy*. Shit, he's not bad-looking, either." Does she realize you can hear her?

"Please don't swear," Bonworth pleads, smile faltering just a bit. "Also, if you could maybe just put some clothes on? I mean, we do have a guest, and it *is* his first time meeting you."

"The hell you talkin' about? I *am* wearing clothes," she mutters, looking down at herself.

"I'm gonna take a shot in the dark here and assume that you must be Cheeky," you comment.

Rather than shaking your proffered hand, Cheeky bites the lower part of her beak in what you're guessing must be a sultry manner, though it just looks more than a little silly. She sidles close to you, looking up into your eyes.

"Man, smart *and* cute? Oh, Bon, I like 'em smart. But then, I like 'em dumb, too," she coos.

"Please don't flirt," Bonworth pleads, smile faltering just a bit further.

Cheeky circles around you like a shark circles its prey, checking you out from every angle. Even Chica isn't this blatant when she's flirting or teasing you. Hell, even *Mangle* never acted this raunchy.

"Y'know, she's quite friendly when you get to know her!" Bonworth looks at you with pleading eyes, drumming his fingers self-consciously on the sides of his legs.

"I'm already starting to get a sense of that," you reply. "All right, Cheeky, my eyes are up here."

"Yeah, in a minute," Cheeky says dismissively as she continues ogling your rear.

"**Anyway**, Chica, this is Mike," Bonworth coughs, forcibly pulling Cheeky away from you. "He's been staying over with Chiclet and her posse, but circumstances have him here for a spell while Marion sorts some stuff out. Let's make him feel real welcome here, all right?"

"Mmmmh," she purrs, low. "Don't you worry. Mike, right? Hey Mike? I want you to know you're very welcome here."

You laugh in spite of yourself. "Well, thanks for opening your doors. I'm sorry to just drop in on you all like this -- it's been kind of a long and stressful couple of days."

"Oh, don't you worry none! We take care of our own in this little community, yes sir," Bonworth says, brushing you off. "How about something to drink, Mike? You look like you could use something cold to wet your whistle."

"Not like *I* need convincing, my whistle can always get wetter," Cheeky says, finally tearing her gaze from your posterior. "All right, well, enough of that, I guess. You want to share a beer with me, Mike?"

"Uh, sure," you answer. "A beer sounds good -- if you don't mind, I mean."

"One bottle of liquid panty remover comin' right up," she cackles, flinging the refrigerator door open. "I'll save the real hard stuff for when I'm sure you can keep up."

If nothing else, you suppose you have to admire her brazenness.

"Ahh, ooh, how about just a soda pop? We've got some good cherry fizz in here," Bonworth nervously stammers, fumbling to open a can.

Cheeky playfully punches his arm, nearly throwing him off balance. She winces a little as she does, shaking her wing out.

"Ow. Gimme a break, Bon. I'm just busting the new guy's chops. Mostly."

She winks at you, and you force a smile, cringing a little as you do. This is it. This must be what the other side feels like. You silently apologize to every girl you've ever tried to use a cheesy pick-up line on.

After a moment's deliberation, you sit at one end of the sofa since you aren't sure whose recliner is whose. This turns out to be an inherently poor decision, however, as Cheeky quickly seizes the opportunity to plop down next to you, purposefully moving in a little too close, two beers in-wing.

"S-so, how's tricks, Mike?" Bonworth asks, taking a slow sip of his cherry soda as he cautiously eyes his determined roommate.

"Eh, I could be better," you reply, accepting one of the beer bottles from Cheeky. "I ended up hurting Mangle's feelings this morning by pure accident, and then I got thrown out by all this before I had the chance to patch things up. So I've got some bad vibes lingering overhead right now."

"Mangle?" Cheeky asks. "Isn't she in the apartment below you?"

"There's more than one Mangle, too? Oh, god," you mutter. You suppose it makes sense considering there are multiple Bonnies and now multiple Chicas, but -- still, two Mangles? That wasn't an eventuality you were fully prepared for.

"Different Mangle, Chica," Bonworth clarifies before resuming his inquiry. "Well gee whillikers, Mike, that's awful rough business. What'd you do, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I walked in on Mangle without thinking. I was helping out with packing orders and doing some modeling photos for Mangle's home business, and I just didn't think. I knocked and everything before opening the door and thought I heard an affirmative to go in, but it turns out I was mistaken."

"You're a model too?" Cheeky inquires, her eyes lighting up. "This really *is* my lucky day."

"Just scarves." Better get that one nipped in the bud before she's trying to snap photos of you in your boxers.

"I'm sure sorry to hear that, Mike." Bonworth rubs his chin, seemingly pondering your situation. "You know, I rightly imagine you're feeling like you got a bum deal being put out of house and home like that, but I think I know Chiclet well enough that she didn't mean anything by it. She probably just thinks she's doing what's best for you."

Sure doesn't feel that way, though.

"Well, I appreciate you guys being understanding. I promise I'll be out of your hair and back at 87-B as soon as I can. Chica -- uh, *my Chica* -- seems to think this'll all be over in a few days."

"Hey, you ain't got anything to worry about, cousin," Bonworth whoops. "We'll have a swell time while you're here. What I don't get is why Marion didn't ask us to be temporary lodging for the sick lady instead. I wouldn't have thought twice about it and I know nobody else here would have either."

"He probably gave you a pass, what with us being saddled with Foxy and Faz and all," Cheeky scoffs, face twisting slightly like she's in pain. "Ouch."

"Now Chica, I won't abide that sort of tongue." Bonworth wags an index finger at her disapprovingly. "They can't help their conditions and you know it -- goodness, why would you even say a nasty thing like that?"

"Oh, c'mon, Bonnie, you know I don't have anything against either of 'em," she quickly backpedals. "Faz is a great guy and Foxy's a sweetheart. I just think it's lousy that Marion gets to determine where everyone goes based on some kind of insane criteria only he understands."

"Well, all four of us have a history at least," Bonworth says. "I think Marion's trying to do the best he can, keeping the gang together, but he can only pull so many strings."

"Sorry, who's Faz?" you ask, raising a hand.

"Oh, he's our fourth member," Bonworth says. "Stays in bed most of the day. He's... sick."

Lowering her head, Cheeky absently fiddles with the label on her bottle.

"Real sick," she adds quietly. After a few seconds, she pats your leg. "Anyway, Mike, why don't you stay with me tonight? I've got the master suite, plenty of room, a nice comfy waterbed, and... other amenities."

"I -- I think I'd be fine with the sofa here," you say nervously.

"Mike, no, that's ridiculous. That thing's way too short for you to sleep on and it's more than just a little uncomfortable. We'll put you up in Foxy's room. He's got twin beds in there and he doesn't even sleep in either one," Bonworth insists.

You scratch your head, running over that sentence in your head again. "Sorry, why does Foxy have two beds?"

"It's a long story," Bonworth smiles, waving an oversized paw.

"He wanted two beds and Bonworth couldn't tell him no," Cheeky says flatly.

"...Guess it ain't that long a story," Bonworth turns a little red. "Still, I'm sure it'd suit just fine, so don't you sweat it."

You nod, relieved. Beats rooming with either of these two whackjobs.

"I guess that works. Thanks, Bonworth."

"Please, just call me Bonnie," he says, carefree smile back in place.

"Man, no offense, but I'm still trying to wrap my head around all of these Bonnies."

"Trust me, it only gets worse," Cheeky smirks.

"Fair enough. I won't force you to," Bonworth says with a sheepish nod. "Well, let me grab you a blanket and a pillow, since it's getting late."

He gets up from his chair and heads for the hall closet, motioning for you to follow. You down the last of your beer before getting up to follow him.

"That sounds good. I think I'll retire early if you guys don't mind. I don't want my sleep schedule to get all out of sorts while I'm here."

"Well, my door's always open if you start feeling lonely and want to come say hello," Cheeky says, pushing herself off the sofa and waddling towards her room. "Nice meeting you, Mikey."

"Likewise," you reply, following Bonworth down the hallway.

Foxy's room is situated on the same place in the floorplan that Freddy's room is back at your apartment, so that's convenient for muscle memory, if nothing else. The room itself is decorated with an obvious pirate theme in mind -- ships in glass bottles, a framed treasure map, and photos of boats and water and all other sorts of nautical stuff. A Jolly Roger flag hangs over a small shelf adorned with various maritime knick-knacks.

Foxy himself is holed up in the closet with the door cracked open, eagerly sorting fake plastic coins and gems into piles on the floor.

"Organizin' your booty, captain?" Bonworth calls out cheerfully as he lays your blanket out on one of the two small beds. It's actually not terribly larger than the sofa was out in the living room, but it does look a lot more comfortable.

"Yarr, I ain't the captain," Foxy replies absently.

"Ah, that's right -- I forgot," Bonworth replies, shrugging at you.

"Common mistake. I won't hold ye to it," he replies, chewing his tongue slightly. "Somethin' feels off. I'll be back."

Foxy hops up from the carpet and trots out into the hallway, coming back a moment later with something in his good paw. "Bosun, I found me tooth. It wasn't where I remember puttin' it last time."

Sure enough, there's a sizable canine tooth -- how fitting -- in Foxy's paw. Dried blood speckles the base of it.

"Can ye put it back in for me, lad?" Foxy asks, opening his mouth.

"Oh, boy. Uh, why don't we take a look at it in the morning, Foxy?" Bonworth sighs as Foxy plunks it into his paw. "Don't forget to brush the teeth you *do* have left."

"Aye-aye. Settin' sail," Foxy replies easily, toddling off in the direction of the bathroom.

"If anything -- and I mean anything -- goes wrong with Foxy in the middle of the night, you come wake me up, Mike," Bonworth says, tucking the tooth into the pocket of his waistcoat. "I don't care if it's because he wants a glass of milk or heard a noise outside."

"I think we'll be fine," you reply. "Bonnie -- uh, my Bonnie, Bonnibel -- is a little high-maintenance herself, and we've gotten along just fine."

Foxy comes back a few moments later, his mouth still hanging open as he stands next to Bonworth.

"Looking good, sport!" he cheers, patting Foxy on the shoulder. "Oop. Almost forgot, I washed your favorite blanket this morning."

Bonworth leaves the room while Foxy remains where he is, jaw agape, still as a statue.

"Here you go, Foxy," Bonworth says, pressing the blanket into Foxy's arms. "You can, uh, you can close your mouth, now."

Shutting his jaw, Foxy accepts a neatly-folded violet blanket covered in a silver star pattern from Bonworth.

"Ah, me night sky. Can sail to any port in a storm by the stars." Wrapping himself with it, he crawls into his closet and curls into a ball.

"Well, g'night, fellas," Bonworth says with a tired smile.

You give him a mock salute as he clicks the light off before closing the door. Foxy doesn't respond, cozied up in his little hideaway.

You sure hope this doesn't last more than a couple nights.

# The Wreck of 93-B

## Chapter Summary

Adjusting to his new roommates, Mike tries to set up a little fun.



Despite Bonworth's particularly dire-sounding warnings, Foxy must not have been an issue all night, as both of you slept peacefully. You gently push his closet door open and see his blanket draped over his toy treasures, but no sign of the fox himself anywhere. He must already be up and moving.

A cute digital clock in the shape of a tiny rum barrel rests on one of his trinket shelves, informing you that it's six AM. A shower sounds good, since your skin feels clammy and gross after

yesterday's training session at the exercise room with Chica and Bonbon.

After retrieving your bags from the foyer, you grab your basic toiletries and head into the bathroom for a shower.

Unlike the sparsely-stocked bathroom you've been using for the last week, you suspect the one here may actually be the most furnished room in the entire apartment. It's definitely been designed with accessibility in mind. For one thing, there's no tub in here, unlike 87-B. Instead, the far wall is occupied by a walk-in shower, complete with a plastic seat and an adjustable shower head -- presumably for use by disabled tenants.

As you stand in the shower waiting for the water to warm up, you think back to yesterday in the courtyard where you saw Foxy hanging out of one of the windows here. By process of elimination, "Faz" must have been the mysterious figure looming behind Foxy. If he's as sick as Cheeky and Bonworth seemed to make him out to be, he probably requires all kinds of special care.

You don't want to be a rude houseguest, so you make your shower a quick affair so you can get your morning started. After toweling off and getting dressed, you make your way to the common area of the apartment where Bonworth is seated in one of the recliners, reading the morning newspaper.

"Look at you, all up bright and early," he crows with his trademark plastic smile firmly in place.  
"Sleep well?"

"Sure did," you answer. "Err -- I didn't sleep through anything I shouldn't have, did I?"

"Not a pip, pop or peep out of place on our end. Kind of a surprise, too!" Bonworth folds his newspaper aside. "Ol' Foxy usually gets a little twitchy late at night. He wasn't any trouble for you?"

"Nope. He wasn't in his little nest this morning, though."

Bonworth gets up from his chair, stumbling a little as he leans forward. You find yourself stepping back as he nearly takes you out with a wild swing of his arms, flailing to regain his balance. Real graceful, this one.

"Whoops! Anyway, I rightly reckon he's probably visiting Faz. The two of them are bosom buddies, yes sir!"

Once he's upright, Bonworth motions for you to follow him into the kitchen.

"What kind of person is Faz?" you ask, already suspicious that you won't like the answer if he's anything like the rest of the characters that occupy this flat.

Bonworth opens up the freezer and begins pulling several food items out, placing them on the countertop. Frozen waffles, frozen sausage patties... frozen eggs... frozen orange juice...

"Well, to be honest, he's a bit of a... stay-at-home type, though I assure you it's not for lack of trying," he answers, opening up the frozen eggs and dumping them into a microwave-safe bowl.  
"He's not at all in good health or spirits. Most days he stays holed up in his bedroom."

You instantly feel sorry for Faz. Bonworth's the type of person that doesn't have any concept of personal space. You can easily imagine him hanging out in someone's room all day, driving them insane with banjo songs and cornpone antics -- all the more reason you want to get out of here and back home before you turn into an extra on the Bonnie Griffith Show.

"Morning, boys," Cheeky says, poking her head out of her bedroom. "Good to see I didn't chase you off yet, Mike."

"Good morning, Cheeky," you return. Not like you have anywhere to go.

"What's for breakfast?" she inquires, shuffling into the kitchen. You can't help but notice that she appears to be in the same "outfit" as last night. Fortunately, a third layer of makeup has been hastily applied over the old, so in her mind she must be presentable now.

"Well, something more filling than cereal, I was thinking! Beef or pork for your sausage?" Bonworth asks.

"Well, I do prefer big, beefy sausages, but being porked also -- eh, you see where I'm going with this one," she mutters half-heartedly, cutting her own innuendo short. "I'll just have a couple waffles."

"Waffles coming up," he replies, loading the toaster with the aforementioned goods. "And for you, Mike?"

"I'm not picky," you lie. After having Freddy cook gourmet food for you every morning, none of this looks the least bit appetizing. You've clearly gotten spoiled. "Whatever you're having."

"The works, then," he affirms. Uh oh. "Why don't you two have a seat in the living room? I'll bring yours out to you."

"Don't have to tell me twice," Cheeky says with a yawn, strolling into the living room and collapsing in one of the recliners.

With a reluctant shrug, you follow Cheeky over and sit down on the sofa. After several minutes of loudly bumbling around in the kitchen, Bonworth saunters into the living room with two paper plates loaded with pre-packaged breakfast items of varying temperatures. He places one on Cheeky's armrest and hands the other to you.

"Thank you," you reply, trying your best to look excited. Bonworth chuckles, shaking his head a little as he goes back for his own plate.

"I'm afraid cooking isn't in our wheelhouse," he comments as you poke at your lukewarm egg puck. "Chiclet really rolled and won when Frederick moved in."

"Frederick?" you ask. "Oh, you mean Freddy?"

"Sure," Bonworth replies, trying and failing to cut his waffle with his spork. He finally settles for picking it up with his fingers and eating it like a cookie. "Quite the chef, that one."

"No kidding. He made this one dish for breakfast, and it was absolutely phenomenal. It was toast, but like -- better, somehow. I think he put an egg in it, and cinnamon and a bunch of other stuff, and

then fried it. Something like that. It's probably twelve thousand calories a slice, but I couldn't care less."

"Geez, and you guys have been keeping this dude from me?" Cheeky growls, chomping her own waffle. "You gotta get me in on this action, Mike. Like, seriously. When you go back over, smuggle me in with your luggage."

"I know for a fact they wouldn't mind having you guys over for dinner and movies sometime," you offer, picking at your own food. "Do the apartments just not socialize much?"

"Some more than others," Bonworth reluctantly admits in-between bites. "Most of the tenants here keep to themselves. Marion's been trying to make a community shindig happen on Thursday nights, but the turnout's always kind of low."

"That's a shame. How about you guys? What's fun to do around here?" you ask, attempting to skewer a sausage link with your spork only to break off two of its three tines.

"You're lookin' at it," Cheeky grins, tugging gently at her top while Bonworth's attention is on you. Your eyes widen ever so slightly.

"We're actually quite active!" Bonworth interjects, setting his plate aside. "Why, we're constantly keeping busy! Just last Monday we had story night and we even spectated a competitive shuffleboard event yesterday afternoon."

Cheeky snaps her camisole back into place as Bonworth looks over at her.

"Spect-- we watched two geezers play shuffleboard on the sidewalk from our patio outside," she squawks.

"And it was thrilling!" he enthuses. "Best of all, nobody got hurt."

"Shuffleboard?! Bon, it's hardly a high-energy sport!"

Both of them turn to you with incredulous, see-what-I-have-to-put-up-with looks.

"I could always call up Chica and see if anyone wants to come over later this afternoon and play cards or something," you offer.

"Have her send over that Frederick guy," Cheeky hastily insists. "Tell him to bring the refrigerator."

You carry your plate to the kitchen and pick up the telephone off the counter, dialing Chica's number. She answers on the fourth ring, sounding out of breath.

"Kind of a bad time, Bonworth," Chica says.

"No, no, it's Mike. Everythi--"

"Oh, Mike -- look, I can't talk now. I'll call you back."

The line clicks before you can even say goodbye.

"Nice chatting," you grump under your breath as you hang up. "Looks like they've got their hands full."

"I don't doubt it," Bonworth says, gathering his and Cheeky's paper plates and dumping them in the trash. "New tenants with special needs can keep you hopping. Faz was a real armful when he came back in, poor fella."

"Ain't that the truth," Cheeky sighs, flipping through the TV's channels aimlessly. "Speaking of which, aren't you going to go check on him, Bon?"

"You bet your sweet bippy!" Bonworth snaps off a silly salute, clicking his heels together with a thump before nearly tripping over himself.

"Tell you what. How about I run across the street and see if Bonbon wants to come hang out this afternoon," you offer. "You guys got any games here?"

"Ooh, so we're having a little game day? That's for me!" he crows brightly, and you find yourself gritting your teeth as he does another bizarre, excited jig.

"We have plenty of games in the hall closet," Cheeky says, setting the remote control aside to look up at you. "Board games, decks of cards, even some video games, too. I think we got a game player last year as a Christmas gift from Bonbon -- one of those active ones where you have to physically get up and wiggle a controller around. Pretty sure it's got bowling and ping-pong and stuff."

"Hey, that sounds kind of fun," you reply. "A friend of mine had a game console like that and we'd play tennis on it every now and again."

"It also came with a big plastic pad and some kind of weight loss game. I thought the whole point of playing games was to escape reality, not so you can get bent over the knee by some computerized fitness trainer," she says, scowling slightly. "Last thing I need is a video game riding my ass too."

"Oh, this sounds so exciting! I'll ask ol' Beanpole if she wants to come on upstairs and spend time with her big bunny brother," Bonworth says, hefting the phone from its cradle.

Your heart sinks instantly. The mental visual of Bonworth and a potentially second, smaller Bonworth in a wig dancing and snapping off cornpone one-liners at each other like a vaudeville act makes you want to jump out the window and end it all right now.

"All right, well, I'll swing by Bonbon's place and invite her over." Fetching your coat off the rack, you head for the front door. "Maybe Bonnibel too, since I imagine she'd like to get out of the house for a bit."

"Aces! Let's maybe have everyone come over at about nine?" Bonworth says. "That way nobody has to miss breakfast, and I'll have plenty of time to get Faz sorted out for the day before we get started."

Slipping your coat over your shoulders, you step outside. "Nine it is. See you in a little while."

As you approach Building 8, you see Chica and Freddy helping April down the stairs. From what little you can see of her, she looks like she's been cleaned and bundled up in some of Chica's spare clothes.

"Hey guys," you call out with a wave.

Chica doesn't look like she even sees you. "C'mon, Freddy, We're going to miss the bus!" she says.

You watch, bewildered as April and even Freddy nod to you, all the while Chica's too busy to pay attention. Either that, or she's just flat-out ignoring you. Lowering your head, you turn and make your way towards Bonbon's apartment.

After just a couple of knocks, the door clicks open and Bonbon pokes her head out.

"Oh, hi, Mike! What brings you here?"

"Hey, Bonbon," you smile. "Mind if I come in just a second?"

"Sure!" she chirps, opening the door wide. "Come on in, we just finished our morning workout."

You nod appreciatively, stepping into the entryway only to immediately trip over a tied-off garbage bag. You catch yourself against the wall, narrowly avoiding a messy landing.

"Well, what can I do for you, Mike? Are you eager to go to the gym again this afternoon?" Bonbon obliviously trots down the hall ahead of you and into her kitchen, rooting around under the sink. "I don't blame you for taking a personal day, but you're going to have to *reaaaally* step it up if you want to be to your ideal weight by New Year's."

"Err -- maybe later," you reply, self-consciously pinching your stomach as you follow her.

Bonbon's apartment seems to have a different design compared to the previous two you've been in. The entryway itself is a fairly long, narrow hallway from the front door to the common area with two doors on either side. The hallway seems to terminate into the common area, and to its right is a large kitchen.

The living room's largely a mess. Pillows are lazily piled up on one end of the couch, with clothes and towels draped over both armrests. Fitness and fashion magazines are stacked up on the floor in waist-high piles. More bags of plastic bottles and trash to be taken down for recycling are tied up in a pile next to the kitchen table, which itself is covered in what appears to be a child's arts and crafts project, complete with glitter and elbow macaroni.

Looking around, it seems the apartment's decor doesn't fare much better -- it's fairly gaudy with bright neon pinks and cyans being the dominant colors. You're pretty sure the curtains are just strips of black canvas that have been splattered with fabric paint. Poster prints of modern art hang in cheap, gold-painted plastic frames over various pieces of furniture throughout the apartment.

The floor in front of the living room's television -- which is unsurprisingly blaring some kind of jazzercise video -- is covered in multiple yoga mats, one of which is currently occupied by a short, pudgy bear with light brown fur frocked in an A-shirt and track pants. He's panting heavily, but smiles and offers you a friendly wave when you walk into the room.

"Hi there. I'm Mike," you greet, waving back.

The bear rises up from the floor and shuffles languidly over to you.

"Hi. I'm Freddy," he replies.

Well, of course he's Freddy. Why would he be anything other than Freddy? You're trying and somehow failing to imagine a world where bears that aren't Freddys and rabbits that aren't Bonnies exist. You extend your hand to "Freddy" for a handshake, but he envelops you in a huge bear hug, lifting you off the ground.

"I see you've met Peanut," Bonbon observes as she returns from the kitchen with a big plastic sports bottle filled with water.

Bonbon's gossip from the other day comes back to your mind. "Oh, *you're* Peanut?"

"It's my real name," Peanut Freddy admits, glancing sheepishly at the ground. "Freddy's just my nickname."

"Would you be offended if I called you Peanut instead of Freddy, then? Err -- reason being, I already know one Freddy," you ask hesitantly.

Peanut smiles shyly, fidgeting with his shirt like a kid on picture day.

"Well, I also know two other Freddys, so sure, I -- I don't mind. Y'know, my mama named me Peanut 'cuz I looked like a little dollop of peanut butter when I was just a cub," he says, swaying his arms back and forth as he talks.

"So Mike!" Bonbon chirps pleasantly, cutting off that odd bit of unsolicited trivia, "If you're not here to let me help you work your puff into tuff, what's up?"

"Well, I came over to see if you guys wanted to come hang out with me and Cheeky and Bonworth later. We were thinking about playing some games or something."

"Oh, can I come too?" Peanut asks, his eyes beginning to widen as a smile creeps at his sleepy face. "I mean, if you don't mind? If it's not too much trouble?"

"Nah, why would it be any trouble?" you ask with a tilt of your head. "It's kinda lonely over there. I figured a game day might liven the place up a bit -- the more of us the merrier."

"Cool," Peanut breathes, toddling towards his bedroom door. "I'll go get dressed then. Thanks for inviting me!"

"Aww, that's sweet of you, Mike!" Bonbon gushes. "Sure, I'd love to join in. I'll put together a veggie tray for us to eat at lunch. What time do you want us over?"

You glance up at the wall clock hanging over Bonbon's magnet-studded refrigerator.

"Let's see, it's almost seven now. Bonworth said any time after nine, I think."

Bonbon chugs her water bottle before slamming it down on the kitchen counter enthusiastically. "Perfect! We'll be there at nine! Tell Bonworth he doesn't have to handle lunch, we'll take care of it."

"Sounds good. Nice meeting you, Peanut," you reply.

"You too, Mike," he burbles, waving as you leave.

As you walk up the stairs to 87-B, your chest begins to ache ever so slightly. You know Chica's been pushed into a situation as uncomfortable as the one you're in yourself. You're not really mad at her, *per se*, and you certainly can't blame April who's as much a victim of circumstance as you are, but your feelings are still a little raw. First there was your encounter with Mangle, now you've got Chica brushing you off -- things seemed like they were going so well until just a couple of days ago.

Now, you're not so sure.

Still, you're not going to punish Bonnie over it. Might as well see if she'd like to join in the festivities. With a smile in place, you knock twice at the door to 87-B before waiting patiently for a reply.

A minute passes, then five more. You knock again, waiting for her to open up. She likely just had breakfast so you know the medicine can't possibly have kicked in yet. After an eternity of waiting on the porch, you turn to leave. The sound of a door clicking open draws your attention as you're halfway to the staircase, and you turn around. A bright patch of blue fur disappears behind the door as it slams shut.

On second thought, she probably could use that nap after all. You storm down the stairs and quickly cross the street, trying to ignore the burning sensation in your cheeks.

# Play Date

## Chapter Summary

A few guests arrive to play an exhausting game.



Three sharp knocks at the front door indicate the arrival of the first guests of the day. Doing a quick double-take at the wall clock, you realize it's not even half past eight yet.

"Someone's early," you remark.

"Eh, that's Bonbon for you," Cheeky observes, dabbing at her beak with a towel.

Upon Bonworth's polite (yet firm) insistence that she "make herself presentable", Cheeky reluctantly took a shower, half-assedly scrubbed off some of her caked-on makeup, and put on a fresh tank top and a pair of frayed jorts. It's an improvement from her previous choice of attire, even if only slightly.

"Bonbon's always been an early bird -- early bun? Early bun." Tossing her towel over the armrest of her chair, Cheeky trots over to the door. "Beanie, though, won't show up until ten at the absolute

earliest -- if she even shows up at all."

"Which one's Beanie again?" you ask absently, fidgeting with the cables for the game system you've been tasked to hook up.

"Bonworth's little sister. You'll see what I mean when you meet her," she answers before opening the door.

"Sorry we're early!" Bonbon announces with no additional explanation.

The energetic exercise bunny happily bounds in with Peanut bringing up the rear, looking hopelessly like some overstuffed teddy bear, his arms full with an ice chest and multiple plastic food containers.

"Nngh. Like we stand on any kind of ceremony," Cheeky says, easing herself into her recliner.

"No offense, but I'm surprised you can stand at all," Bonbon quips, poking the hen in her side.

"Oh, was that a fat joke, little girl?" Cheeky queries, face flushed and eyebrows arched.

"Um, if it's all right, could someone give me a hand here?" Peanut timidly inquires, struggling under the weight of whatever Bonbon decided to bring.

Throwing her paws in the air, Bonbon retreats to safety, hiding next to you.

"Hey, hey! Half-hour on the elliptical trainer a day, maybe some food in your diet that isn't out of a microwavable box? By February, you'll be half the bird you are now," she says. "Just sayin' -- you ain't getting any younger, Cheeky."

With an expression that's equal parts amused and annoyed, Cheeky bounds out of her chair with surprising speed for someone of her size.

"And *you* 'ain't' too old for an ass whoopin'," she bellows, playfully swiping at Bonbon's ears.  
"Outta the way, Mike. I've got a bunny to bop."

"A little exercise wouldn't hurt you!" Bonbon's pinned between you and the wall now, angling for cover behind the television screen.

"Oh, you'll be surprised what'll hurt *you*," Cheeky retorts, reaching around your head and snagging Bonbon's ear successfully.

"*Yeeeeoowww!!* Mercy! Uncle, *uncle!*" Bonbon squeals as Cheeky gives her ear a good, solid tug.  
"I'll be good, I promise!"

"Guys? Mike? Anyone?" Peanut whimpers faintly, beads of sweat beginning to form on his brow.

Satisfied that Bonbon's been thoroughly put in her proper place, Cheeky lets the rabbit go before smugly heading to the kitchen.

"Now look, Bonbon, you know me and exercise aren't exactly the closest of friends," she crows, throwing the door open with gusto. "Isn't that what we got you Chiclet for?"

"Yeah, but Chiclet was too busy to hang out this morning," Bonbon pouts, rubbing her ear.

"I know the feeling," you grumble under your breath.

Returning from the fridge with a beer nestled in her cleavage, Cheeky waddles obliviously past Peanut, nearly knocking him over with an ill-timed swing of her hips.

"Wanna beer, Mike?"

"Don't tempt me," you reply. You're still trying to shove aside the lingering frustration induced by your roommates -- your real, proper roommates.

With a gasp, Bonbon points at the bottle accusingly. "Cheeky! You're already drinking? It's not even nine AM yet!"

"Well, that's why you should learn to be on time." Downing nearly half the bottle in just a couple of gulps, Cheeky belches. "If you'd shown up when you were told, I'd have had this one finished and it wouldn't bother you at all."

Bonbon snorts. "That's -- that's not what I'm saying at all, and you know it."

"Looks like we're all set to go," you announce as you scoot out from behind the entertainment center. Standing up, you brush the dust and cobwebs off of your tee shirt. "The game system *should* be working now, finally."

"Hey, you got it hooked up? All right!" Bonbon cheers. "I'm glad to see you're finally getting some use out of this thing! It's fun *and* it's good for you."

"Nnngh. Fine, whatever." With a wince, Cheeky straightens out her shirt. "As long as I don't have to run around the room like a lunatic."

"Anyone?" Peanut moans. "Little help, please?"

"Really, dude?" you sigh. "You could've set this stuff down at any time, you know -- why just stand there and hold it?"

Even though you didn't really mean anything by it, Peanut almost immediately wilts under your gaze, nearly fumbling the entire lot onto your feet. You catch the cooler mid-fall and help him carry everything into the kitchen.

"Hey, Mike. You okay, buddy?" Cheeky asks. "You *sure* you don't need a beer?"

"I'm fine, Cheeky," you manage, thumping the ice chest onto the kitchen countertop. "Here, Peanut -- I'll start loading this stuff into the fridge."

"O-kay." Peanut gingerly backs away to a safe distance, looking a little unnerved. "Sorry for the trouble..."

"Nope, it's no trouble at all, don't worry about it," you insist with a forced smile, waving him off.

You didn't get a very good look at it earlier when he was "preparing" breakfast, but Bonworth's refrigerator is a mess. Unlike the relatively sterile atmosphere of the rest of the apartment, the fridge is packed full of leftovers and takeout containers, almost all of which looks like it's long past needing to be thrown out.

"What a freaking mess," you grunt, almost afraid to stick your hands inside even if just to move things around to make room.

"Gosh, I'm sorry," Bonworth says, swaggering into the kitchen. "If I'd known you guys were bringing treats, I'd have tried to neaten the ol' icebox up a bit!"

"Pretty sure it's gonna need more than just 'neatening up'," you reply dryly. "Bonworth, hand me a trash bag and a pair of rubber dish gloves, if you have any."

"Hah, uh, neat freak much, Mike? It's not that bad!"

"Isn't that bad?!" you snort, incredulous. "Dude, your coffee creamer is practically glowing, I've got no damn clue whether those moldy little balls in your crisper drawer are oranges or kiwis, and I'm pretty sure half the stuff in here could be classified as a biohazard! And -- *is this the hot dog you bought last week?* Seriously?!"

"Golly, Mike, what do you expect?" Bonworth turns to you and planting a finger on your chest for a few forceful taps. "Buckingham Palace?"

"Cut the crap, Bonworth," you retort. "This isn't just 'a little untidy', it's absolutely disgusting. I can't believe you *live* like this."

"Well shucks, how rude of me!" He throws his gawky arms in the air, shaking his head theatrically. "I forgot the Queen was visiting! We'll get your majesty all squared away then!"

"Just hand me a trash bag, smartass."

After twenty straight minutes of tossing items that are well past their expiration date and wiping shelves down, you've disposed of most of the garbage in the refrigerator and have made more than enough room to store your group's lunch. Rinsing off your borrowed rubber gloves, you place them on a towel on the counter.

"There," you announce, turning back to the chattering guests. "Finally. Now, where were we?"

"*I believe* you'd called us all over so we could have some fun," Bonbon smirks, rising from her seat next to Cheeky, "unless your idea of fun is scrubbing the baseboards. In which case, you're on your own."

"Awww, enough of that stinkin' thinkin'! Who's ready to get their game on?" Bonworth enthuses as you take your seat in the living room. The only thing you're ready for is for your stay here to be over and it's only just begun.

"About time!" Pumping her fist in the air. Bonbon motions for everyone to converge in the living room. "So how we doing this?"

"Can we do teams?" Peanut offers with quiet excitement. "Bonbon, you and me versus Bonworth and Cheeky?"

Shaking her head, Cheeky jabs a wingtip in your direction. "Let's not leave Mike out!"

"I don't mind," you reply, putting your hands up slightly. "I'm not much of a video game player anyway. You guys go right ahead without me."

"Not much of a player, you say? Even better -- we can whip up on you to boost our confidence!" Bonworth laughs as he takes his seat in one of the recliners.

Gritting your teeth, you reluctantly get off of the sofa and take one of the wireless gamepads from Bonworth's grasp. It's some kind of bizarre fusion of a television remote, a tennis racquet, and a back massager. There's a wrist strap on one end and more buttons than you have any earthly idea what to do with.

"Just grin and bear it, Mike." Cheeky fiddles with her gamepad, trying to figure out how it works. "If I've gotta get up and jiggle my way through a few rounds of this crap, you do too."

"That's the spirit," Bonbon smiles as she flips the game system on.

An infuriatingly cheerful pixelated doe leaps onto the screen, instructing each player to key in basic vital statistics such as species, gender, height, and approximate weight in order to determine your "game level". To nobody's surprise, Cheeky is immediately classified as "obese" and even Peanut is tagged as "moderately overweight".

"Mike, what kind of primate are you? Gibbon? Ape? Chimpanzee? Orangutan?" Bonbon inquires, helping you with your controller.

"Just put whatever in," you reply dismissively. To your dismay, as soon as she does, the game lumps you into the "overweight" category alongside Peanut.

"Let's start out on Advanced difficulty for the best burn," Bonbon blithely instructs. "Now normally I play on Extreme, but I want you guys to ease into it."

"What difficulty is Advanced?" you ask, cringing slightly.

"Oh, it's about six."

"And Extreme?" you carefully venture.

"Seven, which is the highest," she answers with an oblivious smile. "I mean the other difficulties are like, just for lightweights -- and you guys can take *way* more than that, right?"

You look over at Peanut, who's retreated into his shirt, and Cheeky, who's staring daggers at the back of Bonbon's head.

"Awesome, here we go!" Bonbon whoops, pressing the game start button.

"You did great, Cheeky!" Bonbon says encouragingly. "You got twelve points!"

"Out of what, a thousand?" she gasps, chest heaving as she lays flat on her back on the floor. "I think I almost broke Mike's spine when I tripped and fell on him."

"It's all right, Chic-- uh, Cheeky," you reply, hastily correcting yourself. "It's only a skinned knee. I'll be fine."

"Jeepers, Mike -- and I thought I was two left feet," Bonworth snickers. "You looked like a flounder in a fryer up there."

"C'mon, I didn't do that bad," you manage, still trying to catch your breath. Yeah, right, only because Cheeky looked like she was seconds from a stroke just trying to keep up with the rest of you. Even Peanut managed to significantly outperform you.

"Well, in your defense, you *did* manage to beat our resident couch potato by a hair, so I guess *that's* something." Bonworth inclines his head toward you. "Hey, third place out of four is still respectable, right?"

The thick sarcasm is cutting. As if you weren't feeling stupid enough flailing around in front of a screen as it is, the last thing you need is this guy busting your chops.

"Yeah, I'll wear it with pride," you grimace.

He claps his broad paws together. "Well, there you go! And *I'll* think of your wobbly dance any time I need a laugh. What a show!"

Like he's one to talk. You've seen drunks more steady on their feet than he is.

As you look over your shoulder, you notice his narrowed eyes seeming to gleam. Nobody else is acting like they notice, but he's still got something left for you, and a toothy smile spreads slowly over his face as it bubbles to the surface in a lower tone.

"After all, that's what monkeys do, right?" He locks eyes with you for a second, grinning widely. "They *dance*."



"You're hilarious, Bonworth," you growl.

"Don't I know it!" he says, slapping the armrest of his chair. "Oh, this has been a hoot. Mostly for me, of course. Remind me to bring an organ grinder next time!"

"Next time my ass." Cheeky chuck's her controller at the side of Bonworth's chair. "I don't want that devil box in my home. Get rid of it. Put it out with that garbage you cleaned out of the fridge, Mike."

"I think I m-might be done for now, too," Peanut says as he trudges toward the sofa, collapsing into it and rolling over on his side.

All exaggeration aside, you suppose the workout game wasn't as bad as you thought it would be -- mostly swinging your arms around in time to music and signals on the screen. The four of you somehow managed to keep at it for close to three *hours*, Bonworth alternating between cheering and deriding you from his recliner the entire time, despite your repeated attempts to make him get up and play.

Why Bonbon let him off scot-free, you might never know.

Still, while you aren't completely defeated, you're grimly aware of the fact that your shoulders are going to be some kind of stiff in the morning.

"All right, Bonworth, I'd like to see *you* take a crack at this thing," you challenge, tossing your controller onto his lap. "It's only fair."

He picks it up and turns it over a few times in his paws, eyeing it nervously.

"Yeesh, ah... wow, looks complicated. I was mostly hoping for something like, you know, maybe some target practice? Like that one game with the little plastic gun and the clay discs you had to shoot all those years ago?"

Yeah, what a surprise.

"Y'know, I don't think I blame you," you relent with a sigh, taking a seat in one of the recliners. "If we play any more games after lunch, I could go for something simple like cards, myself."

Standing up from his chair, he looks at you almost thankfully, gently placing your controller next to the television along with Cheeky's.

"You know, that sounds jake to me! How about we go ahead and break out that lunch now?" he says with another clap of his paws. As he begins wobbling towards the kitchen, a knock at the door draws everyone's attention. "Oh, that's probably Beanie. Mike, I'll get started preppin' the lunch if you can run let her in?"

"Sure," you respond, bracing yourself for whatever horror lies behind the door. One Bonworth is bad enough -- the thought of two is downright horrifying. Your mind is flooded with visions of purple rabbits in striped jackets and straw boater hats doing soft-shoe routines and crooning off-key to songs that haven't been popular in decades.

As you walk over to the foyer, you grip the handle and pull the door open. A female bunny around your height clad in a red hoodie and faded jeans stands at the doorstep, lethargically typing something out on a cheap cell phone.

"Hey, Bonworth," she starts to mumble as she looks up from her phone.

But the second she sees you, her eyes bug out and her ears stand up on end. The cell phone falls uselessly from her paws, clattering to the ground.

"**Oh, come on!**" she shrieks, grabbing the door and slamming it shut in your face.

# Calling the Bluff

## Chapter Summary

Bonworth plays a game with Mike.



The veggie tray and salad brought by Bonbon comprises the entirety of your lunch. Ordinarily you might be inclined to turn your nose up at a plate of nothing but fruits and veggies, but after the disappointing frozen breakfast you choked down this morning, you have to admit that this is much

closer to the kind of fare you've grown accustomed to. While it's nowhere near as tasty as Freddy's style of cooking, you'll happily take something fresh over Bonworth's collection of frozen heat-and-serve meals.

"Mike, right? Sorry about that little freakout back there." Beanie pops a baby carrot in her mouth, chewing awkwardly. "You reminded me of, uh, a guy I work with."

"Sounds like he's a real piece of work, then," you answer, taking a sip of your lemonade. "Don't worry about it."

Much to your relief, Bonworth's little sister, born Bonita Lilac Rabbinson and known better as "Beanie" (short for "Beanpole", apparently) couldn't be any more the opposite of her brother if she tried. In stark contrast to Bonworth's cloying, antagonistic, in-your-face exuberance, Beanie's demeanor is dry, acerbic and almost a little *too* low-key. Compared to her obnoxious brother, you already find her far more agreeable to be around.

"Thanks for being cool about it," Beanie says. "I didn't mean to slam the door in your face, just a force of habit I guess."

"Lot of creepers in your line of work?" you ask sympathetically.

"You have no idea," Beanie, Cheeky, and Peanut all reply simultaneously before exchanging knowing glances with one another.

"Whoa, surround sound in here," you joke.

"Well, you sure missed a humdinger of a game session, little bunny!" Bonworth exclaims. "Oh, you should have seen it. Everyone up and at 'em, flailing around for everything they're worth! Even Chica here broke a sweat."

"I think I broke more than a sweat," Cheeky says, looking at you with genuine embarrassment.

"I'll say," he replies blithely, his trademark grin firmly cemented in place. "You almost snapped ol' Mike in half as well when you flopped onto him like a guppy out of water."

"Don't remind me," she moans. "Oh, man, Mike. You really aren't having a banner day, are you."

"I'll be fine, Cheeky," you insist, fixing Bonworth with a glare. "This stuff happens. That's something Bonworth would know if he'd gotten off his ass and tried."

"Harsh, Mike," Bonworth chortles. "Did I strike a nerve?"

You refuse to dignify him with an answer.

Relieved that you don't seem too terribly upset, Cheeky gently strokes your leg with a feathertip.

"Just let me know if you want me to kiss it better," she winks, coyly snagging another ants-on-a-log off of the plastic tray in front of you.

"All right then, everybody," Bonbon says as she gets up. "I think it's about time for me an' Peanut to be heading back."

"What, already? But I just got here," Beanie snarks. "Was it something I *didn't* say?"

"Oh, Beanie, you're so funny," Bonbon says. "You know full well the new episode of *Legend of Bob* comes on in fifteen minutes and I don't want to miss it."

"Ahhh, silly me -- I can't believe I almost forgot your bizarre human fetish," Beanie groans. "Don't you have a DVR to record that crap so you can watch it on your own time? You know, like a normal person?"

She reaches for another carrot only for Bonbon to nearly slam her paw in the plastic container in her haste to leave. With a finger pointed high in the air like some kind of dynamic action pose, Bonbon's eyes twinkle.

"Yeah, but that's only so that I can rewatch it later and catch everything I missed the first time! Any true fan knows you've gotta watch it first-run for the *authentic, live experience!*" she gushes.  
"Come on, Beanie -- it's geek culture 101!"

"Please don't say 'geek culture' ever again," Beanie mutters.

Rolling to his feet, Peanut begins helping Bonbon box up the mostly-empty plastic containers.

"Um, thanks for inviting us," he says with a timid smile.

"Glad you could make it. Certainly was a lot more lively having you all here," Bonworth says.

"Yeah. Thanks for the near-coronary, Bonbon," Cheeky adds as you get up to let Peanut and Bonbon out. "Let's do this again next year, but give me plenty of warning first so I'll know not to be here when it happens."

Walking Bonbon and Peanut over to the door, you tap Bonbon on the shoulder as she's headed out.

"Mmm?"

"I appreciate you guys coming over," you reply quietly, taking care to keep your voice down. "It's probably for the best, since I don't know if I could have stomached an entire afternoon of Bonworth's shtick."

"*Bonworth's?*" She gives you an odd tilt of her head, seemingly confused. "What are you talking about? He's a great guy, Mike."

"Coulda fooled me," you mutter as she leaves.

Still, maybe she knows something you don't. You internally resolve to at least try to see the rest of the afternoon through.

"So what was this about cards or whatever?" Beanie asks as soon as you return to the apartment's common area.

Now that all the cleaning's been done and the guests have left, Bonworth finally sees fit to get up off his lazy ass. Staggering over to the hall closet, he begins rummaging through cardboard file boxes full of toys and games, most of which you're assuming belong to Foxy.

"Yes ma'am, we've got all sorts of games here!" he grins, dusting the cover of a container off so he can read the label. "What've you got a hankering for, Beanie? Monotony? Chinese checkers? Ooh -- how about a rip-roarin' game of Go Fish?"

"Poker," she answers, scratching one of her ears absently. "Texas hold 'em, preferably."

"You're joshing me!" he declares with an awestruck grin. "My little sister, a card shark! No way!"



"Foxy's been on this big TV poker championship kick lately," she replies, cracking her knuckles. "What can I say -- after having to watch several episodes a week, I guess it's rubbed off on me."

"Well, let's do it then! Mike, you know how to play?" he asks, pulling out a deck of playing cards.

"I think so," you respond. "That the one where everyone tries to make the best hand with the four cards they're dealt and the three on the table?"

"Omaha's four cards -- Texas is two," Beanie interjects, "but yeah, that's basically it. It's not that hard to play, you'll get the hang of it quick. Cheeky, you know how to play too, right?"

"Oh, sure! We played strip poker all the time in high school," Cheeky says.

"Well, better than middle school, I guess," Beanie deadpans as the four of you regroup in the living room.

Early on, it looked like luck would be in your favor. You won a sizable showdown versus Cheeky and took a fair share of her chips, and even started to whittle away at Beanie's pile. Unfortunately,

the tide has since quickly turned. Several hands ago, Bonworth elevated the pot multiple times with such fervor you were convinced he was bluffing -- only for his pocket aces to shatter all of your hard-earned momentum. You've been lured into a few showdowns with him since, most of which have met with similarly tragic results.

To add to it all, while most of you play on the floor, Bonworth has decided to play from his chair above the rest of you, like some emperor on his throne. Whether it's superiority or mere laziness, it does put you on the defensive, having to put more caution in hiding your hand from his potentially-wandering gaze.

"Ah, would you look at that?" he croons, playing his newest hand. "The big *R-S-F* -- that stands for royal straight flush, for those not in the know!"

"We're in the know," you groan. "We absolutely -- we are *absolutely* in the know."

"Well, be glad we're not playing for real money," Beanie says, swigging down her cherry soda while Bonworth rakes in his winnings.

"It's not too late to do it my way," Cheeky suggests. "You look awful hot in that hoodie, Beanie. Don't you think so, Mike?"

"I'll thank you not to drag my baby sister into such debauchery, *Chica*," Bonworth coughs as Cheeky waggles her eyebrows seductively at you.

"Besides, I'm pretty sure strip poker isn't an officially sanctioned method of play anyway," Beanie replies easily.

"Well anyhow, I must be a dehydrated grape -- 'cuz I'm raisin'," Bonworth challenges, splashing the pot with a large handful of chips.

"Yeah, no," Cheeky huffs as she and Beanie fold almost simultaneously.

"I think these two have the right idea. I'll fold as well," you reply. Ordinarily you'd never throw away a pair of sixes, but Bonworth seems truly serious about the hand.

"Come on, Mike," he laughs, goading you along. "What are you sitting on over there, couple of face cards? Decent pair? You'd really toss that away for little ol' me?"

You inwardly cringe -- how in the hell did he know? You glance over at Beanie and Cheeky, wondering if they're feeding him information on your hand just to mess with you -- but each of them are far enough away that they couldn't hope to see your cards. Realizing he's getting to you, Bonworth goads you further.

"Be a man, Mike. See the hand through," he says.

"That's my decision to make, Bonworth -- not yours," you assert. "I fold. The blinds are yours."

"Afraid of the *challenge*, pal? I'll make it easy on you." He flips over his hand -- ace of clubs, three of spades. "See the hand through, Mike."

"Oooh, things are heating up over here," Beanie mock announces, using her soda can as a surrogate microphone. "Will he do it? Will Mike go for the big play, or will he kowtow to Bonworth's incredibly obvious intimidation tactics?"

What is it with this guy today? Did he wake up on the wrong side of the bed, or has his fake ragtime veneer finally worn through to reveal his true personality? Either way, you're seizing the opportunity to put him in his place.

"I'd still have folded especially after you having shown me that hand, but you insist on me beating your ass," you stoically declare. Calling Bonworth's bet, you flip your pair of sixes.

"Hey, solid hand, pal!" he cheers. "Still, it's not over yet, right?"

Having shoved an uncomfortable portion of your chips into the pile, you're fairly certain you won't have enough in reserve to make a recovery should you lose the hand. Of course, the opportunity to put a huge dent in Bonworth's pile and potentially claim a major advantage if you win is too tempting -- and at the end of the day you've got a decent enough hand you might very well be able to pull it off.

"Four on the flop," he says as Beanie deals the cards.

"King of hearts on the turn. Looking good for you, Mike," Cheeky says, drumming her wings on the floor enthusiastically as Beanie makes a show of flipping the last card -- and of course, it would be the freaking ace of clubs.

Bonworth whoops, sweeping the poker chips over to his ever-growing pile so he can begin stacking them into little towers.

"And the higher pair goes to me! Two of a kind for a one-of-a-kind guy!" Bonworth rewards you with a condescending smile. "Ah, cheer up, Mike. Show's not over yet, bucko!"

"Why am I not surprised?" You slump back against your pillow, trying not to look completely crestfallen.

"What a *really* lucky hand, Bon," Cheeky smirks, rubbing her beak.

"For real," you reply. "Y'know what, screw it. I think I will take that beer now if you don't mind, Cheeky."

She nods sagely, getting up and heading to the kitchen while Beanie shuffles the deck again.

"Oh, nice job with the fridge, Mike! I can actually find stuff in there now," she says, returning with two bottles in hand and a chocolate bar nestled securely under one wing.

You accept your drink with a half-smile. "Thanks, Cheeky. Glad to know my services are appreciated by *someone*."

"Yeah, yeah," Bonworth says, tossing a handful of chips in the air and letting them fall loosely into his lap. "Deal us in, little bunny!"

Beanie rolls her eyes at her brother, passing out the next round of cards. Taking yours, you check your hand. Ace and king, both hearts. Finally, something you can work with. You make a show of deciding what to do, then toss a few chips from your modest pile into the center of the floor in an attempt to draw Bonworth out.

"Don't get all crazy on us now with that colossal bet, Mike," Cheeky laughs as she and Bonworth eagerly call.

"Crap here," Beanie shrugs, tossing her cards. "I'd blame the dealer, but, y'know."

Beanie reveals a three of spades on the flop, and after a round of checks follows it up with a seven of diamonds on the turn. You decide to make your move, placing the largest bet you can manage. You're not all-in, but for all intents and purposes you might as well be, given that if you whiff again the blinds alone will be your undoing.

Bonworth straightens out his shirt and combs back the fur on his head with a paw like he's prepping for a photo op.

"I can see the headlines now: *Mike Loses Card Game.*"

"Doesn't sound like much of a headline," you reply.

"Wouldn't be much of a story," he returns, flipping one of his towering pillars of chips off of the armrest of his chair. Cheeky backs off, but you stand your ground.

"Let's see the river, ol' Bean," Bonworth insists.

"You're *way* too into this," Beanie admonishes, flipping the final card over. The king of spades greets you and your heart swells.

"How about it, *ol' pal?*" you mock, turning over your cards triumphantly.

"Well, I'll be." Bonworth leans back in his chair with a shrug before smugly revealing the ace of diamonds and the ace of clubs.

"Oh, for crying out loud!" you choke.

"The look on your *face*, Mike!" Bonworth cackles, slapping his armrest multiple times.

"Were you just *born* lucky?" you ask, tossing the last of your chips into Cheeky's stack.

His smile fades ever so slightly. "Luck's what you make of it," Bonworth replies after a moment's hesitation.

"Quality work, Bonworth," Beanie muses as she idly turns one of his cards over a few times while he sets about building a shoddy house out of his winnings. He doesn't say anything, instead flashing her a cocky grin as you slump over pathetically on the floor.

The rest of the poker tournament, if you could call it that, goes much the same way. Beanie and Cheeky play their hearts out, but Bonworth's luck is unreal, and it isn't long before they bust out mere minutes apart from each other.

"Here's your card, sir," Beanie says with a graceful flourish, handing Bonworth one of the cards from the pack.

"Thanks, little bunny," he winks, tucking it behind his ear with a low whistle before carefully nesting the poker chips back into their plastic tray.

"Well, this has been delightful, but I'd better shove off. Fred'll be home soon and it's my turn to cook dinner tonight," Beanie announces as she loads up the playing cards back into their deck box.

"See you guys. Nice meeting you, Mike, and sorry again about the whole slamming the door in your face thing."

"I guess I must have one of those faces," you jest. She smiles back, clearly glad you aren't the type to hold a grudge. "Take it easy, Beanie."

After an hour or so of zoning out to television, Cheeky begs off to take a nap. "That's the most excitement I've had in a while. Wake me up in an hour so I don't oversleep."

"Just you and me then, sport," Bonworth says, settling into his recliner.

"That's a good point, actually. Where's Foxy been all day?" you inquire, trying not to sound too concerned. The thought of being trapped alone in the room with Bonworth makes you want to rip your hair out.

"Ol' Foxy? Spending time with Faz, as usual. They're pretty close." He flips channels aimlessly, not seeming to find anything piquing his interest.

You nod. "That makes sense."

After watching Bonworth rapidly flip past every channel available through their cable package at least twice, you begin to grow restless. On the third revolution of channel surfing, you can't take it anymore. Getting up from your chair, you grab your coat off the rack by the front door.

"Was it something I said?" he jeers.

"I'm going out for some fresh air," you insist. "Won't be long."

"Now there's an idea," he replies, shakily standing up and collecting his sportcoat. "Wait a second and I'll join you."

Fantastic. That's exactly what you want -- the guy you're trying to get away from tagging along. Flustered, you stomp out onto the outside balcony, quickly descending the stairs.

"Mike, we going for a walk or a jog?" Bonworth jokes, stumbling to keep up with you.

"Hah! After all that guff you were giving Cheeky about being our 'resident couch potato' you can't handle a little exercise yourself?" you accuse, jabbing him in the stomach as he descends.

"I prefer to think of myself as more of a performer than an athlete," he says, clutching the handrails nervously as he steps out onto the lower level landing.

"Oh, I don't doubt that you're quite the performer," you mutter under your breath, taking off down the sidewalk.

The two of you walk in silence through the apartment complex for several minutes. Well, walking's not quite correct. You're powerwalking, and Bonworth is more or less bumbling along trying to keep pace. Eventually he manages to overtake you, teetering down the sidewalk ahead of you while trying to look you in the eye.

"Mike, I, uh -- you aren't still sore about losing the poker game, are you?"

"Of course not," you mutter. "Life's full of winners and losers, isn't it? Sooner you sort out which one you are, the easier it'll be on you."

"Now that's some stinkin' thinkin', Mike," he reprimands, snagging your sleeve. There's that stupid phrase of his again. You wrench your arm away and resume your pace, not wanting to make eye contact with him.

"C'mon, Mike," he wheedles. "Look, it was all just a joke, fella! Didn't mean for it to get so out of hand -- we were just having a little fun at your expense since, you know, you're the new guy. Here, see?"

You stop, turning to look at him. He pulls the card from behind his ear -- the ace of clubs. Suddenly your afternoon makes a lot more sense.

"Guess I'd never last a minute in Vegas," you grumble.

"Awww, it's like I said, luck's what you make of it. Just a little sleight of hand, Mike," Bonworth says earnestly. "I'd never hustle you in a *real* game. I thought for sure you'd have noticed after a couple hands. At that point it was too funny to stop."

You wordlessly shake your head and resume walking at your previous pace. Pocketing the card, Bonworth doggedly plows ahead after you.

"Look, I'm getting the feeling we got off to a real bad start here. C'mon, Mike, *work with me*. What's it gonna take to get you to -- hey, could you at least *slow down*? We're trying to have a conversation here and it's all I can do to keep up!"

"Slow down?" you reply with a mock surprise, hands pressed to your face.

"Mike--"

"Aw, shucks, Bonworth, now that's some stinkin' thinkin'!" you crow in a sing-song voice, stopping in your tracks and placing both hands on his shoulders.

He nervously smiles at you, but you can see a little bit of fear -- and something else -- in his eyes.

"*Slow down?*" you repeat again. "Look at you, you're about fit to have a heart attack! Rabbits are supposed to be *quick!* After all, *that's what bunnies do, right?*"

Eyes widening, you mimic his earlier taunting expression.

"They *run*," you whisper.

With a shove you send him backwards -- not *hard*, just enough to make the point to leave you alone.

Or at least, that's what you *intended*.

The back of Bonworth's right foot catches the edge of the curb. His legs stop but his body keeps going, as if he's falling to pieces. Bonworth tries to brace his fall with one of his arms, and you hear a horrible ringing noise like a dropped pipe as his forearm smashes against the pavement. He rolls onto his back, crying out in a mixture of pain and surprise.

Your stomach drops as your brain processes what you're seeing. His legs are disconnected from his pelvis entirely -- thin, rickety-looking old metal shafts with bulky joints and bracings, clattering to the ground with a terrible sound. His trousers hang loosely, draped over the stubby remnants of his thighs, the prosthetic braces that hold them together now completely unbuckled.

It all makes sense now -- the goofy, bow-legged gait, the vehement refusal to take a turn earlier when you were playing the fitness video game. Sitting in the chair instead of on the floor when you ate lunch and played cards.

Not "won't". *Can't*.

"Oh, shit," you breathe, the animosity you've been letting fester completely evaporated in one fell swoop. You feel ill.

"Oh, wow, I'll be feeling *that one* in the morning," he grunts. Bonworth slowly pulls himself to a sitting position with an awkward laugh. Looking down at himself, he cringes. "Ah, geez. I hope nobody got an eyeful of that."

With a grim smile, he clumsily pulls his trousers back on and begins rebuckling his prosthetics onto his thighs. You stoop and wrap one of his arms around your shoulder.

"Gee whillikers, Mike! I'm fine, you don't have to--"

"Shut up," you snap, biting your lower lip as you pull him back to a standing position. He flinches at your abruptness like a reprimanded child. "Sorry. Look, just -- stop talking. For five minutes, stop trying to be funny, or corny, or -- whatever the hell it is that you do to hide who you really are."

"I've made a real mess of things, haven't I," he murmurs softly, ears uncharacteristically draped down behind him. For a fraction of a second, he looks a lot like Bonnibel would after having been scolded for not taking her medicine.

You don't immediately reply, grabbing the bridge of your nose and firmly pinching it in an effort to stop the growing mist in your eyes.

"What was today about?" you finally manage when you're positive that you've gotten yourself under control.

"I'm not rightly sure I take your meaning," he says carefully.

"When I first met you, you were this wacky and, and -- *goofy* kind of..." You flail your arms around in pantomime, trying to find the right words. "I don't even know what you'd call it, but I got that it's an act. But it seemed like a *harmless* act, so I brushed it off as all part of your shtick. Today, though, you've really seemed like you had it out for me."

"Dad-gum it all. I was just trying to... I guess I wanted to reach you on your level, pal." He somberly hangs his head. "I'm real sorry, Mike. I never meant as to make you feel unwelcome in my home."

"Reach me on my level?" you ask, bewildered. "What does that even *mean*?"

"I was so excited to, you know, have someone new to talk to. We're kinda tucked away, the four of us. Not much for company apart from my sister when she can break away from work." Bonworth sheepishly pulls at one of his ears. "I got the impression from our first meeting, and then a little sly commentary from Chiclet that you were kind of this, y'know -- thick-skinned, rough-and-tumble sort of wiseguy, and so I, uh -- 'tailored' my material to try to accommodate you."

"To accommodate me," you repeat.

"Or at least, that was what I thought I was doing. Looking back on today, I can see how you'd take offense." Wringing his paws, he looks at you with pained eyes. You start to open your mouth again, but he gently pats your shoulder. "Mike, this whole transition's gotta be real hard business -- first you lost your job, then your home, then you had to move in with a bunch of strangers. And right when you think you've found a place to hang your hat, you get me and Cheeky thrust upon you."

"Well, *Cheeky's* not that bad," you joke awkwardly.

Bonworth playfully winces. "*Ouch!* But see, that's the kind of thing right there," he says, tone measured and even -- like he's trying to avoid setting you off. "I got the impression that you were okay with jokes like that, which is kind of what I've been trying to go with. If I'd just had any indication I was bothering you... well, I guess I'm all wet at dry humor."

You're not sure what comes over you -- guilt, relief, sympathy, or maybe something else -- but you throw an arm around Bonworth in a sort of awkward half-hug, gently pounding his back with your fist.

"No, I'm sorry too," you sigh. "It's my fault. I should've said something."

"No hard feelings." He embraces you back, staggering a little under the combined weight of you and himself. "Ooop. *Careful*, Mike! I don't want to give the peepin' toms in the neighborhood another look at me without my britches on."

You can't help but chuckle at the absurdity of the situation. "Seriously though, I'm sorry, Bonworth."

"Really, Mike, don't sweat the small stuff -- and it's *all* small stuff."

"How about we get some takeout for dinner, then?" you ask. "Know anywhere good in the area?"

"Would you settle for delivery?" Bonworth asks. "I think I've had enough walkin' for right now. I know there's a great Greek place two miles up the road that delivers and they've got a swell gyro."

"Sounds jake to me. Let's call it in and see what's on the tube for tonight," you reply.

"Hey, look at you!" he laughs. "Already picking up the lingo. Now you've got your boots on!"

As the two of you begin your trek back to Building 9, you glance over at Bonworth as he limps along.

"So, uh... how long?" you ask somberly.

"Two years," he replies instantly. "Y'know, it's not all that bad, though. I always *did* want to be just a touch taller."

"Do you mind if I ask how it happened?" You mentally kick yourself even as you're still forming the question on your lips. "I -- sorry. That's probably the last thing you want to talk to me about."

"Nah, it's fine," Bonworth answers. "At my old job, our manager wanted a safe installed in his upstairs office. Real classy one, too, like all the old banks in the picture shows used to have. Thought he could save a few greenbacks by having us install it, but the building didn't have an elevator, just stairs."

"Ooof. I have a feeling I know where this is going."

"Foxy and I were on the bottom, and another employee was up top. In hindsight it was a foolish notion that the three of us could've gotten it up the stairs, and we should have gotten some professionals to do it. Lesson learned."

"So wait, is that what happened to Foxy?" you ask, eyes wide. That would explain so much.

Bonworth shakes his head. "Nah, he was able to jump clear -- that time. Me, not so much." He flicks his forearm with his right index finger, and you hear a dull metallic ring. "Fortunately they were able to at least save my arms. Makes metal detectors kind of a bummer, though."

"I can only imagine," you nod glumly as you climb the stairs to Bonworth's apartment. "Man, that's some rotten luck, Bonworth."

Turning the key in the lock, he shoots you a strange smile.

"Well, like I said before -- luck's what you make of it, Mike."

# Take a Load Off

## Chapter Summary

After a long day, Mike tries to find a little comfort.



"Spent the whole of the summer on the waters, but we couldn't find hide nor hair of him. Hare hide, aye, hare hide hide hid -- *bed*. **Hare hide!** Fetches three copper per pelt. Pet per pepper. Finest quality too. From her majesty's own surplus, see?"

"Good to know I've got solid resale value on the black market," Bonworth jokes, exaggeratedly running his paws over his long rabbit ears as if to show off the goods.

"You sure? What's the exchange rate of copper to the dollar, Foxy?" you inquire.

"Hush, you two," Cheeky hisses, the sizeable hen gesturing dismissively in your direction, but it's already too late.

Foxy stops his narration, slamming the handle of the broom down on the carpet. What was his cutlass just moments ago is now apparently a walking stick. He eyes you carefully, pondering your question.

"Copper pieces to the dollar? Aye, four pieces o' eight for just one dollar -- ride any of the rides an' play any of the games, me little buckos."

Bonworth's face falls slightly and even Cheeky seems dismayed.

"Go on with your story, Foxy," she hastily urges.

"Aye, lass," Foxy answers cheerfully, composing himself. "There, the midshipman comes wide at us, actin' as if *he* be the admiral. Skipper put up with none of that talk, he didn't. Knocked the wind right out of his sails. Had 'im port the swab deck!"

He roars with laughter, catching the broom handle with his hook and swinging around on it before scrabbling onto the armrest of the sofa. Wiping a tear from his eye, he continues on.

"Hours, hours, *hours* took us t'get all the gunpowder out of our fur and furs, but it was a small price t'pay. From that day forward, we'd be known as the fiercest in the royal fleet. Boat."

Foxy grins toothily, seemingly pleased with himself. Cheeky and Bonworth clap politely, causing you to quickly follow along. Satisfied with a job well done, Foxy lays the broom on the sofa next to you with such reverence you'd think he was putting a baby to sleep in a crib.

"G'night, lad," he murmurs, gently arranging the bristles in a random pattern. "Ye're lookin' a wee gaunt these days. Get a big breakfast at Hogan's tavern in the morn' before we set sail."

Wincing slightly, Bonworth fidgets with the ice pack on his arm.

"Bonnie, you took a pretty nasty fall today," Cheeky says, patting his shoulder with one of her wings. "Why don't you head to bed early tonight?"

"Not yet," he protests weakly, clearly exhausted. "Too many things to take care of before I can grab shuteye. Don't worry your pretty little head about me, though, I'm still full of zip!"

"I dunno, Bonworth -- you look less zippy and more *zapped*," you reply, feeling more than a little guilty about what happened earlier. "Get some sleep, dude. Cheeky and I can close down shop for the night."

"Whillikers, Mike, I'm not that tired!" he says. You glance at Cheeky who nods vigorously behind his head.

"You sure?" you challenge, opening your mouth as if to yawn. As if on cue, Bonworth immediately yawns back right as you snap your mouth shut with a smirk.

"Wh-- Mike! Yawns are contagious! That's cheatin'!"

"And you'd know all *about* cheating, Bonworth 'Aces High' Rabbinson," you return with a knowing smile, quote fingers and all. "Seriously, go get some rest."

"Consarn it, you know you got me there," he concedes, raising his paws in the air like he's being robbed. "Well, maybe I will tuck in early. You sure it's not too much to ask?"

"I was a real jerk today," you murmur, helping him to his "feet". "Let me make up for it. You've got my word I'll come running if anybody catches fire in the middle of the night."

"Hey, don't even joke about that, Mike," Cheeky interjects. "I left my curling iron plugged in a month ago. Know those warning labels on the cords? Yeah, those aren't just a suggestion."

You nervously eye her feathers, pondering what possible use she could ever have for a curling iron.

"Oh, don't remind me. I *never* thought I'd get the smell of burnt plastic out of my clothes," Bonworth mopes. "Well, if I'm shuttin' out early, can I give you a list of couple chores to take care of before bed?"

"Whatever you need me to do," you answer, shaking the bizarre mental image loose from your head.

As he hobbles over to the kitchen counter to begin jotting down a list, you grimly realize you still haven't met Faz, and you've got no idea just how bad of shape he's in. Whatever's wrong with him must be pretty serious if Bonworth had to spend almost two hours with him this morning, though. You fervently hope Bonworth's list doesn't involve changing bedpans or something.

"Oh, just some simple stuff," he comments, handing it to you. "Shouldn't be too much trouble for a capable feller like you, I hope."

Skimming the list, you breathe an inward sigh of relief. Wash and dry Foxy's blanket, some light chores like vacuuming and neatening up the common area, carry the trash out, take Faz his medication -- nothing you can't handle.

"Got it," you affirm, folding the chore list up and tucking it into your pocket. "All right, bud. Rest easy, I'll see you in the morning."

"Sure do appreciate it, fella," Bonworth says with a genuine smile. "Well then, gang, have a good one?"

"Night, Bon," Cheeky calls out.

Foxy waves from his perch atop the sofa's armrest. "Safe sailin', bosun."

"Whiskers..." Bonworth awkwardly rubs the back of his head, looking around the room like a lost child. "Sure ain't used to bein' the first to bed. Almost feels like back when I was a kit and my mama would get flustered if I hadn't done my homework."

After he reluctantly closes the door to his room, you decide to go ahead and get everything taken care of now. The last thing you want to do is procrastinate, especially after the day's events -- after all, there are some things you'll never forget seeing.

The sight of Bonworth slamming into the pavement is one of them.



Biting your lower lip, you try to push the guilt to the back of your mind for now, choosing instead to make yourself useful by focusing on the task at hand. Might as well get the vacuuming out of the way first before Bonworth falls asleep, since it's easily the loudest chore on the list. As you pull the vacuum out from the foyer closet, Cheeky moans audibly, rubbing her stomach a little.

"Dinner didn't agree with you?" you ask.

"Nah, just a cramp." You raise an eyebrow, which in turn elicits an unimpressed look from her. "Oh my god, Mike, don't worry. Not that kind of cramp."

With a shrug you plug the vacuum in and begin cleaning the floor. As soon as you start it up, Foxy's tail fluffs out and he hops off the sofa, scampering off in the direction of his bedroom. You look up at Cheeky with an incredulous smile.

"I know," she says with a sad shake of her head. "I thought the same thing the first time I saw it too."

"Oh man, that's adorable -- he really is like a little kid. Hey, lift your legs real quick." She grins wickedly. Looking down, you roll your eyes, fighting and failing to hide your smirk. "I said **lift** your legs."

"Sorry, couldn't quite hear you over the vacuum!" she giggles.

"My ass," you mutter before realizing your mistake as soon as she gets up from her chair. "No, **no**. I know you heard me right that time!"

"Awww, Mike, you're no fun," she pouts, zipping her fly back up.

After you're done vacuuming, you gather up the empty drink cans and takeout containers from the living room. One upside to eating fast food and frozen dinners is that there's not much in the way of dishes or kitchen cleaning to take care of, so you're finished fairly quickly. Setting the bags by the front door to take to the dumpster, you detour and head to your borrowed bedroom. After verifying that Foxy's not inside, you quickly collect his starry purple blanket from the closet. It still looks clean to you, but Bonworth specifically requested that you wash and dry it, so you put the washer on the fastest setting so that it'll be ready before bedtime.

As you start gathering up the trash sacks, Cheeky stops you on her way to the kitchen.

"Hey, don't head outside just yet. You want to see a trick? It's a good one, I promise."

You pause. "All right, I'll bite."

"Open the dining room window next to the bookcase, and toss the bag out. The dumpster's directly underneath our apartment *and* the lid's missing."

"You're kidding! Do you guys do this all the time?"

"Well, Bon doesn't really do stairs well and Foxy's not exactly the chore type. Faz is usually cooped up in bed, so that kind of thing would ordinarily fall to me." She cracks a smile. "Work smarter, not harder, I say."

Hefting the trash bag, you drag it over to the window and open it up. Sure enough, there's a dumpster underneath, down at ground level. You shove the trash bag out the window and watch it tumble into the dumpster with a satisfying thump.

"Hot damn," you declare with glee. "I could get used to that! I have to drag the trash all the way down the stairs back at Chiclet's -- that's going to suck when the snow kicks in."

"No kidding! Last winter there was a horrible freeze that came through -- I slipped on my way down the stairs and ended up riding the last three down on my ass," Cheeky shivers. "I saw the dumpster when I picked myself out of the snow out front, realized I could've saved myself the embarrassment and said '*never again!*'"

"Ah, yeah, the 'big freeze'. I think you're the third or fourth to mention it to me. Sounds like it was all kinds of miserable for everybody."

"Y'know, the weather's not *usually* that bad here." She finishes the last of her drink and tosses the empty can out the window before shutting it. "Last year was kind of a freak exception. I'm hoping this winter's much drier."

"Speaking of 'dryer', I just need to dry Foxy's blanket when it's finished washing and then take Faz his medicine so I can be done. Does he have pills, or...?"

She glances at the paper in your hand with a surprised expression, shaking her head slightly.

"You know what, I'll take care of that one for you."

"You sure? I don't mind, I'll have to meet him sooner or later anyway, right?"

"It's all right, Mike," Cheeky says, patting your head with a smile as she wades into the kitchen. "I've got it."

Deciding you've had enough of challenging the system for one day, you concede and let Cheeky do her thing. Clearly she's got a better handle on it than you do.

You watch idly as the hen rummages around in the kitchen cupboards, pulling pill bottles and tubes of ointments. She lines them up in a careful, yet seemingly random order on a plastic tray. Satisfied they're to whatever exacting standards Faz's care requires, she picks the tray up and trudges past you down the hallway.

With nothing else to do, you decide to kill a little time by browsing the shelves of movies in the bookcase. This apartment appears to have much better taste in films than the last -- most of the movies on the shelf appear to be award-winners or major blockbusters. While the titles and actors are every bit as alien to you as they were with Chiclet's eclectic selection of bargain bin DVDs, film is film no matter where you are. Your trained eye can still tell the difference between a chintzy low-budget mockbuster and something more suited to your discerning taste.

You squint at the bookcase in disgust. Now that's just silly -- they've got four movies with similar titles spread across three different shelves. Wouldn't it make more sense to group them together? And for that matter, why aren't the other discs in order? You begrudgingly admit it's unreasonable to expect them to sort by genre, but come on, who the hell could possibly find anything in this mess?

"Are you seriously alphabetizing our DVDs, Mike?" Cheeky inquires, folding Foxy's freshly-dried blanket neatly over the sofa.

You glance up at the clock, then down at the twenty-something stacks of disc cases you've been building on the floor. You've been at this for over thirty minutes. Pretending to jerk your head up, you stare at her as if having been snapped from a reverie.

"Oh *nooo*," you drone, "I've done it *again*."

"Well gee, I'd *never* have guessed you for a neat freak," she laughs, "after, you know, reorganizing and cleaning out our refrigerator this morning."

"Hey, I'm not a neat freak, I'm a cinema snob," you argue with a good-natured grin. "There's a big difference. Besides, cleaning out your refrigerator was just practical application of my knowledge."

"Really, now." Cheeky props herself on the back of the sofa with an amused smirk. "How do you figure?"

"I've seen enough schlock horror movies to know that you don't leave stuff in the fridge too long unless you want to create a sentient, radioactive monster made of goulash and moldy cheese," you state matter-of-factly.

"Of course," she chuckles. "Gotta watch out for those goulash monsters. They're serious shit."

"Damn right they are."

"Well, Foxy was in Faz's room hiding under the bed, so I calmed him down and made him go brush his teeth." She rises again, hefting the blanket from off of the back of the sofa. "Back in a sec, I'm going to go tuck him in."

You nod and resume sorting the movies back into the bookcase. Convinced that they'll be much easier to pick through now, you dust your hands off, proud of a job well done.

The only thing you see out of place is the broom, still propped across the sofa from where Foxy left it earlier, so you return it to the closet alongside the vacuum before finally taking a seat.

As you kick off your shoes and rub your feet, you can't help but feel physically and emotionally drained after the day's events. At the forefront of your mind is the entire deal with Chica and April, and the frustration you've felt at having been shoved out. Then today there was the marathon game session that started out frustrating and quickly escalated, and then of course you had the confrontation with Bonworth...

You grimace. That guilty feeling in the pit of your stomach isn't going away anytime soon.

After a few minutes of silently wallowing in self-loathing, Cheeky trots back into the living room.

"Foxy all squared away?" you ask, grateful for the distraction.

"Yup. The pirate's in his cove and all's right with the world," she responds. "So -- tell me all about what happened with Bonnie today, Mike."

Her blunt request hits you out of left field so hard that you visibly stiffen.

"Mike, I'm not upset, I just want to know what happened," she says, her face softening slightly.

"...how'd you know?"

"He just -- seemed a little off during dinner, and I've never seen him go to bed before any of us even ONCE in the entire time I've been in this apartment. I figured something was up."

"I felt kind of like he was picking on me all day," you begin, feeling just a bit claustrophobic.

Cheeky stretches a little, laying her wings over her stomach. "He *was* laying it on a little thick, I guess. But I just assumed he was trying to suit you."

"Yeah. He was," you mutter, staring at the floor. It takes a second to face what you have to admit, but you continue. "But I lost my temper and-- I shoved him when he kept trying to get in my face. And he went down. It was just a gentle *push*, I didn't *swing* at him or anything, but, uh... it happened. And that's on me."

"I guess I'm kind of surprised at your self control. There've been times when I've wanted to bop him myself," she jokes, shaking her head. "Really, though, his hokey mannerisms might take a lot of getting used to -- but Bonnie's a really good guy."

"I'm realizing that now," you sigh. "I still feel like shit over it, though."

"Look. Accidents happen, Mike. Don't beat yourself up over it, just, y'know, learn from it and move on. But if you need someone to talk to, I'm here."

"I appreciate the offer, but right now, I think I could use some sleep more than anything else," you reply, getting up from the sofa.

"Well then, g'night, Mike," Cheeky says, opening her bedroom door.

"Good night, Cheeky."

The digital clock reads half past eleven and you're no closer to sleep than you were two hours ago.

Foxy doesn't sound quite ready for bed either tonight, as you can hear him in the closet playing with the pirate toys in his treasure chest. The sound of plastic coins stacking and clattering is beginning to wear a little thin. You contemplate asking him if he's planning on going to bed, but the last thing you want to do is come across like you're scolding him especially when you're a guest in his room.

Not only that, you know that a little noise isn't *really* what's bothering you -- you've slept in a cardboard box near train tracks, for crying out loud. No, the weight of life on your shoulders is what's finally getting to be a bit too much. The turmoil and drama from the last couple of days is clouding your mind, stealing your joy.

Maybe it's time to finally call in a favor.

You sigh and gently pull the blanket aside, sliding out of bed. The closet door creaks open and a tiny red muzzle wrapped in purple cloth pokes out.

"What's the trouble, lad?" Foxy asks.

"Sorry, Foxy -- didn't mean to disturb you," you reply with a smile. "I'm, er, going portside for, uh -- some grog."

"A worthy cause." He sniffs authoritatively. "We got some good cherry fizz in the icebox."

"So I hear," you chuckle. "I might have to have one then. G'night, Foxy."

Foxy tucks his snout back into the closet and resumes his sorting.

"Aye."

Not surprisingly, there's nobody in the common area -- Bonworth and Cheeky already went to bed, and as far as you know Faz has had no reason to leave his room. With the living room dark and empty, you can't help but be reminded of your initial impression of the house when you came in last night -- very sterile and devoid of character.

Back in 87-B, the furniture is clearly second-hand and the decorations are simple, but they perform their function well. The house is lived-in and comfortable, even if it isn't overwhelmingly glamorous -- like a favorite shirt or pair of shoes. It's cozy, warm, and inviting.

Bonbon's pad might be tacky and messy, but beneath the layers of neon paint and yoga mats is a sense of liveliness as well. It's obvious that whoever was in charge of their decor has a passion for arts and crafts (even if they might very well be stuck in the 80s). It's cheerful and enthusiastic.

There's something off about this apartment, though. It feels like it's sort of tucked away, almost forgotten-about. Everything's very plain -- there aren't any cute throw pillows on the seating, or any worthless knick-knacks piled on top of the shelves (outside of Foxy's room, anyway). No paintings adorn the walls, no vases to hold colorful fake floral arrangements designed to gather dust. The room's little more than a few comfortable chairs and a sofa arranged around a huge plasma television.

You've seen waiting rooms in automotive repair shops that had better *feng shui* than this place.

Surveying Cheeky's bedroom, seems the light's still on inside. You very hesitantly knock twice at the door.

"Hang on, Bonnie," you hear her call.

Looking down at your flannel pajama top, the mental image of a little boy in his PJs stumbling bleary-eyed into mommy's room flashes through your mind. You hurriedly pull it off your chest and toss it over the sofa right as Cheeky opens the door.

"Oh, now *this* is a pleasant surprise," she says, eyes lighting up. "A half-naked stud being delivered straight to my door?"

"Actually, I figured I'd take you up on that offer to talk if it was still good," you answer, smiling hesitantly.

"Of course! Step into my parlor, said the chicken to the -- hmm, doesn't quite sound as catchy that way." She waves you in gently. "Eh, you get the gist."

True to her word, Cheeky's room is indeed the master suite. There's an enormous king-sized waterbed parked right in the middle of the room, covered with comfy-looking high-threadcount sheets and no less than five overstuffed pillows at the headboard. Her dresser's cluttered with boxes of makeup, mostly containers of mascara and eyeshadow. Dirty clothes are piled in a laundry

basket that looks about a week overdue, and her towel's still on the floor from this morning's shower.

"What's up, Mike?" she asks, walking into her closet. You look around the room, realize there's nowhere to sit, and reluctantly park yourself on the edge of the bed.

"Oh, wow, you weren't kidding," you comment. "This thing's really comfortable."

"It's unbeatable," she boasts. "And best part is, there's plenty of room for two. Wink wink."

"Sorry, did you just say 'wink wink' aloud?"

"Sure, why not? My back's turned, so you can't see me winking," Cheeky replies as she lifts her top off. Blushing, you turn your head, engrossing yourself in her collection of makeup containers.

"So spill, Mike. What's on your mind?"

"I'm not even sure I know," you begin, running a shaky hand through your hair. "Going at it with Bonworth today really kind of did a number on me. On both of us, I'd imagine."

"Still a little worked up over it?" she asks sympathetically.

"I feel like an asshole. I guess I misinterpreted his joking, and -- I just kind of flew off the handle. It's been a rough few days for me. Hell, probably longer than that, now that I think about--"

You hear her unzip, and seconds later the sound of more fabric hitting the floor.

"Don't mind me," she insists. "You were saying?"

You squeeze your eyes shut, doing your best to chase your rapidly-departing train of thought. "I guess it started when I lost my job after a workplace accident a couple years ago. I ended up having to sell nearly everything to make ends meet because nobody would hire me, and eventually I couldn't afford the utilities, then rent..."

The sound of elastic snapping startles you, and you glance over without thinking. Cheeky's holding two faded, threadbare nightshirts in front of herself, pondering which she wants to wear.

"Er -- the pink looks nice and soft," you offer. She nods approvingly, pleased with your choice.

"That's what I thought as well," she replies, letting the green shirt drop. "Sorry. Please, continue."

As you turn away, out of the corner of your eye you notice severe discoloration on her skin, just beneath her thin layer of yellow down -- several large white and purple stretchmarks on her stomach and sides as she begins to pull the shirt over herself.

No, wait. Those aren't stretchmarks.

*Scars?*

Sure enough -- two large, precise scars run the length of her belly from just below her bust to right above her waistline.

"I guess to make a long story short," you continue while trying not to stare, "I eventually found my way here, and things seemed like they were finally beginning to look up for me. Then I kind of overstepped my bounds with Mangle, and never was able to make amends before Chiclet shoved me out the door."

"Because of the new tenant, right," Cheeky says, clicking the closet light off and crawling into the bed next to you.

"Exactly. And it's like, I know these apartments are kind of packed right now, and the landlord gave me the same spiel that I guess he must've fed the new girl about having to move in with roommates until a furnished apartment was ready."

"I mean, most of the apartments here are designed for co-ed living anyway, and a lot of the ones that aren't completely occupied already tend to sublet or solicit roommates," Cheeky says. "If you haven't figured it out yet, this isn't exactly a complex full of trust fund babies."

"I'm actually really fine with living with roommates and even prefer it," you admit. "I've grown accustomed to having people in my life again, and it's so much easier if everyone helps with the load. I just -- I don't know. I wish Chica hadn't put her foot down and kicked me out."

"Did she really kick you out, though? It's just a temporary thing, y'know? You're not *that* miserable here, are you?" she grins.

"No, not at all. You guys have been great. Even Bonworth, when he's not busy pushing my buttons. And I get that's sort of his routine. I just--" You let out a heavy sigh. "I just guess I just kind of miss 'home'. Whatever 'home' is."

She winces a little.

"I'm sorry, that probably sounded ungrateful, didn't it," you mutter.

"No, no, not you, you're fine," she hastily answers. "Just -- a cramp, is all."

"Oh. Um, if you don't mind my asking, what's going on here...?" you gently ask, waving your hand in a circular motion over her belly.

"I don't mind," she answers, rolling onto her back a little and tapping her stomach with one wing. "I have nerve damage. It's pretty... rough."

"...*sounds* rough. How long does it take to heal?" you inquire.

She doesn't answer immediately, instead lifting her shirt a little. Gently, she takes your right hand in her wing and places it on her ample stomach. You study the pattern of the scars as she drags your finger across them.

"It doesn't."

"Come on now," you smile crookedly, hoping she's playing with you, but your words come out like a dry croak.

"There *was* a chance. The doc said up to a year, but it's been more. So realistically, I'm dealing with this for the rest of my life."

You look at her, eyes widening. "Wait, what? It's -- it's really permanent? That's -- does it, I mean, does it hurt, or...?"

"Some days it's not so bad."

The whole "up days" and "down days" routine comes surging back to the forefront of your mind again. You're beginning to sense a trend, and it's not one you like.

"There's nothing that sets it off, specifically, it just comes and goes. Usually out of the blue. When I can feel it, and that's pretty often, it's like..." She pauses, her drifting eyes refocusing on you. "Well, it sucks. But then, like, right where your hand is right now? I can't feel anything there. You could jab me with a **fork** and I probably wouldn't be able to feel it."

"That's -- oh my god, Cheeky." You carefully pull your hand away as she lowers her shirt. "It sounds excruciating. How the -- how'd it happen?"

"Cancer," she replies, far too quickly and easily for your comfort -- as if she was answering what day of the week it is, or what she'd like to drink.

You blink. "Cancer? L-like *cancer*, cancer?"

"And a few dozen surgeries as follow-up," she shrugs, looking herself over.

"Yeah, but," you return hesitantly, "you're better now, right?"

"I'm in remission if that's what you mean." Cheeky snorts, shaking her head a little. She continues looking down at her stomach, now tracing her scars herself. "So even though it might come back someday, I guess I'm better than I was. Sure left its mark, though."

You just sort of deflate.

"That's horrible," you finally manage after a long silence. "Cheeky, I'm so sorry."

She inhales deeply, then exhales. "Eh, don't be. I didn't mean to get so gloomy on you. Honestly, Mikey, I've made my peace with it. I mean, I'm alive, right? And hey, they didn't get my boobs. So there's still plenty of chicken to go around."

The hen pauses, glancing to you, but upon reading your face, her expression darkens a bit.

"Sorry," she murmurs. "Bad joke."

You lean over and place your hand on her wing and squeeze gently. "I'm really, really sorry. I don't even know what to say, it's..."

Her eyes drift to your hand, then make contact with yours, and she gives you a wan smile.

"Hey, I appreciate the sentiment, but I swear, I didn't bring it up just to start a pity party. I don't want to see you worrying about me. All right?" You grimly nod, forcing yourself to smile back. She seems to be having an easier time of it. "So c'mon, enough about me. What about you? You were talking about being homesick, right?"

You can't help it. The realization of how self-centered you've been just kind of hits you like a ton of bricks, and you cover your face with both hands, groaning. Your face is burning with shame, and all

at once you feel on the verge of tears. You hurriedly rub your eyes in an attempt to stem the flow.

"You know, it seems kind of silly right now," you choke, trying to swallow down the lump in your throat.

She hugs you tightly to her chest. "Ah, hell, I killed the mood, didn't I." She groans melodramatically, ruffling the hair on the back of your head.

"Nope," you reply, rubbing the tears out of your eyes. "...just reminded me that I've got a lot to be grateful for."

"For a hairless ape, I'd say you've got it okay," she playfully returns.

That "ape" bit has gotten stale as of late, yet somehow, this time, you find yourself grinning. "You know, I wouldn't be teasing you if you got plucked clean."

"Please, I could rock that look if I wanted. You think you're the only one who can manage the smooth-and-soft style?"

"I do all right for myself," you kick back with an exaggeratedly confident sigh.

"You should have seen Bonnie after his last full checkup. I don't even remember why, but they half-shaved the poor goofball. He looked pretty ridiculous. He's a lot smaller under all that fluff."

You chuckle, staring up at the darkness, imagining the cornball bunny with a buzz-cut and big hairless stripes. Next time he gets on your nerves, you'll just try to imagine that.

"So, tell me about your world, Cheeky."

"Well," she sighs, "I'm just a girl trying to get by in an apartment surrounded by three men, none of whom are eligible bachelors."

"Might explain a few things," you joke.

"Oh, am I *that* transparent?" she shoots back with a playful huff, bouncing the bed. "No one even really comes to visit, 'cept maybe Beanie sometimes, and I'm sure you noticed we don't get out much, so it's a dry little island I'm trapped on."

You tilt your head. "Well, I'm in an apartment where Freddy and I kind of feel outnumbered, and if I move back in and the new lady's still there, that's..." You grimace. "The estrogen levels are probably going to be through the roof. But I guess I haven't really had time to, uh, consider my options."

"I have. I mean, it's -- okay, who exactly am I going to, you know, work with here? Foxy's like my little brother, and Faz -- poor guy's a wreck, Mike. I don't think he even wants to be touched in a *platonic* way."

"How about Bonworth?" you ask before instantly scrunching your face up. "I'm sorry. That probably--"

"Yeah, believe me, Mike, I've tried." she sighs exasperatedly.

"What, he doesn't... swing that way?"

"More like he doesn't even swing *at all*. He's just so busy and tired from taking care of the household... I don't think romance even exists for him."

"If it's any consolation, between Chiclet and Mangle I've got kind of my own issues going on. The constant flirting over there --" Cheeky interrupts you with a cough, blushing and glancing away, before you continue, "-- is just out of control and there's no privacy at all."

"Goodness," she exclaims. "You don't have any time to yourself? So, you don't even... get to let off steam, huh?"

You lie back with a sigh, staring at the dimly-lit ceiling. "It *has* been a while."

"I heard guys start having wet dreams if they don't get off enough," Cheeky whispers almost conspiratorially.

"Nothing yet," you retort. "Should I keep you posted?"

"Yeah, call me if anything comes up," she winks.

You share a laugh, but in the silence that follows you can't really think of anything to say. For a long moment, there's only the quiet of the night, and the warmth of the covers. The waterbed shifts as she rolls onto her side, and you're suddenly aware of how close you two are. Her chest is nearly pressed against your arm and you can almost feel her breath.

"So look..." she begins, in an open, careful tone that feels somehow exploratory. It's nothing like the voice she used for all those earlier pick-up lines. "It's late. I'm having a good time. And... I think you're having a good time, too. So uh, Mike, if you're going to sleep anyway... you're more than welcome to spend the night with me."

You look at her, not even bothering to hide your expression. She's a chicken, you're a human -- even if nobody's buying it. How would that work? It has been a while, but most of the equipment looks the same, right? It would be pretty much plug-and-play, right?

The bed feels so good. You haven't been this relaxed in days. Plus, she's right, it certainly has been a while. And when you touched her... well, all you'd have to do is say yes, right?

You realize presently that you're *seriously* considering it.

...and somehow, it just doesn't feel right. Not yet, anyway.

"I... I think I'm all right for now," you finally gulp.

She nods, sighing. It looks like she was literally holding her breath. She seems understandably disappointed, but otherwise not too upset.

"Well, didn't hurt to ask," she smiles, pulling herself to a sitting position as you carefully stand up from her bed.

"Thanks for letting me vent, Cheeky," you murmur. "I've been keyed up, and it's nice to have someone to talk to."

"Yeah. Same here. I can't always be completely open with Bonnie, myself. I'm sorry it kind of turned into an 'all about me' there at the end," she laments.

"Not at all," you insist. "I appreciate you letting me know what's going on."

Still...

You pause at the door, glancing over your shoulder with a sheepish expression. "Hey, uh, no promises or anything, but just in case... think I could get a raincheck on that offer?"

She grins back, reclining on her pillows. "Hey, you know where to find me."

You chuckle awkwardly. "All right then. I think -- I think I'm going to go to bed for real this time, now."

"All righty," Cheeky hums. As your hand twists the knob to her bedroom door, she stops you. "Hey, before you go?"

"Yeah?"

"You might need these."

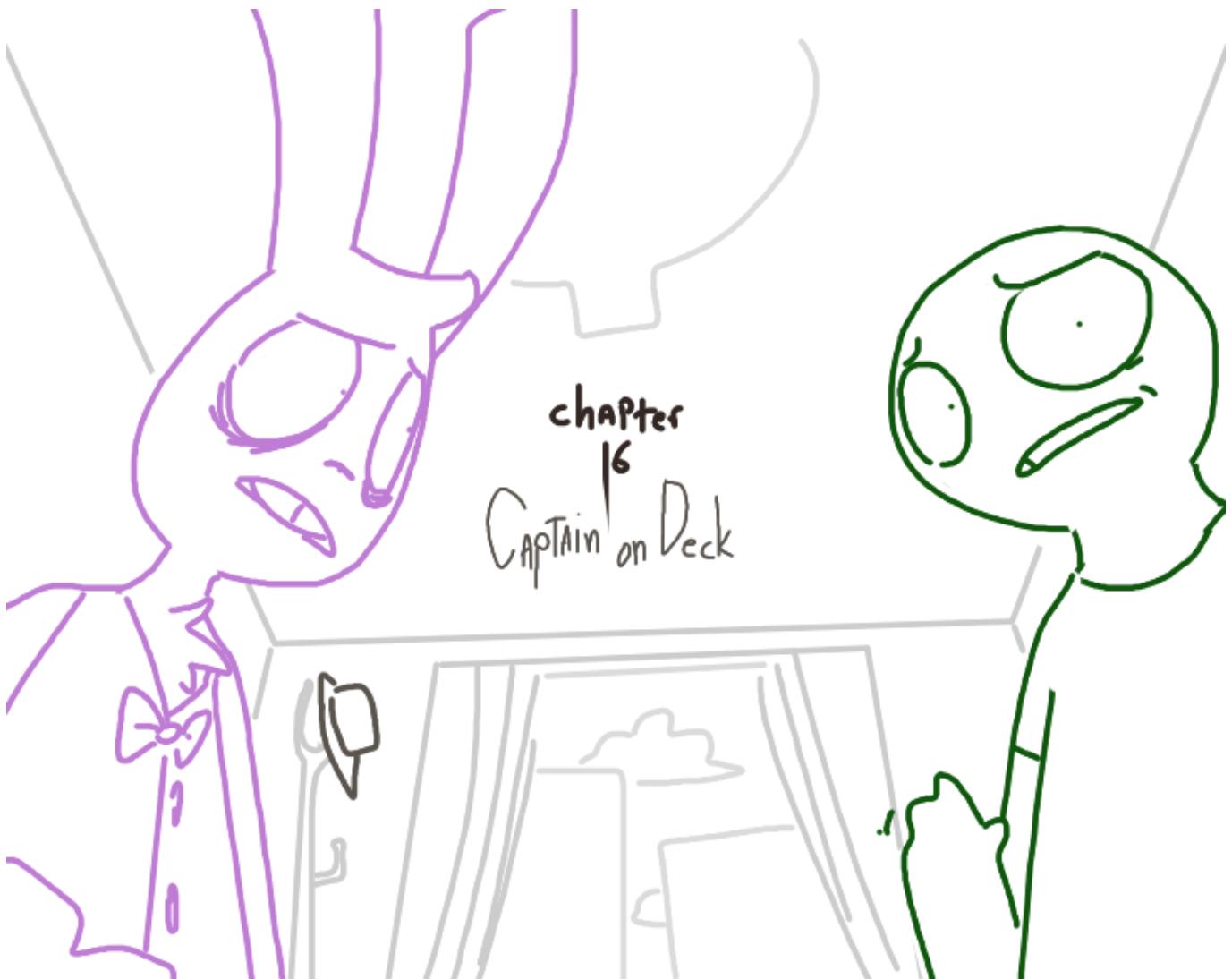
She reaches into her nightstand drawer and pulls out a sealed box of tissues, throwing them to you with a wink. You blush at the implication, hastily tucking them under your arm.

"G'night, Mike," she grins.

# Captain on Deck

## Chapter Summary

Mike meets Faz.



After your conversation with Cheeky, you weren't able to fall asleep until almost two AM, and yet somehow, you're still up at six on the dot. Looks like Foxy's still asleep in the closet this morning, so you gingerly shuffle out of bed and make your way into the hall bathroom as quietly as you can manage. You're still a little groggy, but you see no reason to not get an early start.

Once you've finished with your shower and morning routine, you make your way out to the common area where a brighter-than-usual Bonworth is the only one awake.

"Top of the morning to you, Mike!" he whoops from his easy chair, albeit quietly enough to avoid waking the whole household. Setting his newspaper aside, he pulls himself to standing. "Sheesh,

pal -- you look whipped. Up burnin' the midnight oil, eh?"

"Hey, I live with a real pirate now. We've gotta keep that moonshine operation running," you snort, pouring yourself a glass of cold water from the tap.

"Moonshine? That's serious business in these here prohibition times!"

"You think I'm kidding, but he gave me the hookup on grog -- real grog, cherry fizz and all." You raise an eyebrow. "I'm talking top-shelf hooch here."

The two of you share a chuckle as he folds his newspaper up, limping into the kitchen.

"I just wanted to thank you again for taking care of everything for me last night," Bonworth says, leaning against the kitchen counter for support. "I hate to admit it, but I sure needed the extra winks."

"I should be the one thanking *you*, after yesterday." You awkwardly tap the side of your glass, grasping for something else to say. "I'm... so sorry about what happened out there."

He covers his mouth with a theatrical gasp that even Mangle would be proud of.

"Whiskers, Mike! I don't even want you thinkin' about it. I'm just glad that whatever nastiness was between us has been sent packing."

"Yeah, no -- we're good. I promise."

"Good, I'm gonna hold you to that now." Bonworth spreads his arms wide. "Bring it in, buddy."

You roll your eyes at his corniness, but awkwardly embrace him anyway. With all the metal in his arms it almost feels like getting a hug from a trash compactor -- though you're surprised to find that you don't really mind it.

"Now, are we done with that line of discussion forever?" he asks.

"Yep," you affirm.

"Good! We can't be worried about that nonsense when there's big doings today." He claps his paws excitedly, leaning in toward you with a chipper grin and arched eyebrows. "Ol' Marion's offered me some part-time clerical work helping down at the front desk!"

"A part-time job?"

"He's puttin' me on a trial run for the next couple of days, and even then only for the afternoons. If it works out, then maybe somethin' more will come of it, but for now, he's agreed to knock a few greenbacks off the rent for the month if I help him out."

"Sounds like a sweet gig," you reply, more than a little jealous. Work sounds amazing right now with most of the month left to go before your next infusion of cash. "So clerical work -- what does he have you doing? Helping with paperwork, desk stuff?"

"That's the long and the short of it, yep," Bonworth answers as he opens the refrigerator door. "We don't even need the money so it's really just as a favor to him."

You struggle to avoid whimpering aloud, and settle for chewing your lip instead. "That's, uh -- really big of you," you cough.

"Aw, shucks. It's no skin off my teeth." He blushes a little, making a show of deciding which bottle of carrot juice he's going to select. "You can do anything you put your ear to, I always say!"

"Well, if you're going to be busy over the next few days, what can I do to help out around the house?"

"Aw, Mike, you don't have to do anything," he replies almost automatically. "We'll have it all taken care of. Why, you just kick your feet up and relax!"

The very thought of being a freeloader repulses you. Back at Chica's, you made it a point to pay for room and board plus extra (and even then she still hustled you out the door -- not that you're bitter or anything). Out of the goodness of his heart, Bonworth's letting you stay here and eat his food for free, all to help out a neighbor.

"Yeah, no. That's not happening." You fold your arms defiantly. "You'll be at work and I'm not going to shunt everything off on Cheeky. I'm not that kind of guy, Bonworth."

He struggles with the cap on his juice bottle, purposefully dodging the topic. "These darn childproof caps," he jokes weakly. "Don't know why they'd want to keep kids from drinkin' carrot juice. Good for your eyes, you know?"

You gently ease the bottle out of his paws and deftly twist it open, pouring the contents into his glass.

"Let me pull my own weight, Bonworth," you insist. "If you need me to help take care of Faz and Foxy, just tell me what their routines involve and I'll see to it that it gets handled."

"Faz is kind of... he's not really the sort of fella that, uh--"

"No, I get it, he's a handful, but I've got recent experience at dealing with handfuls. You should see Bonnie when she's in one of her moods."

He looks at you dubiously. "Mike, he's on a different level entirely from what you're used to," he says, voice low.

"I still want to help. And with Cheeky the way she -- y'know, with her whole situation, I just don't want to put any undue strain on her."

Bonworth sips at his juice wordlessly for a while. You lean against the counter, maintaining eye contact.

"All right," he finally relents after a minute or so of awkward silence.

You blink. "Really?"

"I mean, I suppose we've put it off for long enough." He grimly places his glass in the sink. "There's probably a lot I should warn you about before going in, but, uh -- I think you should meet Faz and see things for yourself first."

A strange feeling in the pit of your stomach begins to take form, and you suddenly wonder if you've bitten off more than you can chew. You shove the doubt out of your mind and steel your nerves, nodding once.

"I'm ready."

Placing a paw on your shoulder, he gives you a pained smile.

"No you ain't."

As you open the door, the first thing that hits you is the nearly overpowering stench, causing you to gag involuntarily. The strong, unmistakable odors of alcohol and ammonia permeate the air along with something far more rancid. Your eyes begin to water. The garbage you cleaned out of the refrigerator yesterday would be an upgrade compared to whatever's going on in here.

"Powerful, isn't it," Bonworth whispers.

"What's wrong with him?" you choke.

*"Everything."*

It's too dark to see much, and the temperature is at least five degrees colder than anywhere else in the apartment. From what you can make out, the room is devoid of any decoration or color whatsoever. Its sole furnishings are a nightstand, a wall-mounted television, and an electric adjustable bed not unlike one you'd find in a modern hospital. In the place of a dresser is a laundry basket on the floor, packed full of clothes folded in neat stacks. Atop the nightstand is a small desk fan to provide air circulation, but it's clearly not quite up to the task. As for the bed itself, you can at least tell it's occupied, but you can't quite discern any real details apart from the fact that whoever or whatever Faz is, he's large and more than a little imposing.

While Cheeky and Foxy have somewhat meager rooms compared to the other apartments you've been in, both have character that reflects their owners' personalities and priorities. Foxy's got his pirate toys and paraphernalia, Cheeky's got her oversized bed and dresser full of makeup. Even though you haven't gotten a look at Bonworth's room yet, you can imagine his is probably much the same way.

Faz's bedroom, on the other hand, could easily be mistaken for a hospital room.

...or a mortuary.

"Morning, pal," Bonworth says with muted, gentle cheerfulness as he crosses over to the window to draw the curtains apart. "I see you're awake already. How you doin' today?"

As the room fills with the morning's light, you're finally able to get a good look at the mysterious being called Faz.

As best as you can tell, he's a large, brown bear. His husky build implies a sturdiness that his slumped, weary shoulders belie. Several spots on his arms and neck are bandaged with thin strips of gauze, a few of which are alarmingly discolored. You're pretty sure those small metal protrusions

jutting out of his right bicep are wires, though what machine or device they're meant to connect to isn't immediately obvious.

Visible lacerations across his neck and chest indicate multiple recent surgeries, and not just the kind that Cheeky's been through -- these scars are much, much fresher. Several evenly-spaced indentations from what were once sutures line his throat in pinpoint, precision patterns.

You attempt to study Faz's face while simultaneously trying to avoid looking like you're staring at him. One of his ears appears to have been stitched back onto his skull, and a surgical mask hides most of his muzzle. His head is both gaunt and swollen, skin stretched tight as a drum over his scalp and bony cheeks, yet draped loosely around his throat and jowls.

Wide and bright, his eyes glimmer in the morning sun like beacons, his gaze seeming to go on for miles. He glances first at Bonworth before shifting to stare at you. You nervously break eye contact out of instinct before sneaking a peek back at him again.

He's still staring.

Your awkwardness multiplies tenfold.

Gingerly, Bonworth pulls the quilt off of Faz, adjusting his bed with a control panel from the nightstand so that he can rise to a sitting position.

"Ready to meet a new friend?" Bonworth asks, gesturing to you with a broad smile. You give Faz a timid little wave.

Tearing his gaze from from you, Faz locks eyes with Bonworth. He draws a deep, rattling breath, and with visible effort, raises a large paw to his neck. Pressing a finger to his nightshirt's collar, an audible click penetrates the heavy silence as Faz opens his mouth to speak.

A tinny, synthetic voice rumbles from a speaker in his neck. You realize it's likely from one of those electronic voice boxes that cancer survivors use for when their vocal cords are too damaged to be able to speak properly. As a result, the tone of voice doesn't at all match the body it's coming from, giving the impression of a cartoony toy robot instead of what you would expect from the large, hulking figure in front of you.

**"Absolutely,"** Faz responds without the faintest hint of enthusiasm.

Bonworth winces, and you can't help but tilt your head at Faz's odd choice of words. Hesitantly, you step forward and extend a hand.

"I'm Mike," you offer. "I'll be staying here for a few days... it's a long story."

Faz wordlessly looks at your hand, making no effort to shake it.

You sheepishly lower your arm to your side. "O-oh, right, sorry -- Cheeky mentioned you don't really like to be... ah, never mind," you stammer.

"Say, Faz, you didn't eat much yesterday," Bonworth interjects, clearly noticing you floundering. "How about we go sort you out with some victuals? You feeling up for a walk into the living room?"

Faz carefully nods, lowering his paw from his neck. With another ragged breath, he heaves himself to the edge of his bed. As if testing the waters, he gingerly touches both feet to the carpet before shifting his full weight onto them.

"There you go, hey, you're doin' great," Bonworth coaxes, awkwardly holding his arms out to either side, as if to catch the bear in case he falls. "Mike, do you think you could go fix us something for breakfast?"

"Sure thing. What would you like to eat, Faz?" you inquire.

Faz shakes his head apathetically, plodding towards the door.

"Waffles!" Bonworth quickly answers on his behalf. "A couple waffles would be great, and maybe a little coffee?"

"Comin' right up," you reply, grateful for any kind of direction. You open the door for Faz, who staggers out into the hallway at a snail's pace with Bonworth following closely behind.

After Faz is situated in the living room, Bonworth excuses himself to go tend to Foxy and a few other things while Faz fumbles with the TV's remote control. You head into the kitchen, eyeing the freezer's selection of frozen breakfast items before shaking your head. Nope, you're going to do this right.

Rooting around in the kitchen cupboards, you eventually find an unopened box of pancake mix that hasn't expired in between one that did (well over a year ago, no less) and one that's full of mealworms. Making a mental note to clean the cabinets out when you next have free time, you begin a fruitless search for a proper waffle iron. After five solid minutes of checking every single nook and cranny in Bonworth's maze of a kitchen, you give up and settle on a small electric griddle.

No self-respecting Belgian would ever allow you to claim that waffles and pancakes are the same, but damn it, a fresh hot pancake is going to beat a freezer waffle any day of the week. Besides, it's one of the six foods you know how to cook by heart (the others being hot dogs, ramen, and three different kinds of eggs). You might not be Freddy, but you can at least make a decent flapjack.

Turning the griddle on, you raid the fridge for other suitable breakfast ingredients. There's an unopened carton of milk and a bowl of large eggs inside the fridge, and you remember seeing a bottle of syrup from your previous cleaning binge. The eggs not being in a carton makes you sneak a questioning look in the direction of Cheeky's room, but you quickly shake *that* thought out of your head. Some questions are better left unanswered.

After mixing up the batter and testing the griddle to figure out how it works, you begin flipping pancakes. You're still stuck with microwave bacon but on the plus side there's plenty of eggs to go around. You contemplate asking Faz how he likes his eggs, but decide against it as you seem unlikely to receive a response. Sunny side up was how your mom always made them for you as a child, and you don't figure on this being a picky crowd. Plus, anything's got to be an improvement over those greasy scrambled egg patties that you had yesterday morning.

You still can't quite shake the rubbery taste out of your mouth.

The sound of pitter-pattering behind you alerts you to Foxy toddling into the living room. His twitchy, glassy eyes light up when he sees Faz.

"Captain on deck," Foxy announces, saluting with his good paw. "Good to see ye this morn', skipper."

Faz clicks his throat and nods to Foxy. "At ease, sailor!"

So *that* was what he meant by not being the captain. You smile and wave to Foxy from the kitchen.

"Morning, Foxy. You hungry?"

"Hungary, no, can't say I was ever there," Foxy ponders, leaning against the wall. "Ships never made it out that fffar far far far, farthings..."

He turns, sniffs at the air, and his stomach involuntarily growls.

"I'll take that as an *aye*," you joke.

Satisfied that he's met your conversational standards for the time being, Foxy alights on the armrest of Faz's chair and settles into a ball, watching the TV with glazed eyes.

Once you're certain you've cooked up enough pancakes, eggs, and bacon to feed everyone, you start the coffee maker and begin plating food. Cheeky wanders into the living room, running a makeup-coated wing through her headfeathers.

"Oh, wow, hey Faz," she yawns, rubbing her eyes. "Kinda surprised to see you up and at 'em. Maybe this time recovery won't be so bad, huh?"

Faz nods wordlessly in her direction as she stumbles into the kitchen. Looking up at you, she perks up considerably upon seeing your breakfast array.

"Damn, Mikey!" Letting out a low whistle, Cheeky grins. "If I didn't know better, I'd assume you were trying to seduce me."

You chuckle, handing her a plate with an exaggerated, almost Bonworth-esque wink. "Maybe I am, sweet cheeks!"

She laughs aloud, and you can't help but join in as she does -- it's a genuine, bubbly laugh -- not laced with sarcasm or innuendo, not couching some hidden meaning. Honest happiness in its truest form, something you haven't heard in a while.

"Well. I'm glad to see you're finally coming out of your shell a bit, Mike," she enthuses. "I like it. We could use a splash of color around here."

A bright yellow bird, a purple rabbit, and a red fox -- you find yourself idly wondering what part of you would be considered "colorful" in comparison.

"Well, I feel better after kind of, you know, venting a little last night. Thanks for being a sounding board."

"Mmmm. Sometimes it's good to get stuff off your chest, you know." She nods, taking a whiff of her plate. "Don't be afraid of honesty, just be afraid of how you choose to channel it."

"Yeah, I got a good dose of that yesterday," you mutter. "Oops. Sorry, I promised Bonworth I wouldn't talk about it."

"Sounds like something he'd make you do," she chuckles, picking up another plate to take to the living room. "Bon's not the type to hold a grudge, not ever."

You sigh, cutting a little slab of butter for your own pancakes.

"Probably a good policy to have," you muse.

The two of you carry everyone's breakfast plates into the living room and begin setting up the folding tables. There are only three, so you and Cheeky opt to simply use your laps.

Exiting his bedroom, Bonworth settles into his seat with an excited smile. "Fresh flapjacks and eggs? That's for me!" he declares, slicking his headfur back with a paw. "What a way to start the morning off. Thanks for cheffin' for us, Mike."

"It's no big deal," you reply. "I'm afraid this is about the extent of my cooking skill, though, so don't get too awful excited. I'm no Freddy."

"Nnnngh. No complaints here," Cheeky says as she takes a seat next to you on the sofa, rubbing her stomach. "I think this is the first breakfast in two months I've had that wasn't out of a box or a bag."

"It's still out of a box!" you laugh. "I didn't mill any artisan pancake mix, I'm sorry to say."

She pokes you in the side with a wingtip. "Semantics! You know what I mean, it's not frozen or whatever. Anyway, *let's eat!*"

"That's what I like to hear!" Bonworth proclaims, raising a coffee cup in a mock toast.

Reaching up to his mouth, Faz pulls his surgical mask off. Your heart sinks as you get a good look at his face, or rather, what's left of it.

You can't shake the visual impression of a skull. His muzzle's a sunken, gaunt mess. His teeth press tightly against the thin skin of his lips, which are themselves cracked and blistered. He doesn't appear to even have a nose -- his nasal cavity is scarred and exposed to open air. He carefully opens his mouth revealing a spotted tongue and a slew of missing teeth.

Chiclet, by comparison, has the mouth of a supermodel -- scars and all.

He presses a forkful of pancakes into his mouth, chewing and swallowing audibly. Without turning his head from the morning news, he presses a finger to his voicebox.

"It's good," Faz says.

"I'm glad," you reply with a smile before politely turning your attention to the television set.

"Guess I'd better get going. Are you sure I'm not leaving you with too much to do?" Bonworth nervously asks, straightening his bow tie for the third time in five minutes.

"What's he going to do, run off without me?" you quip, gesturing to Faz. "I get that you're the caretaker here, but we'll be fine. Foxy's with Bonbon, and I'm sure if Faz needs something he'll let me know. Go help Marion, I'll hold down the fort."

Bonworth wrings his paws. "Don't forget his medicine at--"

"At noon, I know," you interrupt. "And then again at two. And not the green bottle, that's at bedtime, and you'll be back by then. Bonworth, I've got your written instructions as well as Cheeky if I need help, and worst case scenario? I can just call the front desk and talk to you myself."

"Well, I mean, if we *really* wanna talk 'worst case'..." He reaches a paw up to his collar, but you playfully swat it away.

"You tug any tighter on that neck ribbon of yours, you're going to cut off the oxygen to your brain," you joke. "Relax. We're fine."

Bonworth laughs. "I guess I am makin' a pretty big fuss, aren't I."

"Sure are!" you chortle. "Now go bail our goofball of a landlord out."

He grins sheepishly, slipping his coat on.

"While I'm down there, I'll see if we can do somethin' about getting the process streamlined to move Miss April into her own place, so that you can get back to ol' Chiclet and the others. I imagine you're climbin' the walls here."

You think back to 87-B. Chiclet never did call you back, and then there was the whole debacle with Mangle, not to mention Bonnibel's refusal to answer the door yesterday morning.

"Oh, don't go to any trouble on my behalf. I'm not in a real hurry to get back over there," you reply, and you're surprised to find you mean it.

Bonworth tucks his paws in his pockets and whistles. "Well all right then, I'll see you this evenin'. Thanks again, Mike."

"Hey, thank *you* for letting me stay here. See you tonight."

After Bonworth closes the door behind himself, you turn to head back into the living room, taking stock of the apartment.

At Chiclet's, you rarely had a moment's quiet. There was always a happening of some variety between running errands or dealing with your roommates' antics. You definitely stayed busy. Today's the first day in a long while where you've got the luxury of privacy and free time, since Foxy and Bonworth are currently out of the house and Cheeky's napping in her room.

It's an unusual feeling.

Faz is seated in his chair, gazing out the window into the courtyard. He's since changed clothes and cleaned himself up a little, but he's every bit as miserable-looking as he was before. Steeling your nerves, you stride with purpose over to the sofa and lean against it, clearing your throat. Faz apathetically tilts his head to focus on you.

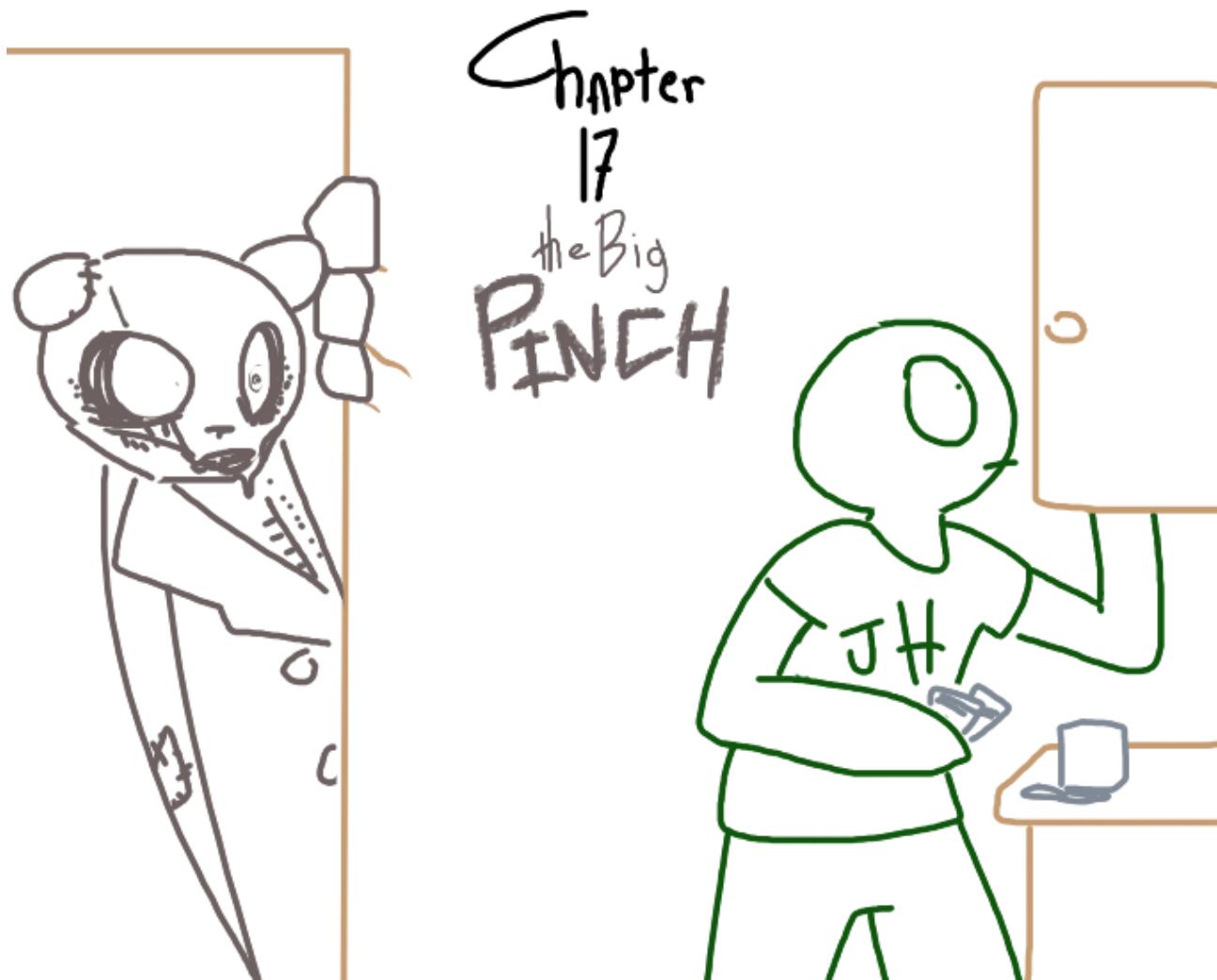
You both hold each other's gaze, and when it's clear that you're not going to win the staring contest with him, you force a grin.

"So, Faz -- you, uh, watch any good movies lately?"

# The Big Pinch

## Chapter Summary

Mike does his best to manage the apartment without Bonworth.



In response to your weak attempt at making conversation, you expected to be met with a blank stare. So far, you're not disappointed.

It comes as no real surprise that Faz isn't much of a talker, if the inconvenient-looking device buried in his neck is anything to go by. Even if that wasn't an issue, it makes sense he wouldn't be keen to expend significant amounts of energy based on the visible evidence of recent surgeries. For all you know, he could very well be on doctor's orders to exert himself as little as possible until he gets better.

Nevertheless, you remain convinced that you can get Faz to open up, even if only in some small way. As you stretch out on the sofa, you begin thinking of a way to engage him. You misjudged Bonworth and Cheeky at first, and even Foxy won you over quickly once you got to know him. You've yet to meet anyone truly hostile in this apartment complex, and in your heart you know Faz is no exception. As long as you're going to be living here, you might as well try to make friends with as many people as you possibly can.

The morning news has given way to daytime programming, and right now some asinine children's show is blasting through the speakers. You idly wonder how Cheeky's able to sleep with the sound up so high.

"All right, so you're not into movies. What about TV? You sure seem interested in, uh--" You squint at the screen, making sure you're reading the title card correctly. "--*Laser Dinosaur Adventures*?"

From what you've managed to glean between commercial breaks, the show itself seems to be little more than a glorified 20-minute vehicle to sell toys, the eponymous characters bringing out some new gadget, vehicle, or playset every few minutes. At least it can't be any weirder than whatever the hell *Legend of Bob* is.

It's been a long time since you've seen commercials aimed at kids. Overly excited boys smash action figures through walls of stacked plastic blocks while girls fawn over "adorable" dolls with creepy hair and creepier eyes. A slew of strange products and toys, none of which seem like they'd entertain for longer than five minutes, parade across the screen. A host of paper-thin gimmicks selling themselves on how little your parents seem to understand about them, or how quickly they'd gross out your big sister.

Faz slowly glances over his shoulder at you with his sunken, vacant eyes, and after a long and very uncomfortable moment, he returns his attention to the television, switching the channel to some local news report.

"Well, you didn't have to change it," you insist, wondering if you've offended him. "If you like cartoons, I mean -- watch whatever you like, I don't mind one bit."

He draws a deep, pained breath before reaching one of his battered paws to the voice controller on his neck. You strain to better hear whatever he might have to say.

"Some days, I miss the sound," he rasps.

"The sound?" You glance at the screen, then back at him. "Of a TV, or...?"

He shakes his head, wincing slightly as he does.

"Life."

The sound of life?

What does *that* mean?

You aren't immediately sure of how you should answer, and apparently, he doesn't expect you to at all. Reclining in his chair, Faz changes the channel yet again. After several minutes of non-conversation, you eventually conclude that you won't get anything else out of him for now. Kicking your feet up on the sofa's armrest, you fold your arms across your chest in groggy annoyance.

Because you didn't end up getting much sleep last night, you're too tired to be productive, yet too alert to go back to bed.

Seeing no real options, you resign yourself to zoning out to the television for now.

A couple of hours pass. You make it a point to check on Faz every so often, even if it's only to offer him something to drink. On the rare occasions you do receive a reply, it's usually in the form of a dismissive wave or grunt. Eye contact is seldom, and fleeting.

Apart from a call from Bonworth to remind you to give Faz his medicine, which you repeatedly assure him you didn't forget, the home front remains quiet until sometime around half past eleven when a knock at the door announces Foxy's return from a morning spent playing over at Bonbon's.

To your surprise, Bonbon herself is more subdued than usual as she plods into the entryway, her expression bordering on one of worry.

"What's up?" you ask as Foxy staggers in behind her.

"Oh -- hey, Mike," Bonbon replies deflatedly. "See for yourself."

Foxy slowly shuffles down the hallway past you and Bonbon, harness and leash still firmly attached to his torso. He scratches awkwardly at one of his ears with his hook, seemingly addled.

"You okay, buddy?" you ask gently, leaning down as he passes by.

Foxy seems to be chewing something, but there's nothing in his maw -- it's as if he's simply biting slowly at the air itself, tongue flopping in and out of his mouth between the gaps in his teeth. His eyes seem focused in two different directions as he bumbles forward, eventually knocking his head into the wall near his bedroom door. He continues to walk against it, but it obviously refuses to move aside despite his best efforts.

After half a minute or so, Foxy literally drives himself up the wall in a scrabbling attempt to get through, until he tumbles onto his back, legs and arms still softly paddling away all the while.

"He's been like this for the last hour or so," Bonbon murmurs. "I've only ever seen him this bad once before, and it was..." She trails off, tugging at one of her wristbands with an awkward expression.

"Oh man, poor guy." You watch as Foxy rolls on the carpet. "Do we have any idea what's wrong with him? Does he need some pills, or like a sedative or something?"

"I wish I knew," Bonbon laments, ears drooping. "He was right in the middle of watching cartoons with Peanut and Goose when he sort of, uh, flopped over. Peanut looked up his symptoms on the internet, and we thought maybe his blood sugar had dropped out or something, so we rubbed a little honey on his gums. When that didn't work, I knew I had to get him over here."

Glancing behind you into the common area, Bonbon squints.

"Where is Bonworth, anyway?" she asks. "He'll probably know what to do."

"At work," you reply distractedly, watching as foam begins to build up around the edges of Foxy's muzzle.

"He works? Since *when*?" Bonbon asks, face awash with confusion.

"Marion needs him for the next couple days, something about clerical work. Shit, I'd better call him."

Stooping next to Foxy, you gingerly tilt his head up so that he doesn't put too much strain on his neck as he kicks around. At the least, you don't think he's so far gone that he's in danger of biting his tongue or choking on his own saliva, but it also doesn't look like there's much you can do for him right now. You turn to head toward the kitchen, almost bumping into something. Looking up, you realize with alarm that Faz is standing directly behind you.

"*Whoa!*" you yelp as you abruptly leap backwards to give yourself some distance, nearly knocking over an end table in the process. When did he even get up?!

If he notices your clumsy retreat at all, he doesn't comment, instead lumbering towards Foxy. Bonbon spares you a bewildered glance, but it's clear from her face that her sole focus is on Foxy at the moment.

Faz inhales deeply as he leans down to the ground. With a grimace, he hefts Foxy like a father would an exhausted child, dutifully carrying him into your shared room. He deposits Foxy on one of the two beds before wrapping him like a twitchy burrito in the purple blanket from the closet. Though Foxy resists at first, the enormous bear soon has him swaddled like a baby.

"At ease, sailor," Faz drones, placing a heavy, weathered paw gently on the fox's forehead. Foxy thrashes slightly before settling down, turning to look at Faz.

"Aye," Foxy answers, straining to focus. "Aye, skipper-r-r-rrr. Fff-ffour... tea winkssss."

Faz shuts the light off and closes the door behind him, stepping out into the hall to face you and Bonbon. Looking up, Bonbon meets his blank gaze with a ginger smile.

"Hey, big bear," she coos with uncharacteristic softness. "It's been a while. How're your battle scars?"

As if to answer, Faz looks down at his chest and scratches absently at one of his incisions. Some less-than-clear liquid clings to his paw, almost causing you to gag.

"That's no good," Bonbon gasps. "Mike, you know how to clean a wound, right?"

"I know some basic first aid," you comment, rubbing your chin. "It was required as part of my training at my old job."

"Good to know," she replies. "What did you do before coming here, if you don't mind my asking?"

You start to answer, then stop abruptly. "I, uh... hold on a second," you mutter, drawing a blank.

"Oh, wait, sorry -- we should probably get him taken care of. Do you know where Bonworth keeps first aid stuff, Faz?"

Faz nods, tapping his voicebox with his clean paw. "Kitchen. Top left cabinet."

"Great. So, Mike, you need me to stick around?" Bonbon asks hesitantly, making no effort to leave the entryway. It's obvious that when she said "we" should get him taken care of, she really meant "you". Of course, you can't really blame her -- she already seems rattled enough as it is because of Foxy.

"Nah, I got this," you affirm, taking pity on her. "Go take care of what you need to. Tell Peanut I said hello."

"Will do," she replies. With one last, furtive look in the direction of Foxy's room, she lets herself out.



"Come on, Faz. Let's get you cleaned up," you declare with false bravado in an attempt to psych yourself up.

After a moment of digging through the kitchen cabinet, you realize Faz hasn't joined you yet, so you lean around the kitchen wall to check on him. He stares back at you from the hallway, standing perfectly still like some kind of terrible statue. He doesn't seem to have taken one step since Bonbon left. Clearly, he's not the type to expend unnecessary energy. You shrug and resume your search, and soon find a box with some basic first aid supplies next to a bottle of saline wound wash.

"Perfect," you announce, closing the cabinet.

You turn back to the hall only to find Faz now quite suddenly standing a mere foot away at the kitchen's entrance, staring down at you. You nearly jump out of your skin, dropping the first aid box onto the floor. It pops open, spilling bandages and ointment tubes everywhere. Damn, he's surprisingly fast for a bear that looks like he picked a fight with a train and lost. You didn't even hear so much as a creak in the floorboards.

With a nervous chuckle, you motion for him to sit down in his easy chair while you pick up the mess you've just made.

Faz slowly unbuttons his shirt as he ambles over to the living room. Once you've gathered everything up, you follow him to his chair. You carefully begin to peel away his bandages, all the while making sure not to rip out what little fur he's got left. He winces as you do so, and you offer him an apologetic smile.

"Sorry you're stuck with me and not a cute nurse," you joke. "But you know, I bet Cheeky might have a costume in her closet if you want the full effect."

To your surprise, a twitch of a smile plays at his battered lips.

"Heh, yeah," you continue, cringing as you dab at the unspeakable ooze on his chest. "Probably wouldn't have to twist her arm, right -- or would it be wing?"

"I know what you mean," he murmurs.

"Right, of course. Okay, so, this is probably gonna sting a bit. There's enough alcohol in this stuff to launch a missile."

While Faz doesn't emote in the same manner that you do, you get the feeling he's at least grateful for the service rendered. After applying some fresh bandages, you clean his paws, finish with hand sanitizer, then pack the rest of the kit up and return it to its rightful place in the kitchen.

"Thank you," Faz whispers.

"What are friends for, right? Now that we've got that taken care of, I'm gonna call Bonworth and let him know what's going on with Foxy," you announce, picking up the phone from the kitchen countertop.

With a subtle shake of his head, Faz taps his voicebox. "Not necessary."

"What, really?" you gawk, incredulous. "He looked pretty rough back there. What *was* that, anyway?"

Faz motions for you to come back to the living room. Eyeing the clock, you make sure to grab his noontime medication and a glass of cold water before you do so. Pouring the numerous pills

Bonworth designated into a tiny plastic cup, you hand Faz his medication and water, which he accepts gratefully.

"So what's going on with Foxy then?" you ask carefully.

He pats the easy chair next to him where Bonworth would normally sit, and you reluctantly take a seat, craning your head to better look at him. With a heavy breath, Faz begins to speak unassisted. His voice is low and quiet, yet intense; a strange kind of brutal whisper.

"Easier for me to talk without the electrolarynx. Just not as loud."

"Electrolar-- oh, that's what that's called," you reply. "I've seen people use those on TV before in those anti-smoking PSAs. Did you-- I'm sorry if this sounds blunt, but... did you have cancer like Cheeky as well?"

He shakes his head gently. "No. My throat was punctured."

You wince. "Oh god, that's horrible. I didn't know. Um, what happened? If-- that is, if it's okay for me to ask...?"

Staring off into the distance, Faz absently rubs his neck.

"I got the Big Pinch," he rumbles, rough and almost inaudible.

"Sorry?"

"Work-related accident. A very temperamental piece of equipment malfunctioned. I happened to be inside it at the time," he wheezes, coughing wetly against his fist. "Everything... came in on me. Throat's from a metal strut that went into my neck. It wasn't the only one."

"That-- how are you even still *moving*?" You scrunch up your eyebrows, shake your head in disbelief. "That sounds less like a machine malfunction and more like you were in one of those, uh, the torture coffins with the nails you see in dungeons. What's it called, a--"

"Iron maiden. And yes. It was a lot like that." He sits up with some effort, resting his heavy, scarred paw on the arm of the chair. "But I believe you wanted to talk about Foxy."

"Are you kidding?!" you blurt, a little too loudly. "I'm like, critically worried about you right now!"

"Forget it, Mike. Ancient history."

Your jaw hangs loose as you try to process what you've just been told.

"Foxy does this sometimes," Faz continues even without your response, extending a crooked finger in the direction of the hallway. "He can't help it. It's the brain damage talking, not him."

"Brain damage? I had assumed he was kind of like our Bonnie, sort of unstable and immature." You hang your head, feeling ashamed at not having put the pieces together sooner. "I never had any idea it was... this sort of thing. How'd it happen?"

"Been trying to find *that* out for years. Doctor said he's missing some... something from his cerebrum. Up here." He gently motions to the front portion of his head. "Hard for him to hold

together some days. Motor skills are shot now. Sometimes he can move great. Sings, dances, plays around. Other times..."

He weakly paws at the air, mimicking Foxy from earlier.

Your heart sinks as you sit back in your seat, your eyes beginning to burn.

"Bonbon said something about him being hit by a car back when we first met. I kinda assumed she was... joking..." you mumble, trailing off as Faz nods.

"Sure. It's why he has a hook now. Why Bonnie makes him wear a leash. Happened after his accident," Faz answers. "Poor kid may be the unluckiest person in the world."

You find yourself furiously resisting the urge to tell Faz he's one to talk. "Holy shit. Bonworth lost his legs and most of his arms, Cheeky with the cancer, and, and... you and Foxy are..."

Faz starts to reply, but is cut off by a sudden onslaught of coughing. Raising his empty plastic cup to his muzzle, he spits mucus into it. A little dribbles from his wounded mouth and down his chin. You quickly head to the kitchen to grab some paper towels for him.

"So that's it then," you utter as you hand him the paper towels.

He dabs at his mouth, staring blankly at you.

"You just..." Throwing your hands in the air, you flop onto the sofa. "You're done?"

Faz doesn't respond.

Brain damage, amputation, cancer, and... whatever "the Big Pinch" entailed? You thought your first set of roommates were messed up -- everyone in 93-B is borderline terminal.

With time and therapy, Bonnibel might be able to adjust to normal society. You wager Mangle's strong-willed enough to eventually overcome the whole body image thing, whatever *that* entails. Chica could probably have a prosthetic beak made, though heaven knows she's pretty enough without it.

Heck, there may even be hope for *Freddy* to someday lead a normal life.

Everyone here, though? These guys are barely hanging on.

You fight to swallow the lump building in your throat as the vision of Foxy thrashing limply on the floor replays over and over again in your mind's eye. It's too hauntingly similar to watching Bonworth struggle to pick himself up off the sidewalk.

The worst part is, they don't seem angry or even all that upset about their circumstances. Cheeky might have been the most bitter of everyone in this apartment, and even then she expressed having made peace with her situation. Foxy's cheerful as the day is long -- when he can hold a conversation with you, anyway. Faz is strangely calm and somewhat creepy -- but talking to him, you don't detect even the faintest hint of suppressed rage. Misery, sure, but no anger. And knowing Bonworth, he probably apologized to the damn safe.

How? How can they accept it? How can they just... accept defeat?

You run your hands through your hair, choking back your own righteous indignation. They've given up. Everyone here has made peace with their lot in life. The lack of feng shui finally clicks with you. The common area in this apartment doesn't remind you of a waiting room in a car shop, it reminds you of a *hospital*.

...no, if anything, it's closer to palliative care or hospice; making things as comfortable as possible for someone who's been sent home to die.

The telephone in the kitchen rings, drawing your attention. You shakily head over and fumble with the handset, answering it right before the recorder picks up.

"Hey, Mike," Bonworth's voice crackles across the line. "Got a lunch break and thought I'd take a second to check in on ya. Everything goin' all right over there? Faz isn't giving you any trouble, is he?"

You force a smile even though it's mostly for your own benefit. There's just something about a phone call -- you always feel like the person on the other end can sense what's going on, even if they can't see you.

"No problems here," you finally manage. "Everything's just fine."

# Hooked

## Chapter Summary

The roommates share a hearty meal and some strange stories.



"Mornin', Mike," Cheeky yawns as she half-waddles, half-tumbles out of her bedroom, one wing bracing against the doorframe.

You yawn as well, annoyed with your subconscious for falling victim to the same trick you used to get Bonworth to go to bed early last night. What goes around, comes around, you suppose.

"Morning? It's **four** in the afternoon," you grumble at the half-dressed hen. "I was beginning to think you'd slipped into a coma."

"Awww, sounds like someone needs a nap," Cheeky sleepily coos in the tone of voice that would ordinarily be reserved for a fussy infant. She ruffles your hair with her wingtips, her beak twisted

into a smirk. "Trust me, it'll do *wonders* for that sour mood of yours."

"I'm *not* in a sour mood," you huff, realizing all too late that you've just proven her point.

"Whatever you say, hon."

As she makes her way into the living room, Cheeky glances over at Faz's chair and her expression softens considerably. "It's rare to see you still up, Faz. I figured you'd have gone and laid down by now."

Faz tilts his head up to make eye contact with her, clicking his electrolarynx on. "It's rare to have guests."

"And how's our *guest* been treating you?" she asks, side-eyeing you.

Looking down at his bandages, Faz seems to consider the question seriously before replying to her.

"Well. Cleaned my wounds, took care of medication." The stout bear draws a ragged, gasping breath. "Bonnie would be proud."

"Hell, *I'm* proud," she beams, flouncing into the kitchen. "If I'd known Mikey was gonna play doctor this afternoon, I'd have slipped on my nurse's uniform and joined him."

You can't help but burst out laughing in spite of your melancholy, and even Faz snorts a little.

"*I knew it,*" you finally manage, wiping tears from your eyes. "*I knew* she had one."

"Hmm? You say somethin', Mikey?" Cheeky hollers, plucking a beer from the refrigerator.

"Yeah, I was just mentioning to Faz that Bonworth will be home soon," you cover, winking at Faz. "So, uh -- what should I do about dinner?"

She fumbles with the cap for a few seconds before realizing that it's not a twist-off, and with a shrug uses the sharp tip of her beak to pop it loose like a makeshift bottle opener. Spitting the offending bit of metal into the sink, Cheeky takes a long pull off of the bottle of liquid bread before replying.

"How about you go hunt down that guy from your apartment and drag him over here to cook for us?"

"Yeah, I *wish*. It's only been a couple days but I've already got cravings for some of his stuff. I imagine he's probably busy helping out the new tenant, though."

"Shame," Cheeky mumbles, fiddling with the paper label on her bottle. "We could do takeout again. You don't *have* to cook, y'know."

"Yeah, but takeout's expensive," you argue as you stand up from the sofa to stretch your legs. "Can't eat *every* meal out on our budget."

"Well, we get a lot more for financial aid than the drapes -- or lack thereof -- would imply," she jokes, waving a wing in the direction of the worn-out miniblinds. "There's plenty of money in the till, so to speak. I know for a fact Bonnie's down at the front desk just because Marion's ass is in a sling, not because we *need* the break on the rent."

"He said as much," you sigh, still bitter that your hands are tied until you get your next check. "Still, waste not, want not. I imagine Bonworth's gonna come home hungry, and Foxy probably needs to eat something as well after his ordeal earlier."

Cheeky tilts her head sharply, her hackles raising as she looks at you. "Uh oh. What's up with Foxy?"

"Oh, that's right. You were asleep when he got back," you respond, heading into the kitchen. "Apparently, he had kind of a -- like an episode, I guess? It happened while he was over at Bonbon's. He stumbled in like a zombie. Wasn't talking, ran into the wall. Looked really bad."

She deflates visibly, folding her wings as she slumps against the kitchen countertop.

"Aw, shit. He was doing so well this week, too," she mutters sadly. "Faz, were you here when it happened?"

Faz nods, coughing a little into his paw. "He was... twitchy. I put him in bed."

"Poor kid," Cheeky laments.

You squeeze your eyes shut, trying to put the disturbing image of Foxy writhing on the floor out of your mind. After a few moments, an idea begins to form in your head.

"Say, what does Foxy like to eat?" you ask, opening the refrigerator door. "How about we make his favorite food for dinner? You know, maybe cheer him up a bit?"

"Ooh, *yeah!* That's a great idea, Mike," Cheeky replies, perking up as she heads for the living room. "He loves seafood, but that might be a bit tricky, since I doubt we've got anything like that here."

Of course the pirate fox would be fond of seafood -- you feel silly for even having asked.

"Seafood, huh? I bet I can come up with something," you reply, closing the fridge and turning to the cupboards. If you can find some canned seafood, you can at least make a tuna salad or some kind of seafood chowder. Push comes to shove, you can probably use someone's computer to find a recipe online matching the ingredients you have here. You might not be the greatest cook in the world, but anyone can follow a recipe.

A sudden, sharp knocking sound at the front door interrupts your train of thought.

"Mike, can you get that?" Cheeky asks, reclining on the sofa and kicking her feet over the armrest. "I'd do it myself, y'know, but I'm lazy."

At least she's honest. Opening the front door, you see Beanie staring up at you, fumbling with her phone in one paw.



"Hi there, Beanie. You aren't gonna slam the door on me again, are you?"

She flashes you a smirk that's made ever so slightly goofier by her adorably oversized buck teeth.  
"You aren't letting me live that one down, are you?"

You match her smirk with a grin of your own, opening the door wide for her. "Nope. C'mon in."

Trotting into the apartment, she unzips her hoodie, revealing a pink and white-striped spaghetti-strap top that shows off just a tiny bit of her fuzzy purple midriff. She tosses her hoodie carelessly on the floor, heading straight for the kitchen to help herself to a soda from the fridge.

"Hi, Cheeky," Beanie greets, popping the top on her can. Glancing over, she notices Faz and quickly stands up straight. Her eyes widen ever so slightly as she nods respectfully to him. "Oh! Hey, Chief. You're looking good today."

"Evening, Bonita," Faz rasps in reply with a brief nod of his head. "Here to see Bonnie?"

"Yeah, I had some time so I thought I'd swing by," she replies, sipping at her drink. "Where *is* my brother, anyway?"

"Down at the front desk with Marion," you answer. "He'll be home really soon, though."

"Oh, okay." Beanie scratches one of her ears absently. "You, uh, you guys mind if I chill here until he's back?"

"Why would we? More the merrier," Cheeky replies. "Mike was just about to make dinner anyway. Wanna stay and eat with us?"

"God, do I ever," Beanie says with genuine enthusiasm you've not yet seen from her. "Fred's making his liver sausage casserole tonight, and Chica used Bonbon as an excuse to get out of it before I could."

Wincing, Cheeky shakes her head. "Hnngh."

"Another cramp?" you ask with a sympathetic nod.

"Thankfully, no. Just thinking about that casserole," Cheeky replies with a grin.

"Yeah, Fred makes it once a month -- some family recipe or something passed down in the Fazbear family line for generations," Beanie continues.

"**Faz**-bear family...?" you interrupt, turning to Faz.

Faz clicks the button on his throat again and responds flatly without even looking up. "No relation."

"It's an... acquired taste," Cheeky mutters.

"An acquired taste that none of us have *actually acquired*," Beanie deadpans, looking nauseated. "I'd rather clean the deep fryer's grease pan at work with my **tongue** than eat that slop one more time. And he *always* makes us have the leftovers at lunch the next day, too."

"I feel for ya, kid, I really do," Cheeky offers. "How about you text Fred and let him know you got invited to dinner?"

The phone's already in Beanie's paws before Cheeky can even finish getting the words out, the slender rabbit's thumbs rapid-tapping away at the keypad as she wastes no time in tapping out a text message. "Sounds good. I feel bad hanging Foxy out to dry, but every bun for herself. So what're we having?"

It takes you a second to process that she's referring to her Foxy, not yours. You briefly wonder what a book of baby names looks like here in the Land of the Animal Clones.

"Foxy -- err, our Foxy -- isn't feeling well today, so I was thinking we might make him something he'd like for dinner. We'd talked about seafood, but..."

"But? But *what?*" Beanie anxiously prompts, licking her lips. "Seafood *does* sound good now that you've mentioned it."

"I imagine freakin' *shoe polish* would sound good, considering the alternative waiting for you," Cheeky cracks.

"Well, I'm not sure we've got anything here, and even if we did, I don't know if it'd be enough to feed everyone." You gesture to the half-barren cupboards full of long-expired pre-packaged foods. "There's probably not enough time to run to the store before Bonworth gets home, and I really don't want to make everyone wait to eat dinner."

"Oh, is *that* all that's holding us back? Pffft, not a problem," Beanie says, sprinting towards the door. "I'll go raid the pantry and fridge downstairs. I'm *sure* Chica's got something even if it's just one of those bulk bags of fish sticks in the freezer."

"You really are eager to get out of that casserole, huh?" you grin.

"You've got **no** idea," she answers, closing the door behind herself.

About fifteen minutes later, you hear a thump at the entryway. Opening it up, you see a shivering Beanie standing outside, holding a large cardboard box full of food. You accept the hefty payload from her, carrying it into the kitchen; sure enough, there's plenty of canned seafood as well as an oversized package of frozen popcorn shrimp.

"That's quite a haul," you marvel, setting it off on the counter and unloading the packages.

"What do you need me to do to help?" she asks, rubbing her paws to warm them up. You turn to answer her, blush, and immediately divert your gaze back to the stove.

"Ahh -- well, could you, uh -- look up -- like with your phone, a uh..."

"Look up what?" she asks, confused.

Cheeky shuffles into the kitchen, tossing her beer bottle in the trash. "Cold outside, Bean?" the hen asks.

"Freakin' *freezing*, and I forgot my hoodie like a dumbass when I ran downstairs. Why?" Beanie responds, teeth chattering.

Enveloping Beanie in a hug, Cheeky leans in close to the rabbit's ears and stage-whispers loudly enough for you to easily overhear.

"You're pokin' through and Mike's too much of a gentleman to say anything."

Beanie's cheeks turn roughly the same shade as Foxy's fur with embarrassment, and seconds later you join her.

"You're awful, Cheeky," you accuse.

"Don't I know it!" the hen cackles, playfully popping you on the rear with her wing as she heads back to the living room. "Now whip us up some dinner, you two. It's seafood night!"

Sighing, you turn back to Beanie, who's already busy zipping her hoodie back up.

"Anyway, like I was saying before I was just *sexually assaulted* -- could you look us up a recipe for some clam chowder or something, Beanie?" you ask, shooting a snickering Cheeky a look.

"S-sure," Beanie mumbles awkwardly, pulling her cell phone out of her pocket. "Manhattan or New England?"

"Whatever we've got the ingredients for, I guess."

While the popcorn shrimp crisp up in the oven, you mix up some dipping sauce with horseradish and ketchup. Hardly fancy, but it gets the job done. As for the clam chowder -- you and Beanie ultimately decided on New England style since you had to substitute less ingredients that way -- requires considerably more effort, but thankfully it's an "all in one pot" type meal which is easy enough for you to manage, and the recipe Beanie provided you with came highly-rated. Towards the tail end of dinner prep, Bonworth arrives home with a tired but cheerful expression.

"Ol' Bonnie's home, gang," he announces with a yawn, hanging his coat at the door. "Oh, my goodness -- what *is* that most heavenly aroma? Smells like an old-fashioned fish fry in here!"

"That's the idea," you reply, tasting your chowder. It's rich and creamy, and the potatoes only need another minute or two before they're perfect. At the risk of sounding like you're patting yourself on the back, it's probably the most impressive thing you've ever cooked.

Gently limping into the kitchen, Bonworth catches sight of his sister standing near the oven. "Hey, little bunny! Are you joinin' us for dinner?"

"Casserole night," she replies by way of greeting.

"Whoof. Can't say as I blame you." He mock shudders, causing his "knees" to knock together with a light clang. "Mr. Fred Fazbear's a wonderful soul, but he's better with calculatin' than cookin'."

Embracing her brother, Beanie murmurs low and even into his ear. "Also, payday isn't for another week and I'm broke, so uh..."

"And the other shoe drops! Shoulda known my own family wouldn't want nothin' to do with me unless compensation was involved," he wails melodramatically.

She lightly punches his bicep before immediately yanking her paw back. "Ow."

Chuckling, Bonworth turns back to you. "So what's the special occasion, Mike?"

Wiping your hands on a towel, you begin pulling bowls out of one of the kitchen cupboards. "Oh, I just wanted to treat Foxy, since he's kinda having a 'down' day."

"That's mighty kind of you," Bonworth says, his tone a little more subdued. "Bonbon called me and filled me in a little while ago. How's the little feller holdin' up?"

"Faz put him down for a nap when he came in this afternoon," you report, stirring the chowder pot with a wooden spoon. "He's still sleeping right now. I didn't want to disturb him since I'm still a stranger, so do you want to go wake him and see if he's ready for some dinner?"

Bonworth nods, happily surveying the kitchen. "Sounds like a plan. Back in a jiff!"

Squeezing past you with her brother's comically oversized oven mitts on either paw, Beanie slides the shrimp tray out of the oven along with a foil-lined cooking sheet loaded with buttery garlic toast -- a last-minute addition to make sure nobody leaves hungry. She sniffs at the tray with her tiny rabbit nose, whiskers twitching ever so slightly.

"Ooh, these came out *nice*," she grins. "How're we looking with the main course, Mike?"

Another taste test confirms that the chowder is ready. "Just had to wait for the potatoes to soften up. We're good to go here, if you want to get the plating going."

"On it."

While you begin setting up the TV trays in the living room, Beanie's hard at work spooning up portions for everyone. Foxy limps out into the living room with a yawn, his eyes a little more focused and a bit more spring in his step than when you saw him earlier.

"C-Captain on deck," he announces, shakily tapping his hook to the side of his head in a salute to Faz.

"At ease, sailor," Faz drones in reply. "You're on light duty tonight. Captain's orders."

"Aye, s-s-skipperrr." Lowering his arm, Foxy turns to Bonworth, sniffing at the air. "When's l-l-lunch, bosun?"

"Oh, it's dinnertime now, fella. You were out of sorts for a spell, it seems. Pull up a seat, we'll have the, er, cabin girl serve your rations," Bonworth replies with a wink at his sister.

Rolling her eyes, Beanie begins helping you carry plates into the living room while Cheeky helps Foxy up onto one of the easy chairs next to Faz. With a hesitant smile, Beanie sets Foxy's plate down in front of him along with a plastic cup in the shape of a barrel, filled to the brim with root beer and topped with a straw. The pirate fox sniffs his meal approvingly, giving her a toothy grin.

"Mmmm. H-haaaven't had a chowder that smelt this fine since... since, since Oskar's, t'was at least... ten moons afore. No takers, no takers, none till we used better bait, th-though it be m-more costly."

"I'll... take that as a strong endorsement," you chuckle. "Eat well, Captain, there's plenty more where that came from."

Foxy's face falls, and you instantly correct yourself.

"Whoops. Sorry. No disrespect to Captain Faz."

He grunts dismissively, batting at one of his ears with his hook. You try not to take it too personally -- looks like he's still not back up to 100% yet. Once everyone's gotten set up with their dinner, you politely let the girls take the sofa while you sit on the floor with your plate.

"Dang, dinner looks great," Cheeky excitedly comments, staring at her plate ravenously. "Oh man, and we're even having *garlic bread*, too? You're spoiling me. The fastest way to a girl's heart is

with liberal application of carbs, Mike."

"Well, the garlic bread was Beanie's idea," you answer, "so all credit due there. I'm with you, though, they do look good."

"I got sick of the crappy all-you-can-eat breadsticks at work a month or so ago that we're 'entitled' to," she grumbles, finger quotes and all. "Best food in town but they can't figure out a damn breadstick, so I figured, hey, be the change you want to see in the world."

"Ugh, don't remind me of those monstrosities," Cheeky grumbles.

"Bad, huh?" you inquire.

"That's putting it mildly. I remember them, and not fondly. Besides, nobody likes a limp breadstick," she says with a wink in your direction. Chuckling, you shake your head good-naturedly.

"I know, right? They're always doughy, undercooked *and* underseasoned, so I learned how to make garlic toast out of sheer spite, I guess. But hey, it's been kind of a hit at our place lately," Beanie adds.

"Well, *I* for one couldn't be more grateful for such a delectable-lookin' platter. Let's eat!" Bonworth announces, catching an irate glance from Cheeky.

"Stole my line, Bon," she huffs at him, crunching into her toast.

Smiling sheepishly, Bonworth starts to reach for the television remote, but Foxy interrupts him by raising his drink with his good paw. Wordlessly, he slowly looks around the room. Everyone -- even Faz -- turns and offers Foxy their full attention.

"Oh, a toast!" Cheeky gasps, raising her glass after a few seconds of polite, but confused silence.

The room quickly follows suit, glasses, bottles, and cans raised high. Apparently pleased at the display, Foxy nods, opening and closing his jaw a few times. He squeezes his eyes shut as if desperately trying to remember something. Everyone watches with reverence, patiently waiting for the tiny fox to say what he needs to, in his own time. He makes a few false starts of muttering and frustrated grunts, then slowly eases his eyes open, finally satisfied that he's found the right words.

"T-to th' best companions... a s-salty dog like me could ask for," he manages, eyes brimming with tears.

"Hear hear," Bonworth whoops, clapping his paws together.

Clinking your glass to Foxy's, you smile as the room cheers their support.

"Couldn't agree with you more, sailor," you add, patting his shoulder.

One dinner later, Faz retires to his bedroom for the evening to rest. Not too long afterward, Beanie also begs off following an impromptu private discussion with her brother. After putting the dishes away, you spend time in the living room watching primetime television -- mostly inane "reality"

shows chock full of contestants who can't sing *or* dance attempting to win prize money in spite of their lack of talent.

"You know, Mike," Cheeky says, plopping down on the sofa beside you, "you're welcome to lay your head on my lap. I'm *quite* fluffy."

Grabbing a throw pillow off the floor, you lay it across your legs. "How about I extend the same offer to you?" you joke.

**"Hot damn!** Ain't gotta tell me twice," she answers enthusiastically, flopping back onto your lap while kicking her feet up over the armrest. Staring down at her smug face, you fight the urge but eventually cave, running your hand through her headfeathers.

"Oh man, these *are* fluffy. Do you use that, uh... special feather shampoo stuff that's real gooey?"

Her eyes widen ever so slightly. "Something like that, yeah. Why?"

"Because that shit almost ripped my hair out when I tried it over at Chica's."

She cackles, stomach rising and falling in time to her laughter. "Oh, wow, you poor thing," she sputters. "Didn't she warn you?"

"Nah. I guess it's -- well, it's probably not anything she'd really think about, y'know?" You smile in spite of yourself, remembering your shower escapade. "I used hers because she offered it to me after I first moved in, since I didn't have any of my own."

Foxy gets up from his chair and shuffles over to the DVD rack, pulling titles off the shelf seemingly at random. You ponder asking him if he wants to watch a movie until you realize he's using the cases like building blocks. Cheeky glances over at him, then turns her head back to meet your gaze with a sigh.

"Sorry, Mike," she whispers in realization. "He gets like this some days. Best just to let him work it out of his system."

"Oh, it's fine," you reply. "Nothing that can't be sorted again later on."

Bonworth interrupts your conversation with a guffaw as yet another contestant attempts singing off-key only to be vetoed by the entire panel of judges instantaneously.

"Goodness' sakes," he chuckles after composing himself, rubbing tears from his baggy eyes. "Based on the quality of these folks, we should try out for this show. I bet one of us would become quite the star."

You briefly consider calling in and attempting to bill yourself out as a real, live human to see if the concept would sell before ultimately deciding against it, realizing the ramifications would far outweigh any potential benefits you'd receive.

"No way anybody would buy me being up there," you laugh. "They'd be like 'who's this dancing monkey trying to fool?' and boo me off the stage."

"Awwww. Don't let what I said yesterday get to ya!" Slapping your shoulder, Bonworth grins at you. "You're a swell feller, and you've got some real hidden depths to you, Mike."

"I thought we weren't talking about that business again?" you respond, trying to ignore the stinging sensation.

"Hah, well you got me there!"

"Y'know, Mikey. I had you all pegged wrong at first," Cheeky affirms. "Now that I've gotten to know you better, I'm gonna have to redouble my efforts."

Blushing, you fiddle with the fringe on the throw pillow Cheeky's currently occupying. "Nah, you probably had me pegged pretty well. I'm sorry for coming across as, you know, an ass. I appreciate you taking me in spur-of-the-moment, too."

"It's what friends do. 'Course, if you're really broken up about it, I'll let you make it up to me."

You snort. "I'll bet you will."

The three of you watch TV together for a while, giggling at the shameless glory seekers and marveling at the rare performers who are clearly destined for bigger things. Eventually fatigue gets the better of you, however, so you gently ease out from under Cheeky's head and haul yourself to your feet. She doesn't look far off from needing to sleep herself, seemingly drifting between consciousness and slumber.

"Takin' off for the night, Mike?" Bonworth quietly asks.

"Probably so. I only ended up getting a few hours of sleep last night, and I think my body's trying to protest."

"Wager that's a good idea," he replies. "I'll make the rounds with the last of Faz's pills for the evenin' and call it quits too."

"You sure? I don't mind taking them to him," you offer.

He scratches one of his ears. "Naw. You've done so much already for today. Thanks for stepping up and pitching in, Mike."

You start to reply, but the sound of plastic crashing behind you causes you both to turn back and look at Foxy, who's currently half-buried under a pile of movies.

Cheeky yelps, eyes snapping open. "What? Whoa, what? Everything good?" she inquires, looking around for the source of the noise.

Foxy's muzzle pokes out from underneath a stack of spaghetti westerns.

"Fire on the mains. Looks like a... drop," he rambles, equally disoriented. "High noon."

You carefully free him from his self-inflicted prison. "All right, sailor. You feel like escorting me back to the, er... barracks?"

"That's for soldiers," Bonworth corrects. "You want a berth."

"Ah, of course," you reply. Foxy seems to get most of your meaning, though, and nods sleepily, clutching at your sleeve with his good paw.

"Aye, mate. C'mon, let's get to it."

"He takes armed escort duty seriously, I see," you call over your shoulder to Cheeky and Bonworth, who watch from the living room with amused grins as Foxy half-drags you towards the hall.

"Night, guys."

"G'night, Mike," they reply in almost perfect unison before sharing a tired laugh.

After reminding Foxy twice to brush his teeth, you slip on your flannels in preparation for some much-needed shuteye. Rather uncharacteristically, Foxy drags his blanket from his closet and carefully climbs into the bed next to the one you've claimed. You help him spread the soft purple blanket out neatly over himself, taking great caution to not snag his hook on the delicate fabric.

"Sleeping out here tonight?" you ask.

Propping his chin up with his good paw, he considers you thoughtfully. "Aye. How 'bout a tale before lights-out?"

"Sure." You figure you'll humor him. "Got any good pirate stories?"

"All th' best tales got pirates in them," he insists earnestly.

"Ah, what was I thinking," you dryly reply, sitting up in bed. "What've you got for me, then?"

"I remember it as if t'were yesterday," he begins, paw and hook spread apart in front of his face as if to frame a scene. "The waters were clear, clear an' still, like a new mirror. Nary a ripple from our vessel as it coasted along in the calm o' the night. Skipper wanted nothin' more than for us t' be able t' pack it in for the night, but our orders were resolute. We'd earn our wage proper an' see our cargo delivered before th' morn, an' so we pressed ahead thusly."

"What kind of cargo were you guys running?" you ask, a smile playing at your lips.

Foxy balls up his fist, and even his hook twitches a little under the tightening of his muscles. He ponders your question for a moment, and you fear you've already sidetracked him. After a few seconds, he replies evenly.

"Th' cargo itself be fragile an' delicate; a mysterious, small box with a spider's web of deftly-woven bits o' metal strings, blown glass an' other such. Couldn't rightly say, I wasn't th' wench who knew how it'd all be fit together. To a sailor like me, it was but one more crate t'be ferried along." He clenches his teeth, growling. "Our buyer now, the *wretched bilge rat*, be temperamental an' fickle as a woman scorned, with beady eyes of black glass an' a smile tight and cruel as the devil's own. A fiend's fiend, no friend of mine nor anyone's."

You put on an angry face for his benefit. "This guy sounds like a *real* piece of work."

"Aye," Foxy replies animatedly. "He be no more than th' trash who paid our wage and kept our pint glasses topped up. Skipper saw somethin' in him, though, an' t'his day I *still* wonder what it be."

Slamming his hook down on the nightstand next to his bed, he swallows loudly before continuing.

"They said to me, they said '*Haddock*, ye're the best man for this job,' an' I knew in my heart it was right and true. Only I was capable o' sailin' the ship through th' waters, them still waters that every man aboard knew were lyin' to us. Well, that stillness was as deceitful as th' man what paid us to sail across it."

"The calm before the storm?" you ask.

"Tha's right, lad. We all knew it well to be th' calm afore th' storm."

Foxy breathes deeply. You look down at yourself, realizing you're clutching your blanket, eager for his next words. When'd you get so into this?

"Th' shark appeared, and a hungry shark he was. Discontent in his bones, an' malice in his lifeblood. Those cold, dead eyes piercin' your very soul. Teeth sharper than any blade, well-hewn in their construct. Set in rows o' two like crescent moons. They were a demon's fangs, fittin' in the benefit of hindsight."

You've never seen him this together, this *alive*. Ordinarily, his pirate stories branch off whenever he gets distracted, but this -- this almost seems practiced. Rehearsed, as if he's reading from a script. No stuttering, no faltering of speech or rambling segues. You're silently kicking yourself for not owning a smartphone so that you could film this moment.

He smooths his blanket out with his paw. "Still as a statue, th' demon shark did lay. Fin of his pokin' out of every nook and cranny. But ol' Haddock had a job t'see done, an' no shark could get in me way." Closing his eyes, he exhales softly. "Fingers quick as quick could be, I moved t'plant th' cargo in the agreed-upon drop spot for our finicky client, seein' fit to swiftly retreat before I became that shark's supper."

"And then what happened?" you eagerly reply, instantly kicking yourself even as you do for potentially derailing his train of thought. He slowly turns, staring at you with his mouth wide open, and you hold your breath, wondering if he's already "reset".

With a terrific loud crunch, he snaps his maw shut like a mousetrap.

You leap back, startled, while Foxy chuckles at your plight, seemingly quite pleased with himself for getting such a rise out of you.

"What happened was, I learned it ain't th' shark you have to keep a lookout for, lad. It's the one pourin' blood out on the water in th' first place."

Blinking a few times, you laugh in spite of yourself, pulling your blanket close to your chest. "Okay, so were you able to sail the ship on through or did you get eaten up by the shark?"

Foxy grins wryly. "If I were a bad sailor, I wouldn't be sittin' here discussin' it with ye now, would I?"

"I suppose not. Pretty tall tale," you muse.

"Aye, indeed. Maybe not as tall as ye *think*, lad."

You lay back in your bed, and a few seconds later, you hear Foxy shuffling around in his own.

"G'night, Foxy," you murmur, succumbing to slumber.

"It was about six years ago, I think."

Snapping back to a coherent state, you glance around the room.

"Hmmm?" you sleepily inquire. "Did you say something, Foxy?"

In the dim illumination from the rum-barrel clock, you see a tiny metal hook raised toward the ceiling.

Foxy's tone is dull and low. Even his pirate-esque lilt's gone -- all that's left is his natural speaking voice, plain as your own.

"My first day at sea was... it changed my life. It was a tiny little merchant vessel, a real rust-bucket. Cramped quarters, real tight. You had to keep your head tucked down low -- even someone my size. And everything smelled like brine and iron and dead fish. But when I stepped out into the misty, morning air, and the salt hit my nose for the first time, I knew right then and there in my heart that it was the life I'd always wanted."

By now you're fully alert, watching him with quiet, rapt attention.

"But it was the night that really changed me. The sheets were threadbare, and the mattress wasn't much more than a piece of cheap foam. It was mid-spring, and cool, but me, I still had my winter coat. The waves were quiet outside, swaying our little tin can. My bed was by a porthole. That time of night, I couldn't see much -- just the moonlight, pale as bone, shimmering on the waters."

He shifts a little in his bed, spreading his arms wide as if waiting for an embrace. You listen with bated breath, hanging on his every word. You aren't sure if it's a dream or reality but right now, you couldn't care less. This is a once-in-a-lifetime moment.

"I was there for a long time. Not sleeping. Not even thinking much. Just feeling the waves roll gently along under me, cradling the boat. Right then, I was a part of the sea. Held in the arms of the ocean. Real calm. And then I just felt myself drifting off, rocked to sleep by the world itself."

Soft rustling. Foxy rolls over in his bed, muzzle pointed towards the door. You're glad he can't see you from here.

"They say that's what it's like to die, and I hope they're right. Makes it easier to think about."

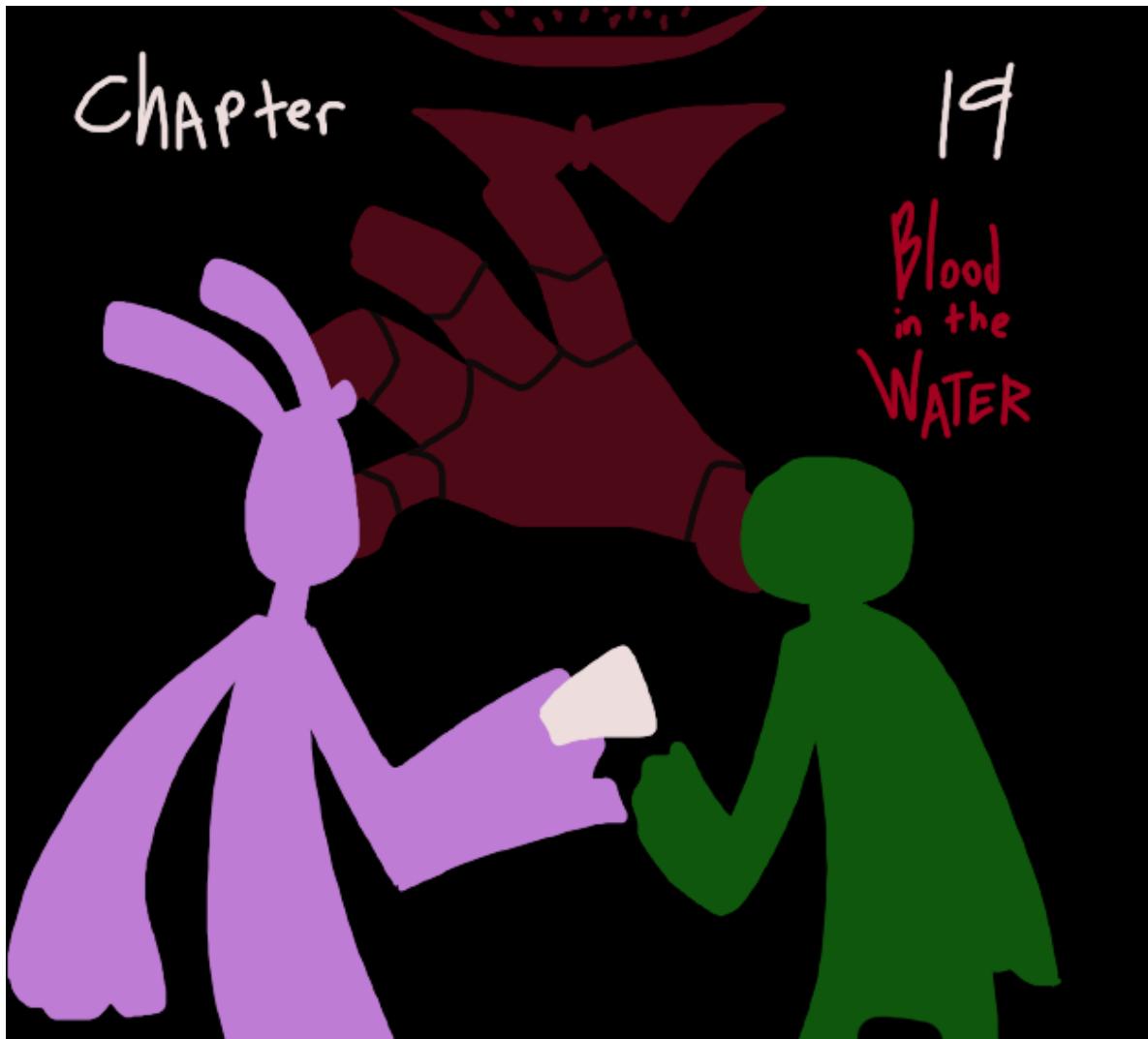
You can't quite seem to swallow. You're aware of something wet on your cheeks and a burning sensation in your nose.

"I miss it, Mike."

# Blood in the Water

## Chapter Summary

There's a coppery taste in the air.



It's six in the morning when you wake from your slumber once more. Foxy's still asleep. You shift to a sitting position and stare at the rise and fall of his chest for a while, contemplating last night's conversation with him.

*Rocked to sleep by the world itself, huh.*

You've never heard Foxy tell a coherent story, let alone two back-to-back. If there's anything you gleaned from his lucid moment last night, it's that his love of the sea isn't just a childlike infatuation.

Your gaze drifts to the pirate "treasures" scattered around his room, most of which are just flimsy plastic toys, about the quality of those poorly-made prizes one would receive at an amusement park or carnival. Perhaps for the first time, you realize that it's not at all the same as how some little kids are into race cars and others are all about fire trucks. The pirate thing isn't just Foxy's infantile bedroom decor, it's who he is.

Who he *was*.

There's still just so much you don't know about the inhabitants of this apartment complex, but you're beginning to realize that everyone you meet has a story of their own to tell, some far more tragic than others. Thinking back to your own apartment, their plight feels almost trivial when compared to looming monsters like cancer, brain damage, amputation, and punctured lungs. And yet still, *your* situation seems like nothing compared to Chiclet or even Mangle -- let alone anyone here.

Still, it's not too late to help turn things around. You finally feel like you've got a purpose. Clearly, fate has brought you into the lives of these bizarre animal people to make a difference.

Somberly, slowly, you make your way out of Foxy's bedroom, moving with quiet purpose so that you don't wake him as you head into the hall bath to begin your morning routine. After cleaning yourself up, you immediately head for the kitchen to begin prepping breakfast. You figure you'll start small and work your way up. Once everybody's been fed, then you can see about tackling the day's bigger issues.

As you click the kitchen light on, you notice that Cheeky's up considerably early, which seems somewhat unlike her. She stirs from the sofa as you flood the house with ambient light.

"Morning," you call out softly. "How you doing?"

"Oh, hey, Mike," she says, rubbing her baggy eyes. "Didn't get much sleep last night."

"No? You weren't feeling well, or...?"

She slowly ambles into the kitchen. "Nah. Stomach pains all night. No matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't seem to get comfortable."

"Hell, that sounds miserable. I'm sorry to hear it," you reply, gently hugging her. "Anything I can do?"

Cheeky shakes her head, leaning her weight against you. "You're doin' it."

With a nod, you begin gently rubbing her shoulders. She slumps into your arms, almost purring.

"Wow, that feels good. Don't stop," she instructs. "But also, you know, make me some pancakes or somethin' too. You look like a multitasker."

You laugh. "Yeah, not unless you want to be cleaning pancake batter out of your feathers. I'm not even close to that level of coordinated."

"Aw, darn. And you were so close to the perfect man, too," Cheeky says, stretching.

"Oh, please," you scoff, opening the cabinets to begin breakfast prep.

Rather than retreating back to the living room, Cheeky lingers in the kitchen for a while, half-propping herself on the countertop island to watch you work. You quietly whisk the pancake batter, letting your mind wander back to yesterday's events, and before you even realize it, you find yourself talking aloud.

"Foxy told me a story last night."

Cheeky sleepily rolls one of the uncracked eggs back and forth on the counter.

"He does love to tell his pirate stories," she yawns. "Well, he tries, anyway. Most of the time they don't make any sense, but you know, we humor him."

Pouring the batter onto the griddle, you shake your head.

"This one was different. He was really lucid. None of the pirate stuff, no silly voices, no banter."

Her interest visibly piques as the egg nearly rolls off the counter. You deftly catch it before it can hit the floor, placing it back in the glass bowl it came from.

"Lucid, huh? That's pretty rare for him. Usually he's kind of like he was at dinner last night -- struggling, y'know, fighting just to get a sentence across. What'd he say?"

"It wasn't actually a story so much as, um... kind of like a memory, now that I think about it. He told me about his first time at sea," you answer. "About the little merchant boat he was on, and the tiny little cabin with the foam mattresses and the thin blankets. He talked a lot about the smell of the sea salt in the air, and the waves, and how it felt like he was being rocked to sleep."

She stares at you, her expression unreadable.

"And he said that he thought it might be nice to d-- to pass away like that," you reply. You wipe your eyes on the back of your shirt sleeve, turning away from her to flip the pancakes over on the griddle. After a second, you sniff and give her a lopsided smile. "Yeah, I know. It's probably one you've heard a million times before, but the way he told it, his mannerisms, his demeanor -- it was heavy, honest stuff."

You fumble with the spatula, feeling very self-conscious for having blurted out the details of such an intimate moment.

"I, uh... I could tell it was just a good memory for him. He-- he really loves the water, huh?"

Cheeky swallows audibly as she brings herself to standing.

"Foxy's never been to sea," she finally says, her tone wary.

"What are you talking about?" you ask, incredulous. "He told me all about it, clear as a bell. He described it all in painstaking detail. Believe me, it wasn't just one of his rants."

She gently takes the spatula from your hand and slides the pancakes off the griddle before they burn to a crisp.

"Mike, Foxy's from *Idaho*. I don't think he's ever gone on so much as a fishing trip, let alone out to sea. Hell, I'm like 99% positive he's never even *been* on a real boat."

Your jaw hangs loose.

"It's a nice story, Mike, and I... really wish I could have been there to hear it, but it's just that: a story." She scoops another glob of batter onto the griddle, pressing the spatula back into your hands. "Nothing more."

"Cheeky, I don't -- look, this was none of his, his weird pirate stuff, okay? And believe me, I can tell the difference. He'd just come off of some outlandish tale about running cargo for a black-eyed demon, and sharks smelling blood in the water," you sputter.

"Oh, that one I *have* heard a million times. And it's not all *that* outlandish," she murmurs with a half-hearted smile.

You roll your eyes. "C'mon. Be serious, Cheeky."

She draws a sharp breath, rubbing her belly with a wince. "I am. I remember when it happened."

It's your turn to stare at her in wary confusion. "What?"

"Anyway, Bonnie's known him the longest out of all of us, so only he'd really know for sure if Foxy's telling the truth about going to sea or not," she says, changing the subject. "I mean, yeah, sure. Maybe the story's 'real' in that Foxy could be remembering something that was told to him, like maybe by a relative or a friend that was in the Navy or something. Maybe something he read as a kid, or saw on TV. Or maybe he just imagined it enough that he convinced himself."

Deflated, you turn your attention back to the griddle.

"It just -- it seemed so real. I find it hard to believe he made the whole thing up."

Cheeky plucks one of the half-burnt pancakes off the stack, sniffs it, and begins chewing it dry.

"Well... I believe it was real to him."

"Another ace breakfast, Mike," Bonworth says, looking around the room anxiously.

It's probably the third or fourth time he's attempted to make small talk, but between Cheeky being exhausted and you being in a funk, neither of you are much for conversation at the moment.

"Should probably go and see if Faz is ready to get up," you mumble lethargically. "Foxy too, I guess. He was still asleep when I woke up."

"His schedule does tend to be on the erratic side," Bonworth adds.

Cheeky pushes her empty plate onto the armrest of her chair before flopping her head in Bonworth's general direction. "Bon."

He sips at his coffee. "Yes ma'am?"

"Has Foxy ever been on the water? You know, like out to sea?"

Bonworth crinkles his nose a little. He sets his coffee mug on the empty portion of his plate and shifts to look at her.

"You know he ain't been, Chica," he says, tugging at one of his ears. "He always wanted to go sailin', before -- well, y'know. Why do you ask?"

"Because of something Foxy said to me last night," you interject, sounding a bit more moody than you intended and immediately regretting it. You offer Bonworth the most sincere-looking smile you can muster at this point in time, which probably comes off as more of a smirk than anything else. "Ah, don't worry about it. It's not important."

"Another one of his pirate yarns?" he asks, buttoning up his waistcoat.

"Something like that."

Bonworth moves to collect the plates, but you quickly gather them before he can get out of his chair. He exchanges a glance with Cheeky, who raises an eyebrow but remains quiet.

"Listen, Mike, I just want to let you know we really appreciate everything you've been doing around here, what with you slaving away over the stove, taking care of Faz and Foxy and just -- well, just everything, I guess."

"It's not a problem," you insist, loading the dishwasher. "So, uh -- what time do you have to head to the front desk today?"

Bonworth gratefully pulls a memo pad from his pocket and begins writing down a list of things for you to do.

"Earlier than yesterday, I'm afraid. I hate to leave you with another heapin' helpin' of chores, but Marion's got a lot of work that needs to be done. Are you sure I'm not puttin' too much off on ya, pal?"

You enthusiastically shake your head. "Absolutely not -- however I can help out. Makes me feel good about myself knowing that I'm being useful."

"Man, Chica, we coulda used a guy like this in management!" Bonworth chuckles. "You're a real go-getter, Mike."

"Oh yeah? What did you do, before your, uh..." Your face falls a little in realization. "I'm sorry, that was probably insensitive, wasn't it?"

Bonworth shrugs, tearing the note off the page. "Why's it insensitive? Can't pretend like it didn't happen. Besides, look on the bright side, I've never lost so much weight so fast!" he responds with an awkward grin, rapping his completely metallic leg with his mostly metallic paw. "To answer your question, I was in foodservice. Started as a busboy, worked my way up to assistant manager!"

Thinking back to your conversation outside the other day, something occurs to you.

"Wait, you and Foxy worked together, right? How did he get hurt if it wasn't the safe?"

Bonworth cringes, hesitating halfway through handing you the chore list, the note crumpling involuntarily in his oversized paw.

"Too much blood in the water," he murmurs, his tone low and devoid of his usual pep. After a few seconds, he glances up, snapping back to the present. "Ah, sorry. Well, we worked at a place that tried to offer -- let's call it dinner and a show? A little food, a little entertainment. You know, for kids."

"Right," you reply.

"A lot of the equipment we had to work with was a mite temperamental."

"Oh please! 'Temperamental'? You've been off the clock long enough, you can stop using the handbook's terms!" Cheeky snaps hotly. "Half that shit needed to be condemned, and I would know -- I was the one that did most of the maintenance work on it!"

"N-now Chica," Bonworth says, wagging a finger and attempting to assume an air of authority, "we've talked about this. Could you please cool it with the profanity?"

"Yeah, whatever," she huffs, hackles quite literally raised.

Blood in the water, huh. You've heard that one before.

"So the three of you worked together, then?" you ask.

"Yes and no," Cheeky says, smoothing her ruffled feathers back into place. "Technically, I wasn't an employee at the restaurant proper, but I was hired on as a mechanic, trained by corporate to do maintenance for various locations. I got to travel a lot, so that was cool, I guess."

"But she *was* sort-of a regular at the restaurant. And so was Faz," Bonworth clarifies.

"No kidding!" you reply. "Small world, huh."

"You ain't kidding, pal," he laughs. "That's why I was real keen when we were all able to, y'know -- be together, here. One big happy family."

"So the four of you have a bit of history then," you reply. "That's pretty cool, I guess. Makes sense why Marion put you all together. Better than moving in with complete strangers, right?"

"Aw, complete strangers aren't that bad, Mike! I mean, we got you, didn't we?" Bonworth says with a lopsided grin.

You chuckle. "Hey, I could be a complete whacko."

Side-eyeing you, Cheeky snorts. "Well, if you're a crazy psycho-killer, at least I'll die with a stomach full of fresh pancakes."

Finishing up in the kitchen, you wipe your hands on a towel and head back to the living room.

"So what'd Faz do, if you don't mind me asking? Was he a mechanic as well? He mentioned his accident had something to do with a machine of some kind and now that I think on it, he used the term 'temperamental' as well."

Bonworth and Cheeky exchange uneasy glances.

"Faz was kind of a jack-of-all-trades, but he had a showman's heart," Bonworth says, somewhat guardedly. "We'd do stage shows, kinda. For the kids, singing and dancing. I used to play the banjo, Faz would sing."

You give him an approving grin. "Banjo, huh? Somehow I don't have any trouble seeing it."

His eyes light up a little. "Yeah, I was a real 'picker' back in the day! Course, my fingers just aren't what they used to be. I can still play, just gotta do it slower."

"Yeah, I used to sing too whenever I'd stop by," Cheeky says softly. "Every now and again we'd all hop up on the stage and just kinda putz around, singing oldies, show tunes... just whatever came to mind."

"The little ones loved it," Bonworth mumbles, lost in the memory. "And I think we did too, more'n we care to admit."

"Yeah, for sure. Good times," Cheeky says, her tone bittersweet.

"That's an awful shame that Faz lost his voice, and... well, everything else," you add softly. "For a singer I imagine that has to be just, you know, like your own personal hell, I guess."

Neither Cheeky nor Bonworth bite at your conversation hook, both looking more than a little uncomfortable. You decide that it's probably best to change the subject.

"As long as I'm prying, I gotta ask. Cheeky, did you work with Chiclet? I noticed a picture of her while I was over at the other apartment. She was dressed up in coveralls, I think. Oh, and she had a tool kit. Looked like she was at an arcade."

"Nah, just a coincidence." Cheeky scratches her stomach. "To tell the truth, I don't actually know Chiclet very well. She kinda keeps to her own brood over there. You'd be surprised to find out we're not the social butterflies we pretend to be."

Seemingly just now remembering the list -- or perhaps looking for an out -- Bonworth finally foists the crumpled paper into your hand.

"Sorry about the, um... if you need me to write you out a new one on account of my smudged writin', I can," he says.

"Nah, it can't be worse than any of my own chicken scratches," you respond.

"*Chicken scratches?!*" Cheeky raises an eyebrow. "What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"Err -- sorry, slip of the tongue," you hastily amend. "So basically same stuff as yesterday, Bonworth?"

"You bet! I'll see if I can't cut out a little early today so you don't have to take care of everything by yourself, Mike," Bonworth replies as he heads for the front door.

"It's all good," you affirm. "Go be a hero, Bonworth. We've got the fort held down here."

"Aw, shucks. I surely do appreciate it," he says. "Guess I'll see you fellas later!"

You've never been much of one for procrastination, so when Bonworth leaves for the morning, you waste no time getting to work on the chore list. You begin by waking the others to get their own morning routine started; after a brief internal debate, you decide you might as well start with Foxy.

On the upside, Foxy does seem like he's doing a lot better this morning than he was at dinner last night, but on the downside all traces of his lucidity are gone. Most of his replies to you are just grunts or one-word dismissals, so you help him get cleaned up and then placate him with some breakfast.

After helping a sleepy Faz into the shower, and then cleaning and rebandaging his wounds once he's out, you give him his morning medications, a bear-sized mug of coffee, and the remainder of the leftovers from breakfast -- which turns out to be a fairly sizable plate of food. With a grateful nod, he begins eating as Cheeky tunes into the morning news for him.

Bonworth's list is much the same as yesterday's with a handful of trivial additions -- mostly some minor household concerns such as taking care of laundry, changing linens, and cleaning the bathroom. Working diligently, you have everything on the list (apart from time-sensitive medications) knocked out shortly before eleven.

In the silence that follows, you enjoy a brief break to check up on everybody again, then decide to take advantage of your free time and head outside for some fresh air. If what you keep hearing about last year's "big freeze" is true, you're not sure you'll be able to go out much when winter's in full force. Might as well get while the getting is good.

"I'm gonna step out for a bit," you tell Cheeky, slipping your coat on. "Just going to clear my head and stretch my legs."

"Oh, all right," she says. "Don't be too long. I'm lookin' forward to lunch."

"Aye," Foxy pipes up. "Flapperjacks an' cold cereal carry a rugged sailin' man only so many scores and seven years ago."

"Lunchtime already?" you joke. "Didn't I just make you guys breakfast *only* four hours ago? Don't tell me you expect to eat twice in one day!"

Cheeky playfully narrows her eyes, resting her wings on her ample hips.

"You know what happens to someone who messes with a hungry hen, right, Mike?"

You pause halfway through buttoning up your coat. "Can't say I do, Cheeky."

She makes a show of licking her beak, and for once, it's not in a seductive manner.

"Of course you haven't. That's because nobody survives long enough to tell the tale."

You glance at Faz, who slowly reaches a paw to his throat without turning his gaze from the news. "She's not kidding," he drones.

"I'll, ah, take that under advisement," you reply, tensely shuffling closer to the front door.

Cheeky flashes you a wicked smile. "See that you do."

Once you're out in the courtyard, you breathe deeply, savoring the cool air. You begin strolling around the complex without any real aim or purpose, appreciating the opportunity to have some time to yourself, even if it's just for a little while. Gazing out at Building 8, you idly wonder how "Chiclet's brood" is doing, as Cheeky so eloquently put it. It's only been a few days since you moved out, and while you have grown rather attached to your new friends at 93-B, you do find yourself longing for familiar territory again.

You are a little tempted to go by and knock on the door to say hello, but helping out with Faz and Foxy has given you a greater appreciation for what they must be going through with April right now. You imagine Chiclet's probably overwrought having to juggle both April and Bonnibel, seeing as how she likely doesn't have much experience dealing with someone requiring the special care April needs. It's best if you just give them some time to adjust.

Pausing for a second, you ponder something. When did you start thinking of her as "Chiclet" and not "Chica"? You suppose it technically *is* her name, and as long as you don't call her Chiclet to her face, you should be golden.

As usual, the apartment complex is fairly quiet this time of day. Every here and there you catch sight of other tenants, but for the most part it doesn't seem to be much of a lively community. But after a little walking, you double-take at a nearby window -- a familiar-looking pink and white fox with messy makeup pokes a head out of a downstairs window in Building 8, tending to a small collection of colorful flowers.

"Mangle?" you shout from across the street.

"Oh, good morning," she calls out in a cheerful, sing-song voice as you pass by.

Approaching the window, you realize your mistake -- though this vixen is superficially similar to Mangle, she's clearly an entirely different fox. Dipping your head politely, you greet her.



"Hi! Sorry, I thought you were someone else. Those are some pretty flowers you have! What kind are they?"

"Mmm. *Foxglove*," the fox murmurs. "These here are called snapdragons. They grow well even in the winter, as long as it isn't freezing. You can tell there's a warmth to every fold of these... delicate petals." She's stroking the flower now.

You rub your chin, leaning in to examine them.

"No kidding! I heard there was a pretty bad freeze last year, though. I'm new to the area, so I wasn't here for it."

She sniffs at you, nodding. "I can smell it on you. You must be Mike, right?"

You flinch slightly. Smell? What?

"I see my reputation precedes me," you nervously chuckle, extending your hand to her for a handshake. "At least, I'm hoping it's my reputation and not some kind of odor."

Without releasing the flower, she pokes a paw out to grip yours in a delicate, ladylike shake.

"Bonbon spoke highly of you, and now I can definitely see what she 'sees' in you. You're very much within her... *preferences*."

You subconsciously back away from the window a half-step. "Is that so," you reply, voice breaking just a touch.

Tittering, she bats her eyelashes at you. "Oh, I guarantee it. My name is *Mangifera*, but please... call me Mango."

So this is the other 'Mangle' that lives below you. That makes sense, because you recognize the unusual curtains from when you were in Bonbon's apartment the other day.

"Nice meeting you, Mango," you reply. "Tell Bonbon I said hello."

"Oh, it's nice... meeting you too," she giggles, blowing you a kiss. "Don't be a stranger. We take care of our own around here!"

You can still hear her "tee hee hee"-ing as you walk away.

Trotting along for a while, you find yourself enjoying the change of scenery more than anything else. Eventually, you make it to the end of the apartment complex, arriving at the cul-de-sac near Building 12.

As you turn around to begin heading back, the sound of a small motor behind you draws your attention. Looking up, you notice a familiar-looking golf cart puttering down the road, its sole wiry, bespectacled occupant nervously clutching the steering wheel with spindly fingers. Seeing you ahead, Marion pulls the cart off to the curb and offers you a timid wave.

"Oh, Mr. Schmidt," he says. "May I trouble you for a moment of your time?"

"Sure thing, Mr. Marion," you reply. "Oh, sorry -- I never did catch whether that's your first or last name."

"Oh, it's my only name. We don't have surnames. My culture believes that each individual should forge their own identity. Taking on the burden of the name of someone who came before you is like wearing their mask, so to speak."

You tilt your head. "Interesting." You're not really sure you get what he means, but that's not really a new feeling for you by now.

"Mmm, I suppose," he mumbles, adjusting his glasses. "I just wanted to apologize to you about the, er, mixup. Ms. May is a client with extremely special needs, and all of our furnished apartments are currently leased or undergoing renovations."

"No harm done, I guess. I've been over at 93-B right now with Bonworth. They're housing me temporarily."

Marion claps his thin hands together, making a slight "splat" sound.

"I'm relieved to hear that you were able to seek alternative arrangements. We could have moved her into one of the empty apartments, but with no furnishings available and no utilities for potentially days, it wouldn't have made for a very pleasant stay for her. You're a gentleman, Mr. Schmidt."

You laugh. "I don't know about that, but everyone in 93-B has been pleasant," you inform him. "I can't say as I have any real, you know, complaints. Actually, I've sort of considered staying on with them -- at least for a while, if they'll have me. We seem to get along well."

"Oh, how curious!" he exclaims. "I'm certainly glad to find out the dark cloud had a silver lining."

There's a sort of awkward lull in the conversation where both of you seem to be struggling for anything else to say.

"I remember what I wanted to ask -- how's Bonworth been working out for you?" you inquire.

"Ah, yes! I do certainly admire Mr. Rabbinson's work ethic. He's a surprisingly proficient typist, despite his digital bluntness, and quite the people person, really. Jeremy's certainly trained him well for managerial duties," Marion answers.

"Jeremy?" you echo confusedly.

Before he can reply, the tinny sound of a music box tune interrupts him. Marion fishes around in his pocket and pulls out a smartphone in a battered, faded white case.

"Oh, when it rains, it pours," he gasps. "One of our tenants reported a pipe has burst in Building 11! I'm sorry, but I must go -- I need to go assess the damages."

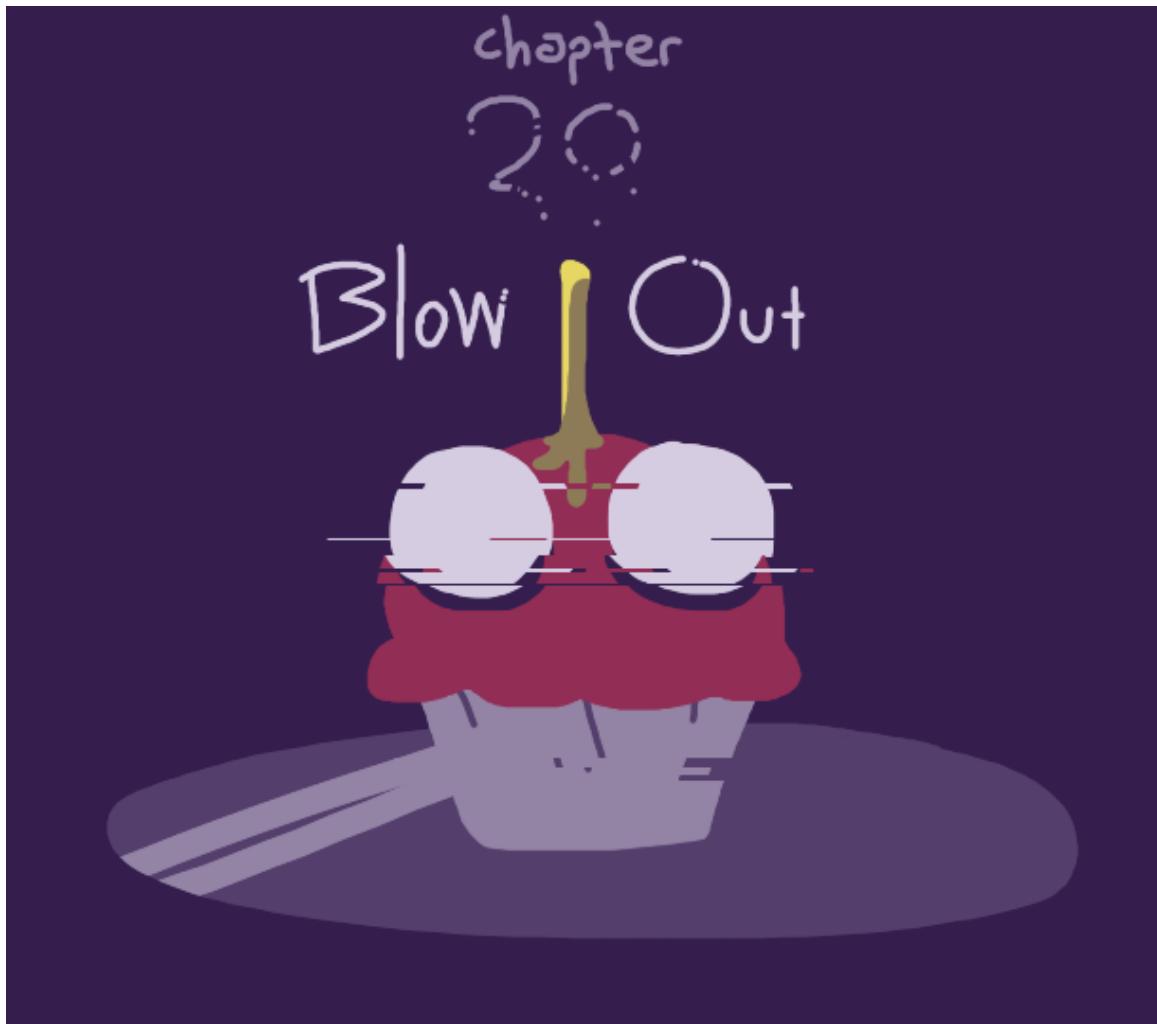
As he speeds off in his cart, you scratch the back of your head.

"Who the hell is Jeremy?" you mumble to yourself.

## Blow Out

### Chapter Summary

Hey, kids! Are you hungry for some delicious pizza?



The front door swings open and Bonworth pads inside, arms loaded down with two large paper sacks full of food.

"Hey, fellas! I'm finally back," he announces. "How's tricks?"

"Never thought you'd get home, Bon," Cheeky gripes good-naturedly from beside you on the sofa.  
"We've been waiting on you to start dinner."

"Well, I'm sure sorry to keep everyone waitin', but the good news is I've got dinner wrapped up -- quite literally, I might add! Picked up some honey mustard and some southwest this time, so y'all can pick what you like best. Mike, can you give me a bit of help here?"

"On it," you reply as you haul yourself to your feet, sneaking a look up at the wall clock hanging above the television -- it's half past six. "Marion ended up keeping you late after all, huh?"

"Had an awful mess in one of the other buildings today," he says, probably referring to the emergency text Marion got while you were talking to him. "He had to temporarily put another family outta house and home, so if it's any consolation you're not the only one out of your comfort zone at the moment."

"Honestly, I should be counting my lucky stars. I'd so much rather be here hanging out with you guys than freezing my ass off in a cardboard box," you quip, helping him with his payload so he can close the front door.

Bonworth grins bashfully. "Whillikers! I'm all too happy to help out a friend, Mike. I sure can't thank you enough for holdin' down the fort while I'm away." Eyeing his crew in the living room, he follows you into the kitchen. "Say, gang, has ol' Mike here been makin' the cut as a caretaker?"

Faz grunts noncommittally, still fixated on a wildlife documentary on the television, while Foxy jerks his head up and down in an almost avian fashion.

"The lad be doooiiinn' a f-fine job. I can't recall when th' last t'was I saw th' c-c-cabin in suuuuuch a staaate." He fumbles his hook around, lost in thought. "And there don't even be any b-barnacles on th' latriiinne."

"Thank heavens for that," Cheeky deadpans, "because if I see any barnacles on the porcelain throne I'm out. That'll be it -- that's where Cheeky draws the line."

"Fortunately this is, in fact, a barnacle-free environment," you declare. "I'm at least 90% certain of it."

"I don't like those odds," the hen mumbles, brow furrowed.

Setting the paper bags on the kitchen counter, you nod to Bonworth, who begins unpacking what appears to be your group's dinner.

"So while I was out on a walk this afternoon, I bumped into our landlord today," you comment.

"Is that a fact? What'd ol' Marion have to say?" Bonworth asks jovially, pulling several wrapped sub sandwiches out of one of the bags. "Oh, can you pop these in the toaster oven to crisp 'em up right quick?"

"Sure thing," you answer, doing as instructed. "But, uh, yeah -- he apologized for the inconvenience of moving the new tenant in on Chiclet, which was big of him. He also sounds like he's pretty grateful to have someone, y'know, competent helping out up front."

"He said that?" Bonworth says, blushing as he discards the crumpled-up sandwich wrappers in the kitchen bin. "Well shucks, it's nice to be appreciated, I suppose!"

"You must be doing something right, since he seems really impressed with you. He mentioned you were trained for managerial work by, uh, what was his name..." Oh, it's on the tip of your tongue. "Jerry, Gerald...? Johnny? Something like that. Name ring any bells?"

Bonworth hunches over with some effort, turning his attention to the refrigerator for condiments.

"Hello? Earth to Bonworth?" you prompt.

"Was that all he said?" Bonworth asks flatly.

"Um, yeah, mostly," you reply, scratching your head. "We made a little small talk and then he got a text about having to go check on a pipe bursting--"

"Good," he interrupts with a tight-lipped smile. "I mean, y'know, that's good an' all that you two got to talk cordial-like, and not, y'know, good about the pipe."

"I'm glad I got the chance to talk with him again. To be honest, I think I've kind of had Marion pegged wrong this entire time, you know?" You smile wistfully, thinking back to your first day here and Marion's blatant discomfort around you. "Something I, uh, seem to be making a habit of."

"Oh, c'mon now, Mike," he chuckles.

"But yeah, that's a real shame about the burst pipe," you continue, "both for Marion *and* for the family that got displaced. Right here at the start of winter and with the holidays not far off."

At least you're only a single guy with a couple of pieces of luggage to your name, so in the long run you suppose you haven't really been all that inconvenienced. Your heart sinks a little at the thought of multiple people being ushered into a foreign apartment, potentially even having lost some of their meager possessions to water damage. This isn't exactly an affluent neighborhood.

"I hear ya. Those poor folks. I should probably go check up on 'em again tomorrow, maybe take them some cookies or something," Bonworth replies, ears drooping a little. Before you can answer, the toaster oven beeps. "Oop, looks like it's suppertime. Cole slaw or potato salad, Mike?"

You gather an armful of soda cans from the refrigerator while Bonworth slides the tray of sandwiches out of the oven to begin plating.

"Surprise me," you answer.

"Cole slaw, huh?" you observe as you eye your plate. "My favorite."

"Y'know, somehow I could *tell* you were a cole slaw man," Bonworth says, winking.

Cheeky takes a whiff of the toasted sandwich on her plate, eyelashes fluttering girlishly. "Oh, these look great. Let's--"

"Right then, let's eat!" Bonworth announces, clapping his paws as he settles in.

The hefty hen gives her roommate a glare, seething quietly. "Damn it, Bonnie, you're doing it on purpose now."

"Oops! Sorry, Chica."

Cheeky tears into her plastic container of potato salad. "So how was work, Bonnie?" she asks, apparently already over her catchphrase having been yanked away from her; at least she's the type to forgive quickly. "Wow, it's been a while since I've gotten to ask you that, huh?"

Shrugging, Bonworth helps Foxy with the pop tab on his root beer.

"About as fascinating as filin' paperwork and fieldin' calls can be, but I don't mind. It's easy labor I can do while sittin' on my behind, and Marion's the real mellow type which makes for a good manager. How about you, what'd you guys do today?"

"The usual," she replies through a mouthful of food. "Lazed around. Watched TV, saved the world through the eyes of movie superheroes and drugstore cowboys."

"Yeah, I've gotten quite a taste for your world's-- err, for uh... your local programming," you stammer, catching yourself quickly.

"Local programming? I'll have you know this household indulges in *premium* cable channels -- only the finest in reruns and B movies," Cheeky boasts. "Believe me, they don't air stuff half this decent on the local stations anymore."

"I-is that so?" you cough. Fumbling for a topic change in an attempt to divert the weird look she's giving you, your eyes light up. "Oh! And I think I might have made a new friend today."

"Oh, swell! Look at you, you're fitting right into our little community," Bonworth enthuses. "Who's your new pal?"

"Uh... Mango, Bonbon's roommate. Or one of them, I guess. She was pleasant enough, I assume she's 'the other Mangle' I've heard tell of," you reply.

Cheeky rolls her eyes. "Ah, yeah, that loon."

You give her a dubious smirk. "Hey now, that's mean, Cheeky! She's a little peculiar, but she seems nice."

"I dunno, what little contact with her I've had she seems kind of... sleazy." Cheeky wipes some potato salad off the edge of her beak with the back of her wing, then licks it off her feathers.

"I'll take that under advisement," you chuckle. "So Faz, what's this wildlife documentary about?"

"Salmon. Fascinating creatures," he muses, swiping at his dry, chapped lips with his mottled tongue as he speaks. "Also delicious."

For some reason, the thought of Faz fishing near a river amuses you, and you can't help but crack a smile. He might be careworn and in poor condition, but at the end of the day he's still a bear.

The documentary cuts to a commercial break, and a too-enthusiastic male announcer's voice starts blaring through the speakers. At the mere sound of the voice, Foxy's tail fluffs out like a startled cat. He leaps from his chair, rocketing off in the direction of his bedroom.

**"Heeeeeey, kids! Are you hungry for some delicious *pizza*?"** the voice booms as Foxy rounds the corner at the end of the hallway.

"Whoa! Is he all right?" you ask.

"Shit!" Cheeky hisses, whirling to look at Bonworth. "Bonnie, where's the remote?"

Dropping his half-eaten plate on the floor, Bonworth stumbles to a half-standing position, his prosthetic legs almost going out from under him as he tries to prop himself up.

"Workin' on it!" he says as he begins rummaging through his chair's cushions. "Faz, do you see it?"

"**Off,**" Faz rasps, barely audible over the television.

You quickly stoop to collect the spilled food, your back to the screen. "Don't worry, I got it. Ugh, this mustard might stain..." you mutter as Cheeky flips the pillows off the sofa.

The grating commercial continues. "That's right, it's me, Jeremy! I've got all the best classic and new arcade games like *Quack-Man*, *Legend of Bob*, and the brand-new *Dinosaur Laser Adventures* racing game, so tell your parents to bring you downtown to Jeremy Human's or we'll--"

The television clicks off right as you stand up to look at it. "Wait, what? What'd that say about humans there at the end?"

"Not now, Mike," Cheeky says, wings shaking ever so slightly as she clutches the remote.

"No, Cheeky, I wasn't-- I'm not like Bonbon. I was only -- wait, wait! That was the *name*, too! Jeremy! It was on the tip of my tongue."

"I said *not now*," she reiterates a bit more adamantly. "Please, Mike."

You blink a few times, taken aback at her curt reaction. You begin to ask what's got her so flustered, but Bonworth cuts you off.

"A-anyway! How about a movie, what've we got on DVD? Mike, can you make any suggestions?" he asks.

"What was wrong with the documentary we had on?" you ask pointedly. "Weren't you watching that, Faz?"

"Movie sounds good," Faz whispers, not even bothering with his voice controls. "Put on a movie."

You look at the stacks of DVDs on the floor from Foxy's failed attempt at a play fort, then back at your roommates. Bonworth harriedly yanks at his tie while Cheeky slumps onto the sofa, rubbing at her belly. Even Faz's rattling breaths sound a bit more labored than usual.

"What's the matter with all of you?" you ask, setting the plate in your hands aside. "You're acting like you've seen a ghost. Was it me? Did I do something?"

Bonworth softly squeezes your forearm. "No, Mike, could you please just--"

You gently but firmly pry your arm loose from his grip. "No, I can't 'please just'. Things went this way with Mangle before I left 87-B, and I didn't get a chance to properly apologize. So if I've said or done something to offend you, all I'm asking is for you... to tell..." You trail off as something begins to dawn on you.

Pizzeria, arcade... "dinner and a show"?

Bonworth and Cheeky both stare at you hesitantly, and even Faz has craned his head up for a better look at your eyes.

"Wait. Wait a minute," you mumble.

Bonworth's words from this morning echo in your mind -- a little food, a little entertainment. For the kids.

You snap your fingers as the pieces begin to fall into place for you. "That commercial that was on the television just now, Jeremy's... that was where you guys all worked together, wasn't it."

"*Pcheeeeeewww*," Cheeky mouths, wingtips spread wide in a pantomimed explosion.

Bonworth collapses backward into his chair with a groan. "Darn it all."

"Congrats, Mike, you figured it out, we worked at a pizza place," Cheeky says with no small amount of exasperation in her tone. "So now can you please just drop it and let's watch a video or talk about anything that isn't -- that's not that place?"

You raise your hands defensively. "I don't-- Why this hostility towards me all of a sudden? I'm not asking about your accidents, or your..." You gesture to Cheeky's stomach. In response, she grabs a pillow off the floor and covers her belly with it.

You feel a pang in your own chest -- guilt? fear? -- but you're determined to stand your ground for once, anyway.

"Look, this isn't going to work if I have to walk around on eggshells around you guys, guessing at what may be offensive and may not be," you continue, trying your best to regulate your tone. You reposition yourself sitting at the opposite end of the sofa from Cheeky, shifting so that you can better make eye contact with the group. "I went through it at the other apartment, and I want to know ahead of time what the 'off the table' topics are here so I don't screw up again like I did with Mangle. I don't think that's unreasonable!"

"Oh, now he's worried about being reasonable," Cheeky sighs.

"You didn't have to hide something of this magnitude from me," you implore, jabbing a finger at the television screen.

"Well gee whillikers, Mike, don't you think it'd be a little darn obvious how we felt about it from our reaction?" Bonworth replies, unusually flustered.

"Don't you think you've been a 'little darn' cryptic?" you shoot back.

"What's cryptic about wanting a shot at somethin' resembling a normal life?" he shouts, clutching his metal knees with his paws. "Do you introduce yourself to everyone *you* meet with a laundry list of your deepest fears an' regrets?"

"I'm not asking for an autobiography, here, Bonworth! But if something like a *TV commercial* can get everyone freaking out, maybe that's something I should know about -- it was bound to come up! I want to *avoid* making you guys feel uncomfortable!" you argue.

"Damn fine job so far," Faz deadpans, clenching his electrolarynx with a rickety paw.

You turn to say something to him, but Cheeky interrupts you before you can get the words out.

"What more do you want, Mike?! We got screwed by a company that built itself up on our backs," Cheeky interjects, fire in her eyes. "Corporate neglect. Unsafe working conditions that didn't meet code. It cost Bonnie his legs and Faz a hell of a lot more. I can barely feel half my middle and Foxy's *missing a chunk of his brain*."

"Cheeky--"

"Do you really think we want to just..." She leans forward, drawing a heavy, trembling breath. "I don't know, parade every skeleton in our closet around for someone we haven't even known a week?"

"For God's sake, Cheeky! It's because I haven't known you guys a week that I'd even ask!" Why don't they get it? "I've been trying to *avoid* this situation!"

"So you avoid it by swan-diving headlong into it?" Bonworth snaps.

Growling in frustration, you lean forward off the edge of the sofa, staring him down.

"Oh, I'm sorry! I'm so, *so sorry*, Bonworth! I forgot I was 'the dancing monkey' whose sole purpose in life is to entertain you every time you want a laugh!"

Narrowing his eyes, Bonworth leans forward to match you, wagging a pointed finger in your face. "Now that ain't fair, Mike, and you know it!"

You take a breath, raising both hands to collect yourself for a moment.

"No, you're right. I'm sorry. That was out of line. I'm not -- I wasn't trying to make it out like that. I'm not attacking you guys. You've been good to me. But that's why this whole thing stinks."

Your righteous fury rekindles a little as you lock eyes with Bonworth.

"But you want to talk about what's not fair, Bonworth? What's not fair is the fact that some two-bit arcade cost some of the nicest friends I've ever had everything they've got! What's not fair is they stuck you in a pair of metal stilts that you don't get to escape from, all for some stupid low-level manager who was too cheap to have his new toy professionally moved!"

"That ain't quite accurate," Bonworth grumbles. "Besides, that ain't your burden to bear."

You shake your head, standing up from the sofa and point to Faz. "What's not *fair* is you being forced to shamble around the house like a zombie because you were turned into a pincushion by some '*temperamental*' piece of equipment this know-nothing company couldn't be bothered to put some safety guards on!"

You're so worked up you're practically shouting by now. The thought of these four having to spend the rest of their lives in this misery is burning in your head. The injustice of it paints a scowl on your face as you thrust an accusing hand in the direction of the foyer.

"What isn't fair is watching poor Foxy bounce off a wall because he's so damaged he can't even think straight! I got to see him -- the *real* Foxy -- last night, and it was the most heartbreakin

I've ever witnessed. Look at what they turned him into, and you won't even do me the decency of a straight answer as to how it happened!"

"**Shut your mouth,**" Faz snarls. You can hear the plastic casing of his volume control cracking in his paw. "You don't know anything about us."

"I know you're a bunch of martyrs," you return, exasperated, arms plaintively at your side as he glares at you. "Faz, how can you of all people *possibly* want to -- protect this crummy place? The company that betrayed you? Don't you want justice? Don't you want to *fix* this?"

You point to Cheeky, whose days-old makeup is running in streams down her face.

"I'd bet dollars to donuts Cheeky's cancer wasn't some unrelated fluke either. What was it, lead in the paint? Asbestos in the walls?"

"It ain't worth it, Mike," Bonworth warns grimly.

Cheeky mumbles something but it's completely inaudible.

You throw your hands in the air. "Oh, so *she's* not worth it?! Right, let them get away with it then! All hail Jeremy, the faceless corporate monster who sacrificed honest people in pursuit of the almighty dollar!"

"And what're we gonna *do* about it, Mike?!" Bonworth says, struggling to stand up. "What're *you* gonna do about it?! We managed *fine and dandy* until you showed up and now you're-- you're throwin' the whole dynamic into a tizzy!"

You shake your head, incredulous. "Look, I'm not saying this because I want to piss you off or something! I'm on your side here, but you're acting like it never happened! You're just gonna lie down and let them get away with it? And what if they do it again? Don't you want them to fix what they broke?"

Faz slams his enormous fist into the arm of his chair. His voice is cut with crackling static. "'Fix'?! **Look** at us! You can't *fix* us, you stupid--"

"Faz ol' pal, please, your blood pressure," Bonworth shakily urges, latching onto his shoulder.

Cheeky tugs your arm gently with one wing while placing the other on Faz's leg. "Come on, boys, everyone take a breath. Mike, we're not all broke anyway--"

There's another perfect example.

"*I am* looking, Faz!" you insist, still focused on the ragged bear. "I'm looking at all the things they have to answer for! How can you want to back off and let bygones be bygones after all the damage they did to you? After they took Bonworth's legs? Foxy's mind? After they turned Cheeky into -- *that*? She could have been beautif--"

The words catch in your throat and everything grinds to a halt, your brain having caught up to your mouth a fraction of a second too late. Frozen mid-gesture and stuck in a choke, you slowly turn to Cheeky. She sits in her chair, eyes wide, jaw slack as she stares at you like she's been shot and you're the one holding the gun. She slowly lowers her wing to her side, slumping against the sofa.

"Cheeky, I... I'm sorry. Look, please, you know I didn't mean--"

You take a step forward to comfort her, but all at once Faz is there, standing at his full and very intimidating height as he moves between the two of you. The ramshackle bear bores down into your skull with his eyes, and you realize how very, very small you are in comparison to him right now. Even though you were standing up to him defiantly just moments before, you find yourself wilting underneath his furious gaze.

"I... I just..." You struggle for something to say, looking back and forth between their faces.

Cheeky's eyes are glossy and unfocused, beak still hanging open. Faz looks like he's seriously contemplating tossing you out the window, and even Bonworth is giving you an uncharacteristic frown, the impact of which isn't lessened even by his normally goofy buck teeth.

Without a word, you slowly turn and trudge toward the foyer, stumbling a little as you go. You're vaguely aware of someone saying something as you make to leave, but the words aren't even registering in your head. Opening the door wide, you step out into the cool mid-November air without so much as a goodbye.

There's mustard on your shirt.

You look down at it and realize that in the process of trying to clean up the spilled sandwich earlier, you got mustard all over your shirt. Or maybe it was from your own sandwich. You hope it doesn't stain. Mustard's pretty hard to get out of clothes. You wonder if it was once used as a dye. Seems like you remember something like that from a movie. Not a movie from *here*, though. It's a pretty strong yellow, so you can see it working for that purpose.

Also, it's really cold outside. The temperature's dropped at least fifteen degrees since you went on your walk this afternoon, and you had your coat then. You don't have your coat now, and you're really beginning to feel the difference. It's reminding you too much of what your life was like before all of this. But no, you had to go and stick your foot in your mouth and get yourself kicked out of two apartments in a row.

You count the money in your billfold -- you're down to less than a hundred dollars and you're not even halfway to your next check. A hotel isn't an option. You could go ask Marion to put you up in one of the empty apartments for the night until you figure out where to go, but for all you know he's not even at the leasing office since the working day is over. You don't have his number to call him, much less a phone to dial it on.

Looking across the street, you see the light flickering in the window of what you're certain is 87-B. Isn't tonight pajama movie night? You can't even remember. A party night in your PJs sounds nice right about now, though. You close your eyes and imagine the scents of a cup of hot cocoa, Mangle's lotion, and even that sticky feather shampoo of Chiclet's.

It's only been a few days, and after how well things have been going you didn't figure you'd be saying it to yourself so soon, but you miss your home.

Your *real* home.

You can't go back, though. You can't walk in and admit defeat. You can already hear the lecture in your mind from Chiclet, and you're sure Mangle's still upset after your whole run-in a few days back. Bonnie wouldn't even come to the door last time you knocked. They probably don't want anything to do with you. On the other hand, there's no way you can march back upstairs and face Bonworth and his crew again, either. Hell, you may never be able to even talk to them after the way you lashed out. The ugly things you said.

With no moves left, you find yourself curling up slowly into a pathetic ball, hunched forward on the curb.

It's really, really cold outside.

Footsteps click down the sidewalk from behind, and seconds later, there's a soft whump on the concrete beside you as a flurry of familiar-looking golden feathers enters your peripheral vision. Not expecting such instant forgiveness, you smile softly in spite of the tears flowing down your face, mixing with the yellow stain on your shirt.

"I sure did screw it up this time, didn't I, Chica?" you start, your quavering voice straining to get the words out.

"Everybody screws up sometimes. Don't beat yourself up about it," an unfamiliar voice replies. You lift your head, wiping your eyes.

It's like a younger, more innocent Cheeky is staring back at you, her small beak turned upwards in a curious half-smile. She's notably shorter and neater than Cheeky (and a bit less wide), her eyes bright and full of exuberance.

"Sorry, I thought you were someone else," you sigh.

"Really? But you called me Chica," she ponders, cocking her head to one side.

You blink. "Your name's Chica too."

She nods, smiling.

"Of course it is," you lean back, sniffling to stifle your runny nose. "Why wouldn't it be?"

The vibrant, fluffy chicken reaches her free wing out and pats your leg. "Hey, c'mon. Don't be sad, huh?" Her worried expression slowly melts into one of eager anticipation, like a kid with a secret to share. "*I got something that might cheer you uuup,*" she sing-songs.

She raises her wing with a flourish, revealing a paper plate with a single chocolate cupcake covered in pink frosting. A pair of silly-looking white gumdrops with black icing on the tips serve as makeshift "eyes". Several little rings of crumbs are all that remain of its fallen brethren.

"One left!" she tempts.

You stare at the googly-eyed pastry and all the hairs on your neck start to prick up. The last thing you want in your agitated state is a mouthful of frosting, but you manage a smile. "I-I'm not hungry right now," you reply. "Just ate dinner and all."

She frowns. "But did you have dessert?"

"Well, no," you admit, wiping your eyes and nose on your shirt sleeve.

"Then have a bite," the chicken huffs authoritatively, unwrapping the cupcake and poking it toward your mouth. She's not even going to hand it over, it seems. A cold, painful shiver runs up your spine, but with great reluctance you humor her, hesitantly forcing your mouth open. She manages to get frosting all over your lips, but the cupcake is surprisingly tasty. Before even realizing what you're doing, you've wolfed it down, gumdrops and all.

"Shgood," you manage through a mouthful of chocolate.

Dusting the crumbs off her wingtips, the chicken hauls herself to her feet.

"Of course it is, it's my secret recipe," she boasts, taking you by the wrist. "And now, you'll need some milk to wash all that cupcake down with. Come on."

She proudly struts down the sidewalk towards the lower level of Building 9, half-dragging you behind her like a little girl carrying a toy. You dig in your heels at first, but the shortstack of a hen is surprisingly strong. You find yourself tumbling along the pavement with her, trying your best to keep from flopping over on the ground.

"Wait, wait, I can't barge into your place like--"

Without even slowing down to look back at you, the chicken shakes her head.

"It's all right, Mike," she trills softly. "We all have down days."

# The Standard of 93-A

## Chapter Summary

Mike is taken in for the night by some new faces.



You awkwardly sip your coffee mug full of cold milk, letting it cool your irritated throat. Between your shouting match upstairs and then your little breakdown outside in the street earlier, you're not exactly hitting on all sixes right now. You don't even remember when the last time was you got a solid night's sleep, which can't be doing your immune system any favors.

Oh, and of course, there's also the sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach as your exhausted mind tries to process the realization that you've gone way, way too far this time.

Leaving 87-B with a cloud over your head was one thing, but you can at least take solace in the fact that the situation with Mangle was an isolated incident. Nothing more than an honest mistake. You knocked, and you mistakenly thought you heard permission to enter. You weren't trying to be a creep or a voyeur. Mangle blew things out of proportion, and you tried to apologize but it never really did quite work out before you had to leave. A little time, a little distance, and Mangle would have been right back to plucking the strawberries from your pancake plate like nothing had ever happened.

But as for what transpired upstairs earlier? There's no excusing any of it -- you *know* you're in the wrong on this one.

Cheeky's look of absolute betrayal still gnaws at you. Replaying the scene over and over again in your mind, you wish you'd had the good sense to back off the first several times you were warned, but instead you chose to escalate. In hindsight, you idly wonder what you were hoping to achieve out of that entire exchange.

"*You can't help being broken like the rest of us.*"

Bonnibel's words come back to haunt you, and you're afraid to even consider the fact that she *might* be right.

More than anything else, what's bothering you right now is your temper. You're noticing that anger has slowly started to get the best of you multiple times lately; your petulant fit in the toiletry aisle at the store last week, shoving Bonworth to the ground a few nights ago, and then screaming at your roommates earlier tonight -- well, your former roommates, anyway. You almost wish you could afford a shrink, but the last thing you need right now is to end up popping pills like Bonnibel.

You know you're not that far gone.

Raised voices from across the house draw your attention. Easing yourself off of the barstool you've been seated at for the last twenty minutes, you gingerly approach the kitchen's swinging doors to peer out into the apartment's common area. Propping one of the doors open just a crack, you recognize the distinctive set of lavender ears poking out from above the couch as belonging to Beanie. Standing in the living room beside her is Chichi, the hen who gave you that chocolate cupcake earlier.

Opposite both of them is a tall, stocky brown bear clad in khaki pants and a button-down dress shirt with rolled-up sleeves. A sharp black porkpie hat is perched atop his head. By process of elimination, you assume that the bear must be the "Mr. Fazbear" you've heard name-dropped a few times -- though you can't recall his first name, if you ever knew it. If he's anything like Faz, you're already intimidated. As you learned tonight, Faz can be scary as hell when he wants to be, even in spite of his injuries; this guy, on the other hand, looks as if he could snap you like a twig and not break a sweat.

You nervously poke your head out the doorway, straining to listen to their conversation. Every once in a while Beanie twitches an ear or raises a paw in response, but for the most part Chichi and Mr. Fazbear are the ones arguing. He's standing with his back to you, arms folded as Chichi aggressively makes her case. The short, pudgy bird appears to be the most animated entity in the

room, but you can't quite make out what she's saying from your vantage point. You suppose it doesn't really matter, as you have a good idea of what the discussion entails; she's pleading to secure you a bed for the night in a household that *isn't* full of people that hate you.

A sudden rustling noise in the hallway draws your attention. You cautiously peer around the corner and catch a glimpse of light reflecting off of something in the darkness at the end of the hall. A single disapproving eye hovers above rows of gleaming white and gold teeth, leering at you from behind a violet curtain. The hairs on your arms and neck bristle, and you hastily duck back inside the kitchen, all but slamming the door. You shiver, rubbing your arms in an attempt to get rid of the sudden onslaught of goose flesh.

Short of heading out into the living room, you're not going to be able to hear any details, and you're in no hurry to meet whoever that was beyond the veil. Chichi was pretty adamant that you "stay in the kitchen for a bit and calm down", and you feel as though you've rocked the boat enough for one evening. Hastily gulping the rest of your milk down, you gently place the mug in the sink before retreating back to the barstool, climbing up on top of its threadbare cushion.

With nothing else to do, you slump against the kitchen counter, burying your head in your arms as you await the verdict.

Something soft brushes against your face, rousing you from your slumber. Lifting your head slowly, your field of vision's flooded with a faceful of bright yellow feathers. Immediately, you jolt awake, nearly tumbling off the barstool in the process as you try to reorient yourself. Chichi draws her wing back with a smile while you scramble to wipe the drool from your mouth with the back of your sleeve.

"Careful there, sleepyhead," she titters. "Can you come here for a sec? Mr. Fazbear is ready to talk with you."

Nodding numbly, you slowly lower yourself to your feet before following Chichi into the living room where Beanie and one Mr. Fazbear await. The slender rabbit raises a half-hearted paw in greeting, not even bothering to glance away from her handheld video game as you enter.

"Hey, Mike. Feel better after your little siesta?" she asks.

"Not in the slightest," you mutter groggily. Smoothing out your stained shirt, you try your best to make yourself presentable for your hosts. "Um, hello."

Mr. Fazbear looks you up and down like a customer eyeing a cut of meat in a butcher shop. "Have a seat," he demands after several seconds of awkward silence.

"Er, if it's all the same to you--"

"Wasn't a question," he responds stiffly, placing one of his massive paws on your shoulder and forcing considerable pressure onto your frame. Your comparatively small body immediately buckles under his push, and you fall backwards onto the couch next to Beanie. She doesn't even react as you collapse beside her.

Once you're seated, Mr. Fazbear seems even bigger and more imposing than before. Thick, dark circles under his eyes imply a weariness that makes even Bonworth look spritely, though you have

no idea whether it's from fatigue or just a generally low tolerance for bullshit. Or both.

"I've been made aware of your situation," he intones, lowering his sizable frame onto a large, well-worn leather ottoman next to a matching easy chair. Placing one of his paws on his knee, he leans forward to look you in the eye.

"And what would that situation be?" you ask hesitantly. You almost feel like you've been sent to the principal's office after a day of misbehaving in class. Considering the way your evening's gone, you suppose that isn't too far off from the truth.

"I'm told that due to various circumstances, you're unable to find lodging for the night," Mr. Fazbear replies.

Chichi tucks her wings up and gingerly plops herself on a nearby "nest" of blankets, looking for all the world like an adorable little bird attempting to hatch an egg. Cute as it is, you hardly have time to be amused given the current tone of the room. Turning back to Mr. Fazbear nervously, you nod.

"Th-that's correct," you manage. "I'm normally -- I live in 87-B, uh, with Chiclet and the others, but Marion needed to move a new tenant in there so I've been staying with Bonworth, but, uh..."

He waves you off dismissively. "I've already spoken with Marion. As for *that* business," he says, pointing a finger in the direction of the ceiling, "I don't know what all went on upstairs, but I sure as hell could hear the shouting down here."

You glumly lower your head. "I kind of lost my temper."

"And with it, your bed," he snorts, folding his arms. "You seriously don't think I'm fooled by your hat-in-hand game, do you? I've heard about what a hothead you can be."

Taken aback, you turn to Beanie for some kind of support, but she shrugs.

"You seem like an all right guy, Mike, but I'm not about to side with you against my brother," she says pointedly, finally lowering her game to look at you.

"That's fair. I wouldn't expect you to," you sigh, defeated.

"Then you have more character than I've been lead to believe. I've decided you can stay for the night," Mr. Fazbear announces, "but I'm going to lay down some ground rules."

You place your arms in your lap. "All right, I'm listening."

"First off, I don't care what time you get up, but you're in bed, lights out, by 12," he says, jabbing a finger at the clock. "I work full-time, and I get up early every morning. Last thing I want is to hear a racket while I'm trying to sleep."

"Reasonable enough," you reply.

A mandatory curfew's kind of hokey and old-fashioned, but you're not really the type to stay up too late anyway. Besides, it's just for the one night. After a little rest you figure you'll go fess up to Chiclet and she'll let you come back home in the morning. Sure, she might give you guff, but you know she's not the kind to put you out in the cold since going back to Bonworth's obviously isn't an option.

"This isn't a bed and breakfast, so the fridge is off-limits. And of course, this should go without saying, but I don't want you going anywhere near either of the girls' bedrooms while you're here."

Beanie scoffs incredulously, startling you. "Seriously, Fred? I'm a big girl. I can look out for my own virtue, thanks."

'Fred' it is, then.

Chichi huffs from behind him. "And what if I wanted to show Mike some of the neat stuff in my bedroom like that quilt I made?"

Raising his paws, the hefty bear lets out an equally hefty sigh. "Whatever. No funny business, though. While you're here, under my roof, I'm responsible for the both of you."

Beanie turns her game system off, setting it aside. "You sound just like my brother," she remarks dryly, folding her arms in defiance.

"Good," Fred approves. "Your brother was one of the finest men the company had. A model employee. I take that as a personal compliment."

A shiver runs down your spine. Bonworth? The *company*? Your eyes widen as the realization hits you. "By chance, Fred, do you work at a place called Jeremy Human's?" you ask, looking him square in the eye.

"It just so happens I do. I'm the regional manager, actually. Why, you familiar with it?" he asks, suddenly all-business.

"We *both* work there," Beanie interrupts, shooting him a look. "In fact, I'm on night shift, so I gotta head out in just a few hours. I should probably go get cleaned up and get some caffeine in me."

"I can't say I've had the 'pleasure' of a visit yet," you mutter as Beanie gets up from the couch, stretching. "I sure would like to see for myself what it's all about, though."

"Best pizza pies in town," Fred proudly boasts. "Largest operational arcade in the tri-county area, too. Over fifty cabinets and consoles."

"Tonight's not really the best night for it, but maybe I'll take you on a ride-along this week," Beanie says. "If you're really that interested. And if you can handle a night visit, I mean."

"Oh, one of those places that's spookier when the lights are out?" you ask. "Like a school or something after hours?"

"You have no idea," she replies grimly before heading down one of the side hallways to the bathroom.

As soon as she leaves, Fred rises from the ottoman and motions for you to follow him. "All right, that's enough chatter. Follow me, I'll show you where you'll be staying."

Situated at the end of two parallel hallways is Fred Fazbear's personal office.

Well, calling it an "office" might be giving it too much credit. It's really more like a walk-in closet with a desk, a futon and not much else. The room itself is of curious construction, flanked by two hallways that both lead back to the common area. On either wall is a door and an interior window that open to their respective halls, and the windows are set with Venetian blinds, perhaps to emphasize the feeling of a private office.

Owing largely to this strange design, the apartment itself is longer than it is wide, and curiously "industrial" -- the walls are made of brick that was lazily plastered over in uneven spots. Exposed pipes and thick bundles of wire run the length of the ceiling, and what few windows *are* present are placed in bizarre or impractical spots.

"Not to be rude, but, uh... I can't help but notice this apartment doesn't look like any of the others I've been in," you observe in your friendliest, most measured tone, hoping you don't come across as nervous as you feel. You suppose the emotional impact of the day and the unfamiliarity of a foreign bed with people you don't know does have you feeling tired and unnerved, but you try just the same to shake it off.

Fred grunts in reply, handing you a tattered blanket and a pillow to make up your bed with. "Whole thing used to be a warehouse, or something. Apparently the landlord owns the entire complex, but there were only eight buildings originally constructed as actual apartments."

For owning so much land and space, it's tempting to assume Marion must be pretty well off. But given that you always see him running maintenance and scheduling personally, you wonder if he can really afford to pay for more employees. This place doesn't even seem to have a security guard, much less an office manager. Even Bonworth, who's helping Marion out at the front desk, mentioned he's only getting a discount on the rent -- not a salary.

Doffing his hat, Fred rubs the thick brown fur atop his head. "Some years back, Marion bought the land we're sitting on. He converted the lower level of this building and built a second set of apartments up top to accommodate the need for housing in this area."

"That's kind of cool, actually," you reply, genuinely fascinated. "It's certainly more spacious than either of the upper-level apartments I've been in. I guess the rent's probably more expensive as a result, though?"

"We get by," Fred says, clearly uninterested in making any further small talk. "Anything else you need?"

Your shoulders slump as you realize you left everything upstairs. "My bags," you murmur, dejected. "I, uh... I left them at Bonworth's along with my coat, and my toothbrush, and..."

He irritably waves you off. "Fine. I won't make you go up there," he growls.

Turning on his heel, he trudges down the east hallway, scratching his side as he goes. Once he's gone, you take a moment to breathe, looking around the stuffy, confined space you're going to be crammed in for the evening.

A large, heavily-used wooden desk takes up the majority of the office. Upon its surface is an old-school conference telephone next to an equally archaic computer. A cheap plastic desk fan provides a small amount of air circulation, gently riffling some loose leaf paper in his outgoing tray. Mounted on the wall above the desk is a bulletin board with papers and photos, but it's too dark to really make any of it out.

You're feeling pretty stifled in here; even the bedrooms you had to share with Freddy and Foxy were several times this room's size. You fumble gracelessly in the dark for the light switch, hoping it'll alleviate some of your growing claustrophobia. To your dismay, however, the switch only serves to activate a flickering, dim lamp in the right-side hallway.

"Chain overhead," Fred bellows from across the house.

Sheepishly, you shut the hall light off before pulling at the string dangling from the ceiling. A lone lightbulb hanging from a flimsy cable illuminates the tiny room, filling you with marginally more comfort.

The bulletin board you were curious about has a number of polaroid shots and faded corporate memos pinned to it. You study the corkboard for a while, curious to see if you recognize any of your new acquaintances in the array of photos. Not unlike Chiclet's own collection of pictures, these are all labeled with brief notes or dates such as "Summer '08" or "Groundbreaking event at the new location", but some of them have slightly more casual or tongue-in-cheek captions.



After a minute or two of skimming the photos you manage to find a handful of relatively recent pictures of Beanie and Bonworth, including one of Bonworth standing next to a bored-looking Beanie, both wearing matching "Jeremy Human" polo shirts and black dress pants. Checking to see if the photo was taken before Bonworth's accident, you pluck it from the board. As you do, another picture partially obscured behind a memo falls loose and flutters to the ground.

Stooping to collect it, you note that this second picture looks as if it may have been shot using a different camera entirely. It's somewhat faded, so you're forced to hold the picture up to the bulb for a closer look. The scene is blurry and poorly focused, likely owing to an inexperienced cameraman. What you can discern is a large party room with a dozen or so employees gathered around a table,

most likely commemorating an event at a restaurant -- Jeremy Human's, no doubt. Perhaps an after-hours staff party?

Though the photo itself is of poor quality, you're surprised to pick out a familiar-looking duo; a curvy yellow-feathered chicken in mechanic's coveralls and a tall, broad-shouldered bear with a wide-brimmed hat. After a few seconds of intense scrutiny, you also make out a shadow that appears to be a small fox in a waiter's outfit, toting a tray of drinks over its head.

Party hats and paper plates deck out the table near them, and at the seat of honor at the long end is a vaguely humanoid silhouette. Mesmerized, you study this strange being, desperately wishing that the photo was of better quality. Interestingly, the "special guest" is predominately cherry red in color, with a tall hat and large, gaping black eyes. Most notably, a fiendish grin appears to be plastered across the surreal creature's face.

Contrasted against the celebratory decorations, the red figure stands out in a most unsettling way, like a demon ripped straight from the pages of some Faustian tale.

The sound of the front door slamming draws your attention, so you hastily pin the photos back to the bulletin board and hurry to take your seat on the futon. After a few minutes, Fred lumbers into the room, dropping your bags unceremoniously at your feet. Chichi quickly squeezes in behind him, holding your jacket.

"Sorry," she giggles. "I think I got a couple feathers on your coat."

"Hey, no problem," you offer as you accept it graciously, sharing an awkward chuckle with her as one such feather flutters down onto your leg. "Thanks again for everything. I really appreciate you guys letting me stay the night."

Fred grunts something under his breath, wordlessly heading off into the depths of the apartment from whence he came. Chichi watches him go before turning back to you with a sheepish shrug.

"You know, um, Mr. Fazbear's not joking about lights out," she says, trotting towards the doorway. "It's already half past nine, so if there's anything you need to take care of before bed, I'd suggest getting it done."

"You know, I think I'm good," you reply, spreading out the blanket on the futon. "Right now I'm just kind of tired, so I'll call it a night here."

Chichi nods. "Oh, all right. Well, good night then!"

You reach a hand out to her, and she accepts it from across the doorway with a smile. You give her wing a gentle squeeze. "Hey, thank you for going to bat for me earlier, and... also for the great cupcake."

She gently squeezes your hand back, puffing up her chest with pride. "Just happy to help someone in need. Sleep well, Mike."

"Thanks. You too, Chichi."

# Hugs and Kisses

## Chapter Summary

Mike attempts to mend a few fences.



Fred's desk clock informs you that it's six AM on the dot.

While the futon wasn't the most comfortable bed you've ever had the pleasure of staying in, you can't deny feeling better after a solid eight hours of sleep for once. The apartment sounds quiet this morning, so you unzip your luggage, gather a fresh change of clothes and a few toiletries, and go pattering down the east hallway in search of the bathroom. Might as well freshen up before you have to face another day.

Making your way through the common area, a sudden sound of pots and pans crashing against each other pierces the air, vaporizing the morning calm. As soon as your heart rate slows back down to acceptable levels, you stumble toward the kitchen to find Chichi humming to herself, oblivious to your presence.

"Everything all right?" you ask worriedly.

Surprised by your sudden appearance, Chichi fumbles the empty saucepan she's holding, causing it to bounce off the floor with another earsplitting clang. "Oh! Mike, you startled me," she giggles sheepishly, kneeling to gather the fallen cookware. She examines the pan for damage before brushing some dust off of it with her wingtips.

"Hey, that's pretty handy," you observe. "Err, if you'll pardon the unintended pun."

"A little trick my mama taught me when I was young. Built-in feather dusters are but one of the many perks of being a chicken," Chichi boasts. Suddenly, she scrunches up her face like she's just eaten something bitter. "Of course, you can't have feathers without molting, but I'm trying not to think about it since I'm due to start again any day."

You give her a sympathetic nod; though you're no ornithologist, if Chiclet's comments about being plucked were anything to go by, you can't imagine molting to be an enjoyable process.

"So did you sleep all right?" she asks, pulling open the door to the massive stainless steel fridge.

"Oh, definitely. I feel a lot better this morning, thanks. Would it, uh... would it be too much to ask to use the shower, y'know, before I head out?"

Withdrawing a carton of milk, she unscrews the cap and takes a whiff. "Leaving before you have breakfast? Not happening in my kitchen."

Your mind flickers back to Fred's comment about 'bed and breakfast' last night. "Ah, well, Fred seemed pretty intent on me leaving as soon as possible," you answer, scuffing your foot on the checkered tile floor. "I don't want to overstay my welcome."

Chichi shakes her head adamantly. "*I absolutely* will not send you out into the November cold without a proper meal in your tummy." Dusting off one of the barstools with her feathers, she motions for you to take a seat at the kitchen counter. "Now, how about some sausage and eggs?"

"Oh -- oh, no, that's way too much effort," you protest. "I could go for a bowl of cereal, or granola or something?"

"Perfect! Sausage and eggs it is," Chichi blithely declares. "Go get yourself cleaned up, but hurry back. And don't you *dare* think about skipping out on me, mister."

"Fair enough," you chuckle. "Only if Fred's okay with it though."

"My kitchen, *my rules*. It might be Mr. Fazbear's name on the lease but I pay more than my fair share of the rent." She suddenly clamps both wings over her beak, as if trying to shove her previous words back in. "Err... don't tell him I said that."

You give her a covert wink as you push the kitchen's swinging doors open. "Don't worry, I've already run my mouth enough for one week. Your secret's safe with me."

"I appreciate it."

You don't know how early Fred gets up and don't want to incur his wrath by beating him to the washroom on a work day, so you speed through your morning shower without even bothering to shave.

After scrubbing off and hastily getting dressed, you check the clock -- it's not even 6:15 yet. You're initially quite proud of yourself for being so expedient, but your smug grin gives way the moment you spot Fred seated at one of the kitchen barstools, sipping a steaming mug of coffee with a dour expression.

Mustering as much cheeriness as you can, you give him a friendly wave.

"Good mornin'," you offer. Fred glares at you, freezing you in place as the two of you lock gazes. You aren't certain where you remember hearing it, but you're pretty sure you're supposed to hold direct eye contact with an angry bear. Or maybe it was that you're not supposed to...? At this point you've made your choice, and it's too late to change now.

"You're **still** here?" Fred grumbles as he breaks off a piece of a cake doughnut to dunk in his coffee.

"No sir, I was just leaving," you lie blatantly, releasing your grip on the back of the barstool you were in the process of seating yourself in. "I just came to, er, thank you for your hospit--"

You're interrupted by the sound of him snorting. You stare in mild confusion for a few moments before realizing that he's just having some fun at your expense.

"Have a seat. My brother would never let me get away with letting a guest leave hungry," Fred smirks, diverting his attention to the morning paper.

With a nervous smile, you abide by his request so as to not piss him off, taking a seat at the far end of the kitchen counter. Conversation's a little slow this morning with Chichi busy cooking and Mr. Fazbear otherwise distracted with the newspaper, so you casually study your surroundings. Like the rest of the warehouse-turned-apartment, the kitchen is similarly "industrial", appearing as if it may have been converted from something else. Oversized commercial appliances take up the majority of the room, not the least of which are a set of double wall ovens and an impressive-looking range with six burners and a built-in griddle.

Huge cabinets and cupboards mounted overhead look as if they're capable of storing much larger items than the conventional cereal boxes and soup cans one would expect to find in a domestic household. The door to the nearby pantry is propped open, revealing metal racks packed to overflowing with ingredients and foodstuffs. Large sacks of flour and sugar are visibly piled up neatly on the floor inside.

Chichi carefully adjusts the temperature on the stove with one wing while energetically stirring water in a pot with her other. "Has anyone seen Foxy?" she inquires, glancing over her shoulder at Fred.

"Better not be holed up in his room again," Fred says, not even looking up from his paper. "He's been leaving his dishes back there. I keep telling him they're gonna ferment."

"Over at Bonbon's, Peanut does the same thing and it drives her crazy," Chichi titters. "Apparently she really had to get onto him about it yesterday when she found a mug full of soup in his room that looked like it had moss growing on it."

"I met Peanut just the other day," you chip in. "He seems like a pretty cool guy. A little timid, but that's not bad."

"A lot of potential in that one," Fred says, folding his paper up. "He could be more decisive, though. That household is in bad need of clear leadership."

"Bonbon doesn't sort things out for them? She seems like a go-getter."

Fred rolls his eyes as he refills his coffee from a carafe. "That walking powderkeg? I'm surprised she has enough of an attention span to tie her shoes in the morning," he grumbles. "All that energy's no good without some discipline."

Chichi whips around from the stove to look at Fred. "Mr. Fazbear!"

"Oh, don't worry, I won't start in on her degenerate obsession," Fred says. "Especially since she seems to have a sympathizer present."

"A sympathizer? What do you mean?" you ask curiously.

Without replying, Fred sips at his mug, seemingly content to let you puzzle it out on your own. Your wrack your brain for several seconds as you think about everything you know about Bonbon -- electric blue bunny girl, health nut... fitness fanatic... likes cartoons...

Your eyes suddenly widen as you replay Bonbon's diatribe over again in your mind, remembering all she said about 'human' cartoons and her fascination with your skin.

"Oh. OH. No, not-- I'm not like THAT!" you sputter.

Fred lets out a short bark of a laugh, drawing Chichi's full attention -- and ire. Wiping her feathers on her apron, Chichi glowers at him disapprovingly.

"*Mr. Fazbear*, what's come over you? Why would you bully our guest like that?"

Without even missing a beat, Fred places both of his stout meathooks on the counter, staring her down.

"For god's sake, just look at him! He's a grown man, Chica."

"Exactly!" she reasons. "So shouldn't he be allowed to enjoy whatever he likes? It's not hurting anyone!"

Having firsthand experience recently, you recognize the warning signs of Fred ramping up to say something immediately regrettable. In an attempt to defuse the argument, you lean across the counter between them.

"Hey, whoa now. I'm not a, er -- I don't have any weird 'human obsession' or anything like that. If you're talking about my lack of 'fur', well, I'm just not a very hairy guy, uh, naturally." You roll your sleeve up for emphasis, showing off the fine hairs growing along your forearm and bicep. "See? I don't shave my body to look this way -- well, I shave my beard, but that's not really the same."

Chichi nods to you sympathetically, dabbing at one of her eyes. "Ohh, Mike. I'm sorry. I didn't know you couldn't grow fur. Still, it's a very distinctive look, though!"

Fred's face softens slightly as he examines your arm. "Guess that's what I get for making assumptions." Chichi gives him a stern look, and he begrudgingly tips his hat in your direction. "My apologies."

"Don't worry about it," you reply amiably. "So, uh, this is a really nice kitchen you guys have. Your appliances and stuff look real fancy. Like, high-end. Like you'd see in a restaurant."

"Thanks!" Chichi responds, carefree smile back in place. "Most of them are mine, but the stove was here when I moved in. You might be surprised to know I'm a baker, and I do some catering on the side. Birthday cakes and stuff like that."

The cupcake from last night comes back to mind. "Having tasted your work, it explains a lot, actually. That cupcake you gave me was really something else! You probably have people lining up for orders, huh?"

"Not as many as I'd like," she sighs. "I've been trying to branch into pies to expand my business, but custom birthday and wedding cakes seem to be all I'm getting traction on. I only took third place last month at the state fair for my rum cream pie." She produces a tiny orange prize ribbon from one of the kitchen drawers for emphasis.

"Chica, why isn't that on display with the others in your room?" Fred asks.

"Because I know I can do better, and I'm not going to stop until I *do*," she answers with a determined huff. Tossing the ribbon back in the drawer, Chichi returns to the stove. "Anyway, breakfast is ready!"

Shaking his head, Fred pushes his newspaper and coffee mug aside as she places plates in front of both of you. Yours is loaded with two large sausage patties, one egg, and some freshly sliced bananas.

"Hope you like your eggs poached," she says proudly.

"Spiffy. I've only ever seen them done that way on TV," you marvel. "You were able to poach eggs *and cook sausage that quickly?*"

Chichi serves Fred a similar plate with a notably larger portion than yours. "Well, breakfast sausage cooked in a skillet's not terribly difficult, and it's meant to cook quickly. The eggs were the trickiest part, but I have my secrets."

"Tricky egg secrets, huh? So is that a chicken thing or a chef thing?" you joke.

"Hmm! I wonder!" Chichi giggles as she begins plating for herself. To your surprise, she loads her dish down with nearly triple the amount of food she served Fred. You can't help but gawk at the heap of greasy sausage patties she's portioned out as she takes a seat between the two of you, but you wisely refrain from commenting on it.

"Well, let's eat," she proclaims. A stab of guilt wells up in your chest as you're reminded of Cheeky's own little catchphrase. "Everything okay, Mike?"

"Never better," you manage with a weak nod.

Slinging your duffel bag over your shoulder, you take one final look at Fred and Chichi as you stand by the door. "I can't thank you enough for your hospitality. I needed a night alone to just kind of clear my head."

"It's fine," Fred replies noncommittally.

Chichi straightens her apron a little, beaming as she does. "I'm glad you were able to stop by. Please come back and visit us again soon, it's always nice to spend time with our neighbors!"

Fred cocks one of his eyebrows at her, but says nothing as he turns and stomps off in the direction of the washroom.

"Don't mind him, he's always grumpy in the mornings," she says with a giggle. "See you around, Mike!"

"It was really nice getting to meet you, Chichi," you reply, shaking one of her wings gently. "And Fred as well."

After exchanging goodbyes, you saunter outside. November's coming to an end soon enough, and it's not long before you'll need to bundle up tighter than just a jacket and a long-sleeved shirt every time you head out. Maybe Mangle would be willing to give you an extra scarf as compensation for your modeling work, though you fear that might be too much to ask for since you have no idea what they cost.

Crossing the street with your luggage, you make your way up Building 8's staircase. Tapping twice at the door to 87-B, you steel your nerves for the inevitable tongue-lashing Chiclet is surely going to give you after finding out you couldn't hack it for a full week at Bonworth's.

After half a minute of waiting timidly on the porch hoping Bonnibel doesn't ignore you a second time, you finally hear a barely audible voice call out to you from within. You hear the lock and chain rattle for a few seconds as whoever's inside fumbles with it before the door slowly creaks open. A tall, heavily bandaged female rabbit frocked in nothing but a fleece bathrobe looks down at you with her lone eye.

"Hello, Mike," April Marchand May whispers softly.

"Morning, April," you reply. "Do you mind if I come in?"

She wordlessly steps aside. You close the door behind yourself, dropping your bags in the foyer. "So how are you settling in?" you ask.

"Never a dull moment," she rattles, scratching absently at the side of her face with a paw. "Very energetic... but welcoming."

"I'm glad to hear you're doing well," you reply, hanging your coat up.

She pads slowly past you into the common area, and you politely linger in the hallway so as to not give her the impression you're rushing her. April gently lowers herself onto the couch, easing her head onto a bed pillow.

As you walk into the apartment, you hear soft music playing from the kitchen. Peering inside, Freddy's tapping one of his feet in time to rock music as he cleans the dishes from breakfast,

singing along in his own way. You watch him half-dance for several seconds, occasionally raising one of his fingers in the air as if to direct the performance. You wonder if you've ever seen him looking so carefree. Shaking your head with a smile, you turn back to the living room where April's resting.



Right on cue, Bonnibel stumbles out of her bedroom. She's wearing an oversized nightie that's also on backwards, and the fur on her head's sticking up in no fewer than three different directions. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she mumbles something in April's direction before spotting you in the kitchen.

"Morning, Bonnie," you greet.

Bonnibel freezes in place for a moment as her eyes meet yours. Ever so slowly she begins moving forward until she's much too close for comfort. She presses both of her paws against your face, rubbing and feeling your cheeks and nose for an uncomfortable length of time.

"Mike?" she finally ventures. "...the 'real' Mike?"

"Hey, I'm told I have a 'distinctive look'. Who else could it be?" you joke.

"Oh, Mike, I... I didn't th-think it was you," she babbles, lurching against your chest. Tears well up in her eyes as she embraces you tightly enough to almost be constrictive to your breathing. You awkwardly hug her back, brushing the back of her head with your palm.

"Why *wouldn't* it be me?" you ask, confused.

"I'm on a clinical trial r-right now," Bonnibel moans softly into a mouthful of your shirt. "The new medicine helps, but, s-sometimes I see people that aren't there... m-mostly you."

"You hallucin-- you're, uh, seeing *me*? Why me?" As much as you've grown to like these guys, you only stayed with them a week. You can't remember the last time you even dreamt about someone. Hallucinating them? That's beyond your scope of comprehension entirely.

Bonnibel eventually releases her deathgrip on you, quivering as she looks up. "Was it really you that came to the door the other day?" she asks hesitantly as she tries to compose herself.

"Ah, thought I was a spook, huh? I was wondering why you didn't answer it. I was, uh, afraid you were mad at me too." You cast a wary eye in the direction of the vent.

"Not at all! I'm sorry, Mike," Bonnibel insists, squeezing your hands. "I'd been seeing some weird stuff all morning and didn't think it was really you."

You gently ruffle her headfur as she shakily takes a seat at the breakfast table. She begins thirstily chugging her prepared morning cocktail like a tiny, adorable lush, having eschewed the usual crazy straw in favor of getting it down quickly.

Trotting out of the kitchen, Freddy carries out a breakfast plate for Bonnibel. He apparently just now notices you, quickly laying the plate in front of her before turning to you.

You don't even manage to get the first syllable of his name out in greeting before he slaps you across your face. He doesn't strike you too hard despite his considerably large size and powerhouse arms, but it's more than enough to cause your face to sting. Even so, you aren't really hurt so much as just genuinely taken aback.

"Freddy!" Bonnibel cries. He ignores her, staring you down.

"C'est pour avoir blessé Mangle," he says sharply, his normally passive expression replaced with a frown.

"Mangle?" you ask, pointing up to the vent, and he bobs his head. What does Mangle... oh, of course.

He's a gentleman defending Mangle's honor. You don't need to speak Freddish to understand.

"I'll... I'll make it right," you stutter.

He doesn't respond.

"With Mangle?" you desperately clarify, pointing down the hallway, then to yourself. "I'll go talk to Mangle?"

He studies your face, as if to check your sincerity. Eventually deciding he's satisfied that you understand what needs doing, Freddy pulls you tightly to his chest in a bear hug, kissing both of your cheeks. After releasing you, his faint frown's since been replaced with a soft smile.

"Quoi qu'il en soit, bienvenue à la maison."

Bonnibel and even April both stare in surprise. "I don't think I've ever seen Freddy that angry," Bonnibel breathes.

"No kidding," you agree numbly, scooting back a couple of steps.

First slapped, then kissed? If you didn't know better, you'd say Freddy was an alien from another planet who's only learned about basic social interaction through television and movies.

As you smooth the creases in your shirt out, Freddy pantomimes eating.

"Uh... no, no thanks." You pat your belly to let him know you've already eaten. With a reluctant sigh, he folds his arms, seeming just a touch disappointed.

"So where's Chica this morning?" you ask, rubbing your face a little. Freddy looks queryingly at Bonnibel, who in turn points at the front door.

"Haven't you heard, Mike? She's dead," Bonnibel replies flippantly.

"She's **what?**" you ask, eyes wide as dinner plates.

"Dead tired," she continues, oblivious. "She's been running around a lot and staying up late helping with April."

You scratch the back of your head at her incredibly poor word choice, which she doesn't even seem to have noticed. Whatever they've got her on must be pretty strong. "Oh, all right. Um, do you mind if I hang out here for a while until she wakes up? I need to ask her something."

Bonnibel's brow furrows. "Why do you need to ask? It's your apartment too, Mike."

You start to politely refute her, then stop. It *is* your apartment after all, and you did Chiclet a favor by leaving -- not the other way around.

So why do you feel so guilty asking to stay?

Yawning, you realize you're still a little drowsy. Maybe some caffeine'll perk you up. You head to the fridge and collect a soft drink from the drawer, downing most of the contents in a few gulps. Freddy's finished with his chores and has since retired to his chair, absorbed in a book. April's already drifted off and Bonnibel looks as if she's not far from doing the same, considering her meds seem to be taking effect. She usually ends up going back to sleep soon after breakfast anyway, if you remember right.

With nobody to talk to for the moment, you finish the last of your drink and chuck the can in the trash.

"Might as well get this over with," you mumble under your breath as you head down the hallway to Mangle's room.

After two false starts, you finally work up enough nerve to knock at the door. You hear thumping and clattering around for a few seconds before a sickeningly-sweet voice calls out to you.

"Come in," Mangle announces pleasantly.

"You sure? I'm not making that mistake again."

You're briefly rewarded with the satisfaction of an audible gasp as Mangle realizes it's you. The door opens a crack and you catch sight of a familiar white muzzle doused in runny lipstick and too much blush. It sniffs twice at you before Mangle opens the door fully.

"I wasn't... expecting you back today, Michael," Mangle stammers, getting your name right this time around. "I haven't had time to neaten up or anything. Please, come in."

You step inside Mangle's bedroom-turned-studio, taking a seat at the computer's swivel chair. It is indeed a bit messier in here than you remember it being last time. Crafting materials such as sequins and buttons litter the floor like leftover confetti from a party, while bolts of fabric are splayed upon every available surface. Mangle alights on the edge of the bed, watching you apprehensively. You maintain careful eye contact, refusing to lower your gaze lest you be obligated to acknowledge the ridiculous hybrid blanket/bathrobe the fox has chosen to cover up with.

"What do you, ah, wish to speak to me about, darling? I'm quite busy with work as you can most surely see."

Several different approaches float through your mind -- everything from trying to save face by making light of what happened, to going on the defensive and acting like you're the victim and Mangle's the one who owes you the apology -- but you know in your heart there's only one option.

"I'm sorry," you plainly state.

Honest and to the point.

Mangle fumbles with one of the blanket's thick felt sleeves. "Oh, it's quite all right, you're not *really* disturbing me. I've just been so absorbed in sewing and creating and trying to get orders out for the holiday rush."

You take one of Mangle's paws in your hand, shaking your head adamantly. "That's not what I meant," you interrupt, "and you know it. I'm sorry for what happened -- no, for what I did, to you, the other day."

"Freddy, dear, it's water under the bridge!" Mangle replies with forced cheer. "Why don't we just let bygones--"

You raise a single finger to Mangle's muzzle, making a shushing noise.

"Please don't make light of this. It's been eating at me for days, and I've got to get it off my chest," you insist, tone sharp and low. "Mangle, I'm sorry. I am **very** sorry. It was wrong of me to violate your personal space. It was an honest mistake and I didn't mean anything by it, but I'm sorry that I hurt you. I want you to know that I never intended to be a hypocrite and disrespect your privacy because I know how I'd have felt in your position."

You maintain a firm grip on the tender white paw in your hand, drawing a deep breath before you continue.

"When I heard you call out, I thought you were giving me permission to enter, and that's why I came in. I'd just wanted to see if you needed any more help with modeling your clothes." You lower your gaze, scrunching up your forehead as you try to find the right words to say.

Mangle's eyes shimmer, locked with yours, and you glance away quickly, forcing yourself to continue.

"Mangle, I don't understand your, umm... well, I had no idea that you're, uh -- that you had this kind of... concern. But while I've been away from the house, the tension between us has been driving me up the wall."

"Oh, sweetheart..." Mangle twists your hand a little, gripping it tightly with both paws. "I'm not going to let you beat yourself up over this. You're not my enemy."

"I don't see myself as your enemy," you affirm. "I just want to know that I'm still your friend."

"Of course we're friends! I can't BELIEVE you'd even allow such a ridiculous notion to seep into that pretty little head of yours!"

Without warning, you're enveloped in a tight hug, sleeved blanket and all. As you both warmly embrace each other, Mangle's furry tail swishes around the back of your head, tickling at the side of your neck. It's a surprising, but not entirely unwelcome sensation. You exhale slowly, sloughing off some of your pent-up anxiety as Mangle gently rubs at your back with dexterous paws.

"You know, I've ended up saying some really bad things to some really nice people, and I very much wish I could take those words back. I can't handle everyone being upset or mad at me. I don't -- I don't do well, y'know, with that kind of stress." Gently easing away, you look Mangle square in the eye. "I guess what I'm saying is, I need to know you forgive me, because I don't ever want to hurt any of you guys with my carelessness again."

Mangle returns to the edge of the bed, pondering your words for a moment. "Well, Mike -- I, ah, tried in my own way to make you feel comfortable and welcome when we met, but you gave me the distinctest impression that you wanted nothing to do with me."

"If I'm being honest, you're right -- I didn't. Now I'm wishing I'd given you more of a chance at first," you sigh. Mangle presses a finger to your own lips, mimicking your earlier action.

"Hush now, you. You've said your piece and now I'm going to say mine," Mangle reprimands in the tone a teacher might use to scold a spoiled child. You quietly nod, allowing the fox to speak. "I knew when you arrived here the first day that we'd been given the opportunity to meet someone truly special, but I wasn't sure what it was about you that seemed so distinct. Now, though, I believe I've figured it out."

A chill runs down your spine as anxiety begins to take hold of you. You brace yourself for impact as Mangle gently jabs your chest with an accusatory nail. This is it, here we go. Somebody's finally managed to put all the pieces of the puzzle together. Someone's finally figured out why you don't belong, why you're so 'unusual', why you don't fit the mold that every other wild character in this town seems to have been cast from.

"What is it?" you cautiously ask, calculating your trajectory should you have to leap from Mangle's bedroom window.

"You're a *virgin*," the fox replies with a saucy smirk.

You let out a breath you didn't realize you were holding even as your cheeks flush red.

"I... what! No I'm not!" you snap, though inwardly you're relieved. "Why, I'll have you know I've had plenty of ladies throwing themselves at me just since I've been here."

"Oh, really," Mangle challenges. "Tell me of your conquests, o *mighty man*."

"So many conquests, where to begin? Girls can't resist this beefcake!" You flex your doughy muscles as Mangle raises a skeptical eyebrow.

"Well, don't keep me in the dark, now! Come on, dish -- name *names*!"

You chortle boldly as you leap to your feet, hamming up every action movie poster pose you can think of as Mangle applauds the silly little private show.

"Well of course Cheeky over in 93-B couldn't resist my wiles," you boast, but being met with an expectant stare, you continue your list. "And I should add Ms. Mango downstairs put up a good fight, but she too fell for me."

"That floozy would fall for a sandwich," Mangle mutters.

"What?"

"Nothing!" Mangle's chin is propped up on one arm. "Now, go on, enthrall me, dear! Tell me how you wooed them both."

"Too many lovestruck admirers, not enough time! I'll have you know that our very own landlord tripped over his lanky feet when he saw me strutting in. Next was the dazzling and irreplaceable Chica, naturally," you swagger.

A thoroughly dubious cough. "Pssh. I'm certain I'd have been made aware of such."

You blow on your fingernails, buffing them on your shirt. "But one of the finest of all was a lovely, saucy little number called Mangle."

Mangle's head snaps back, muzzle opened wide in hysterical laughter. "That would be unbelievably ambitious of you," the fox chortles.

"Hey, *nobody* can keep their hands off of me. I'll have you know I got two big smooches from Freddy when I came in," you announce, turning your face as if to display a scandalous hickey.

"Oh, Bonnie -- what *happened?*" Mangle asks suddenly, rubbing the side of your tender face from where Freddy popped you in the kitchen. "Why do you have a welt on the side of your handsome, rugged cheek?"

"I, uh... well, when I came in, Freddy greeted me with a slap," you sheepishly reply. "Two kisses did follow immediately afterward, though, and that's the honest truth. I guess he wanted to, you know, settle the score for me besmirching your honor or something."

"R-really now? He did that for me?" Eyelashes flutter coyly as the fox processes this information. "Well -- the lovable brute did you a favor, dear."

"Oh? How so?"

"Close your eyes, and you'll find out," Mangle replies, rising from the bed. You sit back down and cautiously do as instructed. A set of warm, wet lips press against the side of your cheek as Mangle gives you a heartfelt (albeit sloppy) kiss.

"To make it feel better, and also... so you have another tall tale to share," Mangle says with a wink and a toothy smile as you re-open your eyes.

Blushing furiously, you stand up, head spinning a little. "I take it all back. You're too hot for me to handle, Mangle."

"Don't you know it!" the fox snickers as you head for the door. "Oh, and Michael, darling?"

You pause, hand on the doorknob. "Yeah?"

"Of course I forgive you."

By the time you're back in the common area, Chiclet's finally up and around, albeit still in her pajamas. She waves at you while fumbling with the coffee pot, thick bags hanging under her normally bright and cheerful eyes.

"Hey, Mike. I was beginning to think you'd never drop by," she yawns.

"I was beginning to think you didn't want me to," you fire back. "But I'll let it slide because I know you've been super busy since you haven't had me around to keep you in line."

"Well aren't you just the most understanding little saint, Mike," she replies with a sleepy grin. "Want some coffee, Mr. Wonderful?"

"Absolutely. Black, but with plenty of sugar and cream, please."

"Hah! You goon." As Chiclet reaches into the cabinet for a coffee mug for you, she glances down at your face out of the corner of her eye. "...Mike, is that Mangle's lipstick on your cheek?"

You see your opportunity and you seize it instantly. "What, surely you don't think I'd cheat on you?" you immediately return with a shit-eating smirk. She rolls her eyes, tossing a sugar packet at your head.

"Yeah, I'm really losing sleep over who you're smooching."

"Obviously. You can tell by those dark circles under your eyes."

"Oh my god," she groans.

"So, funny story for you. Freddy slapped me when I walked in earlier."

"That sounds reasonable of him," she interjects. "Can't say I haven't had the urge to do the same myself. Now that I know it's on the table, I might just indulge later."

"Ouch. I'll have you know this lipstick is from where Mangle kissed it to make it better."

"How sweet! Glad to hear you two made up then...?" she ventures, searching the fridge for some coffee creamer.

"Yeah, I think we're good. I wish I could say the same with Bonworth and the others, though," you sigh.

Chiclet stops mid-pour on your coffee, suddenly all-business. "Mike, what happened?" she asks, voice quiet and measured as she sets the carafe aside.

You lean around the kitchen wall to peer at the living room, making sure nobody's listening in on your conversation. Bonnibel's already retreated to her room for her post-breakfast nap, and Freddy's disappeared to take care of laundry, leaving a soundly-dozing April on the couch.

"I screwed up, plain and simple," you whisper. "I found out about something they wanted to keep buried and I just... I pushed the issue until we all kind of blew up at each other. And then I ended up hurting Cheeky's feelings with a stupid-assed comment..."

You lower your head in defeat as she leans against the counter.

"Oh, geez. What was your fight about?" she asks warily. You turn away, and she lets out a low whistle. "Oh man, Mike. That place..."

"I know. It's the same for you, isn't it?" you ask. She doesn't immediately reply. Covering her mouth with one slightly shaky wing tells you everything you need to know. "I'm sorry. I won't bring it up around here, I promise."

"Look, it's a really shitty deal," she sighs, leaning on the counter. "There's a lot of us that never want to even think about it again, but those guys? Man, they've really got it the worst out of everybody in this entire complex."

"I don't doubt it. I was so ashamed that I just walked out without even saying goodbye. I ended up staying the night with Beanie and Mr. Fazbear."

"Aw, Mike, you could have come back home and told me what happened," Chiclet says. "I don't know most of the people around here too well -- I'm usually so busy that I rarely have time to visit anyone. If Bonworth's roommates are anything like he is, though, I can tell you that they're the type to forgive and forget."

"I, um -- to be honest, I've kind of been hoping you are as well, Chica. I got the impression that I'd offended you when you shoved me out the door after April came in."

"What? Why?"

"Well, I tried to swing by to see if I could spend some time here, maybe pitch in and help. You were in such a hurry the other day, and then Bonnie didn't answer the door..."

"No, *of course* I'm not pissed off at you or anything like that, and if I'd known you'd go through this much of an ordeal I'd have just let you stay in the first place," she says, shaking her head adamantly. "Look, April's here because of a personal favor Marion called in, and I wanted you to have your own bed because you're the new guy and didn't deserve to be put out in the living room after just having gotten here. That's all there is to it, I promise."

"I'm glad that's it, then," you reply.

"If I upset you, Mike, you'd better believe I apologize. I told you before about my policy on how we do things in my house -- nobody ever goes to bed angry here. For the record, I never meant to blow you off." She glances at the living room, lowering her voice to a whisper as she resumes filling both mugs full of coffee. "April's just a high maintenance kind of gal. I've been burning the candle at both ends trying to take care of her and Bonnie and still keep everything else here running."

"I got a really good taste of that with Bonworth's place," you reply. "Faz is a lot the same way -- he requires constant care and attention. Still, it means a lot to know that I'm still welcome here."

"You're ALWAYS welcome in my home, Mike," she brashly insists. "And don't you ever feel otherwise, you understand?"

"Yes ma'am." You throw your arms wide. "Can I get a hug then?"

"Seriously?" Chiclet playfully chides as she hands you your coffee. "A hug? What are you, six? You want a lollipop too?"

You feign frustration. "Are you for real? We've got lollipops here and you didn't tell me? *Hell yeah* I want one!"

"Okay, okay. So where are we gonna put you tonight? April's got Freddy's room, so if you want you can stay with me in mine as long as you don't mind sleeping on the floor."

"Actually... I was thinking I might go back over to Mr. Fazbear's and ask if I can stay a few more nights -- just until April's comfortably settled somewhere," you reply.

"I don't mind if you stay here. I'd give up my bed, but..."

You laugh. "No, Chica, it's cool. I -- you know, coming back today was really good for me and it's not like I intend to move out. But right now, I, uh..." You shrug, smiling apologetically. "I don't think I deserve to be here just yet."

She stirs her mug with a raised eyebrow. "What do you mean, you don't 'deserve' to live here?"

"I need to straighten some things out in my head right now. I love this apartment and all of you guys -- Freddy's cooking, shopping with you and Bonnie, pajama night and bad movies. Mangle giving the best damn shave I've ever had in my life. It's great, and I want to be a part, Chica... but I need to go put some things right that went wrong before I can come back home."

"Well, I really can't say I understand," Chiclet answers, raising her mug in something of a toast, "but I'll keep your seat warm just the same until you do return."

You clink your mug against hers with a resolute nod.

"I appreciate it, Chica."

You stand there for a minute, sipping from your mug.

"...so, are you really not going to hug me?"

"Oh my *god*," she groans, unable to fight the smile on her face. "C'mere, you goober."

# Bake Sale

## Chapter Summary

A chicken in the kitchen is making all the sound.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



After assisting Chiclet with some household chores, helping Mangle pack no fewer than two dozen webstore orders for cold weather accessories, and enjoying another of Freddy's trademark lunches to the fullest possible extent, you figure you've dragged your feet long enough. As much fun as you've had being back home, there's no sense in stalling the inevitable, and so you say your goodbyes and depart Chiclet's at half past twelve. As you step outside onto the walkway, you offer up a silent prayer in the hopes that your welcome hasn't been completely overstayed at Beanie's place, then set off across the street for Building 9.

As you're passing the staircase that would ordinarily take you upstairs to 93-B, the sound of heavy footfalls clanging down the steps overhead stops you in your tracks. Your heart begins a rapid ascent up your throat as you overhear Bonworth himself conversing with none other than Fred Fazbear.

"Well, I sure do appreciate you takin' the time to come all the way back here on your lunch break, Fred." You clamp a hand over your mouth as you press your body against the doorway of the

nearest apartment.

"It's no trouble," Fred replies. "I respect your position, even if I don't personally agree with it."

Bonworth sighs heavily as he finishes limping down the stairs. "Thanks, Fred. Ol' Faz really was a sight to behold last night. Whole thing got him so riled up, you know? Haven't seen him so animated in a while."

"Yeah. I really don't know what it is you people see in that worthless bastard," Fred grumbles. "I'd just as soon have put the freak out in the cold and called it a day."

"Now, Fred, that's a mighty uncharitable thing to say," Bonworth says with a hurt tone. "I know he's kind of funny-turned and his personality's a bit peculiar, but I'd appreciate it if you didn't tear him down like that. Lord knows he's hurting something fierce as it is, he doesn't need our help twistin' the knife."

You glare disapprovingly at Fred through the slats in the staircase. You knew he was a judgmental guy, but to say something like that about Faz is way over the line. Even after him jumping in your face last night you can't possibly bring yourself to be upset with the tattered bear -- you know he was only trying to protect Cheeky and his other friends from your careless words. If anything, you've *gained* respect for him.

Oblivious to your presence, Fred claps Bonworth on the shoulder, causing the slender rabbit to nearly tumble out of his prosthetic braces.

"Well all that aside, I need to get back to work," he rumbles. "You have my word I'll have things sorted out tonight."

"I can't thank you enough, pal. We're all kind of beside ourselves right now."

You hang your head, silently vowing to do whatever you can to make amends before long.

Bonworth and Fred shake paws, and you hear the rabbit begin the task of clattering back up the stairs while Fred continues his descent. Once the stocky bear reaches the bottom of the staircase, he stops abruptly instead of heading forward to the parking lot. You watch anxiously as he pats the pockets of his trousers, seemingly having forgotten something. With a frustrated huff, he trudges back toward his apartment -- in other words, directly towards where you're lurking.

You frantically look around for a place to hide, but the hallway's too narrow. You accept the reality that you're busted, choosing to step out into the middle of the walkway so he can see you. Sure enough, he looks up and sees you awkwardly holding your luggage while standing two doors down from his apartment. Narrowing his eyelids to thin slits, he continues stomping toward you.

"What the hell are *you* doing here? Were you *eavesdropping* on my conversation just now?" he growls.

You nervously stand your ground, shaking your head. "Not *intentionally*," you reply. "I was... coming by to ask if I could stay a couple more nights, and I arrived right as you and Bonworth were coming down the stairs."

Fred studies your expression for several seconds to see if you're being honest, scowling all the while. "How much did you hear?" he barks. "And I'll know if you're lying, so answer truthfully."

"Just the tail end of it, something about respecting his position," you confess, choosing perhaps unwisely to press on as indignation grips you. "And just for the record, you're not being fair to Faz. That was an awful thing to say about someone in his shape."

"Faz?" Confusion crosses his face. "What the hell are you talking about?"

You grip the shoulder strap of your duffel bag tight enough to leave a permanent crease in the fabric. "About him being a 'worthless bastard' and a 'freak', for one thing," you snap, righteous fury fueling your words even as you're supposed to be begging for charity.

**Hah!** Oh, wow, you really *didn't* hear anything!" he guffaws, eyes wide and mouth wider. "If you had, you'd know we weren't referring to Faz -- I was talking about *you*."

Fred leans forward, looking directly down at you. You find yourself instinctively backing up a few inches, both hands raised in defeat.

"Fred, I get the feeling we got off on the wrong foot," you reply, dipping your head timidly.

"*You think.*"

"I really don't intend any disrespect by you or anyone else, and I'm sorry if I'm coming across that way. Believe me when I say I'd prefer to be at peace with everyone here." You jab a finger overhead. "Including them. I plan to make things right, I'm just... waiting for the right opportunity."

"I can't peg you, Mike," he finally says, rubbing his chin. "You can't stop apologizing for your stupidity, but you can't seem to stop being stupid in the *first* place either. So either you're a manipulating freeloader who's never heard the phrase 'fool me once', or you're just a genuine idiot."

"Can it be neither? Believe me, Fred, I'd have preferred to stay across the street and not have ever bothered any of you, but circumstances dictated otherwise. If it's money you want, I'll gladly give you a down payment for rent, and the rest when my next check arrives."

"I don't need your money," he scoffs, brushing past you towards his door. "I'm gainfully employed."

"But *I do* need your help," you plead. "At least, I need a room for a few nights until I can go back to my own bed. If you want, I'll go across the street to do my laundry and eat meals, you won't even notice I'm here. Fred, I'm trying to get it together -- throw me a rope, will you?"

He pauses, paw on the doorknob. "Word travels fast around here," he says calmly. "Ms. Chiclet called Bonworth this morning, and he called me just a short while ago. And you know what both of them had to say?"

You run a hand through your hair, exhaling softly. "I don't."

"They both said you need help."

He opens the door, motioning for you to follow him in. Hefting your luggage, you file inside just behind Fred. You briefly consider challenging him on the definition of "needing help", but right now you're not in the market to push your luck any more than you have already. Considering how welcoming and jovial both Chiclet's and Bonworth's households were to you, you're still trying to figure out where you stand with Fazbear and his crew.

So far, it's not looking too good for you.

"I've got to get back to work, since my lunch break's almost over," Fred says, collecting a set of car keys from a rack in the entry foyer. "I trust you were paying attention when I laid out my house rules last night."

You mock salute. "I was, and I promise I won't be any trouble. Chiclet'll vouch for me."

"She already has," he remarks over his shoulder. "And that's the only reason you got through the door a second time."

Before you can say anything else, Fred Fazbear forcefully shuts the front door behind himself, leaving you standing alone in the foyer.

"Really appreciate it," you holler uselessly after him.

Dumping your bags by the front door for now, you head into the common area to let the other tenants know of your presence. The television's blaring some daytime talk show, but nobody's in the living room watching the screen.

"Sorry to intrude!" you shout over the TV set. "Anyone in here?"

The double doors to the kitchen swing open and Chichi leans out from the kitchen, waving to you. "Oh! Hi again, Mike! I didn't expect you to take me so literally when I said 'visit us again soon'!" she chirps. "I just got a big rush order! Can you shut the TV off for me?"

"Not a problem," you reply, pressing the power button on the front of the television. "If it's any consolation, I didn't really expect to take you so literally either."

She trots out into the middle of the hallway, wiping her wings on her apron. "Well, I certainly don't mind guests! It can be kind of sleepy here during the days with Mr. Fazbear and Bonnie's work schedules. Why don't you come on back to the kitchen so we can chat?"

"All righty."

If there's one constant between apartments, it seems that every chicken you've met has been nothing but friendly and outgoing. You fold your jacket up and gently drape it over the couch's armrest for now before following her into the kitchen. Chichi appears to be in full production mode with mixing bowls and kitchen appliances spread all over the countertops in various states of use.

"So what brings you back around so soon, Mike?" she asks before tearing into a sack of flour with her beak with practiced ease.

"Uh, if it's all right with you, I was hoping I could stay here for a few days. I already cleared it with Fred, but I'd like to make sure that you're fine with it as well."

"Oh, how exciting!" Chichi says, dunking a measuring cup into the flour bag. "I love having company over, and I'm kind of disappointed we didn't get to talk more last night. Do you mind if I ask why, though? Um, why you're staying here, I mean."

"I don't mind. It's a fair question," you reply, pulling one of the barstools away from the counter to take a seat. "I live across the street over in 87-B, but as you heard a new tenant had to be

temporarily placed over there, and with six people staying in one apartment it's just a little too cramped."

"I can imagine," she replies. "Our place is real roomy, but we still get cabin fever from time to time ourselves, you know?"

You nod. "Exactly. I was staying upstairs with Bonworth until just yesterday, but like I said last night, I screwed up pretty bad."

She begins scooping flour into a heavy-duty stand mixer. "Hopefully nothing that can't be fixed, though?"

You mull over the scrap of dialogue you managed to overhear between Fred and Bonworth earlier, weighing their words in your mind. You can't help but feel relieved at the thought that Bonworth still seems to care about you. Maybe you haven't completely burned your bridges upstairs.

"I think so. I mouthed off at them, and in the heat of the moment I ended up really hurting Cheeky with my words. Not on purpose, of course, but still." You shake your head in disgust. "Everything I've been told and everything I've seen firsthand about them -- they're good people. And to be honest, I want to make things right with all of them before I can go back home. Besides, my usual roommates have their hands kind of full right now, so they could use some space anyway."

Chichi props herself up on the counter, nodding. "I think it's big of you to be willing to apologize. A lot of people have difficulty putting their pride aside in the first place, so that says something about your character."

"It's like -- I just got so mad when I started putting the pieces together in my head, you know? It'd be one thing if they were honest accidents for a really high-risk job -- like if this was some kind of... I dunno, coal town or something," you sigh. "These guys worked at a pizza arcade, though. Corporate incompetence can only go so far as an excuse."

You realize you're clenching your fists, your palms stinging from where your fingernails have been digging into your flesh.

"It isn't right, Chichi, and the thought of them just... letting it slide? I know I'm wrong to butt in, but it pissed me off."

She smoothes her blouse out a little as she resumes pouring ingredients into the mixer. "I'll be honest with you, Mike, I've never really cared for the way that restaurant does business, but you're right -- it's *not* our place to butt into other peoples' affairs." The corners of her mouth turn up slightly. "Still, that doesn't mean we can't be there for our friends when they need us."

"Yeah. Yeah, definitely!" you enthuse. "I want to be a reliable guy, you know? I mean, I try to help out around the house wherever I'm at -- it makes me feel useful, productive. I don't *ever* want to be accused of being a layabout."

"That's what I like to hear," she giggles. "In that case, would you be willing to give me some help baking today?"

"Sure, but I don't know how much use I'll be. Freddy's such an amazing cook, I'll confess I feel kind of inadequate. All I know how to do is boil hot dogs and eggs."

"Oh, I bet you can do more than that. Bonnie said you made a really good seafood chowder the other night. Cooking's pretty easy once you get the hang of it." She frowns a little as a few of her yellow feathers flutter down onto the counter. "Uh oh."

"Yikes," you observe, hopping to your feet. "It's started, huh?"

"Well, that explains the cravings for protein this morning," she sighs, collecting her discarded down.

"Craving proteins? Is that a thing like, uh... the cravings expectant moms have, or...?"

Tucking the feathers into a pocket on her apron, she taps her beak thoughtfully. "Hmmm! I suppose it's sort of like that. Feathers are actually mostly protein, so when a hen starts to molt, her body's going to want to replenish the missing nutrients."

"Huh. Learn something new every day." After washing your hands in the sink, you turn to face her. "So how can I help you with baking? If you need someone to taste test, I'm your man."

"Oh, don't worry -- there'll be plenty of that between the two of us," she grins, patting her belly. "Actually, I was asked to bake a *huge* order of cupcakes for a wedding reception later tonight, but the thing is, they want them individually wrapped and boxed to be sent home with the guests as party favors."

"Aha. So between icing and wrapping and all that..."

"Yup, you get it," she says. "It's a fairly big job since the reception's only in about five or so hours, but the pay's spectacular. I'm getting almost four dollars per cupcake!"

Your jaw nearly hits the floor. Even with the wrapping supplies and the cost of the cake ingredients, she can't have that much in overhead. "Damn," you hiss, jealous. "That's a sweet gig! Err -- no pun intended."

She giggles appreciatively. "Well, if you'll help me out, I'll gladly pay you for your time."

"Oh, I can't take your money, Chichi, but I'm more than happy to give you a hand."

"If you've worked for it, you're not 'taking' anything," she huffs. "I can't get it all done by myself in time, and while Rackham was supposed to help me, he's not very good with his-- err, oh dear."

She covers her mouth, looking up worriedly. Remembering the face you saw at the end of the hall last night, you glance behind yourself. Fortunately, nobody seems to lurking there.

"How about you pay me in trade?" you ask, ignoring it and turning back to Chichi. "I'll help you get your orders wrapped and ready to go for tonight, and maybe you can show me a few cooking tips tomorrow. I've always wanted to learn how to bake."

Chichi's eyes light up. "Oh, Mike, that's a brilliant idea! I've got the perfect recipe in mind that's absolutely delicious, and it's so simple a toddler could make it."

"Sounds like it's about my speed then," you crack. "All right, so what do you need me to do?"

The plump little hen begins pouring her mixture into cupcake wrappers for her tray. "Well, you can start by unpacking the cake boxes from the closet so that they're ready for when we need them later.

"There's a little diagram card in each one that shows you how to fold them," she instructs. "Make sure you follow it exactly, since if they're not folded juuuust right the cupcakes could fall out, and that's the last thing we want to happen at a wedding."

"No kidding," you mutter. "I don't want to be the guy responsible for getting you run out of town because the bride's dress got coated in buttercream frosting due to a packaging malfunction."

"Now that I'm starting to molt, at least if I get tarred and feathered it might actually be beneficial," she says with a goofy grin.

The cupcake packaging is simple enough once you get the hang of it. The directions aren't terribly clear and you do end up ruining your first box by accidentally folding the tabs the wrong way, but fortunately she's got literally hundreds of the things. The second one takes forever, thanks to a number of salvageable mistakes, but comes out okay. Once you finally get the method down, it's an easy task.

"So, uh... who's Rodham?" you ask.

"Rackham," she gently corrects, having since moved on to mixing up frosting to use. "He's an old childhood friend of ours -- well, Bonnie and me. We went to school together. Of course, we usually just call him Foxy."

"Ah, that must be the other Foxy that Beanie was referring to," you muse as you scratch the back of your head.

Hmm... yet another household with one bear, one chicken, one rabbit, and one fox. If you didn't know better -- and at this point you really don't -- you'd assume Marion is some high-functioning obsessive compulsive who feels the crippling need to group apartments together with this exact arrangement of tenants. The name (or at least, nickname) situation feels even weirder -- and none of them appear to find it strange or remarkable in any way.

Remembering something Beanie said a few days ago, a sudden thought strikes you. "Say, does Rackham like poker?" you ask.

Chichi nods, smiling. "Foxy *loves* poker! He's always watching poker tournaments on TV. It really fascinates him. His poker face is really good, too, but he could stand to work on his poker tail."

"His poker tail?!" You fight back a laugh. "That's a thing?"

"Sure, why wouldn't it be? I don't really have a tail -- just tailfeathers -- so I don't fully understand it myself, but it's some kind of an instinctive thing in canines, you know? Foxy's tail wags whenever he has good cards and twitches whenever he has bad ones, so we call it his poker tail. When he finally found out what we were all giggling about, he started hiding it under a pillow during the game."

"Well, funny as that may be, I'm in no position to judge," you shrug. "I'm such an amateur that I got run into the ground playing poker just the other day. Bonworth really would've taken me to the cleaners had we been gambling for real money. Apparently he had aces up his sleeve, and I mean that literally. And I didn't even notice."

"No way!" she gasps. "Bonworth, cheating?"

"Oh, it was only for a joke," you answer amiably. "The others were in on it, too. I think he just wanted to tease me a little." You neglect to tell her about the aftermath of the poker game that culminated in Bonworth's literal downfall.

"Well, I'm glad to hear you're okay with it," Chichi remarks, going back to work. "It's nice that you're a good sport, Mike. I think you'll fit in fine here with that kind of attitude."

Of that much, you're not quite sure. Fred hasn't exactly been warm and inviting, and while Beanie seems all right, she's very low-energy and impersonal. You haven't had the pleasure of meeting Rackham yet but if he's the owner of the gleaming teeth and eye you saw leering out from behind the curtain at you last night...

"Well, I certainly hope so," you finally manage.

Thanks to Chichi's skill and experience (not to mention having two gigantic commercial ovens) she's able to get over two hundred large, fluffy cupcakes baked in the span of a few hours. After letting them cool, the two of you are able to get them frosted, decorated, and packed away with time to spare before they're to be delivered to the wedding.

"So how are you going to get all of these to where they need to go?" you ask between bites of one of the leftover cupcakes given to you as part of your reward. So buttery and moist. They're *almost* worth four bucks a pop.

Chichi finishes her third cupcake before starting in on her fourth. "That's the easiest part, actually," she says. "Mr. Marion has a small delivery van up at the leasing office that he lets me use as long as I bring it back with a full tank."

"Hey, nice. You've got a ton of boxes here, though. Do you want me to ride over there with you to help offload them?"

"Sure!" she replies eagerly. "That's nice of you, Mike. Thanks!"

"Hey, no problem, chickadee," you respond smoothly, finishing up your own cupcake before washing it down with a cold glass of fruit punch. "Oh, looks like you've got a little, um... uh, well, everything on your shirt there."

Chichi looks down at her blouse, suddenly self-conscious. It's smeared in chocolate and cake batter. She huffs in frustration as she hops off the barstool. "Oh, shoot! I guess I'd better run to the bathroom and clean myself up before I head out."

"Anything you need me to do here?" you ask, brushing a few stray crumbs off your own clothes. "I can help clean the kitchen or load the truck if you want."

"That won't be necessary," a husky voice interjects from the hallway outside the kitchen. The doors swing wide as a shaggy fox with rust-colored fur barges inside. "I'm more than happy to assist you, lass."

Chichi smiles as she dabs a little of the chocolate sauce off of one of her sleeves. "Hi, Foxy. You're up a little late, aren't you?"

Not unlike the Foxy you're more familiar with, Rackham's also kind of a battered mess, even at a passing glance. He does, however, appear to be much more focused and alert than his upstairs counterpart. A thick cotton medical pad covers Rackham's right eye, held to his head by a tight elastic band. His neck is wrapped in a narrow foam brace, possibly due to a recent injury. His chest and torso fur is mostly thick and bushy, but a couple of spots have been noticeably shaved, one of which appears to accommodate for a recent surgical scar. His paws are stuffed in the pockets of his frayed, baggy khaki shorts -- the only article of clothing he seems to be wearing.

You turn in your seat, politely offering your hand to Rackham for a shake.

"Hey, I'm Mike," you greet. "I'll be staying here for a couple of days. Long story."

Rackham looks at your proffered hand in disgust, withdrawing his paws from his pockets. In place of his right paw is a modern prosthetic hook -- less pirate-like than the one Haddock has and more capable of grasping, but still a hook just the same. He holds it towards yours, clicking the air once and giving you a very unimpressed look, before dropping it back to his pocket. You sheepishly lower your hand as he turns back to Chichi without further acknowledgement.

You suppose that explains why she seemed so uncomfortable earlier.

"Why didn't you come wake me up if you had a big order?" he asks, sounding almost offended. "I don't know why I overslept again, anyway..."

"Hmm, could be because you skipped dinner last night," Chichi replies. "How about I go get cleaned up and fix you something to eat before I leave?"

"I can grab a bite on the way," Rackham says dismissively. "Don't need to go to any trouble on my account, Chica."

"Um, well, I'll just be a moment then," Chichi announces. "I need to go call Mr. Marion and change my clothes before we leave. Why don't you and Mike chat for a bit? I think you two will get along great. Actually -- we can all ride together to drop off my order, and then maybe pick up takeout for dinner? Bonnie's going to be hungry when she wakes up."

"Sounds good," you reply.

She turns to Rackham who gives a shrug, taking a seat at the barstool directly next to yours.

"It's settled, then!" She claps her wings together cheerfully, and a little puff of flour erupts from her feathers as she does, causing her to giggle. "I'll be back in just a few minutes, and we can go get the van and start loading."

Chichi trots out of the kitchen, humming to herself as she goes. As soon as she's out of earshot, Rackham swivels his seat around to look at you. "So what's your game?" he snarls.

You lean back, wide-eyed. "Uh, what do you mean? About me staying here, or...?"

He prods you in the chest with the curve of his hook. "About everything. Your little woe-is-me charity routine, coming over here so you can cozy up to the lasses? You think I didn't see the way you were looking at Chica last night? Hear how you were talking to her just now?"

Your nervous smile turns to a decided frown. "Wait, you think I've got designs on the girls here?" you gawk.

He audibly scoffs, leaning close enough that you can feel the hot breath coming off of his muzzle.

"Play innocent all you want. You're going to have to get past me first, ape," he seethes as he slides off the barstool. Throwing one last glare at you over his shoulder, he stomps off down the hallway toward his bedroom.

You can already tell that you're in for a very pleasant stay.

#### Chapter End Notes

This chapter is followed by a **Roommates Mini Chapter**, which we recommend you should read if you're following the story chronologically!

Before proceeding to the next chapter in the main series, [click here for the next part, Mini 1: Rough Start.](#)

# Fries & Barbecue Sauce

## Chapter Summary

Mike and his roommates stop for burgers on the way home from a delivery.

## Chapter Notes

There's a special "Mini" chapter between this one and the last! If you haven't read the Mini, "*Rough Start*", you can find it [here](#).

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)



Rackham refuses to come into the reception hall upon your arrival, instead opting to stay in the van. He does, at least, help to offload the cupcake boxes onto a push cart for you to take in, though his

prosthetic hook gives him some difficulty with it.

"The last thing Chica needs is *two* sideshow acts putting everyone off their dinner," the fox grumbles quietly. "You'd better keep your distance. Try not to look like you're with her."

You resist the temptation to flip him off as you exit the delivery van, instead choosing to take the high road. The entire ride over to the dropoff was nothing short of uncomfortable, with Rackham having demanded that you ride in the cargo hold with the cupcake packages even though there was plenty of room up front in the cab for all three of you. Your legs are sore from not having a proper seat while being jostled around down winding, twisty back roads.

Pushing the cart behind Chichi, you follow her through the reception hall's parking lot. The client gave instructions to meet in a back room to drop the order off. You suppress a grin as a Seagal-esque scene plays out in your mind of you and Chichi having to fight your way out of a botched black market cupcake deal. Fortunately for yourself and your new friend, there are no cronies waiting around the facility -- unless you count the catering team setting up under the supervision of a matronly female beagle in formal attire.

Upon noticing the two of you walking up, the dog you're assuming is the mother of the bride hastily trundles over to Chichi. You can practically feel Rackham boring a hole into the back of your head with his good eye, so you politely take a few steps back from the cart full of packages so that Chichi can have some space to conduct her transaction.

"You must be Ms. Chichi! Goodness, you got them here so quickly and the wrapping is just beautiful! What do I owe you?"

"Um, 200 at \$3.75 each is \$750, plus the ten dollar delivery fee. I'd be willing to waive that since you bought so much, though," Chichi says as she presents the client with a wing-written receipt.

"Psh, absolutely **unacceptable**. You rushed the order over on such short notice, I couldn't possibly do that to you. What do you say we make it a nice, even \$800?" the beagle replies, handing Chichi several crisp bills.

"Oh, that's very generous of you! Thank you *so much!*" Chichi trills, pressing the money into the pocket of her denim skirt with a grateful smile. "And please, it was no trouble at all. If you're happy with your order, I'd really appreciate it if you would tell your friends and family about me. Tell them to mention you and I'll gladly give them a discount on their orders!"

"I absolutely will," the beagle chuckles, patting her ample belly. "Oh, these certainly do look delicious. I suppose I should be watching my weight a bit better now that grandpuppies are no doubt on the way, but... oh, I must be sampling one of these cupcakes. Perhaps two or three, even -- if they're a fraction as good as I've heard they are, somebody's probably going home shortchanged tonight!"

Chichi giggles. "Well, I hope everyone enjoys them, and I hope your daughter has a *wonderful* reception. Congratulations to both of you!" After exchanging a few more brief pleasantries, she excuses herself and the two of you retreat to the van.

"That went smoothly," Chichi says as you slide in through the passenger's side door, forcing Rackham into the middle of the bench between Chichi and yourself. He fixes you with a flustered glare as you buckle in next to him.

"Pretty tight fit," he mumbles.

You shift a little in your seat under his gaze. "I'm sorry, Rackham. Would you be more comfortable if I sat in the middle?"

Because of the location of his eyepatch, he has to turn his entire head to look at you -- ah. That must be what's bothering him. "I guess it's fine," he mutters.

"I'd ride in the back again, but I got nauseated on the way up here and I'm sure Marion doesn't want me heaving on his carpets," you joke.

Chichi leans past Rackham with a sympathetic look. "Oh no, I'm sorry, Mike! Was my driving too rough?"

"Not at all!" you hastily answer. "The roads were what was rough. You were fine, I promise."

Rackham flops back in his seat with a disapproving huff, but he doesn't say anything else. He doesn't need to -- the expression on his face is more than enough. You suddenly regret your decision to force your way up front, but before you can do anything about it Chichi drives out of the parking lot.

"Well, hopefully the return trip will be a little smoother since we won't be as rushed," she says apologetically.

"He'll be fine, lass," Rackham interjects. "The real question is, what are we going to do about dinner?"

Chichi presses a feather tip to her beak in thought. "Um, well, Mike, you're our guest. How about you pick?"

"I'm still kind of new to the area, so I don't really know what's around here," you reply. Looking at Rackham, you decide to throw him an olive branch in hopes that it might quell some of his latent distrust. "Rackham, can you suggest anything?"

"Oh, I can suggest *plenty*."

Well, so much for that plan.

"What are you hungry for then, Foxy?" Chichi asks obliviously as she turns out onto the frontage road. "We'll pass all sorts of stuff on the way home."

"Burgers," he says with a dismissive wave of his hook. "Burgers are fine. That is, if our *guest* is okay with it."

You nod, shifting in your seat a little so that you're not pressed up so close to Rackham. You can feel his bristly fur against your skin, poking through the fabric of your clothes.

"Works for me," you reply. "Feels like it's been so long since I've had a decent burger that even something from McDonald's would be fine."

"McDonald's?" they both echo simultaneously.

"Err... a cheap fast food place near where I grew up," you answer evasively. Hey, it's *technically* the truth. "Probably out of business now for all I know."

Chichi glances over at you, eyebrow raised. "Oh, I see. Where'd you grow up?"

"You know, I guess I've lived all over when I think about it," you respond at length, "but I'm originally from a little suburban neighborhood up in Colorado."

"Colorado? Hmm! It's a good thing you're used to cold weather then, since I imagine winter's going to be rough if last year was any indication."

"Oh, the 'big freeze'?" you ask. "I've heard so much about it, I could probably recount the stories like I'd been there myself."

"Well, you weren't, so let's not talk about it," Rackham mutters, scratching his side with his good paw.

You start to say something in reply, but you realize his expression isn't the suspicious scowl you're rapidly becoming accustomed to. Instead, his demeanor is almost... wistful?

"All right," you respond gently, dropping the subject. After last night, you're not going to push anybody to talk about anything that they seem uncomfortable with.

Conversation awkwardly drifts off due to Chichi largely focused on driving and Rackham purposefully avoiding eye contact with you. There's not much else you can do at the moment, so you turn your attention to looking out the window in an attempt to get the lay of the land. Unfortunately, the three of you are driving down unfamiliar roads at night, so the only businesses or landmarks to begin with are just a few neon signs in storefronts here and there. The cargo hold of the van didn't have windows, so you really don't have much of a point of reference for where you're at anyway.

Your thoughts turn to the alien setting you find yourself in. While the contrast was pretty steep between Chiclet's and Bonworth's respective households, both apartments had a fair bit in common as well. From the laid-back demeanor to identical floor plans, you didn't feel nearly as displaced jumping from 87-B to 93-B as you do at this moment. Like the last two apartments, you're having to get used to a completely new dynamic all over again, but now you have the added challenge of having to get a read on entirely new personalities.

Beanie seems all right, if not a bit dry and low-energy. From the way she acts, you'd assume she stays heavily medicated. You wouldn't be surprised if that's the case -- seems like everyone here has issues of some kind. Apart from the very limited interaction you had with her at Bonworth's, she feels as much like a stranger to you as the others do. Combining that with her mostly-nocturnal schedule, you're wondering how much you'll even see of her.

While Rackham doesn't seem that *aggressively* hostile, you can definitely tell he doesn't like you at all. Even though you're an outsider, it's clear enough that he's very protective of Chichi -- almost to the point of being possessive of her. He's pretty shifty, and clearly has trust issues -- a far cry from the "Foxy" you're more familiar with. You've tried to see parallels in the neighbors you've met, measuring one bear against another, contrasting the "Bonnie"s you've run into. But compared to Haddock, Rackham is one of the starkest personality contrasts you've seen in similar types. The foxes, at least, are nothing alike.

As usual, it feels like your only true ally in the apartment is once again the resident "Chica". Chichi's flocked to you almost immediately, and considering her tone-deaf bummer housemates you can see why. Maybe she's looking for a friend? Maybe she's insecure. You're not really sure what her deal is, but you're grateful to have someone around that seems to enjoy your company.

Fred's mention of word traveling fast through the complex makes you question just how much misinformation he's been given about you, since he seemed convinced you were a "hothead". And maybe he's right, and maybe you do have a temper, but you're at least aware of it and you're trying to reign it in. Even moreso than Rackham, you intend to prove to Fred that you're not the screwup he thinks you are.

Fred's earlier words about "apologizing for your stupidity" while being "unable to stop being stupid" echo in your head. You can't help but be a little offended -- you certainly don't regard yourself as a genius, but you're a long way off from stupid. You received reasonably good grades in school and grew up in a relatively average household. Sure, you dropped out of high school in your senior year, but you were only a couple of months from graduating anyway. It's not like the first eighteen years of your life are invalidated by your lack of a diploma.

Then again, after winding up over here, maybe they were. Maybe nothing matters anymore. After all, does this world even have a record of Mike Schmidt? Your head starts to ache just thinking about it -- it's like the chicken-or-the-egg scenario. Actually, is it really? A smile plays at your lips as you realize you have the privilege of knowing actual sentient chickens now. Maybe one of them has an interesting take on the great philosophical dilemma.

Still, you're pretty sure you're not a complete idiot. There's a difference between being a stupid person, and being a person who makes the occasional stupid decision. You've done a fair bit of the latter recently, but you're also making strides to correct it, and Bonworth's concern for you this afternoon even after everything that happened has filled your heart up with hope.

No, not just hope. *Purpose*, too. You're going to prove Fred, Faz, and Rackham wrong, and you're going to do it by being the kind of friend *you'd* want to have.



A bump in the road jostles you from your thoughts. You look up, realizing you've arrived at an old-fashioned fast food restaurant. A bright neon sign with a cartoon hummingbird mascot waves to you with a quirky smile. Colorfully-dressed animal carhops dart back and forth on rollerskates from vehicle to vehicle, toting trays full of brown-bagged fast food.

"You're gonna love Humburger, Mike!" Chichi announces as she pulls into the line for the drive-thru, all smiles. "This place has the absolute best burgers and fries in town. Oh, and onion rings, too. And milkshakes, and fried pies, and--"

"Everything here's good," Rackham interjects amiably. "Chica, I'll have a double. Frings, cola with no ice."

"Ooh! Changing it up today with frings?" Chichi comments.

Rackham smiles back at her, seemingly pleased she noticed. "Ah, well, felt like trying something different."

Chichi eyes the queue of cars in front of you as she fishes a cheap cell phone out of her pocket. "Can you call home and see if Mr. Fazbear's in yet?" she asks, handing it over to Rackham. "I imagine he's going to be hungry after getting home from work. Oh, Bonnie too, since she's probably going to wake up soon."

"Sure thing," he says, taking the phone and awkwardly cradling it in his hook. He carefully uses his good paw to dial the house number, but halfway through pressing the buttons his paw slips, causing the bulky phone to clatter around at your feet.

"Damn it," he mumbles, trying to pick the phone up with his foot and succeeding only in kicking it underneath the bench seat. "Oh, come on!"

"Hang on, I got it," you calmly answer. Unfastening your seat belt, you reach under the seat, pulling the phone out from a small crevice it's stuck in. "Here you are."

Rackham wordlessly takes it from your hands, clearly embarrassed. Nestling it in his hook again, he painstakingly dials the number once more.

"Hey, boss, it's me. Yeah, we're picking up dinner... right, Hamburger. Got it. Sorry, the connection's-- yeah, right. Okay. Is Bonnie awake yet? ...oh, I forgot that was supposed to be tonight. What does *she* want? *No lettuce?*" Frowning, he exchanges glances with Chichi. "Oh, I misheard. Extra lettuce. Right, over and out."

Ending the call, he returns the phone to Chichi. "Bonbon is going to be joining us for dinner tonight. Number three with extra lettuce and a lemonade, and Fred and Bonnie will have their usual order."

"Oh, that sounds like fun!" Chichi replies. "Maybe we could play some cards or something after dinner?"

"I'm game," you add. "I don't know her too well yet, but from what I've seen of her, Bonbon seems cool -- as long as she's not making me jog laps around the apartment complex."

"Yeah, I figured you'd be her type," Rackham replies with a smug grin. You narrow your eyes at him, and he quickly turns away, stifling a laugh.

"Foxy!" Chichi huffs as he continues to snicker. "Now that's not fair at all. Mike can't help it!"

After a half minute or so of trying to suppress his giggle fit, Rackham finally composes himself. "Yeah, yeah, all right. Mango's got a tutoring job tonight, and Goose and Peanut are across town at the doctor, so Bonbon's home alone and bored."

"Well, of course she's welcome to join us," Chichi insists, pulling the van forward to the speaker. "The more the merrier!"



Chichi and Rackham drop you off outside the apartment building before returning the van to the front desk. Claiming that he doesn't want Chichi walking across the complex alone at night, Rackham leaves you loaded down like a pack mule with several paper sacks stuffed full of fast food (at least two or three of which are exclusively for Chichi). You can barely see over your hefty payload of dinner as you stumble down the building's lower hallway in the direction of the apartment proper. You nearly roll your ankle twice on the uneven sidewalk slabs, but you soldier on.

Eventually you arrive at the apartment door, having taken far longer than if you'd had a little help. You can't set the bags down for fear of causing a chain reaction and spilling the food on the ground, so you awkwardly knock on the door with the tip of your boot, hoping someone inside will hear you.

After a moment's wait, the front door slowly creaks open, and a familiar shadow falls across the entryway, one paw on the doorknob.

"Hello, Mike."

"Hey, Fred," you reply, voice muffled by a faceful of brown paper. "We got dinner, Chichi and Rackham will be in shortly. They had to return the van back to the front desk."

You hear him turn and trudge down the hall to his office without so much as a reply.

"Yeah, I'm good, thanks," you call out after him exasperatedly.

Padding into the living room, you notice Bonbon hasn't arrived yet. Beanie, meanwhile is draped across the couch, apparently having just woken up since she's still in her tank top and pajama pants. Strangely, Fred's already taken his seat in his leather chair, but he stands back up upon seeing you round the corner into the living room.

"Good, you're finally home," he says. "Where are Chica and Foxy?"

You stare at him dubiously -- didn't you just have this conversation?

"Uh, up at the front desk?" you reply slowly, enunciating carefully in case he didn't understand you the first time. "With Marion's van they had to return from the delivery earlier?" You worriedly glance over at Beanie to gauge her reaction, but she's still half-asleep.

"Oh, I see," he mutters with a frown, reaching to help you with the food bags. "Well, let's go get some plates and start re-crisping the fries, then."

"They're still pretty fresh, but if that's how you guys do it here, then far be it from me to question it." Shaking your head, you follow Fred into the kitchen. "Any word on when Bonbon's going to get here?"

"She *was* here, but just left a few minutes ago. Forgot something at home," Fred mutters. "By the way, you guys left the kitchen a mess this afternoon and I don't feel like doing the dishes a third time today, so pull some paper plates out of the pantry. Oh, and some foil. I don't want to get grease all over Chica's oven, since it's a pain in the neck to clean."

"Right, sorry about that. Chichi was in a hurry to get her order down to the wedding hall when we left, and we didn't have time to clean up since I went with her and Rackham."

You do as instructed, handing him a large roll of commercial aluminum foil from Chichi's stash of baking supplies. Fred begins pulling a few sheets of foil off the roll while you search the pantry for paper plates. Glancing back at Mr. Fazbear, you decide you might as well address the elephant in the room from this morning while nobody's around to overhear you.

"Hey, Fred?" you venture hesitantly.

"Yeah," he grunts, distracted with the oven's controls.

You swallow, throat suddenly dry. "As long as I'm apologizing, there's something else I need to tell you," you begin, heaving a large bulk bag of paper plates out of the pantry.

Warily, he looks down at you. "And that'd be?" he asks, tone laced with suspicion.

"I, uh, I wanted to let you know that I really am sorry for what I said to you this afternoon," you answer. "I didn't mean to be disrespectful or... presumptuous, or anything like that. I just... I thought you were talking about Faz when I came walking up, and, well, he's a good guy. Him and everyone else upstairs."

You untie the bag of paper plates, counting out a stack of them to use for the evening's dinner. "I'm not trying to be a kiss-ass or anything, so please don't think that. It's your house and you don't have to put up with me, but you have anyway," you continue. "I appreciate it, and I also want to at least be of help while I'm here. Even if it's just pitching in with chores or errands."

Fred sighs, rubbing the bridge of his muzzle. "I understand you wanting to defend your friends, Mike. That's respectable of you." You start to reply, but he raises a paw to silence you. "Like I told you this afternoon, I've already been made aware of your situation. You can stay here for the week while you wait for the new tenant at your apartment to get squared away, on one condition."

You nod. "All right. What's the condition?"

Fred empties the packets of fries onto a foil-lined cookie sheet before sliding it into the oven. "You're a grown man, so I'm not going to coddle your feelings. Tomorrow you are going to go upstairs and make amends with Bonworth's household. Understood?"

Your stomach flops. "Tomorrow...? It still feels a little soon, Fred. Besides, I already made plans with Chichi to--"

He shuts the oven door forcefully, causing you to flinch. "I gave Bonworth my word I'd get things sorted out with you tonight."

"And how exactly were you planning on doing that?" you croak. "You seemed surprised to see me when I showed up this afternoon to ask if I could stay here."

"I knew you were coming over because Ms. Chiclet called Bonworth, and Bonworth called me," Fred replies. "That wasn't what surprised me. I just didn't expect you to be standing under the stairs listening in on a private conversation."

Crumpling up the last of the paper bags, he dumps them unceremoniously in the kitchen trash can.

"Besides, even if you hadn't come knocking, I'd have figured something out."

A shiver runs down your spine at the thought of what that could have entailed.

"Oh." That's all you can manage.

"Point is, Mike, you're putting your affairs in order tomorrow, and that's final."

"I suppose I don't have a choice, then," you grouse. You begin mechanically distributing condiment packets onto each plate in an effort to distract yourself.

"You really don't," Fred agrees flippantly, wiping his paws on a paper towel. "I had to drive all the way over here from downtown on my lunch break this afternoon to speak to Bonworth because his entire household was whipped into a frenzy after last night. He asked me to intervene, and you'd better damn well believe that's exactly what I'm doing."

"He asked you to... mediate?" you reply quizzically, glancing back up at Fred.

"They still see something in you. What that is, I couldn't say, but Bonworth always was a good judge of character," he says, scowl softening slightly. "So find your spine and rip the bandage off now, Mike. You'll feel better for it, and they will too."

You hold his gaze for a moment before lowering your head solemnly.

"Tomorrow it is," you finally manage, taking a sip of your soft drink.

"All right, Bonbon, what's the big news?" you ask as your group settles down for dinner.

The energetic blue rabbit makes quite the contrast to her sleepy lavender counterpart in the next seat over -- so much so that they almost look like before-and-after pictures for some kind of TV commercial for a fitness plan.

"Okay, so! This morning I got up at five, like I always do, and I started off my routine with my daily exercises," she begins. "Let's see, was it squats first or pilates today? I think it was pilates -- no, no, definitely squats. Wait, shoot."

"Skip to the interesting part," Rackham says as he fumbles with unwrapping his own burger.

Sticking her tongue out at him, Bonbon pinches a chunk of her salad-sandwich off with her fingers.

"Foxy, she's right in the middle of a story! Be polite," Chichi says, shaking her head at Rackham disapprovingly from behind her own mountain of food.

"Yeah, you're sho impashent, Foxshy," Bonbon mutters between bites of lettuce. "Anyway, when I'm not doing one of my workout shows, I like to listen to the radio, you know? And there was the *best* program on this morning -- a call-in talk show. 1030 AM's *Day Owl*, you know? You've heard him, right?"

The others exchange shrugs.

"I usually just listen to the news in my car on the way to work," Fred says.

Beanie snorts, downing most of her soda in just a few gulps. "Do I look like a 'day owl' to you?"

"Can't say I know him either," you reply, dunking your own fries in your ketchup.

"**Ketchup**, Mike? For *fries*? Are you for real with that?" Bonbon blurts out, leaning forward with her paws pressed to her cheeks. "This *so* isn't like, what humans do! It's *barbecue sauce*, man! Barbecue sauce all the way!"

You consider questioning where she's getting her knowledge of human behavior from, since you're pretty sure her source could use some serious revisions. Still, the last thing you want is to draw more attention to yourself, so you just shrug.

"What can I say? I like ketchup," you reply.

Leaning forward in her chair, Bonbon studies your face like a furry blue lie detector. For a few seconds you start to sweat -- is she onto you? Ironically, it's Rackham who ends up coming to your defense.

"Mike's not a human, he's a monkey," he scoffs, poking her forehead and pushing her back into her seat. "I mean, look. If I shaved my fur off would that make me a human?"

Bonbon's ears twitch in excitement. "Hey now, *that's* an idea," she says. "But, what I mean is, it's a shame he's so dedicated to the look, and then he gets such a crucial detail wrong!"

"Look, Bonbon, normal people eat fries with ketchup," Rackham argues as if he's explaining elementary information to a recalcitrant toddler. "*Bonnie* eats fries with ketchup. *Chica* eats fries with ketchup. *I* eat fries with ketchup. *Humans* eat fries with *barbecue sauce* because they're weird, made-up cartoon characters."

You bite your tongue, trying not to break out laughing. Even Fred seems amused by the exchange, but wisely keeps his mouth shut as well.

"Well, way to take the wind out of my sails, *pirate boy*," Bonbon snaps, leaning back in her seat. "Just for that, you aren't invited."

"Invited? To what?" Rackham asks. "Your birthday was last month."

Bonbon rolls her eyes, producing three thick pieces of embossed paper -- tickets or passes of some kind, upon closer examination. "The fourth annual HumieCon is coming up, and look who's got two paws and three tickets! That's right, it's ***THIS girl!***" She grins widely, basking in the thunderous waves of applause she's surely hearing in her head right now.

"Oh god," Fred mutters, "*That* was your big news?"

"Uh huh! I won 'em on the Day Owl's show for being able to answer a human trivia contest!"

"Interesting," Beanie yawns as she pulls one of the tickets from Bonbon's paw. "A whole convention for this stuff. Who's going with you?"

"These are *hot* in demand right now!" Radiating the maximum possible amount of smugness, Bonbon leans against the table, coolly buffing her pawnails against her shirt. "I was thinking of scalping the extra tickets on my *SkinAffinity* journal but I mean, this is way too good of an opportunity to pass up, you know? So I guess I could be persuaded to take a ride-along or two."

"Your own housemates didn't want to go?" Fred asks with the faintest hint of a smirk, wiping a dab of excess horseradish from his paw. One of Bonbon's ears flops slightly as her smile becomes

visibly more forced.

"Well, Goose didn't want to go and I don't blame her since she's all partied out these days, and Peanut can't take off work to go. Mango's too busy with her side jobs and I don't think this is her cup of tea anyway, and I mean, it's such an awesome opportunity--"

"Fine, I'll go with you," Beanie deadpans. "Chica, you game?"

"Oh, I'm afraid I can't, it's too close to the holidays and it's usually my busiest time with cookies and pastries. How about you, Foxy?"

"I'm not invited, *remember?*" Rackham chuckles, content with the excuse he's been provided.

Bonbon looks at you eagerly. If there's anywhere in this world you'd blend in, it'd probably be at a convention of human-obsessed animals. Still, it sounds like a hassle and you're mildly terrified at the thought of being trapped in a building full of Bonbons. Probably best to let someone actually interested have the opportunity.

"I think I'll have to decline as well," you reply. "It's a really generous offer and I do appreciate it, but you're probably better off selling the extra ticket off for the money."

Her other ear flops down. "That's a shame, Mike. There's a cosplay contest they do every year for Most Realistic Human," Bonbon says, pouting. "I bet you'd be a shoo-in to win, too."

You pause mid-bite. "Sh'there a prishze?"

"Thousand big ones," she says with a hopeful smile.

You try not to gawk, but based on her widening grin it's obvious to her that she's got your attention, and for good reason -- there's a hell of a lot you could do with that kind of cash. Besides, no shaved rat, dog or iguana is going to be able to pull off your "distinctive" look. If there's any contest you've got a sporting chance at, it's one where all you have to do is look like a human.

"All right, you've convinced me," you reply. "When's this convention again?"

Bonbon's face lights up at your answer. "Next month, at a convention center downtown," she gushes. "We're really going to have to start in on your regimen so that you'll look good in your costume!"

"Hang on, costume? What kind of costume are we talking about here?" you ask, suddenly wary.

A cool grand would be nice but you're not about to sacrifice your dignity if it means you have to waddle around in something too demeaning. Rackham and Fred are both visibly attempting to contain laughter as Bonbon whips out her smartphone.

"There's no more iconic human costume than *this*," she squeals, shoving the phone in your face. You squint at the screen and nearly drop your food in your lap.

"No. I'm not wearing that," you insist. "Not happening. Pick something else."

"Come on, Mike," Bonbon pleads. "*Legend of Bob* is in right now and you could *totally* rock this look!"

You roll your eyes. "Bonbon, I'm not gonna shave my hair into a mohawk and dye it electric friggin' *blue*. Pick something else."

The table goes quiet as Bonbon's countenance suddenly pivots from energetically enthusiastic to deadly serious.

"What's wrong with *blue*?" she asks, tone low and chillingly even.

Oh, shit. You've stepped in it now. Your mind's whirling as all eyes are watching you attempt to figure a way out of your downward spiral. Even Beanie's perked up considerably, leaned forward with interest.

"Yeah, Mike, what's wrong with blue?" she adds, a goading smile plastered across her face.

"What I mean is, it's not gonna work because my hair's too short for a mohawk, and if we dye it that shade of blue it won't look right," you stammer, tugging at a lock of your dark hair for emphasis. "I might as well -- like, get a wig so that it, uh, looks more, uh... authentic that way."

*Nice save*, Beanie mouths as Fred and Rackham finally lose it laughing.

"Oh, that makes sense! I bet we can figure something out," Bonbon says, grinning like nothing ever happened. "Don't worry. We'll find a way to make it work, Mike!"

Sighing, you try to smile as you finish your burger. Maybe you won't look *that* bad in tights.

## Chapter End Notes

This chapter is followed by a **Roommates Mini Chapter**, which we recommend you should read if you're following the story chronologically!

Before proceeding to the next chapter in the main series, [click here for the next part, Mini 2: Donut Break](#).

# Chica's Chocolate Cheer

## Chapter Summary

With Chichi's help, Mike seeks apology by way of pastry.

## Chapter Notes

There's a special "Mini" chapter between this one and the last! If you haven't read the Mini, "*Donut Break*", you can find it [here](#).

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

# Chapter 25

Chica's Chocolate Cheer



"I'm home," Beanie declares from the foyer. "Anybody up yet?"

"Nope, we're all still asleep," Rackham sarcastically hollers back from his seat at the kitchen counter. Poking at the remnants of his scrambled eggs, he watches with interest as Chichi nervously frets behind you.

"Careful with that death grip, Mike!" she urges. "Squeeze it too hard and it'll come out uneven."

Without tearing your gaze away from the cake, you nod slowly while easing your grip on the icing bag. Gently, you move it up and down around the edges of the cake using the rhythmic pattern Chichi showed you.

"That's it! Just like a sewing needle. Oh, that looks perfect!"

"I can't thank you enough for walking me through this," you reply, wiping the excess frosting off your hands with a paper towel. "I was hoping to go a bit slower so that I could really learn about the baking process, but after Fred's ultimatum for me to go upstairs last night, I didn't want to walk in empty-handed."

Chichi shakes a little flour loose from one of her wings.

"When we're not as pressed for time, I'll gladly teach you how to bake the right way. I can already tell you're a natural."

"*That's* high praise." Standing up, Rackham collects the pot from the coffee maker, topping his mug up with the last of its contents. "I made the mistake of trying to bake a cake for her birthday last year. I'd watched her do it so many times before that I was sure I could handle it on my own without a recipe."

You carefully screw the cap back onto the icing bag, handling it cautiously so you don't accidentally pepper the ceiling with a shotgun blast of milk chocolate frosting.

"Uh oh. Miss an ingredient or something?" you ask.

"Worse. I confused baking soda and baking powder," he replies, cringing in recollection. "And I *miiight* have *also* assumed the cake could be done faster if the temperature was higher."

"Yikes. If it's any consolation, I'm positive I couldn't have done any better on my own. The most complicated cakes I make are pancakes."

"We all start somewhere," Chichi says encouragingly. "Besides! Just think how excited Bonworth and Cheeky will be when you show up with something you made all by yourself!"

You walk back and forth around the counter, examining the cake to make sure you didn't miss any spots with the frosting. "'Made all by myself' might be a bit of a stretch," you admit. "I'd say it's more like I just did exactly what you told me to do. I hardly deserve all the credit."

Nevertheless, you do feel just a *twinge* of pride as you admire your finished dessert. Even if you were raptly following Chichi's instructions, you still managed to make, with your own hands, something that isn't a flapjack or a boiled egg.

"Thinking about it, I'd never even heard of this kind of cake before today. What'd you say the name of it was again, Chichi?"

"I call it 'Chica's Chocolate Cheer' since it uses three different kinds of chocolate; milk, dark, and white, each in their own layer from top to bottom," she says, gesturing excitedly with her wingtips. "It's my own recipe, and it was the first dessert I ever made that took home a prize ribbon. I still sell quite a few of them to this day."

You carefully hand over the icing bag, nodding in approval. "I never would have guessed that my first cake would be something so... complicated?"

Chichi cocks her head at you, giving you a quirky half-grin. "Oh, I don't know, it's not all that complicated when you think about it. Now, if it was like a super-duper ornate wedding cake with a

ton of sculpted fondant pieces? *That'd* be complicated. This is really just a triple-layer cake with a fancy name."

"Plus, it's a tasty cake," Rackham muses, "and I'd rather have a plain-looking cake that tastes good than a pretty one that's more decoration than dessert."

"Absolutely. Now as for this leftover frosting, we'll use the rest of it later on another treat so that it doesn't go to waste," Chichi says, setting aside the first frosting bag and pulling out a second, smaller bag. "Right now, let's take care of the piping."

"Piping?" you echo.

Beanie pushes the swinging kitchen doors open before unceremoniously plopping into one of the barstools next to Rackham. "It's the gel frosting that they do writing and stuff on cakes with, like 'Happy Birthday,'" she replies. "Chocolate Cheer, huh? *Nice*, save me a piece."

"I'm afraid you'll have to ask your brother for one," you chuckle as Chichi begins mixing up a batch of pink-colored icing. "This cake's going upstairs."

"Bummer. Is this an 'I'm sorry' cake?" she asks, shaking the empty coffee pot over her mug with disdain as Rackham innocently sips from his own.

"It is," you sigh. "Hopefully it goes over well."

Getting up from her seat, Beanie crosses around the counter and begins fiddling with the coffee maker. "It will," she says, tossing the used filter into the trash. "My brother and his friends aren't the type to hold grudges, Mike. Besides, you were the one that left, right? It's not like they tossed you out."

"I suppose that's true. In all honesty? I was so embarrassed and ashamed that I just kind of took off out of there, which I guess only made it worse."

"So what happened, exactly?" Rackham asks. "I was, uh, busy when you came in the other night."

"In hindsight, the whole thing was just a complete trainwreck," you groan, covering your face with both of your hands. "A commercial for that Jeremy's place came on and they made a big fuss of trying to shut the TV off, and when I started asking about it things got heated. And because I think it's ridiculous that a corporation can get away with crapping all over its workers and not be held responsible, I flew off the handle at the very people the place had hurt."

"Story of our lives right there," Beanie somberly interjects. "There's nothing wrong with wanting to stick up for them -- believe me, you're not saying anything that I haven't thought myself -- but they *are* kind of under a non-disclosure agreement as part of the terms of their settlement."

"I-- Why didn't they just say so in the first place, then? At the time it looked like they were dodging the question, and then Bonworth and Faz started getting frustrated with me, and I just..." Your words catch in your throat. "I was just trying, you know, to make a point about how **unfair** it is because I felt sorry for them, but I ended up saying something really dumb and mean about Cheeky that... well, it sounded nicer in my head."

"Which *was*?" Rackham pointedly asks.

Beanie nods, pouring a couple of scoops of coffee grounds into a fresh filter. "Yeah, spill," she adds. "Did you make fun of her weight or something?"

You force a smile, but based on the reactions of everyone surrounding you, it probably looks more like a pained grimace. "Let's just say that I accidentally insulted her looks," you mumble.

Chichi gasps while Rackham bursts out laughing.

"Well *done*, pal. You really nailed it," he chortles. "If that's your way of wooing over the ladies, then Fred's worried over nothing."

You decide not to point out the fact that just last night, *he* was giving you the same suspicions.

"Yeesh, Mike. So maybe Cheeky's not a model or anything, but it's not like she's got a high opinion of herself to start with." Beanie starts the coffee pot before turning back to you. "You don't have to go kicking someone while they're down."

"I wasn't *trying* to kick her while she was down. I was referring to the, you know..." Your voice lowers to a whisper, as if you're about to say something taboo. "Her... cancer. The scars and all, which I blamed on the restaurant, and y'know -- it just came out wrong."

"Mm. I can *kind of* see what you were trying for, but still, wow."

"And now you know why I got up at six and begged Chichi to teach me how to make an 'I'm sorry' cake, as you put it," you add with a wry laugh. "Anything to hopefully help dig me out of the pit I'm in."

"Well, it's a very noble gesture, Mike. We all make mistakes, but it's the rare person who owns up to it," Chichi says as she readies a tube of pink icing. "So what do you want this to say? If you want, I'll handle the lettering since it's a little tricky."

You rub your chin, considering what you want to put on the surface of the cake. It's tempting to just leave it blank, but you agree that it could use a personal touch -- something friendly instead of morose... something personal, upbeat.

Ah, of course. That's it.

"How about 'Let's Eat'?" you offer, thinking back to her being genuinely flustered by Bonworth hijacking her favorite saying at your seafood dinner. "It's like, Cheeky's catchphrase. Something she'd always insist on saying whenever we'd sit down for a meal."

"Oooh, I like it. We'll use two colors for the writing to make them 'pop'. I'll outline the letters in pink and then fill them in with another color, like yellow or something. Do you want it to be written kind of formally, or in more of a fun style?"

"Oh yeah, fun, definitely, like something you'd see at a party," you reply. "Oh, can we put some sprinkles on top as well? To make it look like confetti?"

"Sure, we can do that! Let's take care of the piping first and then the sprinkles can go on so the lettering's nice and even."

With dexterous wingtips, Chichi begins neatly applying the piping, nimbly painting the words onto the surface of the cake with nothing but a bag of liquid sugar and a tiny nozzle. While she works,

you busy yourself by resealing all of the extra cake ingredients in their containers to return to the pantry.

"What do you think?" she asks, sprinkling a small wingful of colored confetti-like sprinkles around the cake.

Leaning over Chichi's shoulder to admire her handiwork, you take one look at the finished product -- and immediately reel as a sudden wave of dizziness washes over you. Your legs buckle, causing you to hurriedly grab onto something in an attempt to break your fall before you careen face-first into your project. The *something* you grab onto just *happens* to be Chichi. She squawks in surprise as you snake an arm around her shoulders, quickly gripping the counter to support both her weight and your own.



"Oh my! All you had to do was say you liked it," she giggles nervously.

Rackham squints at you with his good eye, and you quickly remove your hand from Chichi's shoulders.

"You, uh, you all right, Mike?" Beanie asks with furrowed brows as you ease your weight onto the kitchen wall to steady yourself.

"I'm fine," you gulp. "Just got kind of -- wow, I just got really dizzy all of a sudden. I don't know what the hell that was all about."

"You *are* looking kinda dazed," Rackham says as he carries his dishes to the sink. "Well, moreso than usual."

"Gee, thanks."

Chichi presses the back of her wing to your forehead. "Hmm, you don't feel hot. Low blood sugar? Did you get enough to eat at breakfast?"

"N-no, I ate plenty. I guess I'm just a little anxious," you insist, turning your attention back to the cake with difficulty. "The lettering is... beautiful. It's really lovely. You did a great job."

Trotting over to the pantry, Chichi unfastens her apron and hangs it up on a hook inside. "I'm glad to hear it. I'll wrap it up in a nice box to go if you want to go wash up real fast."

"Um, thank you. And yeah, good idea. Maybe a shower will help clear my head."

"Hey, no need to be nervous, Mike," Beanie says encouragingly. "Tell you what. I'll go up with you, since I've got a few hours before I have to hit the hay, anyway."

"I think I'll be okay, Beanie, but thanks for the offer!"

"Really, I insist," she says, smile faltering.

"So do I," you chuckle. "Honestly, I'm okay, I don't need an escort. This is something I need to do on my own."

"Damn it, Mike!" she huffs, rubbing the back of one of her ears. "Quit *cake-blocking* me! I need my chocolate fix!"

"And the truth will out," Rackham quips piously.

"Work *sucked* and the ice cream machine was broken, pirate boy!" she snaps, playfully socking him in the arm. At least, you *hope* it was intended to be playful. The way he's wincing, you're not so sure.

"All right, all right. You can come too," you laugh. "I wouldn't want to stand in the way of your pastry aspirations."

Smirking triumphantly, Beanie pours herself a cup of fresh coffee. "I *knew* you'd see reason."

Turning your attention to Chichi, you extend a hand to her. "Thank you again for helping me out with this. I really appreciate you bending over backwards to help me out with something that wasn't even your problem."

Chichi pauses midway through folding a large cake box. "What, like you did for me yesterday?" she replies jovially, ignoring your handshake to hug you instead, much to Rackham's chagrin.

"That was nothing," you try to insist to a faceful of her bright yellow headfeathers, but she's not having any of it. Releasing you, she pulls herself to her full height, chest puffed up with no small amount of pride.

"It certainly *wasn't* 'nothing'! You pulled me out of a real fix by wrapping all those cupcakes for me so I could meet my deadline, so you'd better believe I'd do the same for you." Waving a wing

towards the kitchen doors, Chichi puts on a mock serious face. "Now go get dressed, you've got a delivery of your own to go make!"

With a hesitant smile, you push the kitchen doors open and step out into the hallway towards the bathroom. Time to go get ready to face the music.

Scuffing her feet on the doormat outside Bonworth's apartment, Beanie nods to you. "So, you ready to get this over with?"

Exhaling sharply, you nod. "About as ready as I'll ever be."

"You've come this far," Beanie says, pounding at the entrance to 93-B with a balled-up paw.

You wait with bated breath as the latch rattles for several seconds before the door finally opens a crack to reveal a sleepy-looking Cheeky.

"Hey, Beanie," she says before peering past the rabbit and seeing you standing behind her. Her expression shifts just a touch as the two of you make eye contact, and the door widens so that she can get a better look at you.

Cheeky looks much the same as usual, albeit having obviously just stepped out of the shower if the towel slung over her shoulders and the terrycloth housecoat is anything to go by. Her usual globbed-on, days-old makeup is notably absent from her face from where she's just washed up, and her normally unruly, messy headfeathers are slicked-back by still dripping water.

"Hey, Cheeky," you comment with a timid tilt of your head. "You look nice today."

"Mike, I'm damn near butt-ass naked with just a flimsy robe wrapped around myself," she jokes half-heartedly. "*Of course* I look nice."

You chuckle wryly, the nervousness in the pit of your stomach easing a little as she motions for the two of you to step inside the apartment. Beanie carefully pries the cake box from your grasp as you move into the foyer across from Cheeky, still trying to formulate what you want to say.

"I, uh, just wanted to come upstairs and address... um, well, about the other night, I just -- I didn't mean to get so riled up, and..." You look back at Beanie pleadingly as if she's got the magic words to make this whole situation go away. She raises an eyebrow as she leans against the wall with the cake, pushing the door shut with her heel.

"Mike's trying to say he's sorry, I think," she deadpans.

"I gathered," Cheeky comments with a measure of equally dry wit. You nod fervently like a bobblehead.

"*I am* sorry, Cheeky. I got worked up and shot off my mouth like an idiot, which I guess is something I'm developing a bit of a habit of."

"It's fine, Mike," Cheeky quietly responds, not putting up any resistance as you lean in and carefully wrap your arms around her shoulders for a gentle hug. You take great care to arch your back in such a way that you put minimal pressure on her stomach so that you don't irritate her damaged nerves. Looking up at your awkward stance, she frowns.

"What, you trying to hide your excitement to see me?" she jokes, wiggling her hips mockingly.

"No, that's -- that's not it at all," you choke, red-faced. "I just, uh -- well, your stomach? I didn't want to put too much on you--"

"Pfft! It's not like that. Believe it or not, I ain't as fragile as you seem to think. I can handle a hug, Mike," she replies, squeezing you close with much more force. Choking back an elated sob, you hug her tightly as she rubs the small of your back with her feathertips.

"I really *am* sorry," you mumble to her. "Truly, I can't apologize enough. God, I'm the biggest *dick* in the world."

"Mike?" Cheeky whispers back, expression suddenly emotional as her beak quivers. You pay rapt attention, hanging on her every word.

"Yes, Cheeky?" you reply, reaching a hand up to wipe the tears from your eyes.

"I'll be the judge of that claim," she says, instantly shifting back to her usual coquettish demeanor. Pushing away, she gives you a wink as you roll your eyes. Even as you sniffle openly, you can't wipe the wobbly smile off your face.

"Really?" you laugh. "You had to go there?"

"Hey, I'm only chicken," she shrugs. It takes you a moment to realize what she means, but you try not to let your initial confusion at her choice of idiom show. "Really, though, I'm glad to see you too. I, uh... you know, I didn't think you were coming back after the other night."

"...didn't really think I'd be welcome," you manage as you rub your nose and eyes on the back of your jacket sleeve. You'd do anything for that box of tissues Cheeky gave you right about now.

"Mike, *you* were the one that left," she replies adamantly, noticing your plight and using her towel to roughly scrub your face. "The three of us were up half the night trying to figure out whether we should come get you or not, and to be honest, we were all feeling kind of shitty ourselves over the whole deal. It wasn't until we got a call from Beanie that we were able to get any sleep."

"Told you," Beanie says with a smirk.

"Yeah, yeah, rub it in." You wave her off, embarrassed. "But... you guys were worried about me?"

Cheeky steps forward and jabs you in the gut with a feather. "Sure. You were put in our care as a guest, and considering you were homeless until just recently? We didn't want to be responsible for a relapse or anything."

"I'm not a user," you mutter self-consciously. "Never have been. I was homeless because I couldn't find work, not because of drugs or anything like that."

"No judgment even if you were, Mike. We've all got our own problems and histories. You could have come into our little community strung-out and we'd still have welcomed you with open arms." Folding her wings, Cheeky shakes her head. "We'd have immediately put your butt in a program, sure, but we'd have welcomed you just the same."

You rub the bridge of your nose. "I suppose that's a relief."

"Honestly, I *could* kick your pasty ass for coming in here and getting us all riled up over you and then leaving so abruptly. We'd all started to get kind of attached to you, ya weird little monkey." She points in the direction of a pair of bedrooms at the end of the hall -- the ones you recognize as Foxy's and Faz's. "And I do mean *all* of us."

"I was in the wrong, Cheeky, not you guys. It's just... the thought of a whole bunch of greedy corporate assholes using you all up and then tossing you aside?" You bite your lower lip, trying to suppress your indignation. "It's not my business, and I know that, and I understand now that you guys are under... uh, contract to not talk about it. But I got mad and I said stupid stuff, and I never ever should have taken it out on you guys."

She lowers her head as you take one of her wings in your hand.

"And I never meant to imply that you weren't beautiful. I think you're a very pretty young hen, Cheeky."

"Tell you what," she murmurs back. "Let me go get my leather boots on, and you can start kissing them."

"Cheeky, c'mon. I'm being serious."

Pressing a feathertip to her beak, she grins wildly. "And then you can call me 'Mistress Chica'."

You playfully cut your eyes at her. "No, please, mistress -- you're scaring me," you reply, fighting off a laugh.

"Oooh, *good boy*. We'll get you broken in fast," Cheeky purrs.

Shifting the conversation back, you try to return to your original point. "Look, all I'm saying is, I swear to god all I meant the other night was, was your... well, the scars. Not your face, not your body, and I never ever wanted to insult your honor as a lady or pry where I--"

Cheeky tugs your collar with a seductive expression, cutting off your train of thought with a feathertip pressed to your lips. "Mike?"

"Y-yes?" you ask, suddenly nervous. She yanks you close, her breath hot on your neck as she nudges her beak close to your ear.

"Shhhhh."

Frowning, you try to continue. "All I meant was you--"

"*Shhhhhuuuuut the hell up*. Hush. **Shhh**. You're doing that thing where you're talking in circles. Look, I get it -- you didn't mean it. Done. I forgive you."

"All right, all right, I'll drop it," you reply, raising your hands in defeat. "But if you want to 'kick my pasty ass', you'd totally be in the right to do so."

Cheeky teasingly makes a show of considering doing so, but you can tell her heart isn't in it to be upset with you. "Nah, Mike. Might pinch your cheeks, though. That stays on the table," she jokes.

"...which set of cheeks?" you reply suspiciously, raising an eyebrow.

Huffing, she puts both of her wings on her hips. "Well, I'm not gonna do it *now* since you've taken all the fun out of it," she grumbles as you and Beanie exchange knowing smirks.

The sound of metal clanking across the floor draws your attention, and a moment later Bonworth limps around the corner and toward the entryway. He's not yet fully dressed, wearing only a sleeveless undershirt and a pair of pajama pants that expose his metallic prosthetics from the calves down.

"Lookit who it is," he murmurs with a tired smile, noticeably lacking in his usual energy -- though he perks a little upon seeing Beanie, who waves back. "Mornin', lil bunny."

"Hey, Bonworth," Beanie greets.

Bonworth yawns, scratching his side. "Good to see y'made it through another night at the office job from heck," he chuckles. You can't help but notice that the bags under his eyes that had been beginning to lift have returned with a vengeance. "So, Mike, I take it you've spoken with ol' Fred...?"

"I did. He told me last night before dinner to get my ass up here and straighten things out with you guys."

"Ah, shoot," Bonworth sighs, snapping his fingers. "I was hopin' he wouldn't have read you the riot act. I'm awful sorry for the trouble, Mike."

"No, I'm the one that's sorry. You didn't do anything wrong, Bonworth. I take full responsibility for it."

"We could've -- no, *should've* been a little more open about things, Mike, but there's only so much we can say and do," Cheeky laments as Bonworth wraps one of his arms around her shoulders. "And after all we've been through, you understand why it's not exactly something we want to just flaunt out there."

"You're a good guy, Mike. I'm awful sorry things got so heated the other night," Bonworth says, moping slightly. "Tell the truth, Marion sent me home early yesterday, I was such a shambles. Couldn't tell my ears from my tail while I was filin'."

"*I'm* sorry I poked my nose where it didn't belong," you mumble, scuffing one of your feet on the floor awkwardly. "I promise, it won't happen again. We've all got things we'd just as soon not talk about."

Beanie groans impatiently, her paws still clutching tight on the cake box. "Oh my god, okay, we get it, *everyone's* sorry."

Bonworth smiles as the two of you shake on it. "No hard feelings, pal. I think we'll all feel better for it if we just put it behind us."

**"FINALLY!** I've been standing here with this damn thing for like, two hours," Beanie groans, pushing forward past you and thrusting the cake into Cheeky's arms. "I was starting to think I'd have to pitch a tent here."

"I was gonna ask, actually," Cheeky says excitedly, peering down at the box. "I see you come bearing gifts!"

"Well, I wanted to show up with more than just words. I made you guys something," you answer.  
"Well, with a *lot* of help from Chichi."

The portly hen waddles into the kitchen with a curious Bonworth at her side. You and Beanie stand back as she eagerly unwraps the ribbon from the cake box like a toddler opening a Christmas present.

"Shit, Mike, this looks amazing!" Cheeky giddily declares, licking her beak. "You made this?"

For once, it's your turn to swell with pride. "Under Chichi's direct supervision, and adhering strictly to a recipe, but yes -- I baked you a cake."

"I'm telling you, you ought to run a restaurant, Mike. You sure got the chops for it, fella. What a swell-lookin' treat!" Bonworth says, setting the box lid aside. "I know it's still mornin', but it's never too early for a good cake. Sis, would you be a peach and fetch us some paper plates from the cupboard?"

"Oh god yes," Beanie cheers, pumping her fist. "I thought you'd never ask."

Cheeky leans in closely, studying Chichi's lettering job with delight. "Man, I love the design! I oughta have this put on a tee-shirt or something!"

"How about a bib?" Bonworth jokes. "I've seen the way you eat cake, and you'll probably be wearin' more of it than makes it in your gullet."

"I can't help it, Bonnie! Beaks aren't engineered for baked goods," she snaps.

"You sure it's 'cause of that and not just you bein' a messy eater?" he ribs, good-naturedly.

"Just hush up and get the camera. I want a picture before we cut into it."

"Already on it," he laughs, rummaging around in one of the kitchen drawers before pulling out a vintage instant camera. "Chica, Mike, can you both squeeze in a little so I can get both of you in the shot?"

"Nah, let me take the picture," Beanie says. "You deserve to be in it too."

"Really? In my *underwear*?" Bonworth starts to reply before Beanie snatches the camera from his paws. "Sheesh..."

"Take your places and say cheesecake," she says as you heft the dessert, tilting it slightly so that the surface can be easily seen in the photo. Bonworth nervously leans in from your right as Cheeky sidles in from your left.

"*Cheesecake!*" your group cheers in unison as the flashbulb goes off.

In the end, your quartet manages to nearly eradicate the cake in a single sitting. Cheeky and Beanie polish off about half of it themselves, forcing you and Bonworth to settle for slimmer portions so that there'll still be some leftover for Faz and Foxy whenever they wake up.

At Bonworth's assurance of "no tricks this time," your group indulges in another game, opting for a simple team-based board game this time. Working together with Beanie, you fight hard and put in a significantly better showing than you did at the rigged poker match before Cheeky and Bonworth are ultimately declared victorious in a surprise upset.

"I'm so glad we weren't playing strip poker rules," you joke as Beanie begins putting the game pieces back in the box.

"Damn it," Cheeky sniffs, looking genuinely disappointed. "I'd have played for *real* if that was the case."

Bonworth blushes, tugging at his collar as he rises from the couch. "So Mike, do you need me to go downstairs and help you with your bags, or...?"

"Actually, this might sound strange," you begin, "but since Fred's extended the offer, I'm going to stay with him and Beanie for a while until things straighten up back home."

"Really? Why, Mike?" Cheeky asks.

"I can't quite explain it -- maybe I feel like I need to prove something to Mr. Fazbear, and I guess I want to be able to give Chichi a hand -- but I also don't want to look ungrateful. It means a lot to me that you'd still be open to letting me come back, though."

You choose not to mention the lingering awkwardness here. Make no mistake, you're glad the air's been cleared, but moving back in immediately feels a bit premature. They'd argue otherwise, of course, but you can't help how you feel. Best to give it a little while to be forgotten, not just forgiven.

"Of course we're open," Cheeky says. "You're always welcome here, Mike. Just because we had one spat doesn't mean you've been blackballed."

"Ab-so-lutely. Any time you need a place to stay, we've got an open door and a warm bed waiting for you." Pushing himself to his prosthetic feet, Bonworth nods. "I suppose on that note, though, I'd best get ready for work -- and you should probably go tuck yourself in for some shuteye too, sis."

Beanie yawns before hefting herself from the living room floor. "Yeah, I am pretty whipped. I guess I'll go ahead and shove off here, then."

"Sounds good, actually. I think I could do with a nap myself," you agree as the two of you say your goodbyes and head for the entrance. You open the door for Beanie before grabbing your coat from the rack by the door. As you start to leave, Cheeky grabs you by your wrist.

"You forgot something last time you were here," she says, turning back to her own room to fetch whatever it is.

"I did?" you ask in befuddlement, running through a mental checklist of your valuables -- wallet, ID, your luggage, shaving kit, clothes, shoes, coat. What could you have forgotten? You don't carry a phone anymore, nor do you have a computer or anything else of real value. Maybe your toothbrush or something?

After a brief wait, Cheeky shuffles back into view with a colorful box of her own tucked under a wing. "Here you go," she says with a wicked grin, thrusting the still-sealed tissue box from a few

nights ago into your hands. She cackles as you tuck it under your coat with an embarrassed groan.

You shake your head as you turn to leave. "So nice of you to notice."

"Oh, and one more thing," she says. You feel a pair of sharp pinches in both of your buttocks, nearly causing you to trip as you stumble out the doorway.

"Well, that answers *that* question," you begrudgingly admit as she shuts the door behind you, still laughing to herself.

"What was all *that* about?" Beanie asks as you join her outside, eyeing the tissue box under your arm. "Oh, for your nose?"

"Sure," you answer evasively, following her down the upper level hall to the staircase. Pausing midway down the stairs, Beanie stops to consider something.

"Hey Mike, if you're gonna sleep in the afternoon anyway..."

"Hold up a second. I may already be in a relationship, so you'll have to ask *Mistress* for permission," you joke, jerking a thumb back at the door to 93-B.

Beanie gives you a long, cryptic stare, looking you up and down, like she's trying to puzzle something out. She squints further, then scratches the messy fur on her head.

"...say, Mike, been a while since you had some, huh," she asks, pointing to the tissue box under your arm.

You narrow your eyes. "Hey c'mon, I was just making a joke, you don't have to get personal."

"Plus, that was the first game I've played with Cheeky where someone **else** suggested strip poker rules."

"I wasn't suggesting them, I just--"

"Uh huh."

By now your cheeks are redder than Rackham's fur, and she's grinning like the freaking Cheshire Cat.

"Look, Beanie--"

"All right, Mike," she offers in a patronizing tone. You resist the temptation to chuck the tissue box at her smug head. "Look, all I was gonna ask is if you wanted a ride in to work tonight. As long as your sleep schedule's gonna be off and all, you know?"

You start to fire off a snappy comeback about "riding" before it dawns on you what she actually said wasn't an innuendo.

Huh... maybe she's right.

"Wait, really?" you ask, tone hopeful. "As in -- to go see the arcade?"

"Sure. It's getting late in the week," Beanie replies, thrusting her paws in the pockets of her hoodie. "I wouldn't mind an extra set of eyes helping me out."

"Living for the weekend, huh?" you ask, folding your arms to insulate yourself a little from the cold.

"...yeah, something like that," she says, distracted. "We'll head out a little early tonight, so probably around nine or ten. I've got a couple errands to run before work, and we might as well grab snacks to carry us through before the shift starts -- if you're up for a challenge, of course."

"Yeah, I'm totally game," you instantly answer. "I really want to check this place out for myself, see what it's all about."

She nods and resumes walking down the steps.

"Well, let's go get some rest, then. We're both gonna need it."

#### Chapter End Notes

This chapter is followed by *three Roommates Mini Chapters*, which we recommend you should read if you're following the story chronologically!

Before proceeding to the next chapter in the main series, [click here for the next part, Mini 3: Personal Purchase](#). Links will be conveniently provided at the end of each mini leading to the next in order.

# The Restaurant

## Chapter Summary

Now approaching midnight.

## Chapter Notes

There are *three* special "Mini" chapters between this one and the last! If you haven't read the Minis, starting with "*Personal Purchase*", you can find them starting [here](#). Links to the next mini are provided at the end of each.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)



## the restaurant

True to her word, Beanie's in and out of the lingerie shop in record time, exiting the store with two bags hanging from her arms. You extend a hand in offer to help carry her purchases, but receive only an intrigued stare in return.

"What, do you need to examine my new underwear, too?" she asks with a half-smirk.

"I, uh -- I was just offering to, y'know, carry your stuff so you didn't have to lug it." Blushing, you let your arm drop to your side. "No ulterior motives."

Her expression shifts as she realizes she's gotten to you. Turning away to hide your reddening face, you quicken towards the exit but she keeps pace easily, propelled forward by her long, slender legs.

"Awww, how gentlemanly of you," the lavender rabbit coos patronizingly, her prior smirk having exploded into a full-blown grin. "Thanks, *macho man*, but I think I can carry a couple bundles of panties and a six-pack of dice just fine on my own."

"Chivalry truly is dead," you moan theatrically, throwing the heavy glass exit door open.

"So, I know we just had dinner a little while ago -- well, breakfast for me, I guess -- but what do you think you'll be hungry for later?" she inquires as the two of you step out into the mall's nearly empty parking lot. "It's gonna be a *long* six hours and nothing's going to be open, so don't expect any late night munchie runs."

Considering you don't know a lot about the surrounding area, you're having a difficult time weighing your options.

"I dunno. Unless you've got access to like, a fridge and a microwave, we should probably just get a couple bags of chips and some soda from a convenience store or something. I'm not too picky."

"That's good, because pickings are slim even at this time of night," she says, shifting her bags to one arm so that she can put her hood back up now that you're back out in the cool air, away from the stifling heat of the mall. "There's a convenience store not too far from here. We'll swing on in and stock up on snacks, and I'll tell you what -- I'll even let you pay *and* carry the bags."

"Finally, my masculinity has been restored to me!" you announce with over-the-top exuberance, puffing up your chest and striking a pose. Beanie laughs as you nearly trip over a curb performing what is a frankly embarrassing attempt at a roundhouse kick. You can practically hear Chiclet and Bonworth guffawing at your histrionics.

"Oh, those are some *real* moves," she cracks, wiping a tear from her eye. "I feel **leagues** safer already, knowing I've got such a daring do-gooder around to keep me out of harm's way."

Righting yourself, you buff your nails on your shirt as if nothing happened before resuming walking alongside her. "Well, safety *is* my middle name."

"No kidding!" she says, gasping in mock surprise. "'Safety'? *Really*? And I thought my parents gave me and my brother embarrassing names."

"Bonita, I'm offended," you protest. "I'll have you know my full birth certificate reads Mike 'Safety' Schmidt."

She stops cold in her tracks, ears twitching a little.

"Everything all right?" you ask, turning to look back at her.

"...please tell me that isn't your actual name," she murmurs, her demeanor instantly stony.

You can see little puffs of her breath clouding around her face as she covers her muzzle.

"Uh, about safety...?" you ask. "N-nah. It's just a joke, I'm not actually--"

Beanie pulls her bags tightly against her chest. "No, the full -- like, the whole thing and all. What's your -- your family name?"

"Schmidt. My full name is Mike Schmidt. It's German, I think." You tilt your head at her. "We never bothered changing the family name to 'Smith' like everyone else because my parents didn't want to get lost in the phone book. Why do you ask?"

She fidgets with the drawstring of her hood a little, swallowing nervously. Rather than answering, she simply turns on her heel and resumes powerwalking across the parking lot. You scratch the back of your head in confusion. What's gotten into her? An abusive ex-boyfriend with a similar name, maybe? You decide not to press her on it; the last thing you want to do is piss anyone else off now that things are starting to go good for you again.

At this point, you've become the one having to keep pace with Beanie as the rabbit effortlessly glides across the pavement, her sneakers gently thumping along on the asphalt. Her leg-to-body ratio trounces yours, forcing you to nearly jog to avoid lagging behind.

Eventually, you reach the bus stop that you got off at earlier, panting a little. Looks like you've consumed one too many of Freddy's delicious, fattening breakfasts. No wonder the guy's always pumping iron, he clearly knows something you don't. Like it or not, you may end up having to take Bonbon up on exercising after all.

Arriving at a crosswalk, Beanie slaps the crossing button, despite the fact there are no cars around due to it being the middle of the night.

"Those are just placebo buttons, you know," you comment, trying not to look as out-of-breath as you feel. "I read recently that the ones in New York City are almost all disabled, but they leave them there because people feel like they do something if they--"

The crosswalk sign lights up indicating it's safe to make your way across the street, and Beanie tosses you a smug look.

"Sheer coincidence," you grumble.

The gas station is indeed only a block or two away from where you're headed, and you even recognize a few of the shops nearby as part of the older section of downtown. You cringe as your mind goes back to the discount market you were at just the other day with Chica. You're grateful nobody was around to see your little meltdown, however brief or petty it might have been.

Following Beanie inside the convenience store, the two of you make short work of browsing the aisles for snacks. Working in tandem, you successfully cobble together a basket of processed garbage that would be any junk food lover's dream: cheese puffs, gummy candy, and spicy jerk sticks that are more grease than meat. For what could generously be described as a main course, you pluck two preservative-laden sandwiches from a nearby cooler case. A two-liter bottle of cream soda completes the "meal". Sixteen dollars in pre-packaged treats later, you decide you're about as prepared as you're going to get for the upcoming six-hour grind.

"So what exactly do you do at this place?" you ask, trying again to break the relative silence after the abrupt shift in Beanie's demeanor earlier.

"Well, I'm on the night watch," she says with a twinge of pride as she holds the door open for you. "Officially, I'm a security guard, but my duties include a lot more than just monitoring the building."

You try your best not to scoff, but you can't stop a snort from escaping your mouth at the thought of a rabbit that can't weigh more than a hundred pounds standing up against thugs attempting a break-in.

"What? What's so funny?" she asks, cheeks flushing.

Shaking your head, you hastily apologize. "I -- no, I'm sorry. I don't mean to be rude," you insist, trying and failing to wipe the smirk from your face. "I just figured you were, you know, doing something like cleaning or maintenance or whatever. Restocking supplies, that kind of thing. I didn't figure you were on security detail."

"Oh, I see," Beanie returns, cutting her eyes at you. "You don't think I can hack it because I'm a rabbit? Or is it just because I'm a girl?"

"It has nothing to do with either of those things. I'm just wondering what you'd do if someone like Fred's size came in and held the place up. Do they at least let you carry a gun?" Mimicking her expression from earlier, you open your eyes and offer an exaggerated gasp. "Or, no, wait -- have you gotten into trouble lately? Is that why you wanted me to come? You needed some muscle?"

Beanie drags a paw down her face as you break out laughing.

"Yes, Mike, you've figured it all out," she deadpans. "I need you to protect me from the local *arcade robbers*. My plan is to use you as a meat shield in case they show up."

You pump your fist in the air. "Knew it. I knew it, little bunny."

"Hey, only my brother's allowed to call me that," she huffs. "Look, *you're* the one who wanted to come see this place -- or have you forgotten already?"

"No, you're absolutely right. It's just -- I dunno. Things got awkward earlier when we were leaving the mall," you answer. "I didn't know if I'd offended you or not, s'all."

Glancing over her shoulder at you, Beanie studies your face with genuine interest. "You really are one of those types that can't handle people thinking ill of you, huh."

"Oh, absolutely," you reply without hesitation. "I just want to get along with everybody."

"What a ridiculous notion," Beanie remarks, but you catch the faintest hint of a smile playing at her lips as she tugs her hood tighter around her face.

"Don't worry, I'll let that one slide. Wouldn't want to let it ruin this otherwise lovely date we're on."

It's Beanie's turn to give into a giggle fit, which she does with gusto. "Hah! Ahahaha, oh wow! A date!" She nearly chokes laughing, having to lean against a nearby wall for support as she catches her breath. "Haha, ahhhh, wooof. Man, you **wish** this was a date."

"Yeah, yeah," you grumble. Yeesh -- shot down by the closet nerd in the training bra. *There's* a real confidence booster. "Let's just get going, chuckles."

The familiar sight of closure notices gently flapping in the breeze pulls your attention back to the task at hand -- as entertaining as trading quips with Beanie's been, it's time to focus on what you came downtown for. Nearby, black and yellow moebius strips of caution tape seal off long-condemned buildings, acting as a fitting visual metaphor -- if everything you've heard is true, you're heading straight towards a real-life crime scene. You've finally got a shot at seeing the *Arcade-That-Must-Not-Be-Named* for yourself, and you're not about to squander such a golden opportunity. With any luck, you'll finally start getting answers to some of the questions that have been mounting ever since you threw in with your new friends a couple of weeks ago.

You run the tally of the known "accident" victims in your mind. Bonworth's down two legs and part of his arms, Faz and Haddock a whole hell of a lot more. You're still not 100% sure of the exact details, but Cheeky's a safe bet as well if she's under an NDA like the others. You don't have any information yet on how Chiclet lost her beak, but you wouldn't be surprised to find out she was involved too, even if it was just at one of the franchise's alternate locations. That makes four victims you're sure of, five if you count Chiclet in amongst them.

Five lives, all irreversibly ruined in pursuit of the almighty dollar. You're not some head-in-the-clouds sort who thinks big companies are all evil and that turning a profit should be frowned upon, but there's a line here -- crushing workers like grist for the mill is clearly crossing that. Plus, if Haddock's story and Bonworth's corroboration is true regarding "blood in the water", every misfortune can't be written off as purely accidental, regardless of what anybody tells you.

The concrete beneath your feet begins to slowly change color from the usual harsh orange emitted by the streetlights to a pulsating yellow and purple. Looking up, you realize it's reflecting the glow of vivid awning lights overhead.

"We're here," Beanie murmurs as she fishes a set of keys out of her pocket, sounding far more ominous than she probably intended.

Rounding the corner towards the front of the building, you can't help but be impressed at the sight in front of you. You step back a little into the street to get a better view of the restaurant, and it dawns on you that you've seen it before. You faintly recall catching a glimpse of this place out of the corner of your eye when you went shopping with Chiclet and Bonnibel last week.

The building itself probably takes up half the block, maybe more. The exterior walls are made of brick, covered over in aged, faded paint that looks as if it had at one time been a cheerful red. What few windows the building does possess are heavily tinted; posters hang inside, presumably advertising games and pizza specials, but it's too dark to make out what they read without pressing your face to the glass.

By far and away, the arcade's most notable external feature is its enormous electronic marquee mounted atop the roof, casting a dazzling glow around the perimeter like a neon aura. Broad strips of bright lights flash and flicker the name of the establishment, clearly designed to lure in children looking for entertainment and adults looking for cheap babysitting. Not that the venue needs any help standing out -- it's the only point of interest for as far as you can see in any direction.

"Jeremy Human's Funtime Family Arcade and Pizzeria," you murmur, squinting as you read the sign. "What a mouthful."

"Isn't it just," Beanie drolly agrees.

Below the word salad of corporate nomenclature emblazoned across the marquee is a huge vinyl decal of a stylized cartoon human mascot with ridiculous, rubbery proportions. He appears to be wearing a marching band leader's coat and shako hat, and a pair of cheap, fake wayfarer sunglasses that would be right at home on a 1980s "cool kid". In one hand he's carrying a piece of pizza with dripping, melty cheese; in the other hand is an object that looks like a wind-up jack-in-the-box with musical notes wafting out of its lid.

"So is this the infamous 'Jeremy Human'?" you ask, jabbing a thumb in the direction of the pie-eyed music man as Beanie unlocks the door.

"Not... really," she replies evasively. "You coming?"

"Yeah. Just kind of... drinking it all in," you reply, tearing your gaze from the character to follow Beanie in.

You step inside the restaurant's dark foyer, and your nostrils are instantly filled with the familiar (and heavenly) aromas of cheese and freshly-baked bread. Pulling her sleeve back on her hoodie, Beanie eyes her wristwatch. Satisfied that she's right on time, she grabs your free hand.

"This way," she says, half-dragging you through the pitch-black restaurant.

You're lead along a series of twists and turns in a pattern only she seems to know. After a few seconds, Beanie releases her grip on your wrist, stepping back. You hear a few clicks before the entirety of the room is flooded with harsh fluorescent light, leaving you half-blind until your eyes re-adjust.

You appear to be in a dining hall the size of an auditorium. The room is unbelievably expansive -- somehow, the restaurant's even bigger inside than it appears to be from the street, and this is only one singular portion of the facility. Even with all of the chairs turned over and stacked on top of tables in neat, compact rows, it's obvious from the scope of the room that it can seat potentially hundreds of guests at once. You're having a hard time imagining this pizzeria pulling in anywhere close to that kind of crowd, considering its location.

The restaurant's interior is a modern, open design with hallways branching off the dining room to areas labeled with colorful block letters -- "Game Zone", "Prize Room" and "Show Stage" are just a few of the territories in Jeremy Human's pizza kingdom.

"Show Stage"? Do they have live music here too?" you ask curiously, thinking back to what you remember hearing Bonworth and Cheeky tell you about playing songs and singing for the kids.

"When the place first re-opened, they did all the time," Beanie replies somberly, resting against one of the nearby pillars. "Live music was quickly 'phased out', though."

She seems a little bitter. You suppose that makes sense, considering what happened to her brother and his friends.

"So what's up with the stage then, if there are no more bands that come and play? You'd think they'd just knock it down and put something else in its place, considering all this seating, right?"

"Hey, I never said there wasn't a band, just that the restaurant doesn't have live music." You turn and look at her with a puzzled expression, but Beanie's already checking her watch again.

"Anyway, we gotta get going, Mike."

You walk with Beanie through the dining hall and past an arcade room full of game cabinets and rides. "Any chance we could play a few rounds?" you ask, eyeing a light gun game that looks particularly fun, but she shakes her head.

"Not during the shift," Beanie says, clearly distracted. "Afterwards? Yeah, sure, if you think you'll still be up for it."

Stowing your disappointment for now, you nod as she leads you towards a large corridor that runs through the back of the building. It's wide enough that two mid-size sedans could drive its length on either side of each other without fear of ever colliding, assuming they could somehow fit through the doorways in the first place. You dutifully continue plodding behind Beanie down the absolute marathon of a hallway, passing restrooms and a set of wooden saloon doors that lead who-knows-where.

Eventually, the tunnel empties out into a dingy, poorly-lit back cave. Affixed to the wall outside is a scrap of lined notebook paper with the word "Security" written on it in magic marker.

"Yikes," you comment as you behold the security guard's room -- or rather, Beanie's office.

"Yeah, I know," she sighs.

Curiously, there doesn't appear to be a door to separate the security room from the rest of the restaurant. It makes you wonder how anyone could possibly get any work done back here during the day, what with the sounds of screaming kids running up and down the halls.

Once you're inside, the guard shack is perhaps just a bit bigger than the bedroom you shared with Foxy, but it's made decidedly more cramped by its contents. A single bulb dangles from the ceiling by a wire, offering barely enough illumination to keep you from twisting an ankle as you navigate across the rat's nest of wiring and electrical cables strewn across the tile floor. The office's walls are lined floor-to-ceiling with what look like small television sets, which you realize must be part of a closed-circuit TV system. A good several *dozen* of the old monitors are piled up in the corners of the room like so much junk, their screens and surfaces coated in a half-inch thick layer of dust from disuse.

A plastic yellow caution sign is neatly propped atop a puddle of water, which in turn is being steadily fed by a leaky pipe in the ceiling. The only notable decorative elements are a pair of weather-beaten posters of the franchise's cartoon mascot adorning the walls, as well as a bulletin board which features corporate memos and a schedule for the security team. Looks like there may be other guards for this place, since the only name you recognize is Beanie's.

The centerpiece of the room is a crappy metal folding table, slathered with crumpled-up papers and empty soda cans. Amongst the array of garbage embellishing the makeshift desk's scratched-up surface is a near-pristine tablet computer mounted on a swivel bracket. Compared to everything else in the room, it appears to possibly be the most modern, state-of-the-art piece of equipment back here.

"Damn it. I forgot there's only one chair in here," Beanie blurts out in sudden realization as she eyes the desk. "Hmm. I guess have a seat, I'm going to run to one of the party rooms and get another."

"You sure?" you ask. "I don't mind fetching one."

She takes off down the hallway without even answering you. Shrugging, you plop yourself down in the seat at the desk, emptying your two convenience store bags full of snacks out onto the table so you can dispose of some of the trash for a neater eating surface. After filling both sacks to the brim with discarded memos and long-empty cans of off-brand soft drinks, you instinctively begin looking around the rest of the room for clutter you can neaten up.

Beanie returns with an identical folding chair and a carton full of paper cups under one arm. "Oh, man, Cheeky wasn't kidding. You *are* a neat freak."

"I'm aware," you reply with a grin. "It's a blessing and also a curse."

"Speaking of blessings and curses, if you need to pee, now's your opportunity," she says, drying her paws on the back of her sweatshirt while you catch the faintest scent of industrial soap. "I just went."

That explains the hurry she was in. "Uh, what if I need to pee later?" you ask. Beanie stares blankly at you for a few seconds before reaching into the carton and handing you a paper cup.

"Yeah, no," you chuckle, but she doesn't laugh. "Oh god, you're serious, aren't you."

"Tick-tock."

With an exasperated sigh, you get up and walk down the hallway to the bathroom. You don't really need to go, but at the same time you don't want to risk the paper cup option, even if she was just messing with you. After you're finished taking care of business, you wipe your hands on a paper towel, grabbing a few extras in case you might need them later before returning to the security office.

Beanie nods approvingly, the wall clock playing a digital chime right as you take your seat. "Pmffeck timnng," she says through a mouthful of cheese puffs. "Sh'midnight.'

You portion out a handful of puffs for yourself onto one of the paper towels before unscrewing the cap from the cream soda. Taking your assigned paper cup, you begin pouring yourself a drink as Beanie turns the tablet in front of you on.



"So what's up with this thing, are we watching a movie or something?" you ask, kicking your feet up on the desk. "I was honestly hoping to explore the place a little bit."

Wiping some of the cheese powder from her fingers, Beanie loads a program from the tablet's surface. "Wouldn't quite call it a movie," she says as a loading screen pops up. Frowning, you lean over her shoulder.

"Real talk for a second here -- are you going to be cryptic all night?" you inquire frustratedly.

"Patience, little man, and all will be revealed," Beanie retorts, swiping your cream soda before you have a chance to drink it.

"'Little man'? I realize I'm shorter than some of the others but I'm at least taller than you, little bunny," you snap. "And before you ask, no, your ears don't count."

"Like hell they don't. And I told you, only my brother gets to call me 'little bunny'."

The tablet calls up what looks like a still image of the restaurant's dining hall. A layout that resembles a blueprint (or perhaps more accurately, a floor plan) appears on the lower-right corner of the picture. Beanie taps it, and it changes to another camera view, mostly obscured by thickly-pleated curtains.

"I believe you were asking about the stage earlier," Beanie says, wiping her mouth on the back of her sleeve.

You observe the screen with growing curiosity as the video feed updates in real-time. The heavy curtains slowly begin to draw back, revealing a row of three immense, gleaming humanoid statues. They're mounted on what appears to be a grand performance stage littered with props and set pieces -- this must be the "Show Stage". Each figure appears to be a rough approximation of a human, but their obvious mechanical joints and seams as well as completely inaccurate skin colors shatter the illusion before it even has a chance to set in. For all the world, they look like enlarged versions of some child's toy robots.

"Creeeepy," you breathe as you lean in, trying to get a better look at the display.

Positioned in the center of the trio is what has to be a mad scientist's attempt at recreating the marching band character you saw on the door. In hard contrast to the cute cartoon version, the "Jeremy Human" standing upon the stage is a tall, lanky, insidious machine. It (he?) still possesses the identifying features of a band leader's uniform and stylish sunglasses, but instead of the intended inviting smile, its entire head seems to be more reminiscent of a human skull with a mile-wide sneer. Its thin, wispy hands terminate in razor-sharp fingers, clutching a weighty cube that looks like an old-fashioned music box with a hand crank. You realize that must have been the jack-in-the-box thing you saw the cartoon version holding on the sign. From head-to-toe, "Jeremy" is done up in hot-rod red paint with gold and black trim, giving it altogether less of a music man vibe and more that of a demonic drum major.

To the right of "Jeremy" is a portly, weighty machine the approximate color (and shape) of a cantaloupe. Looks like it's decidedly female based on the curves and build. Unlike Jeremy's skeletal face, this one has an overly cutesy, round face with a crescent-shaped indentation for a mouth and huge, expressive lens-like eyes. Atop its head is a thick wig of long hair underneath a hard hat, and instead of a band leader's getup, it's dressed up in a machinist's apron with the text "Celebrate the Joy of Creativity!" embroidered on its front pouch. A toolbox hangs from its right hand, and in its left is a glinting metal screwdriver, covered in patchy, rust-colored stains.

The third and final bandmate bears hardly any resemblance to either of the other two, and you instantly find yourself uncomfortable just looking at it. Unlike the obvious "human with occupation" theme the first two robots possess, this one's a bit of an outlier as it features no discernable role or costume. The only indications as to what it's supposed to be are a baseball cap turned at an angle and fake, chintzy plastic "bling" around its neck. To make matters worse, it's decked out in chocolate brown paint that's peeling and fading near the joints, revealing a bland metallic silver chassis underneath. Not unlike Rackham and Haddock, this robot's right arm seems to have a hook instead of a functional second hand for no immediately logical reason -- it doesn't have any kind of visible pirate motif, so you're not really sure what's up there. In fact, just about everything about its design looks like a PR nightmare.

"Charming," you finally manage, distaste apparent in your tone. "Let me guess... animatronics?"



You're familiar enough with the concept, since animatronic puppets and figures are commonly employed in older movies and low-budget films as a practical effect for monsters, aliens, and the like.

Beanie nods. "Got it in one." She leans back in her chair, leaving the camera feed set to the stage as she sips at her purloined soda.

You run a hand through your hair, yawning a little. "That explains how you have a band but no 'live' music. So what's up with these guys?"

"Red one's Jeremy Human, the real one," Beanie says. "He leads the band. The orange girl is Fritzine, she's the backup singer."

"*Fritzine?!*" you sputter, laughing out loud. "Oh, come on, that's not even a real name!"

"No shit!" Beanie chortles, finishing off her drink in a couple of gulps. "Of course they're going to have stupid, made-up names. They're *humans*."

You narrow your eyes at her as she obviously pours another cup of cream soda. "So, uh, what's up with the stereotype over there then?"

She glances at you in befuddlement.

"What, you mean Darky?" she asks, confused.

"Darky'," you echo, immediately hating the way the name rolls off your tongue. "You're serious. His name's *Darky*."

She frowns at you, one eyebrow arched. "Stupid human names, remember? Anyway, yeah, Darky's kind of... uh, he's a little fidgety. He's like the 'villain' of the group. He had a bit where he'd swipe jewelry and food from the patrons, as sort of his gimmick. At the end of every show, he would always get 'arrested' by one of the other characters and have to give everything back plus extra tokens and stuff."

You're shaking your head in abject horror. What the hell year is it that this company can get away with this kind of thing? Yet it doesn't even seem to register with Beanie.

"Darky was always the least popular one, but they brought him out of 'retirement' since our usual third band member was stolen," she continues.

"Stolen? Really? Those things look like they're seven freakin' feet tall. Who the hell would steal an animatronic from a pizzeria, some crazed fan or something? Besides, don't you guys have cameras for that?"

Beanie quickly pages through the camera's system faster than your mind can really process. You catch glimpses of back storage closets, a kitchen, and a room full of shipping crates before she reverts it to the original view of the stage.

"We have no idea how the hell it happened," she admits. "It wasn't on my watch, I can tell you that. The thing just up and disappeared one day. Management's really unhappy about it."

You pop open the first sandwich wrapper and remove one of the segments, handing it to Beanie. "I can imagine," you reply, taking another chunk for yourself.

"They don't look that impressive, but these things are super-advanced and cost a fortune to build. Replacing the other one would require budget cuts, so until he turns up somewhere or the suits move some money around, we're down a player," Beanie continues as she pinches off a bite of lettuce.

The video feed turns to static, and she suddenly shifts forward in her chair. "Hold on a sec," she says, visibly tensing up.

"What? Did it lose the Wi-Fi signal or something?" you ask, tearing open a mustard packet. She presses a button on the screen to set it to another view, then returns it to the stage overlay. The orange "Fritzine" character is no longer present amongst the trio, her oversized screwdriver carelessly on the stage next to her companions.

"The hell?" you mumble, leaning forward with piqued interest. "Where'd she go, behind the curtain?"

"Damn it!" Beanie gripes, jumping up from her seat and sprinting across the room. "It's gonna be one of **those** nights."

"One of 'those'-- Beanie, what are you going on about?"

She grabs a cardboard box from off the top of a stack of monitors and starts rummaging through it. "The hell are they? Day shift keeps moving the damn things..."

After a few seconds of digging, she pulls from the box a pair of cheap-looking bright red plastic masks that you quickly realize are supposed to be modeled after Jeremy's face. They look like the sort of inexpensive prize one would get from a carnival -- probably taken from this very arcade's ticket counter, now that you think about it.

"Here, put this on," she says as she thrusts one of the two masks into your lap. "You'll need it in a second."

"Why? What's this for?" you inquire, feeling like you've missed some crucial detail. You fiddle with the mask, trying to figure out how it fits on your head. An elastic band is stapled onto either side of the thing to hold it against your face, and small eyeholes are cut out where Jeremy's "eyes" would normally go.

"Mike, I'm not screwing around right now. You need to do exactly as I tell you to, all right?"

"Beanie--"

She shushes you, and her long ears perk toward the hall.

"Put the damn mask on," she insists, slipping her own over her face. She flips her hoodie up, tucking her ears back and holding them in place with the mask's elastic band.

"All right," you sigh, a sense of unease beginning to grow in the pit of your stomach. You don't like where this is going.

You reluctantly slide your own mask on, instantly hating it. It's clearly not sized for a human head, so you can only see out of one of the eyeholes due to the way they're spaced apart from each other. Notably, there are also no breathing holes in the mask. Yeah, *that* doesn't seem like a safety hazard.

You slip a finger between the plastic and your face to allow some airflow so that you don't asphyxiate.

Half a minute passes before you hear a ringing noise in the distance. Startled, you shift forward in your seat, peering into the darkness. Heavy, industrial sounds like pistons pressing echo down the hallway. Moments later, you see a bulky outline come staggering into view at the end of the dim hall. Panicked, you instantly jolt up out of your chair, your fight-or-flight mechanism pounding in your chest. You're thankful you went and emptied your bladder before starting the shift.

"Holy shit!" you cry out, pushing the mask up onto your hair for a better view. "Oh god! What the hell is that thing?!"

"What are you doing?! Put your mask back on!"

"I can't see out of this piece of shit!" you protest, nevertheless tugging your Jeremy mask back on over your face. "Gun! Give me your gun!"

Beanie places a paw on your arm. "Stop panicking, you idiot. I don't have one, and it wouldn't do us any good anyway. Just follow my lead."

You look at her like she's lost her mind, but it's lost behind the plastic visage. "Better idea: you distract whoever it is and I'll hit them with the chair, and we'll book it!"

"Damn it, Mike, shut *up!*" she hisses, but you notice she refuses to let go of your arm. "I'm telling you, let me take care of this."

You're not the least bit convinced as you turn and look back at the hallway, waiting as the noise gets louder. Whirring, clanking footsteps reverberate across the tunnel until a bright orange golem recently introduced to you as "Fritzine" steps into full view. Cowed, you wobble backwards, knocking your chair over onto its side. They looked huge on the tablet screen, but now you've got an idea of just how enormous this monster is -- she's big enough she could give even *Chiclet* a go for her money in the height department, and she probably weighs three times as much as Fred.

Fritzine's eyes begin to glow as she ducks under the doorway, stepping inside the office and scanning the room.

"What the hell is it doing?" you ask, knees knocking. "How are these things even supposed to be able to move? Aren't animatronics just puppets on hydrau--"

Beanie elbows you in your gut before you can say anything else.

Once she's completed her scan, Fritzine drops the toolbox to the floor with a clang. You're squeezing the edge of the desk so tight your fingers start to hurt as you take this scene in.

"Well, howdy there, Jeremy... and uh, other Jeremy," the robot bellows in a thick, syrupy-sweet southern accent. Her voice is warbly and tinny, like someone speaking through a fast food speaker. "How are y'all doin' this fine evenin'?"

"Just radical," Beanie replies in a goofy voice. "Oh, you know us Jeremys! Always up to some, uh, zany antics!"

"It can talk?!" you squeak.

"Other Jeremy, you feelin' all right, fella?" Fritzine asks, her lifeless head tilting unnaturally to emulate confusion. "When was yer last reboot? You ain't done installed any unauthorized parts now, have ya?"

Flipping the lid of the toolbox open with her foot, Fritzine stoops low and begins rummaging around inside it before pulling out some particularly sharp-looking implement.

Beanie looks to you pleadingly, motioning for you to reply. Realizing you're mere seconds away from an impromptu "maintenance" session that could end in a trip to the emergency room, you say the first thing that pops into your mind.

"I, uh -- oh, man! I sure could go for a slice of... p-p-pizza!" you stammer. "H-how about you go get me one?"

"Pizza!" Fritzine beams, dropping the ominous tool back in the box and sealing it up. "So *that's* yer problem! Kin, now you're talkin' my language, but you know we don't got any right now till the mornin' cooks arrive."

"Bummer, dude," Beanie adds shakily.

You exhale heavily as Fritzine folds her arms, annoyed. "Oh, hey, listen -- I don't reckon y'all have pieced together where ol' Schmidt got off to?"

You silently mouth the words "*it knows!*" at Beanie before realizing she won't be able to see it through the plastic.

"Uh, still no leads, Fritzine, but you'll be the first to know," Beanie replies, flashing the thumbs-up at Fritzine with one arm as she squeezes the hell out of your wrist with the other. Fritzine seems to consider her words for a few seconds before turning and heading back out the hallway.

"Well, shoot, I hope he turns up soon. I'm startin' to miss the little devil somethin' fierce. Anyway, I'm off for lab work, so don't you give me no trouble unless it's real important. I'll make the rounds again in a little while to check up on y'all, hear?"

"Sure thing, and thanks! Catch you on the flipside, Fritz," Beanie calls out as the stout animatronic lumbers away with a wave.

As soon as you're convinced she's out of earshot, you rip the mask from your head and turn on Beanie, who's already back to calmly eating her sandwich.

"What the **HELL** was that?!?" you cry out, collapsing against the desk.

"*My job.* Only five hours and fifty more minutes of it to go," she sighs. "Ready to get to work?"

## Chapter End Notes

This chapter is followed by a **Roommates Mini Chapter**, which we recommend you should read if you're following the story chronologically!

Before proceeding to the next chapter in the main series, [click here for the next part, Mini 6: Bonnibel's Bad Dream.](#)

# The Night Shift

## Chapter Summary

It's going to be a terrible night.

## Chapter Notes

There's a special "Mini" chapter between this one and the last! If you haven't read the Mini, "*Bonnibel's Bad Dream*", you can find it [here](#).



You're pretty sure your antiperspirant vaporized the second "Fritzine" clomped her way into the guard room.

Your shirt's drenched with sweat, its poly-cotton blend adhering to your clammy skin like plastic wrap. The initial shock is only just beginning to fade as you stare at Beanie in a mixture of relief and doubt. You're simultaneously appalled and impressed at how calm she's acting, how dedicatedly she's playing up this whole bit. Sure, you realize as the new kid on the block, you're going to get your share of hazing, and if you're being honest you probably haven't been on your absolute best behavior. Still, no offense (real or perceived) has warranted the agitation churning away at your core right now.

"So who was it? Rackham? Chichi? Maybe someone I haven't met yet?" you ask as you leer down the hallway.

Beanie's trying to split her focus between you and monitoring the pizzeria through the tablet, but it's obvious she's more than a little distracted at the moment.

"What about them?" she mumbles, eyes glued to her screen.

"Just now, inside that costume?" You wave your hands around as you laugh insincerely. "Ha, ha! You got me!"

Pulling away from the monitor, she cuts her eyes at you. "Wait. You think this is a *joke*?" she asks flatly.

"No *duh*. I don't think it's a particularly **funny** joke, but I can't argue it wasn't, uh, well-crafted," you retort, folding your arms. "The part with the toolbox, and, and the pizza cutter -- or whatever the hell that thing was? That was **really** convincing."

Beanie bites her lower lip thoughtfully as she flips the tablet computer flat against the desk to give you her full and undivided attention.

"Mike, it's not a joke or a prank," she says slowly, in the calm and deliberate tone one might use to placate a frightened child. You recognize it as the same sort of voice you've heard used with Bonnibel. "*I swear* that I didn't ask Foxy, Chica, or anyone else to climb into one of those suits to scare you."

"So the alternative is, uh, you just expect me to, to -- buy off on a *puppet* managing to **walk** all the way here of its own accord, without a human inside operating it?" Laughing incredulously, you run your hands through your hair. "Do you *realize* how completely ridiculous that sounds?!"

Beanie cocks her head, clearly amused. "A human inside a human-shaped robot? Dude, that's a little too meta even by this place's standards," she snorts.

Having realized your Freudian slip only too late, you anxiously clam up, hoping Beanie doesn't put two and two together. Her gaze lingers on your face for a few seconds too long before she turns her attention back to the camera feeds.

"Sure. When you put it that way, yeah, I guess it sounds like I'm having a laugh at your expense," she says. "But there's nobody in the suits, Mike. They're all automated now."

Rivulets of sweat run down your back anew as you try and fail to process what this information means. "I thought this was just an arcade. A crooked one, sure. I knew they weren't 'normal' coming in, but come on. Are they like, remote-controlled? Is someone in the back moving them around at a console?"

"Yes, it *is* an arcade, and no, they aren't remote-controlled, either." Beanie checks her monitor again, staring intently at a static-filled window with **AUDIO ONLY** superimposed over the image in large red block letters. "Nominally, this is an arcade and a family restaurant, but the mascots have always been part of the business plan."

"I don't have a problem with *mascots*. Walkaround costumes at theme parks, I'm fine with. But Beanie, I know what animatronics are -- and these aren't really like any animatronic display I've ever seen."

"Can't argue with that," she mutters.

Without warning, the sounds of construction and power tools blast through the tiny speaker on the side of the tablet. For some reason, this seems to satisfy Beanie for the moment. With a couple of taps on the gadget's polished surface, she switches the view back to Jeremy and "Darky" on the show stage. Both of the metallic cadavers are as lifeless as they were the first time you saw them.

"The company bills them out as 'humanimatronics', but they're probably closer to full-fledged androids, if we're being real," Beanie says at length. "They were originally designed to take care of, and interact with the kids, which is why they move around. As for *how* they're actually able to walk and talk? That kind of stuff's way above my pay grade. You'd have to ask someone that worked on them like Cheeky or Chiclet."

Robots, huh.

You suppose you have no right to really be surprised, considering that you're carrying on a conversation with a sentient purple rabbit in a hooded sweatshirt. Robots that can move and talk seem relatively probable by comparison. The fact that they're in a children's pizzeria, on the other hand, is far more unsettling -- but you suppose their existence itself isn't really that far-fetched.

You scratch the back of your head, contemplating this development. Maybe these are the so-called temperamental pieces of equipment Faz mentioned?

"Androids or otherwise, that doesn't explain what's up with *this* thing, though."

Hefting the Jeremy Human mask, you turn it over and over in your fingers for emphasis. Beanie's is still on her head, but it's currently tucked up into her hood so that she can breathe easily.

"It's kind of hard to explain. Something to do with facial scanning and software hiccups, like some kind of anti-pedo mode they've got to keep people from taking off with the kids during daylight, uh..." Trailing off, her eyes light up. "Actually, scratch that. I just remembered something."

Beanie fumbles with the tablet while you anxiously peer down the hallway. Facial scanners? *Anti-pedo mode*? You get up from your chair, stepping over the messy octopus wiring on the floor as you move closer towards the doorframe for a better view. The tunnel leading up to the killbox that is the security office appears dark and silent, its only occupants discarded drink cups and posters.

"It's been forever since I last listened to these," she murmurs wistfully.

"Listened to what?" you query, squinting into the darkness.

"My old training tapes. Corporate makes everyone sit through them during their first week." Glancing over the screen, she nearly drops it as she lurches forward upon seeing you standing out

in front of the security room. "Hey, whoa, get back in here! Believe it or not, this is the safest place in the house -- I can't protect you if you go too far outside."

"*Protect* me?!" You turn around, panic welling back up in your chest. "So they **are** a threat, then? Is that why we have the masks? Do they think we're, like, child predators or something?!"

Rather than responding, Beanie taps the tablet screen. The sudden, earsplitting ring of an old-fashioned desk telephone echoes out in the room, causing you to nearly leap out of your shoes.

"The hell?" you blurt, startled. "Who's calling this late at night?"

"Weren't you listening, doofus? I **just** told you, it's pre-recorded," she replies. "Now calm down and listen."

The first thing you hear through the speaker after the phone ringing is an exuberant male voice.

"Is this -- oh, just right here into the handset...? Okay! Wow, look at that!" You hear what sounds like a soda can being crumpled and items being shoved around a desk as the guy on the recording stammers through the tablet's speakers. "Um, hello? Hello!"

"Nervous fellow, isn't he?" you respond with a weak smile, retaking your seat next to Beanie. She rolls her eyes at you as you study the tablet's screen.

"You're one to talk," she retorts.

You smile in spite of yourself. "That was the joke."

"Uhhh, I wanted to record a message for you to help you get settled in on your first night," the voice continues. You lean forward, listening with anticipation as the person fumbles with some papers, clearly reading from a script. For some odd reason, you can't shake the feeling that you've heard this voice before, but you're having the hardest time trying to place it. It doesn't sound like anybody you know off the top of your head.

"Mmmm. I'm actually the day shift supervisor here at Jeremy Human's. Well, one of the sister locations on the other side of town, anyway, but I go back and forth between stores to help out." There's a pause in the dialogue and you can faintly hear another voice in the background, but it's impossible to make out what they're saying. "Haha, uh... hmm. I guess you probably knew that from when I interviewed you," the phone guy adds with a sheepish chuckle.

You give Beanie a sidelong glance, but she's already engrossed in the cameras again, watching the remaining animatronics on the stage with fierce intensity, as if she's daring them to move on her watch.

"I know you're probably a bit restless, cooped up in that building all by yourself. So, uh... take a deep breath, relax; you've got nothing to worry about, y'know? I'm going to walk you through how your first night's going to go, okay? Okay!"

More rustling as another page turns, and you can hear the day shift manager talking to himself under his breath. During the lull in the recording, Beanie reaches into her sweatshirt's pocket, producing a small flashlight.

"When the clock hits one, I want you to shine this down the hallway from time to time," she orders. "Not constantly, just every now and again. Don't go nuts with it, gotta make the batteries last."

"Oh, okay," you reply obediently, taking it from her.

It's not a particularly large instrument -- certainly not like the kind the police carry that could easily double as a weapon -- but it is one of the newer kinds with a strong LED bulb. You give it an experimental click and are immediately surprised at the amount of light it's able to produce, allowing you to see much further down the tunnel than you'd normally be able to.

"The company has an introduction I'm required to read you -- it's strictly a legal thing, nothing to worry about," the shift manager continues. "Uhh... 'thanks for choosing to spend your summer at Jeremy Human's Funtime Family Arcade and Pizzeria, home of Rockin' Tunes and Rad Humes! Humanimatronics Limited will not be held liable for any stolen or missing belongings, merchandise, extremities or other assets. Should anything go missing, a full and complete investigation will be launched promptly, as soon as the company's shareholders have been notified and the property has been thoroughly sterilized for the investigators' safety.'"

You pause, staring at the screen. "Hey, wait, what? Stolen or missing -- and what was that about 'extremities'?"

"Just pay attention for now," Beanie whispers.

"Hey, listen, I get it, it sounds bad -- but that's just the company's lawyers looking out for everyone's best interests. Gotta do things by the book, right? For sure." You hear him laugh awkwardly as he progresses with his script. "So at Jeremy Human's, our pride and joy are our proprietary 'Humanimatronic' band members. The newest models have some real breathtaking features, chief among them being their all new Facial Authentication Zone system for increased customer communication."

Beanie shifts uncomfortably in her seat. Taking that as your cue, you turn the flashlight on again and wave it down the hallway before clicking it off. Satisfied, she goes back to her staring contest with the show stage.

"The new facial authenticators allow our characters to identify with patrons for better one-on-one interaction. It enables Jeremy Human and his whole band to recognize and respond to some of the most common emotional states including happiness, sadness, fear, uh... alarm, panic, consternation, lethargy, and neurosis."

You raise an eyebrow at those last few. *Neurosis?* you mouth at Beanie.

"Of course, this is all so we can create a wholesome entertainment environment that's tailored for each customer's individual needs. Unfortunately, every new system isn't without its, uh, kinks," the manager continues.

"Uh oh," you mutter. "Like what kind of 'kinks' are we looking at here? I'm guessing not the good kind?"

Beanie jabs you with her elbow. "We're on company time. Don't be crass," she reprimands with a smirk.

"Pfft. Yes ma'am."

"The software's still in pre-alpha right now, so it doesn't work at peak efficiency in really poor lighting conditions such as nighttime, or winter. Our characters use a proprietary battery-powered system, but since the rechargeable cells are incredibly expensive for each model we can't afford to constantly be replacing them if they overcharge. For that reason, the animatronics need to expend excess energy every night -- think of it as like being on a road trip and needing to stretch your legs, right?"

"So that's why they walk around?" you ask with a frown. "That's stupid. Why don't they just put the batteries on a timer or something? Wouldn't it be more efficient than turbocharging them or whatever?"

"Oh my god, I don't *know*, Mike," Beanie replies exasperatedly. "**Nobody** knows."

"Now, ordinarily? All that wouldn't matter too terribly much -- but with the new software, there's a potential teething problem; if the humanimatronics see you at night, they probably won't recognize you as a worker. They'll probably, um... see you as another humanimatronic with too many 'unapproved parts,'" the phone voice says, swallowing audibly.

"Unapproved parts," you echo. "Like what kind of 'unapproved parts' are we talking here?"

As if in reply, the supervisor works up the nerve to finish his statement. "So in that instance they might try to, uh, remove some of your parts. Like your ears, and your eyes. And uh, your skin... probably. On account of any fur, scales, and/or feathers you might have depending on your, um, species, I would imagine."

Beanie winces a little as she tugs at one of her ears self-consciously.

"Y-yeah. These are the things they should probably let you know about when you sign up, right? I keep telling 'em 'hey, how about a door on the office'? But, uh... guess that goes against the whole 'modern design' of the facility."

"Oh, sure," you sarcastically interject. "God forbid we be unable to preserve that niche 'kiddie pizzeria' feng shui! Can't let any practical safety features get in the way of our experimental, highly dangerous robot technology."

To your surprise, Beanie bursts out laughing next to you, slumping against the table. "Oooh. God, I'm so glad someone else gets it. I mean, like, a normal person and not, you know, someone back home."

"You guys aren't normal?" you ask softly, smiling.

She stops laughing, clearly taken aback a little, but the recording proceeds before she can say anything else.

"Anyway, we've got a bit of a stopgap measure in place should the humanimatronic characters try to 'surprise' you after hours. We've outfitted all of our guards with brand new, official Jeremy Human masks!" the manager announces. "In addition to making a wonderful souvenir to take home to that special child in your life, it should also come in handy for fooling each character into believing you have the, um, corporate-mandated number of required parts -- so long as you tuck in any major extremities such as ears, tails, bills, trunks, or antlers, for instance."

You cringe as Beanie nods slowly. "Aaaaand *now* you see why I never leave home without the hoodie. Sure, it's great now, but it's absolutely miserable in the summer."

The shift manager sighs in relief, seemingly content now that he's been able to successfully muddle his way through the required monologue. "Right, um! So, just keep an eye on the security cameras, and if you have any questions you can feel free to ask me by submitting a card to the question box," he says. "It's the red one directly next to the suggestion and resignation boxes in the employee break room! I'll give you another call tomorrow night if there are any other instructions I think of. Have a safe first night, rookie!"

The sound of a handset clattering signals the end of the message.

"So let me see if I get this straight," you announce, breaking the silence. "The characters here are robots designed to do meet-and-greet stuff with the customers, which is why they can move around."

"Yeah. Photo shoots, performances on stage, carrying cake and presents to the kids. There's even one that runs the prize counter and hands out toys."

Twirling the Jeremy mask around in your hands, you hold it up to the light. The plastic's thin enough you can almost see through it. "And they're all rigged up with this facial scanning software that's glitchy, and we have to wear these masks to fool them into thinking we're robots too, otherwise they'll rip our skin off," you add.

She nods grimly, lips pursed. "Basically."

"And, uh, I'm guessing that's happened before." You cross your fingers, only to feel your stomach drop when she nods again. "To anyone I know?" you whisper hoarsely.

"No," she answers, her voice even and low. "None of us, thankfully. One or two of the guards that had this job before me, though."

You place a hand over your mouth, breathing in deeply through your nose to quell the sudden onslaught of nausea. You regret the decision to load your stomach full of greasy junk food. If you ever come back, you're packing a real 'lunch' from home. And antacids.

The tablet computer screen flickers, drawing Beanie's attention. "Darky" is no longer on the stage, and Jeremy has now turned his head intently towards the camera, as if defiantly staring you down. The band leader glowers at the two of you through the lens as easily as if he were looking at you face-to-face, his skeletal grin belying a far more malevolent undercurrent.

What moron could ever think this fiend would make for an appealing children's character?

"He sees us!" you exclaim. "Are the cameras two-way? Why is he looking at us like that?"

"I think the more pressing point is that Darky's moving now," she says. "Get ready."

Hurriedly snatching up your mask from the desk, you wrestle it on over your face. Shining the flashlight down the hallway, you catch the reflection off of the next "humanimatronic". Darky's standing at the long end of the tunnel, his hook raised to his jaw in pensive thought. Curiously, Fritzine's back with him as well, standing in front of her smaller companion.

"Make that two," you add, your skin breaking out into goose flesh.

"Oh, shit," Beanie gripes, sliding her mask over her face as well. "Fritzine's with him? That **is** a problem."

"Naw, really?!" you snap, doing everything you can to suppress your panic.

"Well, it's different when there's two of them -- Darky's always been kind of, uh, twitchy," she explains. "He's the only one that isn't fooled by the masks, so--"

"Wait, he knows?! He can see through it?!" you shriek, cutting her off. "What the hell good do they do us then? We're boned!"

"Oh my GOD," she groans, punching your arm. "Am I going to have to sedate you?! Listen, you're just gonna have to distract him with the flashlight. When he gets close, shine it in his eyes."

You blink through the one eyehole you can see out of. "Wait, that's it? Your *master plan* is just being a **dick** to the enormous robot that can *skin us alive*?!"

"Hey, don't knock it if it works!" she chastises. "They teach girls to take cheap shots in kickboxing classes in case of sexual assault or mugging! Anything to even the playing field!"

"Why the hell is *that* the analogy you draw while dealing with the black guy robot," you mutter.

"Huh? Did you say something, Mike?" she asks pensively as both animatronics begin their pounding, clanging march down the hallway.

You ready your flashlight, waiting for both characters to step into view. "Nope."

Heavy footfalls signal the arrival of Fritzine. She ducks under the entryway, her eyes lighting up as she begins her scan of the room. "Howdy again, fellas," the rotund orange machine booms. "I thought I heard some racket goin' on back here, but it looks like it's just you two again."

"Just us," Beanie agrees in the same goofy voice she used earlier. "How's your work coming along?"

"Ugh, I've hit a brick wall," Fritzine replies, her permanently-smiling face belying her frustration. "**Literally.** My dang ol' drill bits are all too dull to keep going, so I'm probably gonna have t'knock out the back corner of the secondary game room with my trusty sledge. Can y'all get that squared up with corporate for me?"

"...sure," Beanie says. "I, just, uh... see if you can busy yourself with something else in the meanwhile, you know? Last thing we need is for the whole building to come down. ...again."

Scoffing, she jabs a finger at Beanie, tapping against the forehead of her mask. "Dang it, J, **y'worry too much.** I know **exactly** which walls are load-bearin'," Fritzine says with a tinny grunt as she raps the side of her metal head. "Last time y'chewed me out I just went and hardwired the whole floorplan into my internal database. Figured I didn't need another lecture."

"Well, don't let us hold you back from, uh, having a rad time!" Beanie croons, doing a little jig as she backpedals. Fritzine tosses her toolbox onto the floor, nearly splitting the floor tile in half as she rests her bulk on the guard desk. You hear the metal table creak and groan under her weight.

"I'll get to it. In th' **fullness of time**. It's my union-mandated break right now. So! What're you boys up to? Better be findin' our prodigal 'bot after that sermon you preached us earlier." Beanie tries to lift the tablet out from under Fritzine's leg on the table, but the robot pushes her paw away. "Whoa, cowboy. Don't go messin' with company property, even if it **is** your name all over everythin'!"

"I, uh, just -- mmm! I'm looking high and low for him, but nothing yet," Beanie replies, voice cracking under the pressure.

"Uh huh. And y'all are conductin' yer search from the comfort o' the security office on y'all's **behinds**, rather than puttin' the footwork in. Mmmmhmmm, I see. Jeremy's not gonna be happy, boys." You and Beanie exchange worried glances as Fritzine makes a show of inspecting the guard shack, seemingly displeased.

"Buuuut I guess you knew that, on account of you're both him."

Beanie laughs nervously as Fritzine's head slowly swivels on its pivot point before stopping to look at you.

"**Well**. Y'all just try t'keep the noise down so I can construct in peace, will ya?"

"S-sure," you and Beanie agree simultaneously.

Climbing down off the desk, Fritzine waves you off as she muscles past Darky, who's now standing under the doorframe. He patiently steps aside as his co-star takes off for parts unknown before slowly walking into the office himself.

"Good evening, Ms. Rabbinson, and... oh, a friend!" he says politely, his lantern jaw clattering as he makes his way into the room. "Hey, how you doing, buddy? They call me Darky."

His steel face contorts even as he speaks his name aloud, clearly not enjoying the sound of it any more than you do.

"Shine the light in his eyes! Hurry!" Beanie urges. "I told you, the masks don't work on him!"

You give her a look, fumbling with the flashlight. "He's -- this one doesn't seem threatening, though," you reply, nevertheless training the beam of light over the robot's face.

"Ow! Hey, come on, guys!" Darky cries out, covering his optics with his single hand. "Seriously? We gotta do this **every single night?** It got old after the first week!"

"Keep shining it!" Beanie hollers as she begins fighting with you for control of the flashlight. "Hurry! We don't have much time!"

"You know you're not fooling **anyone** with that stupid mask you got from the prize room, right?" Darky insists, crouching as Beanie shoves the flashlight in his face. "Hey, quit it! **Geez, lady**, what did I ever do to you?"

You snatch the flashlight from Beanie's grasp, shutting it off.

"You okay?" you ask warily. Beanie whirls around, glaring daggers at you through the eyeholes in her disguise.

"Mike! What are you doing?!" she hisses.

Darky leans down into the room, the aperture-like eyelids on his face clicking open and closed as they readjust to the natural lighting of the office.

"Thanks, man," he offers. "Your name's Mike, right?"

"Yeah. I'm, uh, here with 'Ms. Rabbinson' as a guest. It's 'bring your roommate to work day'." You glance over at Beanie, who's currently in the middle of panicking, hunched behind her tablet like a kid who doesn't fully understand how hide-and-seek works. "I'm told you're not fooled by any of this," you ask nervously, pointing to your own head. Darky snorts, folding his arms.

"Nnnoooo, not really. Listen, I just swung by here to see if there was any word on my boy, Schmidt."

You squint -- that's the second time they've mentioned you by name, now. How the hell does he know your last name if he's just now meeting you?

"Yeah?" you ask, voice cracking slightly. "Like how do you mean?"

"Y'know, just wondering where he went. Fritzine has been burning oil like mad in that lab of hers, but even she can't figure it out. Lost his signal, I guess. I'm not saying he went missing on your watch or anything, Ms. Rabbinson, but the man himself isn't happy, not having a solid answer about this." Darky lifts his hat from his head, holding it over his chest thoughtfully. "Like, uh, even less happy than usual. Honestly, the sooner I'm out of the spotlight and the sooner the band's back together, the better it is for all of us."

Beanie nods quietly. "Definitely. For sure. Well, uh, off you go then. Shoo."

"Yeah, okay, I get the picture. I'll get outta your fur," the humanimatronic mutters. "Just -- be aware things are ramping up, is all I'm saying. Nice meeting you, Mike."

"Um, likewise," you offer, waving in confusion as he dejectedly lumbers out of the room.

As soon as neither mascot is within earshot of the office, Beanie frantically leans forward, shifting the tablet's view back to Jeremy. It appears as though he hasn't moved from his original position on stage, but strangely Fritzine is standing next to him again just as she was at the start of the night. Jeremy's no longer fixated on the camera like he was before, which you take as a good sign.

"What was all *that* about?" you ask Beanie, sounding probably more accusatory than you intended. "Don't get me wrong, I'm still really freaked out by the things, but he at least seemed kind of -- passive?"

"That's just it," she sighs, visibly grateful that he's gone. "He's just -- *really* unpredictable and glitchy, since he hasn't been maintained as well as the others."

"So why don't they fix him up then?"

"Because it's really freaking expensive. Weren't you listening, earlier?" She huffs, shakily clinging to the tablet computer. "Usually, Darky's not much of a threat by himself, but the fact that the mask doesn't fool him is a **really** bad thing. Like, none of us can figure out why it doesn't work. And it doesn't matter if he's 'passive' -- since he isn't fooled by it, that means all he has to do is *mention* that we're the 'night guard and friend' within earshot of one of the others, and we're off to the back room for taxidermy."

Realization hits you like a ton of bricks, and your legs buckle. "Oh," you squeak. "T-that's why you wanted to get rid of him."

"Exactly. If Fritzine had turned around and come back or, even worse, Jeremy had walked in while he was talking to us..."

"We'd have been screwed," you finish, slumping back in your seat as the reality of just how much danger both of you were in washes over you. "Oh. Oh, wow. I'm glad to know it's not because you're like, prejudiced or anything."

"Prejudiced? What the hell are you talking about?!" Beanie grunts, checking in on the other rooms of the pizzeria. "Against a *killer robot*? They **all** freak me out, dude."

You shake your head, peeling the plastic mask back to take a deep breath. "I -- no, I meant because of the color of his, uh..."

"He's a brown animatronic robot, Mike," she says, clearly puzzled by your meaning. "Fred's brown, Peanut's brown, Faz is brown -- it's a really common fur color. I'm not sure I'm following you."

"W-well, but I mean, the hook, and the jewelry? Like, seriously? You don't see anything wrong with that? And did he have a gold tooth, too, or was that just me?"

Content that Jeremy and Fritzine are in their proper places for now, she looks up to make eye contact with you, pushing her own mask back on top of her head. "He's a robber, Mike. Well, sort of -- he's more like a scamp. Of course he's going to have fake jewelry, and he probably lost his hand in a shootout or something. What's your point?"

"I, uh -- forget it," you sigh, throwing your hands in the air in exasperation. "So basically this is what you do all night? Sit back here and watch that camera, putting masks on and flashlighting robots in the eyes so they don't peel you like a grape?"

"Okay, **now** who's being prejudiced?" she asks pointedly. "What, so I'm a *grape* now just because I'm purple? Is that it?"

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean it like that," you immediately protest, completely blindsided by the social trap you just blundered into.

Beanie locks eyes with you for several seconds, scowling at you as you squirm sheepishly.

Grape? Purple? Are purple rabbits called "grapes" as a racial epithet? Ugh! You should have *known* that would be some kind of slur, considering this world's differences from yours. What other possibly offensive phrases or terms could you have used already without realizing? Bonbon seemed upset after that comment you made about dying your hair blue at dinner. Oh god, have you ever called Bonnibel a blueberry?

And Mangle likes strawberries, what does **that** mean?!

"Beanie, I'm really sor--"

Before you can finish apologizing, she abruptly starts cackling, kicking her feet up on the desk in triumph.

"Hah! Gotcha, Mikey," she says, wiping a tear from her eye.

You stare at her completely dumbfounded, before it dawns on you that you've just been played. With a sigh, you drag your palm down your face in complete frustration.

"Nnnggghh...! You're absolutely the worst."

"Don't I know it," the Beanpole beams.

Fortunately for your heartrate, the next few hours go smoothly despite Darky's ominous warning, giving you and Beanie ample time to settle down and relax. Fritzine drifts back and forth between the stage and her 'laboratory' -- which you learn is the static-filled screen. Apparently she demolished the camera in there a while back and the restaurant just couldn't be bothered to fix it. Darky largely stays in the game room, deliberately going out of his way to avoid eye contact with the cameras as he mopes around. Neither of them come to bother you, and Jeremy Human, the "big man himself", hasn't left the stage even once.

You've taken over security tablet duty for the time being, the two of you having had your fill of card games and old VHS children's movies played on the disused security monitors. Beanie walked you through a crash course in how to operate the tablet, which you currently have propped up in your lap.

"So they don't move if you watch them?" you ask curiously, observing as the crimson statue stares unflinchingly at the wall across from him. "I notice you've kept the camera trained on that guy since we got here."

Beanie pulls her hood back, letting her ears flop out. She's worked up a bit of a sweat herself due to the poor air circulation and the high number of cords, machines, and other things generating heat in the stuffy office.

"Basically, that's pretty much it," she says, rubbing the moisture out of her eartips. You catch the scent of her shampoo as she does -- smells like flowers. Lilacs, maybe? "They CAN mess with the cameras, though, which is why I don't just leave it on the stage all night. I think they use like, some kind of radio frequency thing to cause static, which knocks the feed out. They don't do it often, only if you stare too long."

"Sounds kind of like the red light/green light games we'd play as kids," you comment, cycling through the restaraunt's major hotspots of activity to check up on Fritzine and Darky one more time. "Is it like this every night? With the robots in and out constantly harassing you?"

You marvel at how odd that sentence feels spoken aloud.

"No way, not every night. Most nights they're not anywhere near this active, and even when they are, it's rare to ever see them this... confrontational. Though it does kind of follow a pattern; the closer it gets to the weekend, the more restless they are. My job's been a *lot* easier now that I only have to keep track of three," she says, helping herself to another handful of sour gummy candy from your bag. "Things still aren't perfect, but they're certainly more palatable at the moment. Honestly, I kinda hope it stays that way. I know corporate would hate hearing this, but I wouldn't lose sleep if the other ones went missing either."

You nod, fishing a piece of candy out for yourself only to find that Beanie's taken all the good flavors. "I can imagine," you mutter, popping something in your mouth that tastes like a mixture of

tangerine and burnt popcorn. "Blechh. What time is it?"

"We're well past the five AM hurdle," she replies, checking her watch. "Less than a half hour out."

"What exactly happens at six AM?" You fidget idly, trying to find a comfortable position to put your restless hands in. "Do we just make a break for the exit and punch out on the way?"

"No. Thankfully, the lot of them cycle into 'day mode' for the restaurant's opening hours, and all this slasher flick shit goes out the window."

That's a relief. You weren't looking forward to having to sprint out of this madhouse.

"Just like that, huh?"

She snaps her fingers for emphasis. "Just like that. Come six AM we'll stroll out, right past 'em. Like nothing ever happened. Bad news is, this is usually the point where all hell breaks loose on a bad night."

"Delightful," you quip, focusing on Jeremy again. "You up for another game of go fish?"

"Ugh. God, no. I think there's still a couple of tapes left in the box if you want me to turn on another cartoon."

"Pass. I think I've seen enough of *Finicky Fox Saves the Day* for one night," you reply.

She shrugs. "Won't say I blame you. Just extending the offer."

"Speaking of finicky foxes, what's Rackham's deal?" you ask. "For that matter, there's actually still so little I know about everyone in the complex. I was hoping maybe you wouldn't mind filling me in on a few things."

What you **really** want to ask her about is the pizzeria's history of 'unfortunate accidents', but you begrudgingly admit the two of you don't quite have the rapport for you to just bring it up out of the blue. Tonight might have been a bust as far as fact-finding missions go, but you've at least gotten a taste for what the enemy is like.

"Foxy? Well, he and Chica went to high school together along with me and my brother, so we've known each other for years. Foxy's like, how do I put it -- kind of a butt?"

"Wow. That's a *very* mature, technical description. Is he perhaps *also* a smelly fartface, or a yucky poopypants?"

"He is, yes! He's absolutely both of those things," she gasps, placing her paws on either of her cheeks in mock surprise. "And more! You're more astute than you look, Mike! Is it because you're a butt too?"

"I've been known to be, on occasion."

"Well, to answer your question, Foxy actually worked here with me, but he didn't do security. He was just one of the day shift workers, mostly doing custodial stuff. Cleaning the ball pit, stocking shelves, waiting tables, you know -- whatever they needed him to do."

"I gotcha," you reply. "How'd he, um -- his, uh...?"

"Oh, his eye and the hook?" she asks bluntly. You flinch a little at how tactless it sounds, but you nod the affirmative. "Yeah, it was here, if that's what you're asking. I was off shift for the day. There was a, er, I guess it was an electrical malfunction. Remember the thing about the batteries in the robots? One of them overloaded. The thing exploded, and he got shocked and sprayed in the face with battery acid."

Yet another victim of the Jeremy Human regime. Why are you not surprised anymore?

"God," you choke. "That's brutal. He's lucky he can even still see."

"Yeah, 'lucky.' He lost use of one of his eyes and burnt his paw to a crisp. It was so badly damaged that they ended up writing it off. He and another friend of ours both got caught up in it, actually. If Foxy hadn't been there to save her, she'd have bit it for sure."

"Wow... so he's a real-life hero, huh?" you muse with a half-smile. "That kind of puts him in a whole new light for me now. I guess I should cut him some slack."

"Basically. Don't tell him you know, though, he's smug enough as it is," she adds with a glum smile.

"You know, it's an extremely unfortunate coincidence that both 'Foxys' -- Rackham and Haddock -- each lost a paw," you comment. "Poor bastards."

She tilts her head in amazement. "Oh god, you're right... you know, I've never even thought about it that way, but they **are** kind of similar, aren't they?"

You give her a dubious stare, unable to tell if she's pulling your leg or not.

"Yeah, totally," you agree hesitantly, topping up your cream soda with the dregs of the mostly-flat bottle. "What about Fred? How'd you guys meet up with him if you, Chichi and Rackham went to high school together?"

"We didn't share the same class, but he attended our school as well, actually. Fred's not that much older than us," she replies.

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah," she says. "Twenty-four this year."

"*He's my age?* God, you're full of it!" you reply, dabbing at your shirt with a napkin. "No way! I'd have put him at being in his late thirties, maybe early forties -- dead minimum!"

Beanie cracks up laughing. "Haha! Oh, wow. I wonder if I didn't screw up telling you that. He's definitely an old soul -- but it's only his personality."

"No kidding." You shake your head, grinning. "Wow. He plays the stern dad type so well. I was afraid he was going to, y'know, send me to bed without dinner last night or some shit if I didn't behave."

"Ohhh, definitely," she snickers. "I could *absolutely* see him doing that. Fred's always kind of been the 'boss' of our household. He means well, though."

"Discipline the ones you love, or so they say," you agree. "And Chichi? What's the story with her? How'd she end up in our esteemed little community?"

"Hah! Chica takes care of us. Well, in a way. If Fred's 'papa bear' then she's the team mom. Don't tell him I said this, but Fred can't cook a lick and if we didn't have Chica around I think we'd all die of starvation, or at least fast food overdose."

"I've tasted her cakes. She could give Freddy a run for his money in the baking department -- and I assure you, that's no easy feat. I can't understand anything that guy says but he can put out a plate of food that'll blow your mind."

"They should open a restaurant together," Beanie says. "Or, better yet, a bakery. I know Chica's been wanting to get her own building, or at the very least rent a space so that she can have more equipment. Out of the four of us she's the only one that doesn't have extensive work history at Jeremy's, but she does cater their birthday cakes and cookies and stuff from time to time."

"I still think that's so cool. Mangle's got a home business too -- I'm surprised at how resourceful everybody is," you gush. "God, I could use a job."

"Oh, I'm sure JH's would probably hire you in a heartbeat," she offers, "but I wouldn't blame you at all for not wanting to work here. What did you do before you ended up in our neighborhood?"

"What do you mean?" you ask as you begin to neaten up the leftover snacks.

She frowns, taking the tablet back from you to sweep the camera feeds again. "You know, like for a living?"

"I'm here because I ended up getting laid off due to a work-related injury. I ended up homeless for a while until I won a class-action suit, and now I get a monthly settlement. It won't last forever, but it's enough to skate by on for a few months until I'm back on my feet."

"Okay, so that's *how* you ended up here, but what'd you do before you were sacked?"

You pause. "I, uh... huh. Actually, the truth is, I -- I'm drawing a blank. It's like, it's like right on the tip of my tongue. Something to do with computers...?"

"You don't *remember* what you did for a living?" she gawks, face turning serious. "Holy shit, Mike. That's -- that's kind of a big thing to forget, isn't it?"

You wrack your brain.

You don't remember. You actually, *legitimately* don't remember. How the **hell** do you forget your former job? You do recall being terminated rather vividly, and the pink slip with your name on it is still fresh in your mind. But something you did day in and day out for months, possibly years? Why can't you remember?

It wasn't that long ago, was it?

Throwing your hands in the air, you slump back. "I -- man, I must not have gotten enough sleep after all."

Beanie stares at you for several seconds, mouth forming a tight line as she tries to read your expression.

"Wow. Okay then," she says. "What was your injury? How bad was it? If it was some kind of major physical thing you'd have scars, right?"

You look down at yourself, like your shirt has the answers for you. "Um, you know, I'm actually in good shape. I don't have any scars that I know of, so maybe..." You trail off, running a shaky hand through your hair.

"Mike, was it... a brain injury?" she asks quietly. "Haddock had one too. It's nothing to be ashamed of. I promise I won't tell anyone, if that's the case."

"It's not," you adamantly snap. "I'm perfectly fine, I just -- Beanie, I'm sorry, but I can't remember."

She nods, paws raised. "Okay. I'll let it go, then. Sorry to bring it up."

You start to reply, but the tablet's screen and speaker floods with static. Beanie slaps the side of the machine in frustration, trying to get the signal back. After a moment or two, the picture rubber-bands back into clarity.

Jeremy Human has left the show stage.

"Uh oh. That's not good," you mumble.

"You have *no* idea," she says. "Once he starts moving, he's quick. Get your mask on now."

"A mask of *him*? Are you serious?" you reply. "I mean, it's bad enough that Fritzine thinks there's potentially three of him running around, but there's no way in hell he'll be fooled by his own face!"

"You wouldn't think it'd work, but it does, so I don't question it," she says, donning her disguise once more. "Just put it on. If you're quiet and you don't move, he'll leave."

"How about the flashlight? Will that stop him?" you ask, snagging it from the table. "It worked well enough on Darky, right?"

"No, because of his sunglasses," she frantically whispers as metallic footsteps clatter down the hallway at an alarming rate. She's right; the damn thing's hauling ass. You yank your mask on, not even sure if you have it right-side up or not.

The sound of a discordant, irregular music box tune echoes throughout the halls as another set of mechanized feet lithely clink-clank across the tiled floor. You shudder; the melody sounds like it possesses all of the correct notes required to compose a children's song, but their ordering and pitch are just... inherently wrong, in all regards. It sounds experimental, raw -- like someone took a music box apart and then put its components back in upside-down or backwards. It's almost like the musical equivalent of nails on a chalkboard, for lack of any other way of describing it.

"Remember: don't say a word, don't move. Stand perfectly still, and he'll go after a few minutes."

You silently nod, confirming you understand, but keep the flashlight readied in your hand anyway - just in case you have to throw it at the monster's head, if nothing else.

Both of you wait, agitation building up as your stomach doubles over in knots. The mish-mash, contradictory refrain grows increasingly louder as he draws ever closer. Eventually, the star performer himself begins to fade into view, his presence indicated by a pair of pinprick red dots

bobbing along in time to the music like a pair of ghostly laser pointers. As if he were being poured into reality, Jeremy Human emerges from the shadows, marching up to the doorframe. His lissome burgundy form settles under the office opening, his outline only just barely illuminated by the singular lightbulb dangling from the guard room's ceiling.



At once, the music stops, extinguished like a candle in the wind. The only sounds in the room are the thrum of electricity and you and Beanie struggling to regulate your breathing. You swallow nervously, grateful your expression is partially obscured behind a sheet of polyvinyl chloride. Never let them see you sweat, as they say. Jeremy's black-tinted eyes burst into dazzling rays of red as he begins to scan the room, his head rotating at an agonizingly slow pace. One of his slender, claw-like hands juts out, cranking away at the music box's handle to rekindle the aberrant tune.

You wish you could see the clock from here, but it's behind you on the wall. Beanie doesn't dare lift her watch to check the time. If you didn't know better, you'd swear that you were standing across the room from an artificial devil, a tin-plated agent of hatred and malice. He's even decked out in

the stereotypical red suit. All he needs is a set of horns and a forked tail, and he'd be right at home serving at the gates of Hades.

After completing his scan, Jeremy continues to turn the box's handle. You listen as the gears inside the music box protest, their teeth stripping under the strain of being overcranked, yet nevertheless he insists on overpowering the tiny contraption. The smile never fades from his synthetic lips, and you're not sure if it even can. Hell, you're not even sure he *is* smiling; his grin appears to be permanent, carved into his lifeless aluminum skull.

The relative silence is shattered as a deafening bell rings out overhead, striking six times to announce that it's now six AM and Beanie's shift is over. Jeremy releases his grip on the music box's crank, and like air being released from a balloon, a cacaphony of notes burst out of the music box at an unsettlingly expedient pace as the handle whirls around backwards, its tension released. Lowering his head, Jeremy Human regards his toy with a mixture of curiosity and contempt.

"How unfortunate," his oily voice smolders. "Perhaps another night, then."

And just as quickly as he arrived, he's gone.

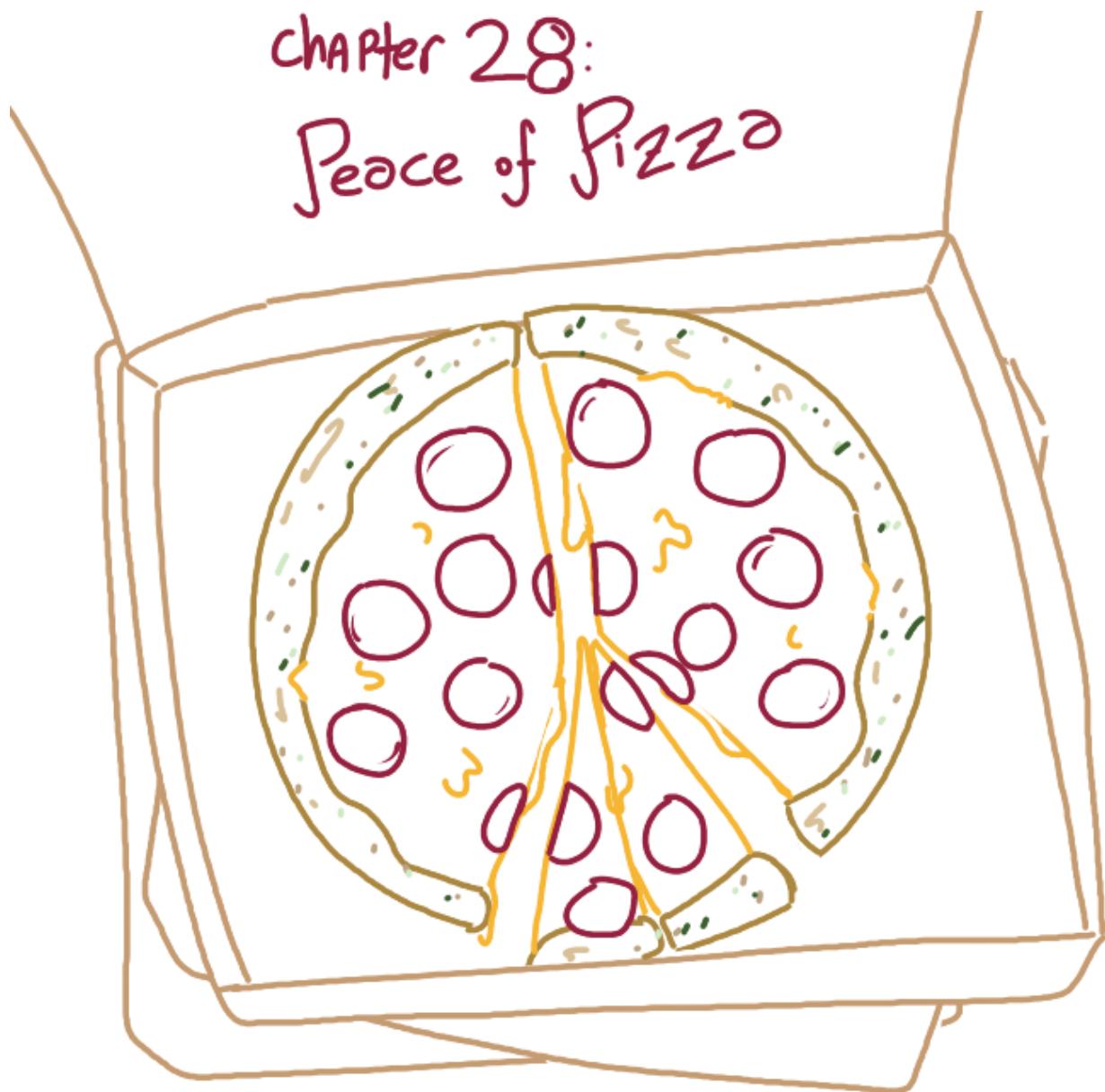
# Peace of Pizza

## Chapter Summary

Mike orders out for the apartment.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



It's black as pitch in Fred's office; you can't even see your own hand in front of your face right now. If it wasn't for the constant whirring of the desk fan, you'd assume the power went out. Getting up

from your bed, you grab for the hanging lamp cord overhead. The bulb flickers a little; it's probably close to burning out, but some light is better than no light at all.

You cast your gaze over the photos tacked to the corkboard hanging above the desk. The group photo that caught your eye during your first night here stands out among the rest of the snapshots once again. You carefully pluck it free from its place on the board, holding it up to the light as you try to make the details out.

Familiar faces smile back at you innocently, friends and co-workers having gathered around a party table to celebrate some grand event from better days. Blink once, and suddenly their faces are scratched out as if someone's tried to remove them from the picture. The previously unrecognizable "guest of honor" from before is the only remaining face in the crowd; the singular, universal constant -- even if everything and everyone else is reduced to zero, Jeremy Human is still here.

You toss the photo away from yourself in disgust, watching with small satisfaction as it disappears into the void. You **really** don't want to be here right now. You should have gone back home after Chiclet extended the offer to let you back in -- hell, you should have swallowed your pride and gone back to Bonworth and Cheeky, or made arrangements with Marion to move into someone else's apartment until April could be re-situated. There's a lot of things you should have done, and more than a few that you shouldn't have. It's too late now, though.

Forcing yourself from your self-induced pity party, you slowly stumble away from the desk and into the center of Fred's tiny workspace. While you groggily try to figure out what you want to do, the nighttime calm is broken by the sounds of pots and pans crashing together in the kitchen. Startled, you hurry out into the hallway to investigate the noise, but your feet only partially cooperate, feeling heavy as lead.

You try to call out only to find that your voice is gone; all that escapes from your mouth is a dry, gasping whisper. You press your hands against your throat in an attempt to clear whatever blockage is holding you back from being able to communicate.

*"Chichi?"* you try to shout out once more, and again, your vocal cords let you down.

At this point you're so exasperated you feel like you could cry. Slogging down the hallway is an exercise in misery; the carpet's quicksand beneath your feet. Your legs are so taut from exertion that they feel like rubber bands seconds away from snapping, but you know you have to check the kitchen considering how unusual it is to hear activity this late at night. Someone could be hurt, or worse. You try to push the troubling thoughts out of your mind, choosing to focus on the task at hand.

Unable to get traction, you drop to your hands and knees, army-crawling across the floor just to make it as far as the living room. Emerging from the end of the eastern hallway, you take a break to catch your breath. Out of the corner of your eye, something red and fast bolts through the living room in the blink of an eye, barrelling down the hallway opposite the one you just came through. Only seconds later do you hear what sounds like a crowbar slamming against the wooden door to Fred's office three times in rapid succession. Your heart pounds with the force of thunder as you try to imagine what that might have been.

Another pot smashes against the hard tile floor of the kitchen, this one sounding less like an accident and more like it was thrown out of frustration. Suddenly, you're not so sure you want to go in there after all. Retreat isn't an option either; whatever the hell just shot past you mere seconds ago is still back in your room. Pinned between two possible threats, you use the thick carpet

beneath you as a handhold to maneuver to the couch. Carefully, one fist at a time, you drag yourself over to the side of the overstuffed piece of furniture, yanking one of the cushions down to use as makeshift cover.

A guttural snarl rips through the quiet of the night. Quick, light footsteps thump across the floor; your "friend" has now returned to the living room. You hunker down behind the cushion, tightening yourself into the smallest ball your body will allow as you struggle not to hyperventilate. Whoever's searching for you clearly seems to be enjoying the hunt; humming softly to himself as he prowls around the immediate area.

*Dum de dum dum dum...*

Voices gather around you, but it's impossible to tell what they're saying -- they sound muffled and distorted as if you were hearing them from deep underwater. Various objects are hurled across the room in fury as the hunter continues trying to locate his prey. You're not sure *how* you know he's looking for you, but you know.

It's growing increasingly more obvious you won't be able to hide here for long. Your muscles begin to tense, your fists instinctively balling up. Everything about you right now is a hot mess of emotions -- you're scared, and in some primal sense, angry. Backed into a corner, you've got no choice but to fight your way out, so you bide your time lying in wait for an opportunity to present itself.

The sound of snorting grows louder; your stalker has now begun to track you by your scent. Considering the animal species in this world that you're up against, it won't be long before you're outed. What a time not to have one of your roommates around to help bail you out! You could sure use someone built like Freddy or Mr. Fazbear right about now. Unfortunately, it's just you against "him" -- whoever "he" might be. The realization that Chichi, Beanie, or any of the others could be injured and bleeding out in the kitchen dawns on you, and your rage continues to boil.

Something sharp and metallic hooks itself around your cushion, tugging it a few inches away from your face. A furry muzzle pokes in through the opening and begins sniffing at your face. Its lips twist upwards in a cruel smirk as the pillow covering you is pulled away. The second your cover's blown you burst into action, tackling your assailant with whatever element of surprise you've got left. Much to your satisfaction, he yelps in surprise as you bodyslam him with everything you have.

Pinning him to the floor with your weight advantage, you muster all the air in your lungs to force noise through your throat. At first, you produce no sound; but after a few seconds of strained trying, a scream of raw, pure anger finally lets loose from your mouth as you grab the monster by his fur. It's still jet-black in the living room, but you can at least make out a single glowing white eye and gleaming rows of teeth as you wail on him.

"Mike!"

Multiple hands forcibly grab you from behind, tugging you backwards off the monster. You're unable to deal with attackers from multiple sides, but nevertheless you stubbornly continue to cling to the beast's fur. He cries out in pain as the two of you are hoisted off the floor together, swinging his curved blade madly at your throat in an attempt to knock you loose.

"Mike! Let go of him!"

Your head feels like it's full of cotton as you jolt awake. Panting heavily, you realize you're tightly gripping Rackham by the fabric of his shirt. He's watching you with a mixture of amusement and confusion, his paw and hook pressed against your torso to keep you at a safe distance. Something tickles at your neck as you slowly release your hold on him.

"What," you manage hoarsely as a pair of feathered wings wrap gently around your waist in a half-hug. "What's -- what?"

"Mike, are you okay?" Chichi asks from behind you, slowly but firmly pulling you back and away from Rackham. All three of you are packed into Fred's tiny office, Chichi seated on the edge of your bed.

"I'm fine," you croak as you stumble to your feet. "What's going, um..."

"You were screaming your head off," Rackham replies bluntly, straightening his creased shirt out. "We could hear you from across the house."

"Was I?" you ask, still shaken from your nightmare. "God, I'm sorry. I had a really bad dream."

"Yeah, no shit. You should have seen the look on your face!" he cackles. "If you thought you could take me in a fight, you really *must* have been dreaming."

Chichi pats your shoulder. "Goodness, Mike. What were you dreaming about?"

"Some kind of... monster. It was trying to kill me," you recount, the details already beginning to drift from your mind. "It had these huge jagged teeth and one glowing eye and this sort of -- it was like a hooked blade it was trying to cut my throat with."

Rackham rolls his lone eye at you. "Sounds horrifying. Let me guess, did it have red fur too?"

Chichi brushes herself off as she stands up as well. "Now you behave, Foxy," she reprimands. "He's clearly been through a terrible ordeal. Mike, are you sure you're all right?"

"I think so," you reply. "Man, guys, I'm really sorry for the trouble. Can we, uh, take this out into the living room instead? It's a bit cramped in here."

"By all means," she chirps, leading Rackham out into the hallway by his paw. "Foxy, why don't we give him a chance to put himself together?"

"Yeah, sure," he says, staring at you over his shoulder as he slowly follows her out.

After taking a few minutes to settle down and catch your breath, you change out of your pajama pants and into more appropriate daywear before staggering out into the common area. Checking the clock, it's a little past eleven AM; you've been home from your trip to Jeremy Human's for less than five hours.

The room's sole occupant at the moment is Rackham, who's currently engrossed in a televised poker championship, his feet kicked up on the coffee table. You nod to him as you pass by to tend to pressing concerns (chief among them being draining your bladder and filling your stomach). A hasty trip to the washroom solves the first of these two issues, but you haven't stayed here long enough to feel comfortable helping yourself to food from the kitchen.

"Hey, Rackham?"

Reluctantly, he pauses his show, jerking his head in your direction so he can see you better out of his good eye.

"What?" he barks, just a little too loudly. You flinch in surprise, immediately raising a hand in defense. Despite the smirk on his face, his ears flatten against the top of his head, and he dips his muzzle ever so slightly in apology. "Still a little jumpy?"

"I guess I am," you reply shakily. "Sorry."

Even though you know it was just a nightmare, you're still alarmed by it. You've never really subscribed to the theory that dreams are meaningful, but if your subconscious is trying this hard to get a message across to you, you figure the least you can do is listen.

"What do you need, Mike?" he asks a little more earnestly, setting his remote aside.

You scratch the back of your head. "Is Beanie around?" You'd really appreciate the opportunity to talk to her now that you're both out of the restaurant.

He shakes his head. "Nah. She went to bed about half an hour ago; rough night at the office."

"I know. I was there," you mutter. "Have you eaten yet?"

"Nope. Chica just got back from a delivery and she's handling something at the front desk, and Fred's at work, so I figured I'd just wait to eat lunch."

"Oh, all right," you reply. "What time do you guys usually eat?"

Rackham glances at the clock. "Noon. Why, planning your next meal?" he smirks.

"Actually, I was planning everyone's," you reply, indignant. "You guys have been kind enough to let me chill here. I can at least handle lunch."

He starts to say something, but before he can get the words out, his stomach makes a loud growling noise. It's hard to tell based on the color of his fur, but you could swear he blushes a little.

"Looks like my own gut betrays me," he sighs. "All right. What'd you have in mind?"

You consider your options. "Delivery? I'm not much of a cook, and I'm sure Chichi could use a break from the kitchen."

"Sure. There's a bunch of menus in the drawer underneath the phone in Fred's office," he says, gesturing down the hall.

"Got a hankering for anything in particular? Anyone have any, uh, food allergies or dietary restrictions I should know about?"

"The only thing any of us are allergic to is Fred's cooking," he quips. "You're paying, so I say you pick."

"Fair enough. I'll see what I can do, then," you reply, padding back towards the office.

"Cool. Thanks, Mike."

You pause halfway down the hall to your temporary room. "Sorry, *what* was that?" you ask teasingly.

"You heard me. Don't let it go to your head," he says, reaching for the TV remote.

"Funny, Beanie told me something similar about you," you return before slipping into Fred's office.

You ease into the rolling chair at his desk, feeling a touch awkward as you do -- partially because of your nightmare, but also because you almost feel like a schoolkid snooping around in the principal's office while trying not to get caught. Sure enough, in one of the desk's drawers full of stationery, you find a thick bundle of delivery menus and cards held together with a binder clip.

"All right, so we've got Chinese, Italian, seafood -- wait, who delivers seafood?!"

You flip the menu in question over before setting it aside in disgust upon seeing the \$100 minimum order. It's not like you're catering a garden party here or anything, you just want lunch. The next one in the stack looks familiar, and after briefly examining it, you recognize the name of the Greek restaurant you ordered takeout from with Bonworth and Cheeky. Recalling it with a smile, you have to concede that Bonworth was right: they *did* have tasty gyros.

It's a little surprising how many restaurants in this area deliver -- even in some of the larger towns you've lived in, you're not used to having this much variety. Maybe Marion got them to make a special exception for the complex due to the complicated nature of some of its tenants?

"Barbeque? Hoagies...?" You drag your hand down your face, exhaling in frustration. "What the hell should I order?"

"Can't go wrong with the classics," a throaty voice rumbles from off to your side.

Startled, you lean across the desk to see Fred standing out in the hall with his back to you. He's rummaging around in the closet, digging through a file cabinet.

"Hey, Fred. Sorry, I didn't hear you come in," you offer by way of greeting. "I'm ordering in for lunch today, if that's all right. Any suggestions? I'm a bit, uh, overwhelmed here."

"The gold standard of family cuisine," he replies absently. "Everyone loves pizza."

"Works for me."

You finish sifting through the menus until you find a pizza place that delivers. Satisfied you've got an option everybody can agree on (as well as having double-checked your funds to ensure you can pay for it), you pick the handset up off the desk and begin dialing.

"Oof, bad beat," Rackham mumbles as the dealer flips over the river card. The poker celeb on television throws his sunglasses across the table in disgust before storming offstage, much to the amusement of the commentators.

"Holy shit. Poor guy had thirty thou' riding on that, too?" you gawk. "You'd think he wouldn't be that risky, if he's playing with that kind of money."

"Thirty thousand is a pittance in serious play," he replies. "Besides, *someone* has to lose."

"I'm probably nobody to judge; Bonworth rolled me in a game of poker recently. Turns out I suck at it."

"Bonworth plays?" he asks, scratching his muzzle. "Huh. I wonder if I could get a game night going."

"Maybe," you reply. "You'll have to pat him down for pocket cards, though. I didn't even notice that every one of his winning hands seemed to have the same ace slipped in."

"Wait -- he plays *and* he's a blatant cheat?" Rackham guffaws, tail wagging. "Oh man. I'm never gonna let Bonnie hear the end of that. Or you, for that matter."

"Yeah, yeah. Say, you have history with Bonworth, right? Beanie mentioned you guys went to high school together."

His face settles into an easy smile, and for once it seems genuine. "Oh yeah. He was such a dick when we were in our junior year, but I have to give it to him; he grew out of it fast enough once he fell in with the right crowd."

"No kidding. He rubbed me raw at first, but once we got to know each other he definitely won me over," you admit. "I'd kind of like to do something else for him and the others since, well, I don't feel like a cake was enough."

"That's on you, man," Rackham says. "I'm sure you'll figure something out."

The sound of the front door unlocking draws your attention to the entryway. Rackham instantly tenses, sniffing fervently at the air before relaxing upon seeing Chichi trot into the living room, carrying a small parcel in her wings.

"I'm back," she announces. "Are you feeling better after earlier, Mike?"

You cringe at the unwelcome reminder. "Y-yeah, I've calmed down a little."

Chichi nods in satisfaction. "That's good. Where's Bonnie?"

"She already crashed," Rackham replies. "Went to lay down about an hour ago."

"Oh, I see. Well, look who I ran into at the front desk," she says, opening the door wide with one of her feet. "Ta-dah!"

The doorway's empty.

"I know I'm down an eye, but... is it just me or is nobody there?" Rackham asks, squinting at the doorstep.

You lean past him to see if whoever's supposed to be there is just out of view. "It's not just you," you admit as Chichi's grin falters. Setting her box down on an end table, she quickly walks over to the door, poking her head out around the corner.

"It's okay, you can come in," she quietly urges to someone standing just out of view.

A short, plump bear timidly pokes his head around the corner before he shuffles into the foyer, a bashful smile playing at his lips. At first glance he seems unusually well-dressed, wearing a tuxedo coat and a tall stovepipe hat; upon closer inspection you realize his coat's been mended several times with patches and his hat's a felt costume piece that's sagging slightly in the middle.

"Hi everybody," the bear squeaks by way of greeting. "Hello, Mike. Um, how're you today?"

You blink a few times as you stand up, trying to place where you've seen this guy before. "I'm good, thanks," you lie. "Err -- have we met before?"

"We have, but I don't leave too much of -- I guess I'm not uh, really one for first impressions. It's me, Peanut," he says, blushing a little as he extends a paw. "We played those exercise video games together the other day?"

"Oh! Oh, okay, yeah. Hi, Peanut," you grin, recalling the portly bear as you reach out to shake his paw. "No, I remember you well. I just didn't recognize you all dressed up; what's with the costume?"

He titters nervously, retracting his already near-neckless head further into his oversized suit like some kind of strange turtle/bear hybrid.

"Ah, uh, it's not a c-costume. These are my, um, my n-normal clothes." He self-consciously begins tugging the brim of his hat, almost like he's trying to pull it down over his eyes. "Oh, gosh. Do -- do I look, uh, weird? Ohh, oh geez..."

"No, not at all," you insist as Rackham and Chichi watch your face intently, as if they're daring you to screw up. "You look very, uh... *dapper?*"

Both of them nod, seemingly satisfied with your assessment. Beaming, Peanut gently clicks the door shut behind himself as he trundles into the living room.

"Oh, thanks! Mr. Fazbear says to dress for the job you want, not the one you have." So Peanut wants to be the Monopoly guy? "Of course, he also says not to violate any of the company dress code policies either, so I just wear my uniform at work."

"Sound advice," you reply, nevertheless dubious. "So can I assume you work together with Fred at, uh, the restaurant?" For some reason you can't quite bring yourself to say its name out loud.

Peanut nervously looks at Chichi and Rackham before turning back to you.

"Um, sure. Today's my day off, but ordinarily I'm on day shift," he says.

Well of course he is. At this point, you're just going to assume the entire apartment complex is one big Jeremy Human's victim support group.

"I just clean, and, uh, wait tables mostly," Peanut continues. "I'm trying to work my way up to assistant manager, you know? Beats working nights. I had to fill in for night shift a couple times, and, oh gosh. That, um, that was kind of rough."

"Yeah, no kidding. I got a firsthand taste of what you mean this morning," you reply, involuntarily shuddering at the thought of the robotic Jeremy cranking his music box with that horrible, manic

grin. "I went downtown with Beanie last night and hung out with her during her shift. It was, uh -- eye-opening."

"I'll bet," he agrees. "Man, Beanie's kind of like my hero. She's so cool, being able to go back night after night like that. I don't have the, um, the stomach for it."

"You're a sensitive guy, Peanut," Chichi softly protests. "There's nothing wrong with that. We bloom where we're planted, and Bonnie just happens to be good at what she does."

Peanut's blushing brightly as Chichi lifts his hat, ruffling his headfur.

"So, hey," she smiles, clapping her wings together, sending a few of her golden feathers fluttering to the floor, "why don't you stay for lunch? I'll go fix us all something to eat."

"Mike ordered lunch in while you were at the front desk, actually," Rackham interrupts.

You check the large wall clock hanging above the television. "Yeah, the delivery guy said it'd be here by noon, so it shouldn't be too long now."

"Oh! That was very nice of you, Mike!" Chichi says. "In that case, will you boys help me set the table?"

"You got it," Rackham says, uncharacteristically cheerful as he jumps up to follow Chichi into the kitchen. All she needs is a leash for him, and he'd look every bit like a loyal puppy following his master. You peek over at Peanut to see if he has a reaction to this transparent display, but he's too busy carefully hanging his coat and hat by the door.

"So Mike, how did last night go?" Chichi asks, handing Rackham a stack of plates from one of the kitchen cabinets. "Was the ride-along everything you thought it'd be?"

"Honestly, not at all. The whole thing was just surreal," you answer. "Is it really all right if I talk about it with you guys, though?"

Chichi looks up from the fruit bowl she's in the process of picking through, one eyebrow raised. "Mike, I wouldn't have asked if you couldn't," she says, plucking a sizable orange from her collection.

"Yeah, man," Rackham agrees, carrying the plates out to the dining room table. "Fred's out of the house, and he's the only one here that'd really care if you badmouth the company. I honestly don't give a shit."

"Wait, you said Fred's still gone?" you interject. "I thought I saw him just a little while ago when I was ordering food."

He stops in his tracks, turning to look down the side hall. "Really? Did he get home early?"

"No, he's still out of the house," Chichi says. "I called him on my cell phone when I was up at the front desk speaking with Marion."

You shake your head. "Great, I must be seeing things, then. I could have sworn he was rummaging through the hall closet while I was flipping through menus at his desk."

Rackham and Chichi exchange looks with each other as if you aren't even standing there. "You, uh, absolutely sure about that, Mike?" Rackham asks.

"At this point, I'm not sure of anything," you gripe.

"Maybe it was part of your dream?" Chichi asks softly. "I know he can be scary sometimes, but he really is a good, kindhearted bear."

"I don't *think* so. The thing in my dream looked more like, uh..." You trail off nervously as Rackham mutters to himself, resuming placing plates on the table.

Speaking of kindhearted bears, Peanut steps into the kitchen having since finished shedding his accessories. With his ruffled dress shirt and black tie, all he needs is a towel draped over one arm and he'd look like a waiter at a fancy evening club.

"How can I help, Chichi?" he asks.

"Oh, if you could get some cutlery out of the drawer that'd be wonderful. Boys, do you want fruit punch or lemonade?" she asks, deftly slicing the juicy orange into thin medallions.

"Fruit punch!" Rackham hollers from the dining room, perking up. "Ooh, and some crushed ice!"

"Sounds like you've got a decisive answer there," you chuckle, rubbing the back of your head. "Hope you like fruit punch, Peanut."

"Aw, I'm good with anything," he smiles as he begins neatly rolling bundles of silverware into napkins with practiced ease.

"Mike, can you fill this bowl with crushed ice from the freezer while I get started on the fruit punch mix?" Chichi asks. "Oh, and we got kind of sidetracked; you were going to talk about last night?"

You nod, pressing the ice bowl against the spout on the freezer door. The ice maker rumbles to life, spraying chipped ice into the bowl. "Honestly, it's not at all what I was expecting," you manage. "I just thought Beanie was like, a normal security guard, making the rounds with a flashlight and hanging out in a guard shack most of the evening."

"Oh wow," Peanut replies, carrying an armful of wrapped cutlery out to the dining room. "So you, um, didn't know about the..."

"The animatronics came as a surprise," you nod. "A very unpleasant one."

Rackham laughs, but it's sympathetic rather than mocking. "Yeah, they're kind of shit. I don't get Bonbon's obsession with them at all; humans suck ass."

"They **are** pretty scary, even though they never actually moved outside the stage on any of the shifts I took." Peanut agrees. "I know the ones at Jeremy's are just robots, but honestly, if real humans are like that, I -- I don't think I'd ever want to meet one."

"Well, good thing they're just make-believe. Bonbon'll just have to make do with schtutting a shaved monkey," Rackham says. "Uh, no offense, Mike."

You fumble the bowl slightly, spilling some ice onto the floor. The truth is you're *not* bothered in the slightest, and that worries you. Nevertheless, if those horrible machines at the arcade are all

they have to go off of, then you can absolutely understand why they'd hate the very concept of humanity.

"Like I said, I'm not even sure any of it was real. I'm having a hard time just, uh, wrapping my mind around everything that happened last night; it played out so strangely, almost like some twisted game. You guys ever play that 'red light/green light' game as kids?"

Everyone nods, but says nothing. So that's one constant, at least.

"We had these, um, plastic masks; they were like carnival prizes. I think Beanie said they came from the toy counter where you give them your tickets." Setting the bowl down on the counter next to Chichi, you grab a paper towel and kneel to clean up the water puddles on the floor where the chipped ice has already begun to melt. "If we wore the masks, the robots -- sorry, animatronics -- went away. Except for one of them; he wasn't fooled."

"Darky," Peanut confirms. "Beanie warned me about him. He's scarier than he lets on."

You clench the paper towel in your hands. "Aren't they all," you mumble under your breath. You aren't sure whether to be relieved or terrified that he's so easily confirming the events of last night; your nerves decide to split the difference between both.

"Mike, why don't you sit down?" Chichi asks, sensing your agitation.

"No, it's -- it's okay. This is helping, I think," you insist, tossing the crumpled paper towel into the trash. Your palms have red marks from where your fingernails have been digging into them for the last half-minute or so. "Anyway, the big guy himself finally showed his ugly face at the end of her shift. Beanie and I had to stand perfectly still while he cranked this crazy, uh, music box kind of thing for what seemed like forever. I guess we stalled him out, and he left."

"Wow," Rackham replies, visibly awed. "No wonder Beanie crashed. She's only had that happen *once*, and she had to call in sick because she couldn't sleep for almost two straight days."

"I remember that," Peanut says. "That's when I, uh, really started to look up to her. Most people who see Jeremy don't, um -- well, they don't really..." He trails off abruptly.

"So then it *was* all real," you breathe. "How many 'accidents' have happened because of the animatronics themselves?"

Chichi places a soft wing on your shoulder, shaking her head. "A lot, Mike," she quietly answers. At a loss for words, you simply nod, leaning against the kitchen counter to let this information sink in.

Eventually, the calm is broken by the sound of a doorbell echoing throughout the house. Grateful for the diversion, you pull your wallet from your pocket and head for the door.

"Lunch is ready," you announce with stilted enthusiasm.

Chichi trots into the dining room with a large glass pitcher filled with punch, crushed ice and sliced fruit.

"I didn't know what everyone liked on their pizza, so I just kind of got a variety," you announce, setting the stack of pizza boxes down at the center of the kitchen table. You take your seat next to everyone as Chichi begins pouring drinks.

"Pizza, huh," Rackham comments, face unreadable. Nobody seems interested in making the first move towards the food.

"Are we waiting for someone?" you ask, taking a quick head count at the table; Peanut, Chichi, Rackham and yourself makes four, and you've got more than enough pizza to feed everyone here and still have plenty of leftovers. Fred's nowhere to be seen, much to your chagrin. Considering this was his suggestion for lunch, you're mildly alarmed that nobody seems the least bit excited about it.

Is this his idea of a joke? Did he set you up just to mess with you, or was he being sarcastic and you just couldn't tell?

"No," Chichi says, taking a seat next to you. "Not that I'm aware of, anyway. Lunch looks wonderful, Mike; thank you again." Her smile's just a touch forced as she pops open the topmost pizza box.

"Yeah, thanks Mike," Peanut adds as he sips his punch, taking great care not to spill it on himself. "I appreciate you guys letting me come over, y'know?"

"It's just pizza," you reply, taking the first slice of whatever's on top. "It's not that big of a deal." Apparently. Despite the fact it burned through most of your remaining money.

You make a mental note to be much more stingy with your finances starting next month.

As everyone slowly begins to pick at their food, the front door opens. Fred walks inside, gently scuffing his feet at the doormat before plodding into the living room.

"Oh, good afternoon, Peanut," he says, nodding to everyone at the table. "Ah! We're having pizza?"

"Your idea, wasn't it?" you reply pointedly as he takes a seat at the table, placing his hat off to the side. Fred gives you a quizzical look as he opens up the pizza box, helping himself to several slices.

"Not that I'm aware of," he says with a furrowed brow, tearing open a packet of pepper seeds. "Chica, why didn't you say you wanted pizza earlier when we were on the phone? I'd have brought some home from work. You really have to have it there, though; it doesn't travel as well from downtown."

You look at the others with an are-you-seeing-this-shit expression; they don't even seem to notice you.

"Mike treated us," Chichi responds pleasantly.

"Is that so! In that case, thank you for lunch, Mike," Fred says, nodding in your direction. You shrug apathetically.

"How are you today, Mr. Fazbear?" Peanut asks, reaching awkwardly across the table for a handshake. Pawshake? Whatever. Fred grips his paw, nodding politely to him.

"I'm well, thank you. How about you, enjoying a much-deserved day off?"

"I am, sir!" Peanut replies bashfully. "Well, two days off anyway; the store's closed tomorrow."

With the ice seemingly broken, the younger bear reaches for another slice of pizza, emptying the box out. One down, three to go.

Fred nods, dabbing sauce from his paw with his napkin. "Good to hear. You know, word is corporate seems really impressed with the job you've been doing; I imagine you're on the fast-track to assistant manager. Don't be surprised if you get a pay bump and a new title before summer."

"Aw, gee," Peanut stammers, blushing as he fumbles nervously with his food.

"Wow, dude, this **is** really good. I sure love pizza!" Rackham says, finishing his slice and going in for another. You lean back in your chair, still chewing through your first piece disinterestedly.

"You don't have to fake it, man," you reply suddenly before you can stop yourself. "I'm not offended."

"Huh?" he asks, a slice of supreme hanging from his hook. "What'd you say?"

You set your half-eaten slice down on your plate, wiping your mouth on the back of your hand. Fred cuts his eyes at your table manners, and even Peanut looks slightly appalled.

"I mean you guys don't have to pretend you like it. It's fine, I was fed some bad info is all," you return, glaring back at Fred who's resumed eating, seemingly oblivious to your meaning.

To your surprise, Chichi bursts out laughing, covering her beak with a wingtip. "Aha! Are you kidding me, Mike?" she asks, grinning widely. "You've got it all backwards! This family was pretty much *built* on pizza."

"Yeah, dude. We used to eat this stuff by the truckload," Rackham says. "This is nothing compared to the company's recipe, but still, it's damned tasty pizza. I guess we're all just a little nostalgic for the stuff. Jeremy's has the best stuffed crust."

"And our buffet really can't be matched," Fred adds with pride. "We're working on a new recipe for the breadsticks, though."

"It's about time," Chichi says. "I know you guys have corporate rules and all, but I have no idea how a pizzeria can put out some of the best pizza I've had in my life -- recipes I'd *kill* to have -- and yet they ruin the *breadsticks*? Come on!"

"Your bias is showing, Chica," Rackham grins. "Leave it to the best baker in town to spot something with the bread."

"You don't have to be a baker! Those things taste like modeling clay and we all know it," she insists, eagerly stacking six more slices onto her plate. You stare at the rapidly diminishing pizza in shock -- the pepperoni's already gone and the supreme's not far behind. Somehow you've gone from imagining you'd have too much in the way of leftovers to wondering if you'll even get to have a second slice.

"Our dessert pizza sales are up thirty-five percent from last month," Peanut chimes in. "That was a really good idea to start having the restaurant carry those. Apple cinnamon's our best flavor, but pumpkin pie's close behind."

"Pumpkin pie pizza," Chichi echoes. "I have no idea how you came up with that one, Mr. Fazbear."

Shrugging, the elder bear flips open the next box lid. You furtively dart your hand towards another slice as soon as it cracks open, drawing a funny look from him.

"Just watching market trends," Fred says. "You must *really* like Hawaiian, Mike."

"Well, you know what they say," you grimace, your face souring as you bite into a chunk of pineapple. Nobody says anything. "So, uh, market trends? Like what, noticing what customers buy?"

"Basic economics," he chuckles. "Figure out what your clients want first, and then sort all the details out from there. You can't sell what nobody's willing to purchase. Like Hawaiian pizza, for instance."

"Har har." You make a point of finishing the offending piece in all its disgusting glory just to spite him. "You know, I got the impression it was really more of an arcade first and a restaurant second."

"Not even close. They're an intrinsic part of the equation -- always have been. The entertainment and the games get some people in the door, sure, and encourage customers to stay longer. But financially speaking, our bread and butter is and has always been pizza sales. Isn't that right, Peanut?"

"Yes sir," Peanut says. "'Ignore the sign,' you always say. 'We're a family pizzeria first and foremost.'"

Fred nods proudly. "See?"

Conversation drifts from pizza sales to all sorts of topics such as Chichi filling her roommates in on the details of her newest baking creation and Peanut elaborating on home life. You tune out halfway through the discussion, though you are pleased to see that the mood of the room's lifted substantially from the initial aversion to what you ordered.

You tuck away the info about pizza being something of an issue for later, wondering why you didn't draw that connection in your mind after visiting Jeremy's in person. After the awkwardness of this morning's rude awakening, as well as the circumstances that brought you to this apartment in the first place, you really don't want to be making any more major social gaffes.

Between Chichi's voracious appetite and the fact you're feeding two adult male bears, you and Rackham manage to get away with just two or three slices each (including the pineapple abomination you had to choke down) before the remaining pizza is obliterated. No wonder they haven't had it in a while -- they probably can't *afford* to keep everyone fed on a welfare budget. This is less like lunch and more like a between-meals snack.

After everyone's finished eating, Peanut sticks around a little while longer to watch television with Rackham while Chichi and Fred excuse themselves to get back to their respective jobs. You finish clearing the table before deciding you could really use a breath of fresh air. You grab your coat from the rack in the foyer, and a minute later, you're sitting outside on the stairs, basking in the brisk November chill. Closing your eyes, you breathe deeply, letting the cold air wash over you to calm your troubled mind.

You're not sure of how long has passed when the sound of gentle footsteps stirs you from your meditative state.

"Hey, stranger."

Opening your eyes, Cheeky stares down at you, grinning coyly. This is about the most put-together she's ever been in your presence; her makeup is neater than usual and she's bundled up in a light jacket and sweatpants.

"Hey, Cheeky," you grin back, genuinely glad to see her. "Heading somewhere?"

"I'll be gone till late, yeah. Gotta head to the pharmacy and then take care of some business at the county courthouse," she says, nudging you over a little so she can sit next to you. "Oh, that cake was great, by the way. Even Faz was impressed."

"Aw, thanks. I'm glad you guys liked it, it was a lot of fun to make."

Sitting next to Cheeky makes you realize that even though it's only been a couple of days, you really do miss your friends upstairs. Despite the sterile, bleak environment; it was warmer and cozier in its own way than the place you're currently occupying. Grass is always greener, you suppose. You bite your tongue to keep from asking to move back in; you know it wouldn't be appropriate after having *just* said you wouldn't, and you'd just end up looking crazier than you already do. Still, some small part of you desperately misses familiar territory after your grueling overnight stay at Jeremy Human's.

Almost as if she's reading your mind, Cheeky wraps a wing around your shoulders. "So how're you doing? We're missing your cooking already; bird cannot live on microwave meatloaf alone," she chuckles.

You swallow back a lump that's growing in the back of your throat, shoving the question you want to beg of her out of your mind, replacing it with benign commentary instead.

"I, uh, I guess I'm doing all right," you lie for the second time today. "How're you guys? How's everyone back ho-- upstairs?"

If she notices your slip, she keeps it to herself. "Bonnie's fine, tired from work. Foxy's doing okay, I guess."

"How about Faz?" you ask.

"Faz is doing well, aside from being kinda mopey. It's Faz, though, so it's hard to tell when he's up and when he's down," she says. "He kind of keeps to himself, you know. Always pretending he's the strong silent type."

You nod, rubbing your hands together a little because of the cold -- pretty soon you'll be needing gloves too. "And how's Cheeky doing?"

"Heh." She ruffles her headfeathers with her free wing. "Tired, achy, horny; the usual. She'll manage."

Tired, achy -- a sudden brilliant idea hits you. You stifle laughter, feeling dumb for not having thought of this sooner.

"You know, I could help with two of those things," you declare. She looks at you with a smirk.

"Don't tease me like that," she says. "I'll hold you to it, and you know it."

You grin. "I have a friend who owes me a favor," you reply. "I'll put in a message later today."

"Is your friend a gigolo?" Cheeky asks, eyes lighting up. "Oh, *Mike!* Just what I wanted and it's not even my *birthday*!"

You laugh, gently shaking your head. "Not quite, I'm afraid. Besides, why would I know a gigolo anyway?"

She feigns hurt, pressing the back of her wing to her forehead in a melodramatic feint. "Damn it, *Mike!* There you go, getting my hopes up and shooting them to pieces."

"Hah! Sorry to be a disappointment, but trust me on this one. Good things come to those who wait. What's up with Faz, though? You said he's kind of mopey -- something I can help with?"

"Y'know, I'm not really sure," Cheeky admits. "He's been sitting around the apartment, being a bit more withdrawn than usual." The normally taciturn Faz being even more quiet than usual doesn't sound like a good development.

"Well, I know this is kind of weird and short notice, but do you think we could do a guys' night out tonight?" you inquire. "Bonworth, Foxy, Faz, and me, I mean?"

She narrows her eyes. "What, *I'm* not 'one of the guys'?" she pouts. "Come on, *Mike*, don't discriminate against me here. I can pee standing up, if you need me to prove it."

"Aaaand too much information," you groan as she cracks up laughing. "Honestly, I hate to admit this, but the last 24 hours have been kind of an emotional roller-coaster for me. I could use a drink, and maybe the others could handle getting out of the house for a bit."

Cheeky's expression softens slightly as she realizes what you're saying. "Everything okay, *Mike*? Did something happen?"

You look at her wordlessly. She reads your face for several long seconds, and you notice something in her countenance shift almost imperceptibly.

"All right," she finally says at length. "Yeah, of course. I'm sure they'd love to get out of the house for the night. What time do you want to head out?"

"Early evening," you reply. "Maybe around five or so, or whenever Bonworth gets off -- early enough that we're not out all night, if possible."

"Sounds good. You got a place in mind?"

You shake your head, still unsure of the area apart from the few trips you've made outside of the fold while in the company of others. "Figured we'd just find someplace comfortable and toss a few drinks back. Maybe a sports bar or something, doesn't have to be fancy. I just need to take the edge off for a bit."

She nods, patting your shoulder. "Okay, *Mike*. I'll swing by the front desk and let Bonnie know on my way out."

"Thanks, Cheeky," you murmur. "I'll see you later tonight, then?"

"Maybe," she grins, perking back up. "I'm curious to see what this big secret surprise of yours is. I'd better be more cake."

"Oh, it's something so much better than cake," you reply as she gets up from the stairs. Standing up after her, you wave to Cheeky as she trundles off toward the front of the apartment complex.

Time to pay 87-B a visit.

"That's about it, really," you finish, waving to Freddy from outside on the porch. He waves back with a smile, cradling a passed-out Bonnibel in only one of his enormous arms.

"Awww! That's so sweet of you to do that for her, Mike," Chiclet coos, grinning. "I'll let Mangle know. You sure you don't mind?"

You shake your head. "Nope. It's not that I don't appreciate new clothes or anything like that, but this is a way more worthy cause. Tell Mangle I said everything'll be square between us."

Chiclet yawns. "You got it. Hey, you coming in for lunch?"

"Oh, no, that's okay -- we just ate," you reply. "Thanks though. Tell everyone I said hi."

"Same. Take care, Mike."

With that chore crossed off your list, you jog down Building 8's steps, heading back across the street to get ready for tonight. It'll be nice to have a quiet, relaxing evening out together with some friends.

## Chapter End Notes

This chapter is followed by a **Roommates MEGA Mini Chapter**, which we recommend you should read if you're following the story chronologically!

Before proceeding to the next chapter in the main series, [click here for the next part, MEGA Mini 7: Guy's Night Out.](#)

## The Threshold

### Chapter Summary

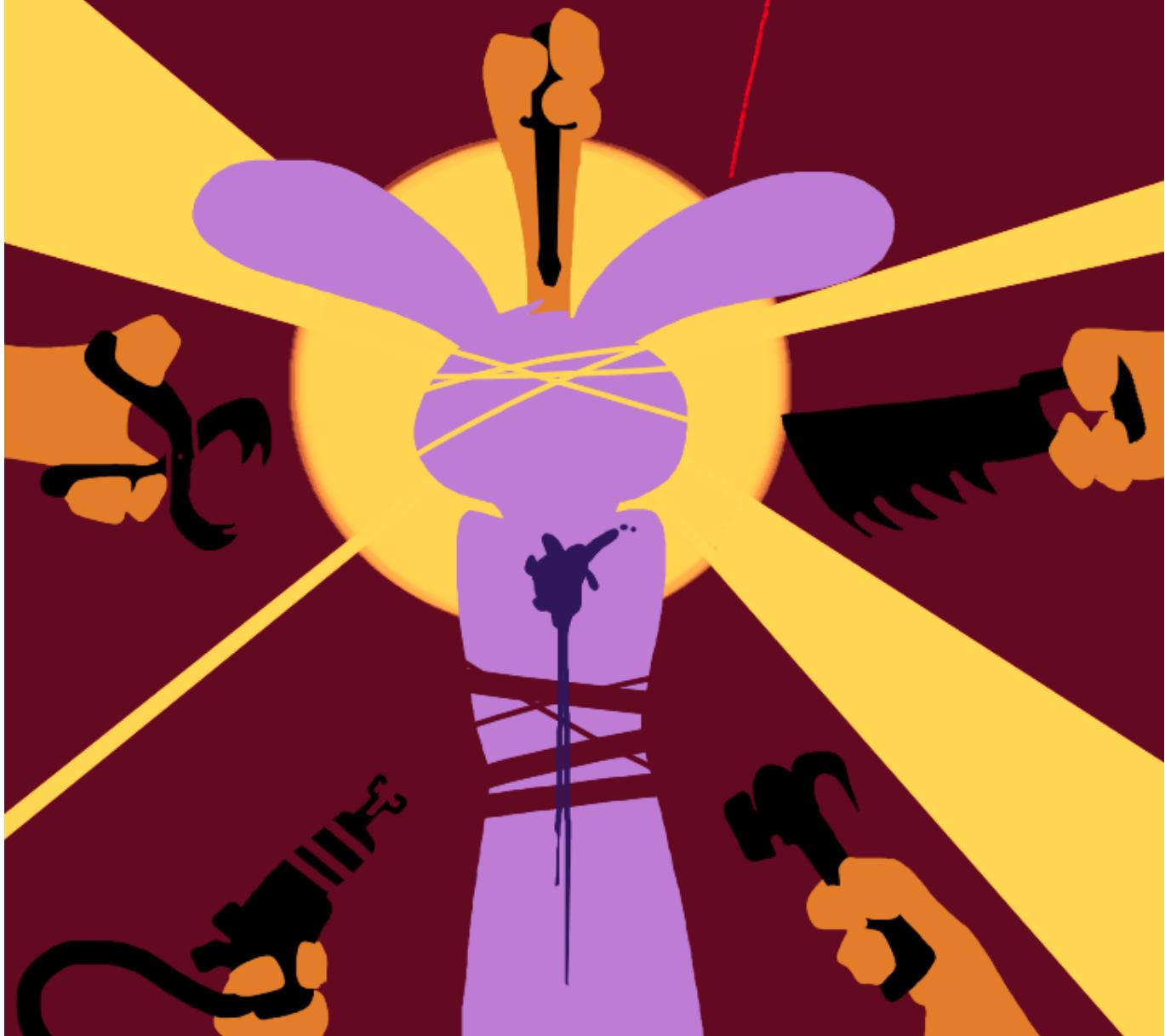
I hear machines  
They burst at the seams  
But tar and feather  
All stick together

### Chapter Notes

There's a special "*Mega Mini*" chapter between this one and the last! If you haven't read the Mini, "*Guy's Night Out*", you can find it [here](#).

## CHAPTER 29

# the threshold



You feel like you've been hit by a truck.

You open your eyes, and immediately regret the decision to do so. The sunlight filtering in through the window might as well be a spotlight aimed at your face, exacerbating your already intense headache. You roll over onto your side in an attempt to get away from the offending solar rays, only to discover that you're suspended in what feels like a pool full of water. Startled, you begin to panic, flailing and flopping around atop your gelatin prison. Before you can get too worked up, however, something soft and warm presses firmly against your chest.

"Whoa there cowboy, settle down!" Cheeky orders, pinning you in place with one of her wings.  
"You're gonna buck both of us off the bed if you're not careful."

"...Cheeeeky?" you slur, tilting your head slightly towards the sound of her voice. "Where'm I...?"

She releases you as you relax your body. "Hey now, you don't mean to tell me you forgot all that stuff about getting married, right?" she says. "We're on our **honeymoon**, Mike!"

Your eyes snap open as you lean upright to look at her. She's got the biggest shit-eating grin plastered all over her face as she basks in your surprised reaction.

"*Relax*, I'm just messing with you," she chortles. "You crashed here last night after all those quesadillas and drinks didn't sit well with you, remember?"

"Ugh, don't remind me," you groan as you collapse against her pillow. Laying back, your hungover brain catches up to the information that you're actually in bed with someone. Panic returns anew as you lift the cover to see if you're dressed or not. You have your boxers and shirt, but your jeans are nowhere to be found.

"Hey, um, Cheeky?" you ask as delicately as you can manage. "Please don't take this the wrong way, but--"

"Of course not," she interjects. "You passed out across my lap while we were on the sofa, but after an hour or so you looked uncomfortable, so I brought you in here and laid you out on my bed. That said, I *would* just like to point out that you *did* ask to take me up on my previous offer last night while you were plastered."

You study her face for a few seconds before giving her a sleepy half-smile.

"Oh, well, that's too bad," you manage, relief nevertheless setting in. If you were going to do anything with anyone, you'd at least want to be coherent for it. Cheeky shifts a little on the waterbed to face you better, her usual coquettish smirk back in place.

"What, that you needed beer goggles?"

"Nah," you reply, pressing a hand against your forehead to try to stem the pain. "It's too bad that I needed liquid courage."

Chuckling, she ruffles your hair. "Oh hoh! Well, I'll remember that next time you show up reeking of microwave Mexican food and alcohol," she laughs jovially. "You ready to get up and face the day or do you want to loll out here a little longer?"

"Mmm. What time is it?"

"Little after six, looks like."

The truth is, you *could* stand to lay here for a lot longer -- the waterbed is surprisingly comfortable. Still, you don't want to throw your sleep schedule out of whack any more than it already is.

"I guess I'll go ahead and get it in gear," you answer reluctantly. "Oh, uh, Cheeky?"

"Yeah, Mike?"

Carefully, you reach a hand behind her back, pulling her toward you. She doesn't resist as you gently work your way closer to her side, enveloping her in an awkward half-hug.

"I really appreciate everything you guys have done for me," you murmur, lightly pressing your lips to her cheek. "I needed to be around friends after the last couple of days I've had."

She's visibly taken aback for a split second, but she recovers quickly. "Well, Mike, I have something real important to tell you too. And I want you to take this to heart, because it's *serious*."

You nod, leaning in closely as she works up the nerve to tell you what she has to say. Pulling you into her generous bosom, she presses the tip of her beak to your right ear. The hairs on the back of your neck bristle in anticipation of her confession, your face flushing with excitement as she gently exhales against your skin.

"Dude, go brush your teeth," she whispers. "Your breath's kinda ripe."

"Ugh, you're horrible!" you mutter as she giggles to herself, rolling out of bed with ease. "Here I was, thinking we were having a moment!"

"We were! And there's no saying we can't have that moment another time, because you **know** I'd love to. But maybe our first real kiss *shouldn't* taste like cheap beer and stale nacho cheese sauce."

"Is that a promise?"

Cheeky runs her tongue along the ridges of her beak, smirking at you. "It can be."

"Well then, that's good enough for me." You attempt to mimic her exit from the waterbed only to flop off the side, awkwardly thumping into the carpet with all the grace of a brick falling out a window. "*Oof!*"

"Oh, nice disembark!" she snarks, trotting around the side of the bed. "The little ballerina twirl you did with your feet at the end, too? Solid ten, right there."

"Clearly I'm better in bed than out of it," you groan as she helps you up off the floor.

"I'll be the judge of that," Cheeky says. "All right, all right. All this half-assed innuendo's making me hungry. Why don't you clean up so we can go see about breakfast?"

You stumble forward with a thumbs-up. "On it," you reply before pausing to look around her bedroom in bewilderment. "Oh, have you seen my jeans? I seem to, uh, be making a habit of losing them lately."

"They're probably in the washer," she replies with a raised eyebrow. "I'd have let you sleep in them, but your shoes were in the way and I didn't want them to puncture the waterbed."

"Oh, all right," you reply. Hand on the doorknob, something clicks in your brain as you turn back to look at her. "Wait, why'd you have to take my pants off if the problem was just my shoes?"

"Hmm. How about that."

"And for that matter, why did you bring me to your bedroom when Foxy has two beds--"

"Oops! Oh well, too late now!" she giddily interrupts, ushering you outside. "I'll get you some fresh clothes from downstairs while you shower. Off you go!"

Rolling your eyes as you realize you've been played, you reluctantly pad out into the living room. "You're the worst, Cheeky."

"Don't I know it!"

After showering, you feel better than you did when you first woke up -- not enough to go running a marathon, but you're at least semi-functional. While this isn't your first hangover, you're not much of a stiff drinker; the occasional beer or social drink every now and then is about all you normally need. Of course, the aftermath of yesterday was an exception.

You're not thrilled about the headache, but you are grateful that you were able to get out with some friends and relax, even if you did almost end up in a bar fight. Fortunately, thanks to timely intervention from Faz, everyone made it home unscathed.

As you begin brushing your teeth, there's a series of gentle taps at the door. Hastily making sure you're wrapped in a towel with nothing embarrassing hanging out, you peek outside. To your surprise, a seemingly-lucid Haddock's standing in the hall with a fresh change of clothes for you in his arms.

"Mornin', lad. Good t'see ye lookin' more ship-shape t'day," he says, smiling toothily. "Last night ye were green, green, *greener* than seaweed. Imbibin' all that bad grog'll do it."

"Morning, sailor," you reply as you accept your clothing from him. "You bet I was. I think I'll be sticking to the cherry stuff you recommended."

"Aye, that'd be wise. Hoist your mainsails up then and set a course. Don' want to keep th' wench waiting on her breakfast rations."

"Good advice, that," you grin before shutting the door to get dressed.

By the time you make it out to the "galley" as Foxy might say, he's already drifted off to the living room to watch TV. Cheeky's the only other person awake right now, lazily flipping through a newspaper.

"Feeling any better?" she asks.

"Yeah, some," you reply, rubbing your temples. "Still got a headache, but I figure that'll go away on its own soon enough."

Cheeky sets her paper aside as she follows you into the kitchen. "Want a piece of classic Cheeky advice for dealing with a hangover?"

"Yes, please."

*"Charred toast."*

"...really? How's that supposed to help?" you ask, skeptical. "Wouldn't that just make me **more** nauseated?"

She taps the side of her head with a feathertip, winking. "The carbon in the burnt crust filters out the impurities from the alcohol, kind of like how a water filter does."

"No kidding! That's so crazy it just might work."

"Take it with a can of ginger ale from the fridge, and you'll be feeling better in no time," she says. "Hell, if you want to make some pancakes, I'll burn you some toast."

You shrug, heading for the cupboards. "Hey, I'm willing to try anything as long as it doesn't make it worse."

After whipping up pancakes and nuking some frozen sausage links in the microwave for Cheeky and Foxy, you take a seat at the sofa with your own less-than-appetizing meal of charcoal. It tastes about as well as can be expected, but you're able to choke the majority of it down with a liberal application of ginger ale.

"Ugh. Okay, I think that's about all of *that* I can take," you grumble after a piece and a half, shoving the remaining crusts aside.

"That's fine," Cheeky replies, licking syrup off of her feathers. "It'll take a bit to kick in but I promise you'll be feeling better soon enough."

"Do I want to know how you figured this little remedy out?" you ask as you brush some blackened crumbs off of your shirt.

"I got drunk a lot in college, what do you *think*? It's not exactly a complicated story."

"Got it," you chuckle. "I'll defer to your expertise."

The two of you continue to enjoy the morning in relative silence as Foxy restlessly surfs channels, seemingly unable to find anything on the television that catches his interest.

"Looks like the weather's getting colder this week," Cheeky remarks as he speeds past the morning news for the fourth time in less than two minutes. "You think you'll be ready for th--"

Whatever else she was planning on saying is abandoned as the door to Bonworth's bedroom bursts open, the rabbit himself tumbling out into the common area with a terrific crash. His prosthetics are splayed at unnatural and painful-looking angles. Foxy jolts up from his spot in front of the TV, but instead of retreating he promptly scurries over to Bonworth's side.

"Bonnie, what the *hell*?" Cheeky blurts, dropping her plate as she stands up.

"Man down! Quickly, lad!" Foxy says, beckoning you over with his good paw.

"That looked like it hurt," you remark as you hurry over to his side. "What happened?"

"Ohhh, darn these rickety poles of mine!" he wails as you and Cheeky each take one of his arms to stand him upright on his prosthetic legs. He's clearly distraught, what's left of his legs quivering as he tries to regain his balance.

"Is everything okay, Bon?" Cheeky asks, visibly alarmed. "What's going on?"

"My sister's in big trouble!" Bonworth exclaims, clearly panicked and making no effort to hide it.

Tears and sweat dribble freely down his face, splashing against his undershirt. By the looks of him, he's just woken up; his headfur's messy and uncombed, and he's still in his boxers, decked out with a rubber ducky pattern. If you weren't preoccupied with concern for his well-being, you'd almost find his unusually disheveled appearance amusing.

"Calm down," Cheeky instructs as Foxy tries in vain to reconnect Bonworth's leg braces. "Start from the beginning. What's wrong with Beanie?"

Taking a deep breath, the elder of the Rabbinson siblings nods as he tries to collect himself. Meanwhile, you crouch low to take over for Foxy.

"Every mornin' she calls me to let me know she's leaving work," he stammers, nervously looking up at the clock. "It's *half past six*, an' I don't have any messages on my phone from her at all."

"Maybe she just had a long night at work and forgot to call to check in," Cheeky suggests.

"I'm hopin' that's the case, but she and I have a rule." Bonworth nearly slaps you by accident with a flustered wave of one of his paws. "Whenever Beanie leaves she's **always** supposed t'immediately call me, and she **always** does. Every single mornin' without fail."

"Except today," you clarify.

"Except for today," he echoes. You can hear the metal joints clicking in his fingertips as he gingerly wrings his paws. "What's worse is, *I just* got off the phone with Mr. Fazbear, and he said she wasn't supposed to go into work because the restaurant's **closed** for today!"

"Is there a chance she's at home and they just don't realize it?" you ask as you finish buckling the last of the straps back in place. "I know that sounds stupid, but--"

Bonworth shakes his head. "No, I thought the same thing," he says, cutting you off. "Mr. Fazbear checked her room personally; her bed's made and her keys and wallet are missin'."

A thoroughly unwelcome sense of unease begins to radiate through you. "So then she went to work on a night she wasn't supposed to, and she's still there right now?"

"Mike, I don't gotta tell you how dangerous that place can get!" Bonworth cries.

"Yeah, I know," you admit. "I've gotten a taste of it first-hand."

Cheeky gawks at you. "Wait, **what?** You went there, Mike?" she asks incredulously.

"Yeah, I had *that* little bombshell dropped on me last night too," the rabbit says with a frown.

"I... might've briefly mentioned it to Bonworth on our way to the bar last night," you reply defensively, feeling like a rebellious teen being grilled by your parents after a night out joyriding in the family car. "I went with Beanie to see what it was all about; I knew I couldn't really ask you guys for any more answers. It's not like I had any idea of what I was walking into."

Cheeky looks at you disapprovingly, wings resting on her hips. You suddenly find it difficult to meet her gaze.

"Well, we'll cross that bridge later," she finally says, turning back to Bonworth. "If she didn't call you after leaving, then someone needs to get down there like, *yesterday*."

The thought of going back to Jeremy Human's pizzeria utterly repels you, but you're not *about* to sit idly by and watch from the sidelines. If Beanie's already been dragged off to one of the back rooms -- no, that's not a thought you even want to finish. She's got to be fine -- most likely, her cell phone died.

And she just forgot to bring a charger for it.

And the office phones just happened to go out, and then she couldn't find a pay phone outside.

"You know what, I'll go," you declare, fighting against the dread twisting your stomach into knots. "I can hop the bus and be down there in no time."

"No way, Mike! It's a weekday morning and all the commuters going into the city to work are going to be on the bus," Cheeky argues. "You'll hit every single stop on the way there. It might take you an hour and a half to get downtown. You guys'll have to go by car."

"That'd be great if any of us **owned** a car," you argue. "Can we borrow the van from Marion? What time does the front desk open, Bonworth?"

A banging sound from the front door interrupts your diatribe. Bonworth hurriedly staggers over to answer it; Fred's on the other side, looking about as disheveled as Bonworth does, in a pair of sweatpants and a faded tee shirt.

"I just got off the phone with one of the supervisors," Fred says by way of greeting. "Nobody's due to be on-site today. I'm going to drive down there and check on her myself if you want to join me."

"Absolutely," Bonworth says, vaulting as quickly as he can towards his room for some clothes. "Go fire up your runabout and let's get goin'!"

Fred nods, turning around and heading out the door for the staircase. Bonworth tumbles past you in hot pursuit of Fred, hopping a little as he fumbles with his belt buckle. His metal feet clank along the floor, not even bothering with shoes.

"Fred, I'm coming along too," you call out, grabbing your coat from the rack as you run outside after both of them. Turning on his heel, the bear looks up at you from halfway down the steps.

"Mike? So *this* is where you went. I was wondering why you never showed up for dinner last night."

"I'm really sorry about not calling to let you know beforehand," you reply, slipping your shoes on. "I was out late."

He snorts, clearly disinterested. "*Please*. You're not beholden to me regarding your social life. The door locks at curfew; I just assumed you'd found some other place to lay your head for the evening. Either way, your 'assistance' won't be necessary," Fred remarks matter-of-factly. "This is family business."

"What?" you stammer, taken aback.

Bonworth's practically dancing in place as he buttons up his shirt at the bottom of the stairs.

"You heard me," Fred continues. "This doesn't concern an outsider. If you want to be useful, go downstairs and keep Chica and Foxy company until we get back."

"Like hell I will! I'll ride over in the *trunk* if I have to, but you two aren't going in without me! I've seen what those **monsters** are capable of!"

The dour grump of a bear's ears twitch at your last comment. His burly chest heaves in frustration and steam erupts from his nostrils as he tries to formulate a rebuttal, but before he can get another word out, the front door to 93-B slams open behind both of you. Cheeky storms out onto the landing, still in her nightie.

"Oh my **GOD!!**" she screeches, banging one of her balled-up wings against a nearby wall with a loud whud. "Why are you all still *here*?! **Quit arguing and DRIVE ALREADY!!**"

Fred's tiny eyebrows seem to rocket up his forehead at Cheeky's brashness, and even Bonworth seems horrified at her standing up to the behemoth that is Mr. Fazbear. You nearly trip over your own feet as the two of you hastily thump down the rest of the steps towards Fred's car.

"Was she *always* that much of a spitfire?" Fred asks once your group's out of earshot.

"Only when she's mad," Bonworth replies sheepishly.

Fred lets out a nervous bark of a laugh as he reaches into his pocket for his keys. "I guess I never really noticed. You must have done a good job keeping her reined in."

You glance up at the overhead railing of Building 9. Cheeky's still standing out in the cold, watching with worry as all of you pile into Fred's car. You nod to her, hoping that your facial expression makes it obvious enough that you don't plan on coming back empty-handed.

The vehicle in question is a two-door sedan with two seats in front and an extremely small bench in the back that would be cramped even for a child. You fold up without protest anyway, cramming yourself into the uncomfortable partition so that Bonworth can have the passenger's seat. Despite your bravado earlier, the trunk may very well have been the more comfortable choice, but none of that matters now.

"Hold on tight," Fred says. "I know a shortcut that'll cut several minutes off the drive, but we're going to have to go down some back roads. It'll be a rough ride."

"Whatever gets us to Beanie the fastest," you answer.



Fred wasn't exaggerating when he said the drive over would be rough. Your "breakfast" of burnt toast nearly makes a resurgence at several points along the way, but fortunately you manage to keep it down long enough to arrive safely.

The restaurant's a lot less glamorous during the daytime hours, but you're not here to sightsee this time.

"Who's got the time?" Fred asks as he shoves a pawful of coins into one of the meters.

"Not quite seven yet," Bonworth answers, checking his tiny phone.

Extricating yourself from the sardine can of a backseat, you sprint towards the restaurant's front door, grabbing the handle and giving it a pull. It doesn't so much as move under your grasp.

"Locked," you announce. "Fred, you're the manager here, right? You've got a key to the building, don't you?"

"Damn it. I must've left them at home," Fred growls as he pats his pockets.

"Oh, of all the rotten luck!" Bonworth groans. Teetering over to the front door, he raps a few times on the glass, but there's no answer from anyone inside and the windows are too heavily tinted to make out much.

"Hang on, I've got an idea," you say, walking over to Fred's car. You pop the trunk open and begin digging around inside.

"Mike, what the hell are you doing?" Fred asks.

Like his office, the luggage compartment of Mr. Fazbear's car is neat and fastidiously organized. A cardboard box packed full of office supplies is nestled safely next to a neatly folded silk vest and top hat, like a much classier version of what Peanut was wearing at lunch yesterday. A plastic

carrying case full of car tools and emergency supplies is fastened to the right wall of the trunk. You rummage through the tool chest, looking for something suitably heavy before deciding on a lug wrench. Hefting your prize, you head back to the front window.

"Stand back, guys, I've got this," you declare brazenly as you size up the glass.

Satisfied, you raise the weighty instrument over your head before swinging it with all of your strength square at the face of the mascot Jeremy etched onto the pane.

"No, you idiot! Don't--" Fred starts, but it's too late. The wrench rebounds off of the surface of the window, sending a shockwave of pain rippling through your arms.

"Agggh! What the *hell*!?" you cry as the tool clatters uselessly to the ground. Adding insult to injury, the window isn't even cracked despite your best efforts.

"The windows aren't made out of glass," Fred finishes lamely, pulling an old-fashioned flip cell phone out of his sweatpants pocket. "They're shatter-resistant -- after an accident we had a few years ago."

You wince in pain, forcing your fingers to flex one at a time to make sure you didn't just destroy your own wrists. "Well that just sums this place up, doesn't it? Nothing but accidents here."

Bonworth hobbles off to the side, pressing his muzzle up against the glass for a better look into the restaurant.

"Black as the devil's own heart in there," he mutters. "Fred, do you think we could give a locksmith a holler?"

"I'm calling Peanut to see if he can get a hold of the day shift manager to come over and let us in," Fred says as he begins punching buttons on his archaic phone's keypad.

"She'll be **dead** by the time anybody gets here to help," you growl. Bonworth looks at you in terror, trembling.

"Mike, please don't say that," he quietly pleads. "I'm *beggin'* you, please don't say anything like that."

"Bonworth, I told Chica to call me immediately if your sister shows up at the house," Fred says, glaring down at you. "Just to be safe why don't you try her on her phone one more time?"

As you look up at the awning in frustration, an idea suddenly strikes you. Leaning down, you pick the wrench up off the ground again.

"You just don't learn, do you?" Fred warns. "You're gonna end up in the hospital if you try that move again."

"I'm not," you reply, a smile forming on your face. "I've got an idea. Fred, give me a boost real quick."

He furrows his brow in confusion, lowering his phone from his ear. "A *what*?"

You point to a thick, square-shaped metal grate just below the awning and a little to the left of the front doors.

"Do you see that vent cover? I'm going to pry it loose and climb into the restaurant that way. Then I'll let you guys in from the other side."

"You're going to climb in... through the *air vent*," he echoes. "Are you *serious*? You'll never be able to fit inside that thing."

"And either of you would? Look, just boost me up there; we don't have time to sit and argue."

With a sigh, Fred looks at Bonworth, who's anxiously watching this scene unfold. "All right," Fred grumbles, holding his paws out for you to use as a foothold.

You hurriedly clamber up onto Fred's shoulders just as if you were scaling a furry, barrel-shaped tree. One of the tips of the cross-shaped wrench is big enough to unscrew the bolts holding the vent cover shut. They've long since rusted over, but you're just barely able to apply enough torque to twist them off. Once that's done, you jam the wrench into the small gap between the grate and the brick wall, popping it free and sending it crashing to the ground.

"**Careful!**" Fred shouts as the cover nearly smashes into his foot.

"Sorry," you reply, passing the wrench back down to him. "All right, I'm going for it. Wish me luck."

"This'll never work."

"Relax, Fred. I know a professional who does this kind of thing all the time," you reply.

Reaching into the vent, you fumble around for a handhold before finding a support strut that seems like it'll hold your weight long enough for you to crawl inside. Carefully, you hoist yourself up into the duct to find that it is *indeed* a very tight fit. You kind of wish you'd met Bonbon a few months earlier so that you could have lost enough weight by now to make this more viable.

"Shove my feet from behind," you call out to Fred.

He grips your ankles as you suck in your gut, and with the two of you working together you're able to squeeze in through the narrow opening. A volley of dust floods into your eyes and nostrils, and you instantly begin sneezing. Crawling forward, the combination of dust and the lack of lighting in the vent is making it impossible to see what you're doing.

How Mangle is able to do this on a daily basis, you'll never understand.

Nevertheless, you continue shimmying along slowly, crawling just a few inches at a time as you attempt to find a room inside that the air shaft can empty out into. A creaking noise underneath you alerts you to the fact that unlike the ducts back home, the ones *here* aren't exactly rated for the weight of an adult. You've never considered yourself claustrophobic before now, but the thought of getting stuck in here is putting a serious damper on your already waning bravado.

After several minutes of blindly shoving yourself through the duct, your fist bumps into something. You drag your face along your jacket sleeve to try to wipe some of the dust out of your eyes so that you can see what it is you've found, but you only really succeed in smearing it in thanks to the sweat pouring down your forehead. Squinting, you manage to make out a small amount of light trickling in through thin slats; you must have located another grate, this one inside the restaurant proper.

The creaking underneath your belly is growing louder, and you can hear the frail support struts groaning as they continue to protest your presence. Unlike the one you had to pry loose in order to gain access to the building, this new grate appears to just be a normal plastic cover to keep dust and debris inside the vent and out of the restaurant. You press your palm against it to see if you can pry it open, but in so doing you shift your weight too far forward. The cover pops loose, and with nothing to hold you inside the vent any longer, you tumble out of the duct altogether.

You cry out in surprise as you free-fall towards the floor. In an incredible stroke of luck, your pants leg gets caught on the vent at the last possible second, breaking your fall just enough so that you don't slam into the tile head-first. Dangling from the ceiling, you manage to twist yourself loose, falling the last couple of feet onto your side instead of your skull.

"Uuugh!" you whimper, rolling over onto your back. Pain rockets through your leg and shoulders as you try to collect yourself. "What *is* it with me and falling today?"

"Mike! You okay?" you hear Bonworth yell from outside, his voice mostly muffled by the thick windows.

You pull yourself off the ground, rubbing the excess dirt and sweat out of your eyes so that you can see better. You've landed inside the front entrance -- all of that misery and you only ended up moving a total of about fifteen feet. There's a gash in your left leg, and while the cut's not too deep, it hurts to put pressure on it. Your jeans are most definitely ruined, and the pain is admittedly a bit of a handicap, but other than that you suppose you could be a lot worse off. Once you're confident you can walk, you hurriedly move towards the door to let the others inside.

"Uh oh," you mutter.

Fred and Bonworth are both pressed against the glass, watching you as you try to figure out how to open the door. No matter which way you turn the door handle, it doesn't want to budge. You try pushing, pulling, twisting, rattling -- nothing works.

"Everything all right?" Bonworth hollers.

"It's locked from this side too!" you shout back. "I can't get it open!"

Fred slams his fist uselessly against the doorframe, groaning aloud. "I forgot, it's electronic! You'll have to override it at the security room!"

"What the hell good does that do us?!" you snap.

"It's the best security money can buy," Fred returns. "At least it's good at keeping unwanteds out!"

You resist the urge to argue that it was probably designed to keep "unwanteds" *in*, not *out*. The notion of being trapped alone in a facility full of potentially lethal robots with *no backup* is **not** sitting well on your queasy stomach.

"I'm going to go see if I can find Beanie," you yell. "Call for help if I'm not back in a few minutes!"

"We're calling for help anyway," Fred says, holding up his phone. "Be careful, Mike."

You're surprised to find that he even seems to genuinely mean it.

"No promises," you joke weakly before turning around to face the depths of Jeremy's lair. "Hang on, Beanie. I'm on my way."

Even though you've been here before, the dining hall still awes you with how legitimately huge it is. Without anyone else around, it somehow seems more massive than it already did last time. Signs of a fight (or at least *some* sort of scuffle) seem obvious. The room's in complete disarray with upended tables and chairs, party hats and paper plates carelessly strewn all over the floor. You gingerly step over the piles of damaged product as you drink in the chaos.

After just a moment of gawking, you shake your head. You can't risk getting distracted. The first thing you need to do is see if Beanie's even still in the building -- you don't want to stay a second longer than you have to if she's not even here. You nervously force yourself to continue moving across the dining hall and towards the long corridor that leads to the security room.

"Horses, not zebras," you mutter; might as well check where she works first before you go gallivanting across the rest of the restaurant.

It's quiet enough in here that you could probably hear a pin drop three rooms away. You're suddenly wishing you'd brought the lug wrench along so that you'd at least have something to use as a makeshift weapon if necessary. Of course, as far as regrets go, you're also wishing you weren't performing a rescue mission with a hangover and a busted-up leg. At least your headache's faded somewhat, possibly thanks to Cheeky's dubious remedy. Unfortunately that's little comfort considering that your nausea's much worse than it was before.

You press your back to the wall, crab-walking down the long hall to the security office. Your feet seem to have a mind of their own, like they're trying to convince the rest of your body to turn back and run while running's still an option. You can't *remember* the last time you were this gripped by fear; when you were here your first night, you quickly became aware of the dangers of Beanie's job, but she was still here to keep you company and guide you through the night. Now, you're flying solo through enemy territory without anyone to watch your six.

Eventually, you make it to the dingy guard room. Beanie's not in the office at all, but there is at least *some* evidence that she was: a half-eaten fast food meal adorns the desk next to the tablet, and a cheaply-made wallet with a carrot-print design lays forgotten beside a small flashlight.

Underneath the desk is one of the plastic masks of Jeremy you used to hide yourselves from the robots, crushed and mangled beyond usability as if someone tossed it inside a trash compactor.

"Uh oh," you whisper. "*That* can't be a good sign."

You reach for the flashlight first, giving it a test click. Fortunately, it still works and it even seems brighter than before. Beanie must've replaced the batteries in it. You pocket it as well as Beanie's wallet to return to her later; since there were two masks, you hastily search the office for its twin so that you have *some* kind of shield in case one of the robots finds you. It won't protect you from Darky, but you've at least got the flashlight if he shows up, and this time you're not going to be nearly as merciful in using it against him.

After a cursory examination of the security office, you locate the second mask in a cardboard box full of knick-knacks and useless junk. Slipping the elastic band on over the back of your head, you push it up onto your hair for now before taking a seat at the desk to use the camera system.

As you turn the tablet on, a loud ringing noise pierces the silence, causing you to nearly rocket out of your seat. It takes you another ring to realize it's just the tablet's phone system and two more consecutive rings to figure out how to actually answer it, but you manage to do so in the nick of time. It's likely another pre-recorded message; you silently listen in anticipation of the voice as you load the security camera application.

"Hello? Hello?" a mechanical, tinny voice anxiously splutters. "...what on earth are you doing there?"

Your eyes widen as you recognize the speaker instantly. "Faz?" you ask, leaning close to the tablet.

"Mike, is that you? Is Bonita with you?" So much for it being pre-recorded, but a familiar entity is at least welcome right now.

You shake your head before realizing there's no reason to do so since he can't actually see you.

"No, she's not," you answer, trying to puzzle out what you need to do to pull up the camera feeds. "I'm here trying to find her."

"I just woke up. Chica's been filling me in. Put Bonnie on the line, Mike."

"He's not with me right now," you reply distractedly, fumbling with the security app. "Long story short, it's just me. I'm trying to figure out the camera system."

As you continue to wade through the needlessly complex menus, a screen of a dimly-lit, empty stage with a colorful backsplash flashes onto the screen.

"Wait, I think I've got it," you announce.

"What do you see?" Faz asks.

"Uh, I think it's the show stage," you explain, "but none of the characters are there."

**"Seriously?!"** Cheeky's voice blurts. "The Humanimatronics are programmed to return to the stage at six sharp, every single morning! Did someone not reset their internal clocks for Daylight saving time?"

"Hi, Cheeky. Um, I don't think that's it. Jeremy got in the other night when, uh, when Beanie and I were here. He took off as soon as her shift ended. Hey, how do I change screens to look at the other rooms?"

"Arrows at the lower right corner of the screen," Faz replies, "on the floor plan of the building."

You do as instructed, flicking the camera quickly through the other rooms. Most of the lights are out so you're having to operate on the very faint natural light that's filtering in through the dark windows, but you eventually spot Darky, hiding obviously behind a table in a darkened room you don't quite recognize. You make a mental note of his location before continuing through the system, clicking through each room in order. After you're sure you've double-checked every single camera angle available to you, you come to the determination that you can't find Jeremy or Fritzine anywhere -- let alone Beanie.

"Well?" Faz asks impatiently.

"I can only find one of the mascots," you announce, worry creeping into your voice. "Darky. Looks like he's hiding somewhere. I don't see the other two, and I also can't find Beanie anywhere in the building."

"Other two?" Cheeky asks. "Mike, there are supposed to be *four* characters at that location."

"Yeah, but one went missing recently. It sounds like it was stolen. I don't know much about it, though. The only two besides Darky I'm familiar with are Fritzine and Jeremy."

"Safety, Schmidt," Cheeky says.

You chuckle humorlessly. "Believe me, you don't have to tell *me* twice."

"Huh?"

"Never mind," you mumble. Looking up from your tablet, you flash your light down the camera blind spot of the hallway just to make sure Jeremy or someone else isn't creeping on you. So far, you're in the clear.

"Listen carefully, Mike. Disconnect the tablet. Take it with you," Faz orders. "I think I know where Bonita is, but you'll need the tablet."

"Oh god, not *there*," Cheeky moans. "Mike, do I understand correctly that you're by yourself right now?"

"Yeah. Fred and Bonworth got locked out," you reply.

"Faz, you're sending him to the lab on his own? Are you *trying* to get him killed?!" Cheeky shrieks at her roommate. "Mike, **no** -- don't listen to him! Grab the tablet and find a safe place to hide. I'm going to call the police and send them over."

"Cheeky, it's already been over an *hour* since Beanie's shift was supposed to end," you argue vehemently. "I'm not crazy about being here either, but we can't wait any longer! If Faz has a lead or something then I've gotta follow it up. Now, where do I need to go?"

You hear both of them quietly bickering with each other, but they're too far away from the phone to be heard clearly.

After a few seconds Faz's voice comes back on the line, with instructions. "Back to the dining room, take the opposite hall and go through the main arcade. Beyond that is a door labeled *Bot Bay*. It should be cordoned off."

"Sounds like a happy place," you mutter sarcastically as you disconnect the tablet from the power source. It immediately pops up an alert letting you know it's switching to battery power, which you hastily clear off of the screen. "Sorry, had to detether. You still with me?"

"Yes. Hurry."

You gather up the tablet and its power cable, adding them to your growing inventory with Beanie's personal effects. Making sure your mask is still snugly tethered to your head, you quickly begin moving down the hallway towards the dining room.

"Can you guys still hear me?" you ask, holding the tablet close to your chest as you run. A cell phone would be nice right about now instead of a bulky monitor, but you've got no real choice if you want some inside help.

"We're fine," Faz says dismissively. "She's not. Go."

You continue down the main hall, racing for the dining room. "I'm hauling ass, Faz," you insist, tossing a look over your shoulder to make sure you aren't being followed. For the time being, at least, Darky seems content to stay out of the way, which suits you just fine. One less threat to contend with.

Branching paths lead off to small rooms for private parties. The walls and doors are adorned with colorful posters of inane "fun" buzzwords such as "Consume!", "Create!", and "Craft!" -- all of which are superimposed over pictures of the restaurant's various mascots. You jump a little upon seeing a life-sized cardboard standee of Jeremy Human himself inside one of the party rooms before realizing it's not the real thing. Just to be on the safe side, you reach a shaky hand up to your mask, ready to don it at a moment's notice.

Back in the dining room, you quickly cut through to the flashing lights of the arcade until you come across an extremely out-of-place door that resembles an airlock on a spaceship. Bright, colorful lights surround the frame, with caution tape threaded around stanchions to keep customers away. *Bot Bay* is painted on the door's metal surface in neon yellow letters. Below them, a scrap of construction paper is taped to the door panel with the words "out of order" written on it in magic marker.

"I think I found it," you whisper to the tablet's speakers. "And you think Beanie's in here?"

"Hopefully she's not," Faz thrums. "There's a panel on the right side. See it?"

"Yeah," you reply, lifting the tape over your head as you pass under the barrier. "It looks like an elevator call button, but there's no button."

"Good," Faz says. "Underneath it there's a small port. Hook the tablet up to it."

You work the plastic panel cover loose from the door frame. Contrary to his advice, there are actually *multiple* small ports present in the access panel, but only one looks like it's the correct size for the end of the tablet cable. With a shrug, you connect both ends of the cable to their appropriate sockets. Instantly the tablet screen fades to black.

"Uh, Faz?" you ask. "Can you still hear me?"

"I'm still here. Did the screen change?"

You nod again before silently kicking yourself for repeating the meaningless habit. "Yeah. It's blank now."

"That means it's loading," Cheeky interrupts. "In a few seconds you'll see something that looks like a combination lock. You know, like for a, um... like a bike, or gym locker."

You watch as a progress meter fills before being replaced with a digitized version of the Jeremy Human's corporate logo. The logo hovers on screen for a few seconds before disappearing, an elaborate menu with input fields taking its place. In the middle of the screen are four portraits

featuring photos of the animatronic mascots. You recognize Jeremy, Fritzine, and Darky, but there's a fourth character you haven't seen yet -- a bright green robot with a lantern jaw and a peaked cap, probably intended to be a police officer?



"It says 'Custom Night' at the top," you announce. You run your hands through your hair as you attempt to describe what you're looking at to Cheeky. "There are like, these boxes with pictures of the characters, and uh, underneath them are -- sort of number boxes, I guess. And left and right arrows; it looks like they're all set to ten each right now. They're greyed out, though -- I can't do anything with them."

"Ten?! Oh god!" Cheeky says. "Poor Beanie! Uhh -- okay, Mike, that's not the screen you want. Hit the 'X' in the upper corner."

You backtrack through the system as instructed. "'Employee Access?'" you venture, reading off the list of possible options. "It's either that or something to do with inventory."

"No, you're right. 'Employee Access' is what you're looking for," she replies. "When the dialog box comes up, the code is eight-eight-one-four. Unless they changed it, but this is Jeremy's we're talking about here. That'd require actual *effort* on corporate's part."

She sounds bitter. Somehow you can't find it in yourself to blame her.

Sure enough, this screen actually resembles an old-fashioned tumbler lock, though you don't suppose you could be faulted for believing the customization menu was an abstract interpretation of

such. You hastily punch in the combination before pressing the validation button.

"**ACCESS GRANTED,**" the tablet says in a voice almost as artificial as Faz's.

"Now what?" you ask, sizing the door up.

As if responding to your question directly, loud industrial motors begin to churn within the walls as pressurized air hisses out from the slits in the door. You lower the tablet, instinctively covering your face with the mask as you step away from the airlock.

--ke? Mike? Be --ful goin-- --side. Mi-- --hear me? Mike?!" You can hear Cheeky trying to say something, but her voice is too garbled to make out.

"Cheeky?" you respond. "Are you there? Can you hear me?"

--ine, Mike! Watch for Fr--"

The tablet's connection goes dead, *NO SIGNAL* flickering across the middle of the screen as if you couldn't figure that out on your own. With a grimace, you turn your attention fully to the door as the panels finish retracting into the walls.

This entire operation is unbelievably over-the-top for a children's pizzeria, so you can only guess this must be some kind of futuristic attraction or ride. You disconnect the tablet from the door, stashing it in your coat pocket for now; it's a snug fit, but you've got nowhere else to stow the thing at the moment, and you're *certain* you'll need it again before long.

The inside of Bot Bay is pitch-black, the only light in the room coming from LED readouts and tiny lights. Machines softly click, beep, and whirr as you poke your head inside; if you didn't know better, you would assume it was a server farm or some kind of photography darkroom.

Carefully, you reach for your flashlight only to stop as you realize it'd probably give your position away, assuming the door opening hasn't already. After a brief internal debate, you reluctantly hold onto it for now, choosing not to turn it on just yet. Any surprise advantage you have now *might* be the difference in getting out alive, so you try to get your eyes to adjust to the dark as you make your way further inside.

You move along at a snail's pace, hands outstretched to help ensure that you don't trip over anything. The mask is obscuring what precious little you can see, but you don't dare take it off for fear of running into one of the animatronics back here accidentally.

After what seems like an eternity of shuffling through the unknown terrain, your foot bumps into something soft. Dropping instantly to the floor, you bury every voice screaming in your head to run back out the door and never come back, instead carefully extending a hesitant fingertip towards the object in question. You silently hope against hope that whatever it is isn't a corpse.

Your index finger brushes against a warm, fuzzy texture. Hesitantly, you gently press your hands against the rest of it, recognizing the sensation of fur and skin. You hear a muffled moan, and that's enough to get you to break out your flashlight. Flicking it on quickly, elation rushes through every fiber of your being as you make out a patch of lavender fur concealed behind a thick hooded sweatshirt.

"Beanie!" you softly whisper. "Beanie, are you okay?"

"Mmmrgh..."

She's laying face-down on the floor, her arms wrapped behind her with electrical tape. You recoil in empathy; that's going to sting like hell when she goes to remove it later. You take great care in rolling her over in case she's wounded. Slipping a hand behind the small of her back, you help her lithe form into a sitting position. She appears to be semi-conscious, the only signs of injury you can immediately identify being her left eye swollen shut and some blood smeared on her muzzle from a cut on her lower lip.

"Beanie?" you ask again, a little louder this time.

All of a sudden, she lunges forward viciously, knocking you onto your back. You cry out in surprise as you drop the flashlight, fighting to pull her away from your body. The flashlight makes a cracking noise as it bounces off the floor, plunging the room back into darkness again.

"Beanie, stop!" you respond, holding her back as she tries to headbutt you. "It's Mike! I'm here to help!"

At once, she goes limp.

"Mike?!" she gasps in surprise. "Oh god! I'm so sorry! Did I hurt you?"

"No, I'm fine," you reply. "More importantly, are you okay? Did they -- did they *do* anything to you?"

She sounds like she's on the verge of tears as she replies.

"I'm okay! I'm okay, I just -- I didn't know the restaurant was closed, and -- and the robots were, they -- they were..."

She trails off, coughing a little. It's genuinely upsetting to see the normally calm and dry Beanie reduced to a sobbing wreck, and right now you want nothing more than to torch the whole building and run like hell. She rolls off of your chest and onto her side with a grunt.

"Mike, w-we have to get out before Fff-Fritzine comes back," Beanie warns. "Sh-she caught me before my, um -- my shift ended, and, and she brought me back here to her lab, but one of her 'instruments' is broken, and she w-was talking about 'a-aftermarket p-p-parts', and--"

"It's okay, we're leaving," you reply, gently shushing her. "We're -- nobody's, nobody's getting chopped up. Let's just get the hell out of here."

You hold Beanie carefully by her side in the darkness, helping her to her feet as well.

"Can you untie me?" she asks, leaning against you for support due to her center of balance being thrown off.

"Outside. Your paws are all taped up and I don't have anything like a knife or whatever to cut it loose with. Let's just get out and we'll take care of it."

You feel her ears flapping as she nods vigorously. You wrap your arm around her waist, half-shoving her towards the exit which is surprisingly much further away than you would have estimated -- Bot Bay must be a long, narrow room that runs the entire length of the *already* massive building.

As you and Beanie drag yourselves towards the exit, the airlock door lights begin to flicker and flash. Hydraulic components and heavy metallic thumping outside signal the approach of one of the animatronics. Thinking quickly, you hurriedly rip your mask from your head and press it loosely against Beanie's face, yanking her hood down over it to keep it in place while still giving her airflow. You force her down under a table before turning to the door, heart pounding in your chest.

"What are you doing?!" Beanie asks, voice muffled by the plastic mask. "Mike, no! They'll kill you!"

"I've got a better chance than you do," you reply, voice cracking as you frantically grope around in the dark for anything in the room that might be usable as a weapon. All you manage to turn up is Fritzine's prop screwdriver from a nearby table. Hopefully, you can at least jam it into a pressure point and maybe short one of the robots out as you die a horrible, painful death.

To nobody's surprise, the returning special guest is Fritzine herself. The rotund muskmelon of a robot trundles into the room, pausing to scan her surroundings for any available targets to interact with. Locating Beanie, Fritzine tilts her head in confusion.

"Now what in **tarnation** are y'all doin' under my drawin' table, **Jeremy Human?**"

"Just, uh, l-looking for my music box," Beanie replies, not even trying to fake the robot's sinister voice. It's obvious she's too rattled.

"Well all right then, y'silly lugnut," Fritzine mutters as she reaches up onto the wall by the airlock frame, flipping a switch.

Rows of fluorescent bars overhead bathe the entire room in a sickly blue glow, causing you and Beanie to stick out like sore thumbs. Not that it would have done you any good to remain in the dark, since she was able to spot Beanie immediately *without* light. Your muscles tense as Fritzine slowly turns her gaze on you, lens-eyes flickering as she begins her second scan. Without the mask, you realize you're a dead man. Out of options, you hunker down into a running position, waiting for the right moment to strike.

"Well I'll be," Fritzine's voice box coos as the scan completes.

Her toolbox clatters to the ground, forgotten as she excitedly tromps forward towards you. It's now or never; you jump forward into her arms, swinging the prop screwdriver down at her face. It snaps in two as it collides with her metal hide. If she notices, she sure doesn't seem fazed by it.

You squeeze your eyes shut as she envelops you in her arms, squeezing you like a tube of toothpaste. You'd cry out in pain, but the wind's been knocked out of you. You're pretty sure the cracking noises you're hearing are a couple of your ribs, or perhaps your spine. It's too hard to tell - everything below your neck and above your waist feels like mush at this point.

"The dang ol' prodigal son's back at last," the construction worker booms enthusiastically as she continues giving you a crushing hug. Turning to Beanie on the floor, her eyes burn bright as she releases you with a big slap on your back. You crumple to the ground, gasping aloud as you try to force air back into your lungs through whatever means possible.

"I wouldn't believe it if I hadn't seen it with my own darned optics," Fritzine joyfully declares. "Sure as shootin', our boy Schmidt's **finally come home!**"



# The Abyss

## Chapter Summary

A cry for help in a world gone mad.



"So Schmidt, not ta make it **uncomfortable** or anythin', but I gotta know: where in the blue blazes have y'all **been**, son?" Fritzine asks as she drags you to a standing position. Still suffering from your diaphragm spasm, you can't manage to force the words out of your mouth, not that you'd have a plausible answer anyway.

As you lean against one of Bot Bay's many workstations struggling to catch your breath, it finally, *finally* clicks in your head: the missing fourth mascot's name is "Schmidt". You suppose that explains Cheeky's words from earlier as well as Beanie's minor freakout in the mall's parking lot the other night. Even considering the overabundance of "Bonnie" and "Chicas" and so forth running around, you'd *never* have guessed there was someone sharing your name in this social

circle -- let alone that it would be a machine. You could kick yourself for missing the obvious coincidence if you weren't just trying to get air back into your lungs.

"Well? **Speak up**, Schmidt!" Fritzine orders, her tone a manic cocktail of cheerful aggression. "Somethin' wrong with yer voicebox?"

You adamantly shake your head. "N-no, I'm fine," you croak, wiping tears from your eyes. Something in your side hurts just to touch -- you're positive you've got at least a couple cracked ribs, maybe worse.

"Aw, **shoot**. Did I crunch yer innards with that hug just now?" she groans, rapping a fist against her metal head in a childlike imitation of self-punishment. "**Darn** it all t'**heck**, I forget m'own strength sometimes. Prob'lly knocked a couple wires loose."

"It's okay, r-really. Just gimme a minute," you stammer as you involuntarily gulp down precious oxygen.

"Oh, it's no trouble. I'll have it fixed in no time," Fritzine blithely insists, eyes glowing like lighthouse beacons as she scans you again. "All right, **up you go!**"

Beanie watches in wordless terror from her spot on the floor as Fritzine effortlessly manhandles you onto a nearby work table, dropping you onto your back with a *whump*.

"Gotta tell you, Schmidt, I didn't think we were **ever** gonna see you 'round these parts again," she chatters idly as she begins fastening you to the table.

You look to Beanie pleadingly, trying to signal with your eyes for her to do something, but she's too frozen with fear to even so much as twitch. The haunting phone call from the first night begins to replay in your head as you realize you're about to be dissected like a biology class frog.

"Uh, Fritzine? This really isn't necessary, you know," you beg, panic surging through your voice. "Don't we have a, a show or something? G-gotta go sing for the kids, right?"

Fritzine gives you what you're guessing is a confused look. It's difficult to tell with her mouth molded into a constant smile.

"**Nonsense!** Store's closed for today, so Jeremy told us we got the place to ourselves. Why d'ya **think** we're not havin' to stand around on the stage like wallflowers? Now **quit your bellyachin'** an' lemme do my darn job, ya **lunk!**"

Moving with the precision and efficiency only a machine could possess, Fritzine fetters you to the platform with an array of vices and clamps likely designed to hold the animatronics in place for maintenance. You're not even close to the same size as any of these mechanical abominations, so what might normally be a "comfortable" fit for one of them makes you feel like you're being drawn and quartered. Pain erupts anew in your already injured leg, and before your neck is pinned down you're able to catch a glimpse of a dark red stain widening on your tattered pants.

As Fritzine fastidiously works to adjust your bonds, the security tablet falls out of your coat pocket, clattering onto the floor.

"Well, would you **look** at that," Fritzine says as she stoops to collect the fallen gadget. "Here y'are, not even home for a **full day yet** and you're already back to ensurin' the safety of the restaurant

again! You're a one-of-a-kind bot, Safety Schmidt."

"You know me," you grimace, struggling against your bonds.

"So I see you've gotten some design tweaks -- smaller frame, more compact," she comments, scrutinizing you like a jeweler examining a freshly-cut diamond. "That's good, kids'll **love** havin' someone at eye level."

"I'm not *that* short," you mutter. She picks up the broken screwdriver you attempted to stab her with, experimentally jabbing at your elbow with what's left of it.

"Ow! Fritzine, stop!"

"New shell, too," she continues, oblivious to your pain. "Synth skin's **too dad-gum soft**, though. They really safety-rated this for kids?"

There's that word again -- *safety*. *Safety*-rated. And earlier, she called you *Safety Schmidt* -- which you realize Cheeky mentioned when you were talking to her on the tablet earlier.

Safety...

An idea suddenly strikes you -- it's a long shot, but it's the only chance you have of getting out of here in one piece. You're not sure of why you've been mistaken for the missing character, but the inability of these faulty things to tell humanimatics apart from actual humans could very well be a blessing in disguise. Measuring your words and tone carefully, you watch as she sets the tablet aside before turning her attention back to deciding what tool she wants to gore you with next.

"**Fritzine**, in the interest of security I'm ordering you to **stand down**," you bark in the most monotonous, robotic drone you can manage. Your fear-addled nerves and pain-wracked torso almost cause your voice to break, but you soldier through it. "I'm not **safe** right now."

She pauses digging through her toolbox. "Yer not **safe**? Whatty a mean?" she asks dangerously. "Schmidt, how'm I s'posed to **fix** ya if I can't take ya apart to know what's wrong?"

"That's exactly my point," you reply, straining your neck to make eye contact with the deranged robot preparing to carve you like a thanksgiving turkey. "You **don't** know what's wrong with me. I just got back from the factory. For new upgrades."

"Schmidt, I need you t'level with me," Fritzine says, worry creeping into her digitized voice. "This gonna be a thing for all of us? Our last redesign was bad enough and y'all **know** how I feel 'bout aftermarket parts!"

You swallow. The guy you're supposed to be is like a cop or guard or something, right? Gotta sound official. "I was chosen to be a **prototype** for a new design. You're not familiar with the new schematics," you insist authoritatively. "Protocol dictates **any** on-site repair requires **extensive familiarity** with all related manuals."

"**M-manuals?!**" Fritzine sputters angrily, slamming her fist on the table next to you. "Ya know I **hate** wastin' valuable work hours with red tape when I could be wrenchin' instead!"

"**Those are the rules!**" you snap back heatedly, getting further into character. "No manual? **No maintenance!** You cut the wrong wire or even worse, you rupture my power supply because you're

more interested in experimenting? You could start an **electrical fire** and the whole place'll **burn to cinders!** You said yourself the restaurant's closed today, so corporate wouldn't even know!"

"I -- just a quick peek, Schmidt?" she pleads. "You don't even have t'let me adjust anythin', just gimme a chance to pop the hood and get an idea of what I'm lookin' at? I gotta-- **I gotta** know!"

"Not a chance, Fritzine," you demand. "I won't let you put a customer -- or worse, **a child** in danger! What if you loosen something you shouldn't and I come apart on them while we're trying to pose for a photo op? You want to be responsible for getting a kid's head **cleaved** in half?"

You stare at her icily, hoping she's bought it. Her eyes click and flicker as she visibly struggles to process the information she's been given, but after several seconds of consideration -- an eternity of thinking for such an advanced computer -- she acquiesces.

"No, I suppose we can't risk that," Fritzine finally says at length as she reluctantly begins untethering you from the table. You lower yourself to your feet, wincing slightly as you put weight onto your aching leg. At least the bleeding's stopped for now.

"Darn it, Schmidt, I hate it when ya get all logical on me," she huffs as she begins gathering her tools.

"Logic's what we do," you respond stiffly. "I'm just doing my job and looking out for the safety of the customers."

She bucks up a little, wrapping her arm around you -- albeit far more gently than before. "Yeah, yeah. Yer right."

"Good," you answer with a mechanical nod, lowering a hand to Beanie to help her to her feet. You make sure to shield her from Fritzine's view with your own body as much as possible. "Now let me and **Jeremy** here get back to work."

"Oh no y'don't. Y'still **ain't** answered my question about modifications," she snaps. "I ain't puttin' any kind of **cheap, third-rate** vendor trash in me. I've done dealt with enough unauthorized components t'know I want no part of it."

"What is it with you and 'parts' anyway?" you testily reply.

You glance over your shoulder at Beanie to check on her. She's huddled up behind you, avoiding eye contact with both you and Fritzine. You take hold of one of her bound wrists, trying to signal that you're ready to bail out. She gives you a shaky nod in response, and the two of you begin moving towards the airlock door to put distance between yourselves and the insane robot.

"G-get the tablet," Beanie whispers to you, her body trembling under your grip. You nod, grabbing it and returning it to your coat. You can practically hear Beanie's knees knocking as she hovers behind you.

"**Y'really** want to know? All ya gotta do is take a look for yerself," Fritzine boldly attests in response to your question, jabbing a finger at a metal storage locker near the exit. "They're all categorized nice an' neat in case I ever have to return 'em to corporate."

She brushes past you, opening the cabinet door as you and Beanie advance through the lab. Packed tightly inside Fritzine's storage vault are rows of glass vials and jars filled with all sorts of cloudy,

murky fluids. Each one is labeled with a name, but several of them have pictures pasted to the sides as well.

"See? Cheap, inferior materials, probably outsourced to overseas manufacturers -- can't trust 'em," Fritzine says, producing a jar at random and shaking it like a magic eight ball. You can see something tiny floating inside, but you can't make out what it is. "They **break down** after just a couple weeks o' use. I've been stockpilin' evidence t'present to the bigwigs overhead, but they don't return my calls."

Your stomach flops upon realizing what's inside that cabinet -- the 'unauthorized' parts the phone call mentioned come from flesh-and-blood creatures, not robots. As Fritzine's closing the cabinet door, one of the containers inside catches your attention -- a small, round beaker with a cork lid, filled to the brim with crimson fluid. *MANGIFERA* is printed in all caps on a tag tied to the neck of the vessel. You feel like you've heard that word before, but you can't immediately place what it means.

...wait, was that an *eyeball*?

"Anywho, back to work," she announces, opening the airlock door for you.

"**Affirmative**," you reply, tugging Beanie along through the exit. "Restaurant's not going to secure itself."

Fritzine folds her arms as the two of you leave. "Go do yer thing, but as soon as I get my hands on this new manual or whatever, your keister's comin' back fer repairs, y'hear?"

"Ten-four," you reply, snapping off a rigid salute.

You and Beanie quickly limp through the dining room, stumbling over the mess of decorations and overturned furniture in your haste to get to the exit.

"What **happened** in here?" you ask Beanie, shoving a chair out of her way as you look around the room for any signs of a potential animatronic ambush.

"Fritzine," she replies evasively. "I didn't go along willingly."

Satisfied no other animatronics are going to lurch out and tag you, you turn back to Beanie. "**Figures**. I'm just glad you're okay. If **something** had happened I--"

"Mike."

You pause mid-sentence, whirling to look at her. She's still wearing the Jeremy Human mask, but you can see her red, tired eyes peering out at you through the holes. "What? **What is it?**"

"You're still doing it. The, um -- the voice. You can stop now," she says, quivering slightly.

"What voice? What do you mean?"

She draws a heavy breath. "For a minute there I almost forgot you weren't *really* Schmidt. You even sounded like him -- just like one of them," Beanie timidly clarifies. "Fritzine bought it. And in the dark, I... I almost couldn't tell the difference, either."

Between your hangover, the blood loss from your leg wound, and your adrenaline rush petering out, you feel overwhelmed by a sense of crippling enervation. Her words sink into your spine like an ice pick, slowing your pace to a stagger. Your mind whirls back to the day when you first met Beanie, and her initial reaction upon opening the door to her brother's apartment only to see you instead.

"Is *that* why you slammed the door in my face when we met?" you softly question. "You thought I was one of *those* things?"

She doesn't respond. She doesn't need to.

Swallowing the lump in your suddenly parched throat, you turn your focus back to the entrance. You're only vaguely aware of Bonworth and Fred cheering from outside as you pull the tablet from your pocket.

"How do I hook this thing up, Jeremy?" you ask as you try to figure out how to connect it to the locking mechanism. Beanie stares at you as you turn to look at her. "Well?"

"...Mike?"

"What?" you inquire. "Just -- please! Tell me how I get us out of here. Is there a cable or something?"

She's shaking like a leaf in the wind right about now. Even Bonnibel would look more together by comparison.

"Main menu," she finally manages to spit out. "Door, uh, lock. There's a, um, door lock button."

You're not really sure of what she's trying to say, but you're able to puzzle it out after pressing random options on the tablet's menus. After fiddling with it enough the lock audibly clicks open, the red light on the handle turning green as an indicator that you may pass through.

As soon as it unlocks, Bonworth's already tugging the door open for the two of you. He softly catches Beanie up into his bulky arms before she can even finish walking outside, pulling her to safety from the building as if it were on fire. She shakes the plastic mask loose from her head as he embraces her fiercely, tears running freely down both of their faces. Bonworth quietly whispers soothing words in her ear as stress and grief finally overwhelm her, sobs wracking her slender frame.

You calmly walk out onto the sidewalk next to Fred, who's standing by his car watching the siblings' reunion from a respectful distance. He too seems emotional, though he's doing a far better job of managing his feelings than Bonworth, who's crying openly alongside his sister. As you approach, he looks down at you, seemingly struggling to phrase what he wants to say. After a moment's hesitation, he finally settles on placing one of his sizable paws on your shoulder, gripping it softly.

"You did good," he says, no trace of his usual disapproval or stern demeanor in his tone. It's probably the most earnest you've ever seen him. You draw a ragged breath, silently nodding in acknowledgement as you place the security tablet down on a nearby bench.

Eventually, Beanie succeeds in pulling it together, leaning away from her brother.

"Wh-what happened to your arms?" Bonworth asks in astonishment. Biting her swollen lip, Beanie wordlessly turns to show him the electrical tape wrapped around her wrists. "Oh, geez. Fred, you got a pair of scissors handy?"

"Yeah. Just a minute." Fred opens the trunk of his car and after rummaging around produces a utility knife from his box of office supplies.

"Hang on, I'll cut that loose," he murmurs as Bonworth turns Beanie's back towards him.

Fred gently slices through the thick, sticky tape, taking care to not nick her in the process. Once Beanie's paws are free, she staggers forward, retrieving the mask from where she shook it off earlier. Clutching it to her chest, she looks up at Fred, her battered face unreadable.

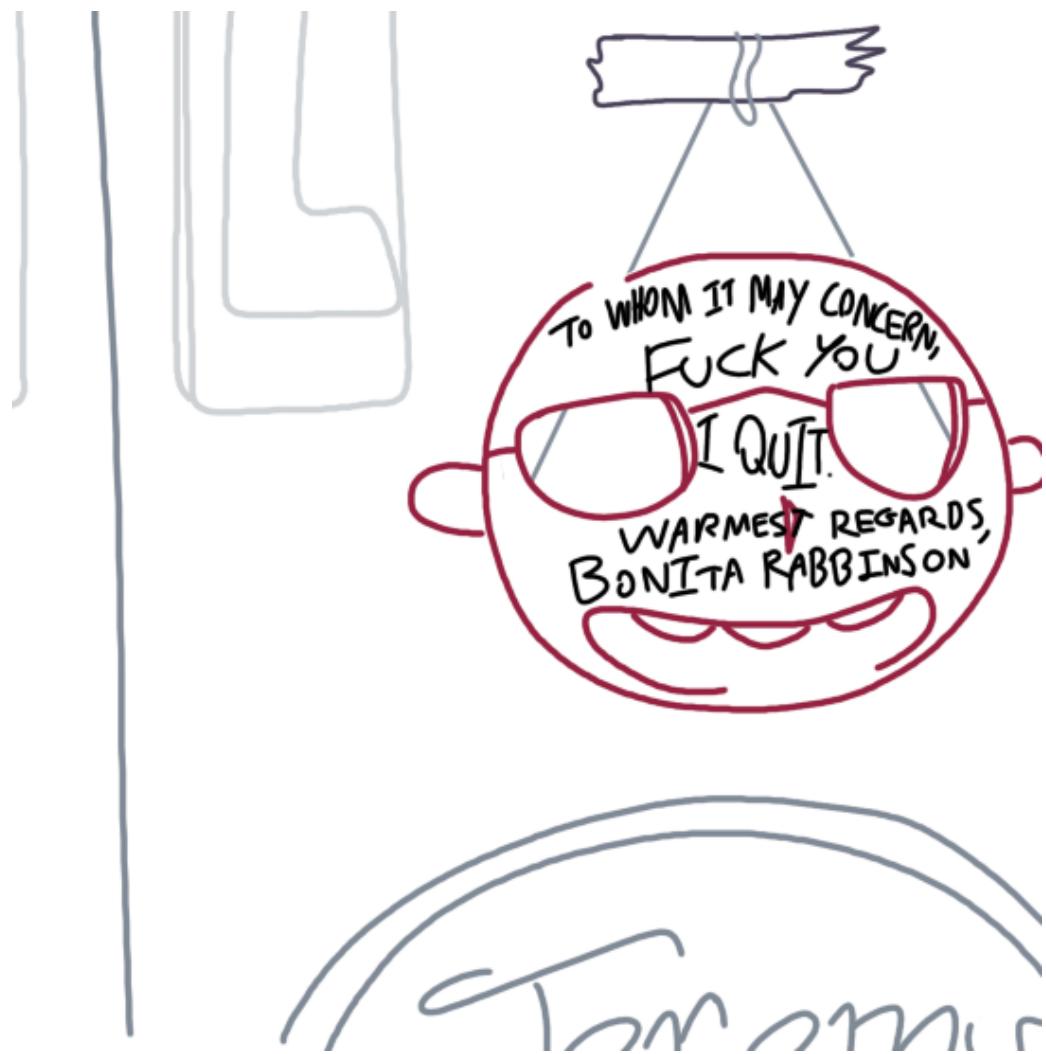
"Something to write with?" she rasps.

Fred shrugs, tossing the knife back in the trunk. "I've got just about every type of writing implement you could want."

"Pen, marker. Anything."

With a curious nod, Fred pulls a black felt-tip marker out of his box and hands it to her. She takes it in an unsteady paw, placing the mask down on the bench next to the tablet. Kneeling to the ground, Beanie begins to write on the surface of the mask. After a moment, she caps the marker and returns it to Fred.

Walking towards the pizzeria's entrance, Beanie rips off one of the pieces of tape still attached to her wrist, hissing as it takes a good chunk of her fur with it. She holds the costume piece up to the restaurant's front door by its elastic strap, affixing the tape to it so that it'll hang just above the company logo etched into the glass. You squint, reading the message scrawled directly across the surface of the mask in shaky writing.



TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN,

FUCK YOU. I QUIT.

WARMEST REGARDS,  
BONITA RABBINSON

"...lil bunny?" Bonworth cautiously ventures as he looks at her "notice" of resignation.

Without even stopping to admire her work, Beanie staggers over to the car. Fred opens the door for her, his face heavy with obviously mixed feelings. She wordlessly climbs into the back seat, sliding over to make room for you.

"Let's go," she mutters, turning to stare out the window, "and let's never come back."

"Ship's come in!" Haddock jubilantly declares as you file in behind the others.

Quite the crowd has accumulated in 93-A's living room by the time your group returns. It almost feels like half the neighborhood's huddled around the common area, each with their own varied expressions of relief and anticipation upon seeing your party's arrival. Rackham and Bonbon are

both seated on the floor by the coffee table, the latter looking uncharacteristically careworn. All of Bonworth's roommates are present and accounted for: Cheeky and Faz are seated on the couch while Haddock peers out through a cardboard tube from the safety of sloppily-constructed pillow fort. Chichi's in the process of nervously over-watering a potted plant as you walk in.

"Beanie!" Bonbon and Chichi whoop almost simultaneously, running towards their friend to greet her.

Bonworth helps his sister inside, a protective arm wrapped around her as she drowsily leans against him for support. While Chichi maternally frets over Beanie's wounds with a wingful of first aid supplies, Bonbon begins peppering both the returning bunnies with a rapid-fire assault of questions.

"What were you *thinking?*" Bonbon asks, her plush feet anxiously thumping up and down against the carpet like a pair of furry jackhammers. "Why didn't you return any of my texts?! Didn't you get the memo saying the pizzeria would be closed today?! It was in the employees-only corporate newsletter that went out last night! Didn't you read it?!"

"Obviously not," Beanie deadpans, grimacing as Bonbon hovers anxiously around her.

"She's... had an awful rough go of it, Bonbon," Bonworth says in an attempt to mediate. "Shoot, we all have. Could y'just give her just a little space?"

"*Obviously not,*" the hyperactive rabbit echoes. "I called your mom and filled her in on what was going on as soon as we heard from Fred."

"You **can't** be serious," Beanie growls. "Oh *god*. You *are* serious, aren't you."

"*Whiskers*, Bonbon! You got our mama involved?" Bonworth drags a paw down his face out of genuine frustration. "Now what the heck'd you go and do that for?!"

Bonbon's ears flatten against the back of her head, her cheeks burning with righteous indignance.

"Gee, I dunno -- I was thinking maybe she'd have to scrape another one of my *friends* out of a **mascot costume!!**" she shrieks before realizing what she's just said. "I-- oh, gosh. *Sorry*. I'm sorry, Faz!"

Faz waves her off, staring at Bonworth pointedly. "She's got every right to be concerned."

"You're damn right she does," Cheeky pipes up, almost as flustered as Bonbon. "If she hadn't called your mother, I would have. You gonna be pissed at me for wanting to keep her in the loop too, Bonnie?!"

"Chica, don't do this to me," Bonworth mopes, slumping as he walks Beanie through the throng and into the living room. "Not today of all days."

Cheeky stands up from the couch to make room for Beanie. "You're her *kids!* What, you don't think she has a right to know?!"

"Please, stop! That'll be enough infighting now," Chichi interjects, fighting back tears as she dabs at Beanie's black eye with a cotton ball. "Ohhh, your face is a *mess*. I hope your lip doesn't need stitches! What *happened* in there?!"

"I *really* don't want to get into it right now," Beanie says as she gently shoves Chichi's wing away. Walking over to the couch, she collapses into the cushions, leaning against Faz. "I'm *already* dreading having to face the music with my mom -- thanks again for that, Bonbon."

"God, you're *insufferable*," Bonbon grumbles, stalking off to the kitchen with her arms folded.

"Hey, Mike," Cheeky whispers, waddling over to you. "You all right? You look like shit."

"I'm okay," you lie, shrugging your coat off.

It slips out of your weak grip, landing on the floor with a plop. You stare at it apathetically, unable to even muster the drive to pick it up off the ground. A nervous Cheeky wraps both of her wings around your chest to embrace you, only to pull back with a start when you wince in pain at the pressure placed on your sides.

"You really don't look okay, Mike," she says loudly enough for the room's benefit.

Conversation drops as everyone gathered seems to notice the condition you're in. Seizing his opportunity, Fred pulls his cell phone out of his pocket, muttering an excuse as he heads for his bedroom. All eyes are on you as Haddock lowers his makeshift spyglass, poking his muzzle fully out of his cushion tent. He gently sniffs at the air before climbing out of his fort altogether.

"Lad?" he asks softly, his glossy eyes beginning to brim. "Am I seein'... *blood*?"

You start to reply, opening and closing your mouth a few times, but your brain just doesn't want to sync up with your mouth. After multiple failed attempts at formulating a coherent response you give up on it altogether. Turning on your heel, you begin slowly walking down the hall towards your borrowed room.

"Mike? *Mike!* You're not going anywhere -- let me take a look at your leg!" Chichi orders, brushing past a stunned Cheeky to tend to you. "Mike, come back! Let me clean that up! You don't want it to get infected!"

You don't even look behind you to make eye contact with her, or offer any kind of explanation as you trudge down the east hallway, heading towards the sanctity of Fred's office for some peace and quiet. The living room's abuzz with hushed whispers and frantic speculation about just what might have happened at Jeremy's -- but you honestly couldn't care less. There's literally *nothing* you want more right now than to bury your head underneath a pillow and sleep for days.

"Please don't make this any harder than it has to be," Chichi urges before you close the door in her face. She shifts over to the window, giving you a haunting stare. You can see her breath fogging up the glass as she gawks at you.

With a tired sigh, you nod to Fred before collapsing on his futon, pulling your blanket over your face in the hope that it'll somehow make Chichi go away. You don't even bother to take your shoes or bloodied jeans off -- you figure you'll apologize to Chichi for both your rudeness and your mess later, but at the moment, getting some sleep is your number one priority.

Closing your eyes, you exhale heavily, willing yourself to slumber.

*Wait.*

Your eyes snap open as it clicks that you're not alone in the office.

"Sorry, Fred," you offer, tugging the blanket loose from your head. "I hope I'm not interrupting any..."

You trail off, realizing it's not actually Fred you're speaking to -- though the resemblance is strong to say the least. A tall, well-built male bear with vibrant fur the color of sunflower petals reclines in Fred's desk chair, paws clasped in front of himself. He's dressed somewhat plainly, wearing a violet button-up shirt and black slacks.



"Rough day?" he asks.

"You have no idea," you respond groggily. "Sorry, I just assumed you were Fred. Have we met?"

"People have been known to confuse us. You can call me Goldie."

His voice even *sounds* similar to Fred's, though he's a bit softer-spoken -- lacking Fred's signature gruffness.

"Hi, Goldie. My name's Mike." You shift to a sitting position to better look at him.

Goldie clasps his paws, smiling slightly. "I know."

"Yeah. I guess everyone in the complex must have heard of me by now," you mutter, embarrassed.  
"So, uh, are you dropping by, or...?"

"Oh, you don't have to make small talk on my account, Mike," Goldie replies evenly. "But you *really* shouldn't sleep on that leg, either. At least let Chica take a look at it."

Nodding, you reluctantly look over at the window. Chichi's still lurking outside in the hallway, nervously clutching her first aid kit. She seems to be working up the nerve to barge in on you. With a sigh, you make it easy on her, opening the door up to let her into the room.

"Go ahead, Chichi," you offer as you collapse on the futon.

"I promise I'll be gentle, Mike," Chichi says graciously, working your shoes off of your feet and setting them aside. "Can you, um...?"

She points to your ripped jeans, and with a grimace you unfasten your belt, sliding your pants off. You suppose she wouldn't be the first chicken to see you in your boxers today. Goldie turns his head politely, pretending to study Fred's collection of polaroid photos as Chichi begins cleaning your leg wound.

"Ooh. This is a pretty rough scrape, but it's not as bad as I thought," she says. "It'll likely scar, but... I don't *think* you're going to need stitches. Might sting a little, though."

"There's no way it can *sting* as much as being stretched out on a workbench by a demented robot," you comment with a dull, humorless laugh as she swabs your leg with alcohol.

"Are you serious? *That's* what happened!?" Chichi looks up at you in horror, setting the alcohol bottle aside. "Good heavens! What else went on in there? We're all trying, but we can't get a peep out of Bonnie. She won't talk to any of us about it."

"Don't forget to put some gauze on it," Goldie adds.

Satisfied you won't get an infection, Chichi pulls a roll of gauze and some bandages out to finish wrapping your leg. "Is it true that you rescued her from one of those monsters, Mike?"

You wince, elevating your leg as you recline on the futon. "Rescue might be an overstatement."

"If you got her out of there, it's a rescue, and that makes you a hero," Chichi softly protests. "Mike, Bonnie's my best friend. I know you're just trying to be humble, but from the absolute bottom of my heart, thank you for bringing her home to us."

She leans across your chest, cradling your head in one wing. Pulling you close, she pecks your cheek in as much of a kiss as a beak can manage.

At a loss for words, you simply watch as she packs the remainder of her medical supplies up into the plastic box.

"Cheeky said you looked like you were in pain when she tried to hug you, so I'm going to ask Bonnie's mom to take a look at you when she gets off of work," the plump little hen continues. "You'll love Dr. Rabbinson. She's been taking care of all of us for years, and she's a *very* good doctor. She'll be able to tell if you need any x-rays or anything."

"No, no doctors," you insist, bolting upright in a dizzy panic. If you thought Fritzine's workshop of horrors was bad, you can only imagine what a team of *actual scientists* would do to you if they found out a real, live human being was within their grasp. "I'm fine, Chichi, really! Just -- let me get some rest, okay?!"

"Better let her have this one," Goldie quietly suggests. "Once her mind's made up, she won't change it."

"Yeah, not happening," Chichi tuts, shaking loose a few more feathers. "Dr. Rabbinson is a sweet lady, Mike! You *are* going to let her look you over, and that's final. If you're worried about the money, *don't*. We'll make sure everything's taken care of."

You look to Goldie, who winks at you, then back to Chichi. "Fine -- but she'd better not amputate anything."

"I promise I won't let her near you with anything sharper than a pair of safety scissors," Chichi jokes, but you can tell she's too rattled by both the day's events and your own behavior to really be feeling it. You reward her attempt at humor with a pained smile as she excuses herself from the office.

Standing up from the desk, Goldie brushes his shirt off. "Sleep well, Mike. Let's talk again later, after you're feeling better."

"Oh, um, sure. Will you be staying here a while, Goldie?" You're already imagining having to move apartments again if another new guest is going to inadvertently run you off like April did before.

"Actually, I've always been here," he replies absently. "My brother has a place for me. In the back."

"No kidding? I'm surprised we haven't run into each other sooner by now. Fred's your brother, I'm guessing?" Process of elimination -- unless he's adopted, you're pretty sure the only other bear under the roof is a safe bet.

Nodding, Goldie opens the door to let himself out. "See you later."

"Sounds good. Hey, uh, nice meeting you Goldie," you call out over your shoulder. "Sorry it wasn't on better terms."

He pauses halfway out the door, stroking his chin softly. "Nice to properly meet you too, Mike," he replies before disappearing down the hallway with a lighthearted chuckle. Properly?

With a shrug, you settle back down on the futon, nestling your head in your pillow.

But you didn't *really* escape, did you.

You're back in the lab, strapped down on the maintenance workbench. This time you're held in place with chains and padlocks -- they really don't want you getting away. Fritzine's learned from her mistake, having called for backup; Jeremy and Darky stand by, ready to pounce at the slightest sign you're trying to escape.

Beanie's still curled up under cover nearby, her Jeremy Human disguise plastered on her face. You call out to her, urging her to abandon you and run while she's able. She scrambles to her feet, taking

off down the hallway as fast as she can -- but as soon as she moves, Darky outs her with a wave of his hook. Beanie's inherent rabbit agility is no match for Jeremy Human's lightning-fast processing speed. In seconds he outpaces her, grabbing her by her arm and dragging her back to Fritzine, who's eager to begin experimenting, tools in hand.

Beanie cries out in pain as Jeremy's razor-sharp claws slice through her flesh, severing muscle and going straight to the bone. As punishment for running, the demonic drum major rips her left arm clean off from her body, sending it careening across the room in a spray of dark fluid. The severed extremity clangs as it rebounds off of the ground, ringing out in the inky blackness of the laboratory like a piece of pipe. Beanie's screaming bloody murder as the larger-than-life automatons force her onto the table. Fritzine's literally foaming at the mouth to begin disassembly. You jerk and fight against your bonds, yelling and swearing as you struggle to break loose, but just like before, you have no chance of freeing yourself -- let alone saving Beanie.

"Time to see what's underneath that face!" the crazed performers sing-song in unison as Fritzine yanks Beanie's mask off. The plastic facade tears loose, revealing a hysterically sobbing Beanie. Jeremy Human wraps his knife-like fingers around her skull, tucking his fingertips under her chin as Beanie begs for a quick, merciful end.

"**Kill ya?**" Fritzine asks in an exaggerated display of confusion. "Shoot, cousin! Why in the heck would we go and do that? We're gonna **fix ya!**"

"You've worn my face for so long, rabbit," Jeremy seethes. "**Consider us even.**"

Before you can react, Fritzine wedges a crowbar into Beanie's mouth, stifling her cries. Throwing her weight onto it, Fritzine pops Beanie's face off of her head like a pop-tab on a can of soda. The lavender rabbit's eyeballs and teeth spill out of her facial cavity, rolling down her chest and across the floor where they clack and clatter like marbles. Her tiny frame lurches and shudders with pain, before finally, *finally* collapsing.

Silence falls over the room as the animatronics step back to assess their work. At a loss for words, you squeeze your eyes shut, but even that proves to be no refuge -- her lifeless body is still there. You can still see it, burned into your mind.

"**All better!**" Fritzine cheerfully declares as Jeremy moves aside, the remains of Beanie's face clutched in his claws like a sadistic trophy. You begin to dry heave as you stare in shock at her butchered form.

Without provocation, Beanie -- or what's left of her -- begins to convulse. Her body creaks like an unoiled hinge as she slowly forces herself to a sitting position. Shifting her weight off of the table and onto her feet, she haltingly shambles towards you, one heavy footfall at a time, like some undead monster out of a bad horror movie.

Even though it's only a distance of less than ten feet, it feels like an eternity watching her plod in your direction. You thrash against the table, trying your hardest to pull away, but the locks on your extremities make it impossible to budge even an inch. You're hyperventilating as you're forced to watch her reanimated corpse stutter and falter towards your prone form. Whatever they've done to her, she's beyond saving now, and soon you will be too.

Slowly, surely, Beanie lowers her empty head towards your face. No bone, sinew, or even blood is visible -- if anything, it's like looking into a hollowed-out gourd. There's nothing at all where her face should be.

"Beanie?" you whisper.

Her body begins to thrum as two red beacons light up inside her void of a head, bathing you in a sickly crimson radiance. Circuitry and wires run criss-cross throughout the entirety of her skull. Support struts jut out of her torso, penetrating the filthy lavender fabric that's a mockery of her usual fur. Placing her only arm on your chest causes you to shiver uncontrollably -- it's cold to the touch.

Cold like steel.

"It's been a **long** time, Mike," Beanie's voice box crackles. "**Come back to us.**"

You tumble off of the futon in a cold sweat, gasping for breath. Your shirt and boxers are sticky with perspiration, your skin clammy and unpleasant to the touch. Fred's office is getting dark, and the house is much quieter than it was when you went to bed; the clock on the wall indicates you slept far longer than you wanted to. Staggering to your feet, you recoil as a throbbing pain rockets through your wounded leg.

You're half-expecting someone to burst into the room to check on you, but after a moment of reorienting yourself, you realize nobody's coming. You're hoping you didn't piss everyone off earlier by being so withdrawn, but you've been feeling "wrong" ever since you came back from your *first* jaunt at the restaurant -- the second one's more than sealed the deal.

Consider your curiosity sated. You've gotten quite enough of the twisted world of Jeremy Human's. You realize now that it's no place you want to be part of. If they're the only baseline your friends have to go off of when it comes to humans, it's no wonder Peanut and the others seem so repulsed by them. It certainly makes Bonbon's infatuation seem all the more unhealthy.

After the trauma Beanie endured at Fritzine's maniacal hands -- not to mention whatever *else* she might have endured had you not shown up when you did -- you can't fault anybody for not wanting anything to do with humans. You *especially* can't blame her for looking at you and being frightened stiff.

*For a minute there I almost forgot you weren't really Schmidt.  
You even sounded like him. Just like one of them.*

But you **are** one of *them*. Flesh and blood rather than wires and oil, sure, but despite everything, you're *unquestionably* human -- and to these animal people, "human" is the symbol of everything that has caused them pain or misfortune.

It's been so long since you really stopped and faced that fact. You haven't truly tried to claim it to anyone but Bonbon, and she's so delusional she probably didn't pay it a second thought. But you're as much of a *human* as Beanie is a rabbit or Fred is a bear.

In a way, you've passed so long as some "hairless ape" that you'd almost forgotten it wasn't true. You'd almost come to believe the lie yourself.

So the question remains -- what are you going to do when they figure out the truth? You shiver as you imagine their terror, their disgust. Peanut's words from yesterday come back to mind.

*I don't think I'd ever want to meet one.*

The repulsion, the distaste in his eyes -- it didn't bother you then. You were so far into this lie you didn't even realize the implications. At the time, it didn't seem to even apply to you, but now you know better.

What if they knew?

What if they were made aware of your nature, if they could see you for what you really are? Would they still welcome you into their homes? Would they still smile at you, pet you, want to learn more about you? Would you be able to share a meal with them? Laugh with them? Would you still be able to enjoy the carefree lifestyle you've become accustomed to?

You try to shake the troubling thoughts from your mind. They don't know, not yet. And you're going to do everything you can to keep it that way for as long as possible.

Dragging yourself over to your suitcase, you rummage around inside it for a clean change of clothes. You've just been stuffing your laundry into your bag without even bothering to fold or organize it. One of these days, you need to see about getting some real furniture when you land somewhere more permanent. A dresser, at the very least. After all, you've been here for, what, over two weeks now? And somehow you *still* haven't found a solid home?

Home. Where *is* "home"?

87-B felt like "home". Still kind of does, but you've made so many new friends along the way that you at least feel welcome in other apartments. After today, you could bury yourself in the room you shared with Frederick and never come out. If Bonnibel spent any amount of time at Jeremy Human's at all, it's no wonder she's a whackjob. Then again, considering what torment you endured -- and you and Beanie are the ones that got away relatively unscathed -- it's a wonder you're *not* a whackjob.

Or maybe you are. Hell, how would you even *know*? You're the only real human in the world, surrounded by people who look like they could be cereal box mascots or *Hanna-Barbera* cartoon characters. What metric, what standard do you have to ensure that *you're* not completely stark-raving insane? Bonnibel's diagnosis of you being "broken like the rest of us" doesn't even sound so far-fetched anymore.

*Bonnibel.* Bonnibel, Frederick, Chiclet.

...when did they stop being "Bonnie", "Freddy", and "Chica" to you?

Everyone else refers to *their* rabbit as "Bonnie" or *their* chicken as "Chica". Every apartment has a bear (two in the case of this one), as well as a bunny, a chicken, and a fox. Nicknames and appearances vary, sure. Some bunnies are blue and some are purple. Some foxes have pink makeup and some are pirate-like with red fur. Some bears are soft and cute, some bears are big and strong. At least all the chickens you've met are sociable and outgoing.

Thing is, which "set" of animal friends is truly yours? Who do you call "Foxy", who do you call "Bonnie"?

Is "home" where the "Chica" is?

Shaking your head, you exhale heavily. Your mind's running rampant with nonsense, and the only thing you're really sure of is how cripplingly, debilitatingly alone you feel. Earlier, you just wanted to be left to yourself. Now, you want anything *but*.

Oh, and some food that isn't a burnt slice of toast would be nice too, you guess.

You strip down and hurriedly change into dry clothes, tossing your sweat-soaked shirt and boxers in a pile of your other dirty laundry by the corner of the office. It's a little after six PM; if you hurry, you should still be able to catch dinner, or at least some leftovers. Limping down the hallway, you head into the living room, fully expecting everyone to have gone back to their homes. To your great surprise, Cheeky and Fred as well as both Bonworth and Beanie are present; the latter two dozing next to each other in Fred's oversized chair, curled up under a shared blanket.

"Hey, Mike," Cheeky whispers to you, taking care not to wake the siblings. "Feeling any better?"

"Worse, actually," you answer honestly. "I'm sorry for barging out earlier, Cheeky. My head's not really in a good place right now."

"That's actually a good sign," Fred replies, getting up from the far end of the couch. "You and Bonnie have been through the wringer. We'd be a lot more worried if you were trying to pretend like everything's fine."

Cheeky bobs her head in agreement. "Fred's right. There's absolutely no shame in admitting you're not doing well, Mike."

You're not sure you have anything to say, so you just nod quietly. You can't even force a smile or crack a joke. You've got nothing left in you.

"The others went to go get some stuff for dinner and pick up Dr. Rabbinson from the emergency clinic," Cheeky murmurs as Fred leaves the room. "She's going to come examine you and Beanie. And then, knowing her, she's probably going to take both of her kids back home and chew 'em out for hours."

Nodding again, you look around the room, feeling lost and overwhelmed. Perhaps sensing as much, Cheeky takes your hand and pulls you gently over to the couch next to herself. You slump into the cushions and huddle up beside her.

"There we are," Cheeky soothes as you curl up against her body. She gently strokes your back with her soft down, handling you with the utmost care.

After several minutes, Fred comes back from the kitchen with a mug of coffee in his paws. He hands it to you, and even though you're not up to drinking it, there's something wholly therapeutic about the warmth of the mug in your hands.

"Thanks," you whisper, losing yourself in the inky brown liquid.

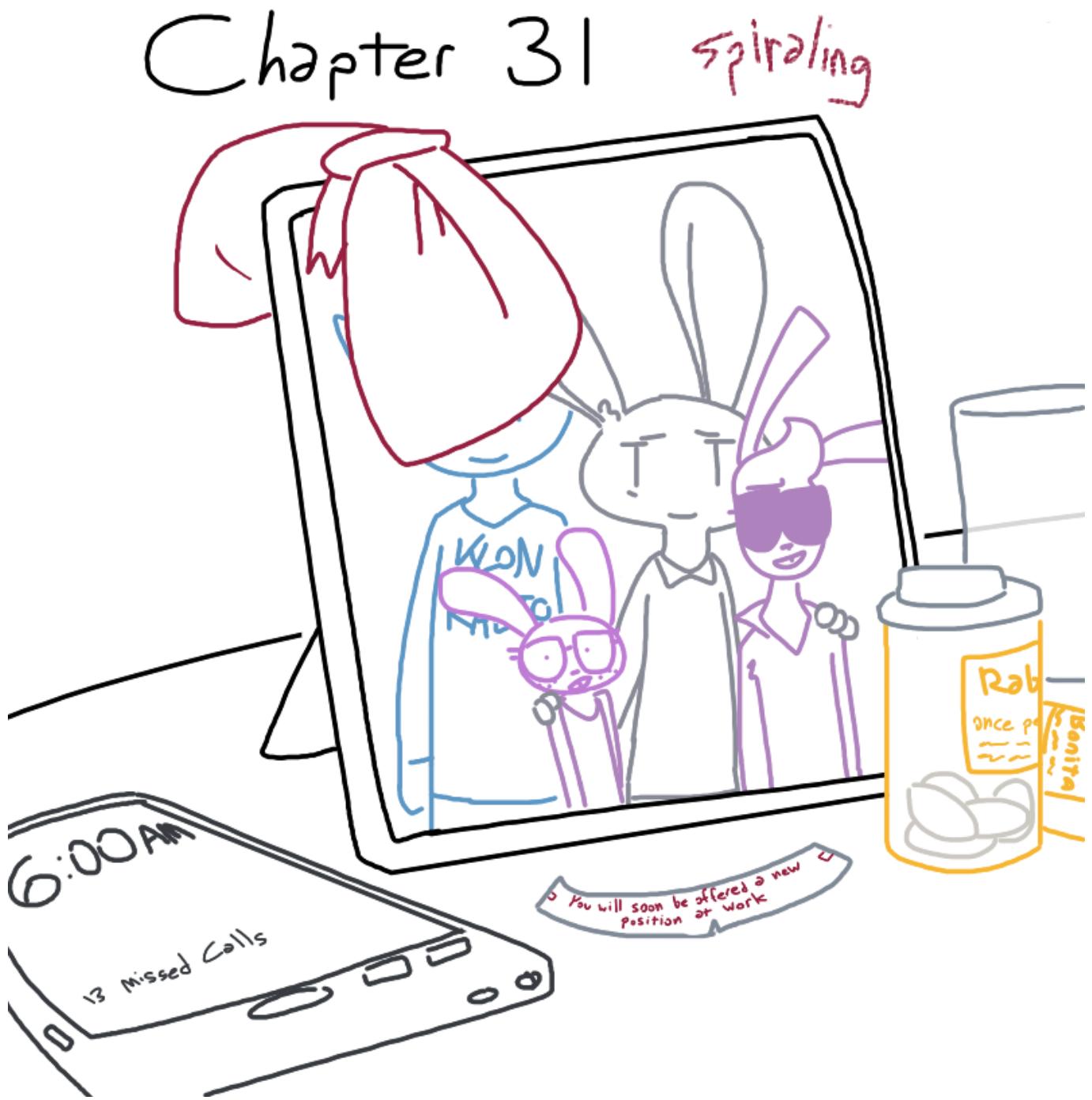
Retaking his seat, Fred puts his feet up on the ottoman.

"Anything for family."

# Spiraling

## Chapter Summary

In the wake of a horrific ordeal, Mike struggles to hold on.



"Well, doc?"

Dr. Rabbinson (or *Carrol* as she insists on being called) turns out to be completely different from any mental image you could have possibly had in mind. Even though she's shorter than both of her children, and her fur is as white as the driven snow, there's still a hint of family resemblance. Carrol is as fastidious and detail-oriented as Bonworth is, and you can definitely see where Beanie inherited her dry personality (and her cup size) from.

"As best as I can tell, Cheeky, his ribs are at least bruised. But there's the possibility of a couple of minor fractures," Carrol remarks, pulling her stethoscope from her enormous bunny ears.

You, Cheeky, and Carrol are gathered in the master bedroom -- Fred's own room, which he offered unprompted -- due to its large size and isolation from the rest of the apartment. Cheeky's seated next to you on the bed for both moral support and your own personal comfort; even though Carrol offered to examine your wounds privately, you insisted on having someone else in the room with you at all times.

Chichi and the others are in the kitchen preparing dinner while Beanie rests outside in the living room, having seen her mother ahead of you. According to Carrol, Beanie came out of your mutual encounter at Jeremy's in better physical condition than you did, suffering "only" a sprained wrist and a black eye.

Of course, the damage to both her psyche and your own remains to be seen.

"What all are we looking at, then?" Cheeky asks as Dr. Rabbinson finishes re-bandaging your leg. "Any possibility it's more serious than a fracture?"

"I don't think so. He's in pain, but it's not excruciating and he can take deep breaths without much trouble, both of which are good signs. Of course, given my limited tools, that's about the best I can tell you without taking him downtown and running x-rays." You open your mouth to protest, but she raises a gloved paw to silence you before you can say anything. "And yes, he's made it abundantly clear how he feels about *that* particular plan. Just from a cursory inspection, I can't find anything else wrong with him. Just the leg and the ribs."

Patting your thigh in an attempt to calm you down, Cheeky turns her attention back to Carrol. "Will he need stitches?"

"No, the laceration isn't deep at all. Keep the wound clean so that it doesn't get infected, and it'll be fine -- whoever wrapped this before I got here did a good job." Standing up, Carrol discards her rubber gloves in Fred's wastebasket.

"We all do a lot of bandage changing around here," Cheeky murmurs with a half-hearted smile.

Finally, Carrol turns to you. "Michael? Or do you prefer Mike?"

"Just Mike's fine," you murmur, reluctantly forcing yourself to divert your gaze from the dark spot on the carpet you've been fixated on for the last several minutes.

"All right, Mike. You don't have to get into graphic detail if you don't want to," Carrol says softly. "But if you think you're up to it, can you at least go over the basics of what happened today? Bonita's not saying anything, and I need to know what I'm dealing with when I get her home."

You give Carrol a shaky nod as she begins returning her medical supplies to her bag. Studying the tension in your face, her expression softens slightly.

"Take it from me, Mike. I know you're kind of rattled after today, but talking about it will prevent you from going into shock -- even if it's the very last thing you feel like doing."

"I think he's already past that point," Cheeky sighs softly from beside you on the bed. "He hasn't left my side once since he woke up this evening."

You take a deep breath before looking up at both of them. "You don't have to talk about me like I'm not here, you know," you rasp, struggling to smile.

Cheeky gives you a strained grin of her own, trying her hardest to encourage you without being overbearing. "Look at you, gettin' all snarky. There's the Mike we know."

"If your sense of sarcasm's still intact, you'll probably be fine," Carrol teasingly chimes in.

You take a second to massage your temples. Hesitantly, you dredge the day's events back to the forefront of your mind even though you'd much rather leave them buried.

"This, ah, this morning -- I guess it was about six, seven AM?" you begin, looking at Cheeky for confirmation. She nods.

"Close enough."

"Right, um -- Beanie didn't call to check in with Bonworth after work, and apparently that's something she always does. Jeremy's was closed, and I guess nobody was there to turn the robots off or whatever? Cheeky's probably got a better idea of how all of that works than I do."

Bobbing her head, Cheeky counts off on her wingtips. "Protocol is that pre-show opening mode kicks in at six sharp to disable them, but since the store was closed, the animatronics must've stayed in free-roam mode."

"That sounds about right," you agree, thinking back to Fritzine's words when you were in-character as Safety Schmidt. "Um, so we drove over to check on Beanie, but the building was locked. We didn't have the key, so I had to climb in through an air duct. That's how I, uh, sliced my leg -- the vent gave out on me once I was inside the building."

Eyebrows raised, Carrol nods. "I see. That explains the unusual pattern of the cut."

"Once I got inside, Cheeky and Faz gave me instructions on where to look for Beanie. I'd be dead if not for their help. Faz was..." You trail off, struggling with the words.

Cheeky pats your back gingerly. "It's okay, Mike. Like Faz said about a dozen times when you got home, we were just doing what anyone would've. Quit trying to act like you weren't the one out there doing all the real work."

"With their help," you continue reluctantly, "I found her in Bot Bay--"

"Bot Bay?" Carrol interrupts.

"I think it's supposed to be an attraction... but really it's just a horrible back room workshop where one of the animatronics does 'experiments'," you answer, trying to force the image of Fritzine's collection of 'confiscated parts' out of your mind. "On, uh, live subjects. Like us."

"I'm... *familiar* with the type," Carrol replies with a heavy sigh. "Wish I wasn't. I'm willing to bet you feel the same."

"Beanie was, um -- she was tied up with electrical tape," you explain, hurrying along through your recounting of the events. The less you have to dwell on it, the easier it'll be to put everything behind you. "We tried to book it out of there, but one of the animatronics, Fritzine, she -- she just showed up out of nowhere. I tried to, uh, 'disable' her. Didn't work, but then she got all excited and gave me a 'hug'."

Wincing out of sympathy, Cheeky pipes up again. "And *that* explains the ribs. I guess she thought you were one of the other mascots."

"I can see how that would happen," Carrol muses. "Between your... 'unique look' and their long-running history of mechanical failure, it's actually quite believable that they would identify you as one of their own."

"Easily. No offense, Mike, but you even *look* like a human, too," Cheeky sheepishly adds. Your heart skips two full beats as she slaps a verbal red flag over what you've been trying to play low. Eyeing Carrol nervously, you try to gauge her reaction, but fortunately she doesn't seem to have put two and two together. "Besides that, their facial scanning system was buggy as hell when it was new. I can't imagine they've made many improvements to it in the time I've been gone."

"And there's also no telling what kind of condition they've been kept in since my son and Cheeky stopped working there," Carrol says as she stands up on the tips of her toes, reaching up high to ruffle Cheeky's head feathers. "I'm pretty good at fixing people up, but this gal here's the best robot doctor in the business."

"Awww! Thanks, doc," Cheeky says, tearing up a little. She presses her free wing to her face, dabbing at her runny makeup. "Dr. Rabbinson's been looking out for all of us for years, Mike. Y'know, she pulled all kinds of strings so that I could see the best oncologist in the state."

You're exceedingly grateful for the focus to be off of you for the moment. "That's really cool, Cheeky," you breathe, wincing as you tug your shirt back on over your head.

"Speaking of which," Carrol interrupts, gently tapping Cheeky's belly. "Any...?"

"Still NED as of the first of this month," Cheeky proudly replies. "Just a few aches and pains here and there, but otherwise I've been very lucky."

"Good. Now, I don't want you so much as getting a cold. We both know my son would be lost without you."

"He's not the only one," you admit, causing the curvy hen to blush a little. "Um, what is, uh -- what does NED...?"

"No Evidence of Disease," both of them say in unison.

"So remission, basically," Carrol helpfully adds.

You carefully slide off the bed, taking special care as you put weight on your leg. "That's awesome. I'm legit happy for you."

Raising a paw, Carrol attempts to steer the conversation back on course. "So I have to know, how the hell did you get out of there with Bonita? Did you just grab her and run, or...?"

You don't reply immediately, instead taking a moment to catch your breath and gather your thoughts. In this situation, less is more; it's to your advantage to avoid going into too much into detail on your escape, especially the part about impersonating a human-like robot. You *really* don't want to draw any unwanted attention to yourself -- not just because of the nature of your species, but also because you really, *really* need some down time right now just to decompress and clear your head.

A knock at Fred's bedroom door serves as a perfectly-timed distraction, saving you from having to answer Carrol's line of inquiry.

"Dinner's ready, everyone," Chichi calls from outside, coming to your rescue.

"Thank you, Chica. We'll be there in a moment," Carrol cordially responds, refusing to break eye contact with you. It's obvious she still wants more information, but she backs off for now, seemingly having recognized your discomfort. "Mike, believe me, if there's anyone who understands what you're going through, I do."

You genuinely doubt that.

"Likewise," Cheeky adds, patting your shoulder. "Every single one of us has taken our turn at the grinder at some point."

"As long as there isn't anything too pressing I need to know about Bonita, why don't you just take the night and rest? Doctor's orders."

"Sounds good," you agree, thankful for the reprieve. "It's been a very long, very, uh -- rough couple of days. So I just need to take it easy because of the -- um, the fractures...?"

"And in case there's any lasting effects, I'll kill you," she flippantly remarks. "Painfully."

Your jaw drops. "S-sorry?"

You shoot Cheeky a worried look, but she doesn't seem the least bit fazed at all as she holds the door open for you.

"I said, 'in case of any lasting effects, I'll get you some painkillers'," Carrol repeats, cocking her head at you quizzically. "Don't look so surprised, Mike. That's *literally* my job description. Unless you're worried about money, in which case don't be; I'll see that it's taken care of."

You exhale the breath you've been holding as your heart rate begins to slow back down. "O-oh, right. Um, th-- thank you."

"It's the *least* I can do. The pills will help dull the pain, so you'll be able to sleep and breathe easily -- and more importantly, so you don't get pneumonia. If you just take it easy, your ribs will heal themselves on their own in a month or two. I'll swing by to check on you weekly, or more often if need be."

"Wow. Okay, thank you very much," you reply as you practically sprint towards the door, ready for this conversation to be over. "I hope you guys don't mind, but I'm just going to go, y'know, take a

breather? I-if that's all right?"

"Absolutely. Oh, and Mike?" Carrol adds, placing a firm paw on your shoulder.

You pause mid-stride, grudgingly turning back to look at her. "What is it?"

"These words don't feel like they have any meaning no matter how I express them, but please, please believe me when I say this," she whispers, tearing up. You can barely make out her whisper-quiet voice over the din outside Fred's room. "They might be all grown up, and I'm **unbelievably** disappointed in them right now, but our kids are *everything* to me and my husband. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for bringing my daughter home safely."

A wave of mixed emotions washes over you. All at once you want to hug her and tell her you're just happy to help, but at the same time you've got the sudden urge to berate her for such gross parental negligence. You resist the temptation to scream at her, to shake her like a ragdoll for being so blind as to let her children throw themselves into the maw of death itself for minimum wage.

Instead you end up settling on a wan smile and an unenthusiastic nod. Satisfied, Carrol follows you and Cheeky out of Fred's room and out into the apartment's common area, where everyone else is eagerly awaiting the news. While Carrol announces your condition to exuberant applause from most of your friends, you stifle the compulsion to run and hide under a piece of furniture.

Just gotta get through the night, and this'll all be behind you.

Considering the unusually large number of houseguests tonight, one could be forgiven for assuming this was a big family gathering for the holidays. Indeed, it's getting to be late into November, just about that time of year. You think back to your own family's seasonal parties, only to frown as you realize you're having difficulty remembering what they were even like.

Fred, Carrol, Faz, and Cheeky are quietly assembled around the dining room table while a nervous Bonworth and Chichi scurry back and forth carrying plates and filling drinks, insisting that they'll get around to eating once everyone has been served. You suspect that both of them are still too wound up to sit still.

The living room television's blaring some benign comedy movie that nobody seems the least bit interested in watching, serving purely to be background noise in an already hectic atmosphere. Haddock and Bonbon are seated on the floor at the coffee table, the latter chattering away about cartoons in a one-sided conversation with you, Beanie, and Rackham.

Chichi gently places a tray of food in your lap, jarring you from your thoughts. You look up at her, then back down at the plate: hot dogs slathered in rich, homemade chili, with a side of fries, and a scoop of fruit salad. You stare at the dinner apathetically -- despite having eaten almost nothing all day as well as emptying the contents of your stomach last night, your appetite eludes you.

"Thanks, Chichi. Looks good," you manage.

"It's no big deal, I just wanted to throw something together quick so we could all eat," Chichi replies quietly, leaning over your shoulder. "What would you like to drink? Cola or root beer?"

You turn to answer her, only to be caught off-guard by how sharp her beak is as she's leaning in. Her mandibles gleam like polished blades in the light of the dining room chandelier. You haven't really gotten an up-close look before, and it wasn't an issue with the other birds you've grown familiar with; Cheeky's beak is round and dull, and Chiclet doesn't even have one -- but Chichi's glossy, razor-sharp beak looks like it could really do some serious damage.

For that matter, don't birds peck out eyes when they're threatened or panicked -- or was that just something Hitchcock came up with?

"Uh, Mike?"

You jerk back suddenly, realizing you're quivering. "Huh? No, no, -- um, I mean yes. Whatever -- whatever's fine," you sputter dismissively, unable to take your eyes off of her mouth.

Chichi casts a worried look over to Bonworth, who returns it with a sympathetic shake of his head; ultimately, the two of them decide on root beer for you.

You fumble with the tab on your can of soda for the longest time, nervously clawing at it in your shaky hands as if you were trying to pick a lock. Beanie watches you disinterestedly through one half-lidded eye before abruptly getting up in the middle of Bonbon's impassioned rant, carrying her plate over to one of the dining room chairs. It's plain as day she's purposefully avoiding you. You can't really blame her; right now, you'd avoid *yourself*, if it were somehow possible.

"Sooooo, Mike," Bonbon begins anew from her seat at the floor, "I was talking to Mango about your costume, and maybe you could--"

Bonworth places a heavy, clumsy paw on her shoulder. "Now really ain't a good time, Bonbon," he stage-whispers. "Let Mike have some time to himself, okay?"

The smaller rabbit's muzzle twitches out of annoyance. "Geez! I'm just trying to take his mind off of--"

"Not now," he repeats, a bit more firmly. "Just... be at peace, all right?"

Bonbon glares at him as she shoves her food aside in disgust. Slipping out from under Bonworth's grasp, she begins army-crawling under the coffee table to get closer to you.

"Damn it, Mike, don't pull a Beanie on me! *Talk to us here!*" she exasperatedly demands, springing up from underneath the table to hover directly in front of your face.

Gripping both of your shoulders, she pans slowly from your right to your left, scrutinizing your face with her vibrant green eyes. Feeling *thoroughly* attacked, you shove her away with a grunt, having had enough scans for one day -- mechanical, organic, or otherwise.

Bonworth's on her in seconds. "Good heavens, Bonbon! What is the *matter* with you? Are you tryin' to give him a *conniption fit*!?" He grabs her by her shirt collar, pulling her off of you. "That's it! You're goin' over here, where the grown-ups can keep an eye on you."

**"What?!"** But I *AM* an adult!" she whines as he half-drägs her over to the dining room table.

"Oh, you're very *decidedly* not acting like one," Carrol rigidly argues, directing her to sit between Fred and Faz. "Now eat your food like a good girl and quit hectoring that poor boy, or else I'm

calling your mother."

Bonbon slumps dejectedly in her chair as Bonworth places her plate in front of her. "You're kidding, Mrs. Rabbinson. A-aren't you?"

"Oh, you *know* she ain't," Bonworth mumbles.

"Yeah, that's Mom for you," Beanie testily chimes in, defiantly pinching off a piece of her hot dog bun. "Putting the 'mother' back in 'smothering'."

"Oh, don't either of you even *start* with me tonight," Carrol growls, voice shaking and eyes ablaze with righteous indignance. "You two don't **EVEN** know what manner of trouble you're in...!"

Realizing you're staring, you turn your attention away from the escalating scene at the dinner table.

Haddock's lost interest in eating his own dinner, and has since begun to construct what appears to be a boat out of fries. He systematically dunks each of his potato sticks in ketchup one at a time, using the condiment as a mortar for his project. Eventually, he runs out of ketchup, so he goes for another bottle to top up his makeshift glue. As he grapples with the glass bottle, it's apparently taking too long to pour for his liking so he begins to bang on the bottle's side with his hook while staring at the mouth from below.

After the third or fourth tap, the inevitable happens: ketchup erupts from the bottle at once like an upside-down tomato sauce volcano, drenching Haddock in a goopy red mess.

"He's at it again," Rackham groans, rolling his eye at the display as he gets up from the couch. "Hang on, I'll go get a towel."

"Nah, I got it. You okay, Haddock?" you venture nervously, pulling your napkin from your lap to help clean him up. Hearing his name, Haddock whips his head back to look at you, his muzzle splitting into a manic ear-to-ear grin. With a throaty cackle, he stands up and begins shambling towards you.

"Soorrrry, *l-la-laaad-ad*," he warbles, almost musically. Crimson fluid drips off of his face and paw, dribbling onto the carpet with each faltering step. His glazed eyes are seemingly focused in two different directions as he lurches forward to snatch the proffered cloth from your hand with his bloody hook. "*A-a-a-prr-ppreciate iiiit.*"

You set your untouched plate on the coffee table as he obliviously dabs the stains from his mouth with your napkin. Food no longer holds any appeal to you at all.

"Thank you for the lovely dinner, Chica," Carrol says. "Are you *sure* you don't want any help cleaning up?"

"I'm positive, doctor," Chichi replies with a tired smile as she and Fred begin gathering up the dinner dishes. "When is Mr. Rabbinson supposed to come pick you up?"

Reaching into the pocket of her skirt, Carrol checks the time on her smartphone. "Actually, I just missed a text from him. Looks like he finished up at the station a little while ago, so he's on his way here now. Shouldn't be but a few minutes."

As Beanie gets up from her chair to carry her plate off to the kitchen, she's stopped by both Bonworth and Carrol.

"Hey now, you're not going anywhere, lil bunny," Bonworth awkwardly chuckles as they fence her in. "Let us pamper you tonight."

"Look, it's over. I don't want to talk about it," Beanie irritably replies. "I don't need anyone 'pampering' me, I just want to get back to standard operating procedure. Or whatever the hell passes for it around here, anyway."

"Bonita, you're going home with us tonight and that's final," Carrol says firmly, looking up at Beanie as if daring her to be defiant. "Now that we're done with dinner, you and I are going to go into your room and pack up everything you'll need for at least a week's stay, maybe longer. Clothes, medication, the whole lot. I'm not letting you out of my sight for--"

"**Mom,**" Beanie interrupts, ice in her tone. "I'm staying here, and *that's* final."

"Absolutely not." Carrol firmly takes hold of her daughter's uninjured paw in a move that's clearly intended to look authoritative, but with her height disadvantage, it looks more like parent and child have swapped roles. "You need to be at home, with *family*, so that we can protect you."



Beanie slams her foot against the floor, sending Haddock scurrying and causing Chichi to jump backwards in alarm.

"This *is* my home! This *IS* my family!" Beanie shrieks. "**YOU** weren't anywhere to be found this morning while my ass was being dragged off to the -- the *torture chamber!*!"

"Don't you *dare* push this off on me, young lady! I had *no idea* you were even there because you've been *deliberately* keeping it from me!"

Bonworth turns quickly from his sister. "Mama, you know she didn't--"

"Don't you '*Mama*' me! I can't believe you *let* her! You couldn't even tell me your own sister was working in that deathtrap?" Carrol's breathing heavy, her tiny frame quaking as she glowers at her daughter. "And for *what*?! Some misguided sense of duty? Your father and I make *plenty* of money to support you both! All you had to do was ask!"

Beanie flinches at the sudden outburst, but quickly recovers. "I already *quit* the damn **job**, Mom! What more do you want from me?!"

"There's no reason for you *or* your brother to have ever worked at that hellhole of a restaurant in the first place, though! Was him losing his legs not enough for you?!" Carrol thrusts her paws in the air as if she's trying to appeal to the heavens themselves. "I'm just struggling to figure out what your thought process was this entire time!"

Coughing awkwardly, Fred excuses himself from the room, heading for the kitchen.

"Mama, *please*," Bonworth pleads, desperately trying to salvage the mood of the room. Beanie's eyes widen as she foists her plate into Chichi's trembling wings, pushing forward towards Carrol.

"You **REALLY** want to know what I think?!" Beanie's shaking with rage as she draws an infuriated, ragged breath. Her muzzle flares as she leans down into her mother's face, and you can see that what she's about to say is going to be impossible to take back as soon as it's out of her mouth. After all, you've had plenty of firsthand experience in *that* department recently.

Before you can stop her, however, Bonbon beats you to the punch, hopping to her feet and scrambling across the room.

"Whoa, *whoa!* Time out, everybody!" she yelps, leaping between them like she's taking a bullet. "Beanie, you're mad, you're upset. That's fine! Of course you are! Who wouldn't be? It's been a rough day! But let's just all take a chill pill, okay?"

Beanie stares at her, her shoulders heaving, ears pressed flat against the back of her head.

"You too, doc. We're all a little tired, and a *lot* emotional," Bonbon continues, snowballing her momentum. "How about we all just, y'know? Calm down! Before someone says something they don't mean. And c'mon, after everything we've all been through? Beanie's as much our family as she is yours! She's like the little sister I never had!"

The blue bunny is beaming with an earnest smile; for having been treated so childishly just moments ago, it's strange to see her playing the *adult* in this conflict.

"But you're younger than me, Bonbon," Beanie blinks, successfully distracted.

"By what, like two months?" Giggling to herself, Bonbon intentionally shrugs dismissively. "No need to split hairs."

Turning back to Carrol, Beanie's visibly forcing herself to calm down. "She's got a point, Mom. If these guys hadn't been there for me -- if Mike hadn't risked his life for me -- we wouldn't be having this conversation," she huffs. "Everything leading up to it is irrelevant."

"I still don't appreciate being deceived," Carrol argues, "and you *have* to know that I'm concerned for your wellbeing."

"But my life is here. My stuff is here, my friends are here." She gestures to the apartment in a sweeping motion. "I'd feel a lot more, I dunno... *secure* sleeping in my own house than in a bedroom I haven't stayed in since I moved out."

"Bonita..."

"I love you, Mom, and I always will. But despite what you, or, or what -- Bonworth thinks? I'm not a *little bunny* anymore. I'm a big rabbit now. If you and Daddy want to stay here for the night, that's

fine; you guys can sleep in my room and I'll crash on the couch or something. But I'm staying here."

"Bonnie, you're more than welcome to sleep with me in my room, if that's the case," Chichi timidly offers. "I don't mind."

Taking a deep breath, Carrol seems to gather her thoughts for a moment before finally admitting defeat. "No, that's -- that'll be all right. I, I'll respect your wishes."

Bonbon politely steps aside so that Beanie can tearfully approach her mother's petite, trembling form. Pulling Carrol into her embrace, Beanie squeezes her tightly. Mother and daughter hold each other in silence as Carrol quietly breathes out her stress and grief against her daughter's chest. For her own part, Beanie manages to keep it mostly together until Bonworth joins in, but soon enough all three of them are overcome with emotion.

Out of respect, the others superficially busy themselves with neatening up to give the Rabbinson family a moment to work through their feelings.

"And they said I wasn't capable of being an adult," Bonbon giggles as she retreats to observe them from a safe distance next to you. In spite of everything that's happened today, you indulge in a cathartic chuckle with her.

"Nice work defusing that one," you offer as she stoops to gather the dishes piled up on the coffee table.

"Thanks! I'm going to go help clean up real quick," she says before picking up your own plate.  
"Geez, Mike, you didn't eat anything at all. You weren't hungry?"

Looking down at the untouched chili dogs, you give her a grudging nod. "Yeah, I -- I don't know what's wrong with me today. Earlier I was hungry when I got up from my nap, but it passed really quickly. Sorry."

Bonbon shakes her head, stacking the plates to make them easier to carry. "No need to apologize," she says with a smile as she trots toward the kitchen.

As you watch her scamper off, something cold presses against your shoulder. Before you can turn to see who it is, an electronic voice box buzzes dully in your ear.

**"Hello, Mike."**

Chills run down your spine. Somehow, Jeremy Human or one of his cronies has followed you home to finish the job. Your wobbly legs nearly give way as you're slowly spun in place, fear shaking you to your core.

Time seems to slow to a halt. The Rabbins remain locked in embrace, caught up in their own little world. Bonbon and the others mindlessly continue on their way throughout the apartment, completely unaware of your plight. This is it, this is how you die -- in the arms of a giant bear looking at you with visible concern on his tattered face.

"Nice work today," Faz says approvingly, one finger still on his voicebox control.

"Man, you gave me a fright," you manage as a wave of relief crashes over you. You try to laugh it off, but instead your voice comes out sounding like a strangled squeak.

Strangely, Faz seems to completely understand. "Better?" he asks using his real voice; without the electrolarynx it doesn't carry far, but at the moment the room's quiet enough with everyone distracted that you can hear him.

"Much," you admit, shame and embarrassment thick in your tone. "I'm sorry, Faz. I heard your speaker and I just -- I didn't mean to--"

"It's no trouble," he says empathetically, lowering his weighty paw from your shoulder. "There's a reason I don't use it much."

With nothing else to say, you simply nod appreciatively as you sit back down. Faz graciously steps away to give you space, making a show of checking up on Haddock.

It's not until the dining room and kitchen are cleaned that the hug party finally disbands. Running contrary to Cheeky's earlier prediction, Carrol very reluctantly leaves both of her children in the care of their respective households, but not before giving Beanie a laundry list of "doctor's orders" and making everyone present promise to call if anything happens. Bonworth and Bonbon use Carrol's departure as their own excuse to leave for the night, collecting Faz and a dozing, ketchup-stained Haddock on their way out.

"You comin', Chica?" Bonworth asks halfway out the door.

"I'll be along later," she replies, side-eyeing you. "I'll stick it out here and keep an eye on things for a while. You don't mind, do you, Mikey?"

You give her a gentle shake of your head in reply as you force yourself to unwind.

"Good, because I was gonna stay even if you *did* raise a protest." She snuggles up next to you on the couch, enveloping you once more in a warm, comforting wing.

"Certainly glad to know I had a say in the matter," you weakly joke, nevertheless grateful for the company.

Puffing up her chest, she kicks her feet up on the coffee table much to Fred's visible chagrin. "Tough love, Mikey."

Trotting over with a blanket in tow, Beanie plops down at Cheeky's other side. "Sign me up for some of that tough love too, then. Sorry, Foxy, but you're sitting on the floor next to Chica. Hopefully you're not too put out."

"Y'know what? I'll live," Rackham coyly responds as he curls up beside Chichi's blanket nest, fighting to hide his grin. The smaller of the two chickens gives him an apologetic smile, completely heedless of the fact that he couldn't be happier as he lays his head on her lap.

"Awww, I wish I had my camera right now!" Bonbon lets out a frustrated moan, bouncing in place behind Bonworth. "Everyone looks so cute together!"

"Yep, sure is a comfy lookin' scene. Puts my own mind at ease, anyhow," Bonworth concurs. "All righty then. G'night everyone -- see you all first thing tomorrow mornin'. Be safe, lil-- sorry, *big* bunny."

"Night, Bonworth." Beanie's already half-asleep, a thin smile forming on her lips as she nestles into Cheeky's soft feathers for a much-earned nap.

Once he's seen everyone out, Fred takes a seat in his easy chair, surveying the living room with an approving gaze before turning the television set on.

"Anyone have a suggestion as to what we watch?" he asks cordially. You're mildly taken aback by how pleasant he's being, but it's certainly a welcome change from his usual gruff demeanor.

"How about something lighthearted and calm, Fred?" Cheeky proposes, a wingtip pressed to her chin. "No gory or rough stuff, I don't think these two could take it."

"Anything with robots or humans and I'm torching the place myself," Beanie mumbles, her voice muffled by a mouthful of feathers.

Scrolling through the listings, Fred nods. "History channel coming right up."

A couple of hours pass. The marathon documentary series on Malaysian basket weaving proves to be entirely far too much fun for Chichi and Rackham, both of whom have fallen asleep. Beanie's long since conked out as well, and even Fred himself looks like he's not long for consciousness. Only Cheeky remains fully alert alongside you, watching over you and Beanie like a mother bear defending her cubs -- or more accurately, a hen defending her nest.

For your part, you're still unable to sleep, but at least things have died down enough that you've stopped hallucinating for the moment.

Gentle, rhythmic knocking at the front door causes Fred to snap to. "Hmmm? Yes, of course," he says, acting as if he wasn't nodding off. "Nobody move, I'm on it."

On the doorstep is a bright-eyed and very familiar white fox, bundled up in an ornate, heavy coat and a floral-pattern kimono.

Mangle titters on seeing Fred. "Oh, Mr. Fazbear! So good to see you!"

"Good evening," he nods, politely. "I assume you're here for--"

"*There* you are," Mangle announces cheerfully, trotting past Fred and into the room with a wicker basket loaded with lotions, fragrances, towels, and other spa supplies. "How are you, Foxy?"

Opening his eye, Rackham bolts up mid-snore. "Zzznnor-- huh?! Wha -- what?!"

"Oh, not you, dear," Mangle whispers upon realizing half the room's asleep, ignoring Rackham and turning to you. "Mr. Fazbear called earlier and informed Chica that you were involved in some, ah, *unsavory* business downtown today? What happened? Are you all right?"

"Hey, Mangle. I've been... better," you quietly admit, standing up to greet your roommate. The fashionista fox engulfs you in a tight hug, clearly uninformed about your rib damage -- you sharply inhale, but grin and bear it just the same knowing how thin-skinned Mangle can be. "I'll fill you guys in later. How's everything back h-- back at the apartment?"

"Oh, we're all just fine," Mangle replies, brandishing a row of gleaming teeth at your forehead causing you to instinctively pull away. "Bonnie and April are keeping us on our toes, but it's nothing we can't manage."

"April?" Fred chimes in curiously. "Would that be the name of the new tenant that put Mike out?"

"Inadvertently, but yes -- she's a darling," Mangle replies, stopping to shake Fred's paw. "Thank you again for hosting him for us on such short notice, Mr. Fazbear."

"Don't worry about it. What brings you by, Foxglove? It's rare to see you out and about."

*Foxglove?*

You raise a curious eyebrow at Mangle, who gives you a casual wink in return. "I came by to repay a debt of gratitude I owed Michael. He's been kind enough to assist me with my entrepreneurial endeavors."

"Oh, I see," the business bear says, nodding. "How helpful of him."

Rummaging through the basket, Mangle produces a pumice stone and a bottle of scented lotion. "He dropped by yesterday afternoon at lunchtime to put in a request for a favor. I'm told, Ms. Cheeky, that you're a girl in need of a therapeutic massage. Is there somewhere private we could tend to your needs?"

"What, *me*?" Cheeky cocks her head at you. "Was this the surprise you had in mind, Mike?"

"Hey, you said 'tired' and 'achy', didn't you? Don't knock it until you've tried it," you respond. "I got an unexpected 'therapeutic massage' myself, and after the initial shock wore off, I felt better than I have in years."

"I told you, Mike; healing paws," Mangle beams. "I may not look it, dear, but I'm every bit a licensed massage therapist."

"I'll take your word for it," Cheeky says with a dubious smirk. "I'm afraid tonight's bad timing, though, Foxglove."

Mangle's lower lip juts out in frustration. "How disappointing. When *would* work for you?"

"Cheeky, go on," you insist, nudging the hen. "We're all right, really."

Sighing, Cheeky looks you over in dismay. "You know you're not, Mike. Beanie's still a mess and it took you an hour just to stop shaking."

"Wait -- he's been *shaking*?" Mangle gasps, face falling. "What exactly happened today?"

"*Jeremy Human* happened," Cheeky answers bluntly.

Mangle's tail stiffens like it's been pressed flat on an ironing board. Eyes wide, the snow-white fox lets out a heavy sigh.

"I see."

"Really, Cheeky, I'd feel better if you let Mangle take care of you." Drawing a deep breath, you nod to Mangle. "Cheeky suffers from some -- uh, nerve damage? So if you could please account for that...?"

"Certainly," Mangle purrs. "Come along, honey. I promise you'll feel like a new hatchling when it's all said and done."

Clearly torn, Cheeky reluctantly decides to disembark for her massage date, if only to avoid offending you and Mangle. Standing up from the couch, she gently rearranges the pillows underneath Beanie to make the rabbit a little more comfortable before heading towards the door.

"I'll be back later," Cheeky insists as she toddles out behind your fashionista roommate. "Don't you guys go running off on me."

"No you won't," you snort as you hold the door open for her. "You'll be out like a light, trust me. Go on, Cheeky, you deserve a reprieve too."

"Just gotta be the most selfless little shit, don't you, Mike." She exhales heavily through her beak.  
"Well, thank you. I appreciate it."

As you let Cheeky and Mangle out, a muted cough draws your attention on your return to the living room. At the end of the west hall near the door to Fred's office stands Goldie. He gives you a polite smile and a wave, signaling to you that he'd like your attention. You turn back to the living room where Chichi, Rackham and Beanie are all still slumbering. Fred nods to you, so with a shrug, you head down the hall to see what Goldie needs.

"Hey, Goldie," you reply by way of greeting as you limp into Fred's workspace. "What's up?"

"You looked like you could use a 'reprieve' of your own," Goldie replies as he sits down at Fred's desk, a photo in one of his paws.

Warily, you take a seat on the futon across from him. "Today's been a long day. For everyone."

"And how about you?" Goldie replaces the polaroid on the corkboard before turning back to you.  
"How are *you* feeling, Mike?"

"Well, the doctor -- uh, Carroll... she says my ribs are probably fractured. She recommended that I take it easy and she'll get me some painkillers--"

"That's not quite what I meant," Goldie pointedly interrupts. "You said yourself to Chica that your head's not in a good place right now. What do you mean?"

"Oh, you overheard that, huh." *Chica*? You could have sworn you told Cheeky that, not Chichi.

Smiling, he clasps his paws carefully as you lean against the futon's backrest. "Carroll's right about one thing -- you *are* going into shock."

"Okay, now I know you've been eavesdropping," you grumble, cheeks flushing with embarrassment. "She said that while we were in Fred's room."

"And I told you, I stay in the back," Goldie replies innocently. "Besides, the walls are thin. You understand."

You let out a heavy sigh. "I guess. To be honest with you, Goldie? Today's the worst I've felt in my entire life."

The dandelion-furred bear gives you a thin smile as he leans forward. "I can tell. You're spiraling, Mike."

You grimace at his matter-of-fact assessment of your psyche. You're not sure what makes him so qualified to make a snap judgment about someone he barely even knows, but the way he says it -- the way he lays it out so plainly, makes him seem almost authoritative.

"Is it that obvious?"

"Yes, and it's going to get a lot worse before it gets better. You need to get it off your chest before it gets to be too much for you."

Closing your eyes, you decide to be honest with him. "You're right. I've been seeing things all day ever since we got home -- little things I haven't noticed that are just, uh, getting to me. I'm like... ninety percent sure I've been hallucinating."

"Oh, that's not all that unusual," Goldie agrees amiably -- almost too amiably, considering the somber tone of your conversation. "You've just had a traumatic ordeal, and on top of that, you're displaced from home. I understand why you'd feel... discomfited."

"I take it you've seen your fair share of near-death experiences, then?" you return, sounding more caustic than you intend. If he notices, he pays it no mind.

"Tomorrow is another day, Mike," he replies, pushing back from the desk. "Rest up, so that you can get on with the mending process."

He politely excuses himself from Fred's study, retreating out the eastern doorway. You defiantly follow him out into the hall, where he lingers halfway, just long enough to give his brother an affable wave. Fred waves back, and Goldie crosses to the back of the apartment, retiring to his bedroom. He catches your eye and offers one last smile before closing the door behind himself.

Truthfully, you're far too high-strung to be tired, especially now that Cheeky's gone for the night, but you're also just tormented enough that you should probably heed his advice anyway. Even though you don't feel like it, you decide to return to your futon. Fluffing your pillow, you gently ease down onto your back so that you don't aggravate your injuries until Carrol can get you some painkillers.

Might as well get some sleep.

...or not.

Hours have passed, and while everyone's gone their separate ways for the night (indeed, Cheeky is probably still passed out upstairs after Mangle working that massage magic), you're no closer to sleep now than you were when you laid your head on your pillow. Your decision to not eat dinner has finally come back to haunt you; your stomach growls in protest of your incidental hunger strike.

Nothing for it. You've simply got to go hunt down a snack in the kitchen.

Checking the clock, it's only a quarter until midnight. You quietly scurry down the hall towards the now-empty common area, taking care to not make too much noise as you move past Goldie's bedroom. It's so dark with all the lights out that you nearly bang your injured leg against the coffee table as you cut across the floor; fortunately, you catch yourself just in the nick of time, saving yourself further pain.

Chichi's kitchen is well-stocked as always, but you're not in the market for a gourmet meal. Some chips or a piece of fruit will more than meet your needs. Hopefully, getting something on your stomach will help you get back to bed; your sleeping schedule's been chaotic ever since your first trip out to Jeremy's. Rummaging around in the pantry, you spot a box full of individually-packaged cheese crackers. Hoping nobody will miss them, you help yourself to a couple packages before turning to the refrigerator for something cold to drink.

Despite not wanting to gorge yourself, you're unable to resist the call of some delicious-looking applesauce in the middle of the fridge. You pour a generous amount into a bowl, then fill a glass with cold milk to wash everything down with. Hurriedly carrying your ill-gotten gains back to your room, you click the overhead light on and take a seat at Fred's desk.

The ice-cold applesauce and milk soothe your raw throat, and while the cheese crackers are nothing special, you're so hungry you'd eat *shoe leather* if it filled you up. Vanquishing the snacks in record time, you contentedly lean back in the rolling desk chair.

The sound of softly-whirring machinery catches your ear; Fred's computer idly hums away in front of you. You can't remember the last time you've had a clean shot at browsing the internet or playing a computer game. You feel around on the monitor for the power switch before realizing you only have to shake the mouse to wake it from standby mode. Maybe you can find something entertaining to tire yourself out with -- surely Rackham has some kind of card game loaded onto this machine, considering his poker obsession, right?

The computer wakes from its sleep, and a login screen appears with portrait icons and usernames for each of the apartment's residents: "01\_freddyfazbear", "02\_bonnie", "03\_chica", and "04\_foxy".

You can't help but wonder if that's representative of the house's pecking order too. Poor Rackham.

All four user accounts are password-protected -- a tiny padlock icon rests over them. You're half-tempted to try guessing their passwords for fun, but knowing how stern Fred can be, you don't want to upset him by accidentally setting off any kind of silent alarm or computer security measure. With a huff, you go to shut the monitor off, but as you reach for the switch, the screen scrolls over to the right revealing a familiar face and an equally familiar name.

Directly underneath a photograph of you is "05\_mikeschmidt".

Curiosity ignited, you squint at the screen, rubbing your eyes to make sure you're reading it correctly. Fred must have set you up a user account and just forgot to tell you about it. Intrigued, you move the mouse over to click on your portrait. It's not password protected unlike the other accounts, and so you're able to log in easily.

The display goes dim as the hard drive cranks away in the quiet of the night. Based on the faded yellow case and the clunky monitor, this is clearly a much older model. You can practically count the individual pixels on the display once it enters desktop mode. A plain, sky-blue background

greets you, three icons lined up in a uniform column on the upper left of the screen. One's a globe, the second a trash can, and the last an envelope.

You might not be familiar with the operating system, but those icons seem universal enough.

You click on the globe to load the web browser; after a few seconds, an error screen labeled "Connection not available" pops up. Does this thing *really* use dial-up? With a grimace, you close the browser to instead search around for some games, but after a few minutes of snooping through the file menus, there don't appear to be any pre-loaded. Of course -- whatever game software the machine has would probably be on the other user accounts, not yours.

Frustrated, you sit back in the office chair. No games, no 'net. The trash can doesn't have any files in it, so you click on the envelope out of boredom. Maybe you can at least set up a personal e-mail account for later use in case you need one.

The mail program takes half a minute to load before greeting you with a prompt.

[Check mail?]

Rolling your eyes, you click "Yes", knowing full well that not even having an account means you definitely won't have any mail. To your surprise, however, one brand new message appears in your inbox. You blink for a second, not quite believing its existence. Seems Fred really went the extra mile. With a shrug, you skim the subject line. It's probably spam anyway.

To: Mike Schmidt  
Re: Employment Opportunity  
From: Fazbear Entertainment  
Date: 11-07-XX

"Employment...?" you mutter, eyes lighting up as you read the sender's name. It's from Fred, apparently -- or his business, anyway. His last name *is* Fazbear, after all. Is he trying to get you a job?

"Hopefully not at Jeremy's," you shiver as you cautiously open the message.

Mr. Mike Schmidt,

Thank you for your interest in Freddy Fazbear's Pizza, a Fazbear Entertainment-owned and operated subsidiary.

We've received your application and are able to inform you we have an opening available.

We believe this opportunity would be a perfect match given your skillset of: [NONE]

"Asshole," you mutter with narrowed eyes. And here you were starting to think you were getting along with him. If this is a joke, it's a cruel one.

Effective midnight tonight, you will be installed in the role of: [NIGHT SECURITY DETAIL]

Your non-negotiable salary will be: [\$120.00] per week, made payable via cashier's check.

Your effective start date is: [TONIGHT] at [MIDNIGHT] hours and [NOW] minutes.  
Please dress appropriately. On-site training will be available either in-person or via pre-recorded  
phone message.  
(Whichever is more cost-effective.)

There is no need to reply to this automated message.

Remember to smile,  
Freddy Fazbear's Pizza, LLC  
A Fazbear Entertainment Subsidiary

You lean back in your chair. "Freddy Fazbear's Pizza?" you wonder aloud. Is he doing some kind of startup business? The date on the e-mail has already come and gone -- in fact, it seems to have been sent before you ever even arrived at this apartment. How would Fred have known about you?

As you're mulling it over, the grandfather clock out in the west hallway begins to chime; you'd recognize the infamous Westminster Quarters anywhere. Without warning, the computer screen flickers and wavers as if the monitor has been degaussed. After the picture resets, you're greeted with a simple black screen featuring a blinking battery icon in the lower left corner and a grid-styled map layout in the right.

"No," you mumble, feeling all at once like something's just come loose inside your chest. "No, no -- I know this. What is this?"

You reach up to run your hands through your hair, only for your fingers to bump into something foreign. Taking a hold of the object, you realize you've been wearing a hat this entire time. Yanking it off your skull, you examine it under the dingy overhead bulb. It's a peaked cap like the kind a police officer might wear, only dark green in color, with the word *SECURITY* embroidered across its front.

"What the shit," you breathe before realization strikes you. You hurl it away from yourself as if you've been bitten by a snake. "No, this isn't right! What's -- what the *hell*'s going on?!"

You're no longer in Fred's familiar study, but rather a cold, drab office. The carpet's gone, replaced with a checkerboard-pattern tiled floor. Fred's desk is no longer present; in its place is an oily black table covered in cobwebs and disused CCTV monitors. The corkboard photo collection is mysteriously absent, swapped out for a collage of faded coloring-book pages and childish stick-figure drawings. If you didn't know better, you'd assume Haddock and Bonnibel had a field day with a box of crayons.

"Where am I?" you shout out into the void, standing up from your office chair.

As if in answer to your question, the desk phone lights up. Turning to look at it, you hesitate to pick up the handset. After a mere two and a half rings, however, it decides you don't get a say in the matter, answering itself instead. A familiar, pleasant voice with an inoffensive midwestern accent comes on over the speakerphone option.

*"Hello? Hello? Uh, I wanted to record a message for you--"*

You waste no time in ripping the offending phone off of the desk, hurling it out of the office. It disintegrates on impact with the east hallway wall, shattering into thousands of fragments across the black-and-white tile.

"**No!**" you firmly insist, clutching your achy ribs as you collapse in the desk chair. "No, *hell no*. I'm not playing this game -- not ever again!"

A dark, haunting laugh echoes out through the pizzeria in response.

"You **know** that counts as destruction of company property, don't you, **Mr. Schmidt?**" a throaty, baritone voice asks through what sounds like an electronic speaker.

Your heart's in your throat as you death-grip the table. Looking out the east-side doorway, you catch sight of a pair of glowing white pinprick eyes observing you from the darkness. A bulky figure with broad shoulders, a barrel chest, and a high silk hat mounted atop its head watches you from behind the glass window.

"That'll be coming out of your livelihood, **one way or another.**"



# The Real Thing

## Chapter Summary

That golden moment.



Lurching across the desk, you nearly put your fist through the wall punching the "door close" button in an effort to keep that *thing* from making its way inside. An industrial metal shutter slams ceiling to floor with a resounding clang, sealing off the right side of the room just in the nick of time.

"**Go! Get out!**" you growl through the window at the bulky bear's silhouette. He loiters rebelliously outside, eyes faintly glowing in the inky blackness. You wish you had something to throw at his

head, but the broken displays are too heavy to lift and you've run fresh out of desk phones. "I said leave!"

"You're making this more difficult than it has to be, Schmidt," he sternly reprimands. "Get out here, and we'll go over your behavior while we get you fitted for your new uniform."

Somehow, you already know exactly what "new uniform" really entails: a gruesome end after being shoved inside a disused mascot costume loaded down with razor-sharp mechanical components. Crossbeams, wires, and electronic devices that'll gouge out your eyeballs and teeth. Fine for an animatronic performer, certain death for any human unfortunate enough to be forced into one.

Panting, you wildly search the room for anything you can use to chase off your lurking foe, but all you're able to find is a coffee mug underneath the table. You anxiously pluck it from the ground, opening the right side door just long enough to hurl it as hard as you can at him. Unfortunately, due to the pain in your chest, your arm seizes up and you airball your toss. The mug sails over his head to land somewhere out in the dining room with a dissatisfying thump.

"**Seriously?**" he mutters, seemingly awed at your brazenness.

Leaning back in your chair, you grab fistfuls of your hair in a delirious frenzy. There isn't *anything* you can do. Your resources are nil -- no weapons, no tools. All that's keeping the monster outside at bay is a rickety metal door and a window that you desperately hope is at least reinforced glass. You reach for the light switch on the wall, pressing it much more gently than you did to shut the door. Even with the flickery bulb illuminating the corridor, you can't see him, but you know he's still out there.

He'll come back. He always does.

You can't risk opening the door again. It was a stupid decision the first time, and it only worked because you caught him off guard. He's not generous enough to give you a second chance. The power usage meter on the desktop is fluctuating wildly; you can't even read the numbers, they're draining so fast. You douse the lights to alleviate some of the burden on the system. With the door closed, it's not like lighting the hallway does you much good anyway.

"Shit," you hiss, taking a second to steady your breathing. As long as you keep an eye on the other side of the office, nothing's coming in through that door. They can't move when you're watching them, right? It's one of their rules.

And they always, *always* follow their damn rules.

A sound like nails dragging down a chalkboard floods your ears. "**Hi, Mr. Fazbear!**" a girlish voice shrieks from behind you. "Is the night guard hiding in there **again?**"

You glance up at the window and wish you hadn't. Snapping against the dark glass is a plastic orange beak, stuffed with not one but *two* full sets of gleaming teeth. Mustard-colored metal feathers swipe against the window, leaving scratches in the glass's polished surface.

"Yay! There he is! **I see him!**"

Of course they know you're in here. You're not trying to hide, you're trying to stall for time. Wait the clock out, sit and survive. No more ballsy moves at this point.

You pull the camera screen closer to your face as if it'll somehow protect you. West hall's clear, nothing in the corner outside your office. You change views to the backstage and nearly fall out of your chair. Soulless eye sockets mounted in a lavender skull gaze at you through the security feed. Long, floppy purple ears twitch as a pair of LED lights focus on you from the other side of the camera.

"**Not long now**, Mike," the rabbit croons seductively into the camera's microphone before killing the feed.

Shoving away from the computer screen in hysteria, you hit the west side lights again, half-expecting her to have teleported all the way across the pizzeria.

Nothing. Yet.

"*Gonna make it,*" you breathe, desperately trying to convince yourself. It's not working. The way these doors work, electricity's required just to hold them shut. It doesn't make sense, yet it feels like the most obvious thing in the world. With the extra power drain from the door, you can only use the camera in short bursts; you're already severely handicapped on your power allotment, and you've **got** to conserve power. If the lights go out, it's all over. Steeling your nerves, you force yourself to go back to browsing the feeds again.

The only occupants of the backstage are severed costume heads and spare parts; the rabbit that was in the room used the disabled camera as a distraction to relocate. You quickly mash buttons on the keyboard trying to track her down. There's three of them in all, right? You know where two are, you've just got to keep tabs on the last one and you're set.

Supply closet's empty. Dining room's a bust, show stage is a ghost town. In your hurry to track down the last of your would-be animatronic tormentors, you scroll one screen too far.

Situated in the middle of the monitor's static-filled display is a round, elevated stage. Curtains made of bright purple cloth embroidered with silver stars hang in a semicircle over the empty platform. You squint at the screen, trying to place where you've seen that fabric pattern before. Unfortunately you don't have the time to study it in detail right now. You tap one of the arrow keys to change feeds.

Switching to the west hallway, you manage to catch a glimpse of a rusty red nightmare hauling ass down the corridor, jaw flapping and arms flailing in a mad dash to get to your room. The thing's got to be doing close to sixty. Crying out in alarm, you jump up from your chair and throw yourself across the office at the other door, only barely managing to slam it in the face of the rabid, fox-shaped monster. It unleashes a pained wail as it crashes into the door's surface, and something metallic begins banging on the side of the frame in protest of your decision.

"**Aaaaarrrrgghhh!** Schmidt, ye ruined it all!"

A single amber eye presses against the glass, looking in at you. The pirate fox -- you can't believe you forgot about him.

"Nice job, **idiot**," the rabbit drones from behind him, her already low voice nearly muted by the door. "I almost had him."

"Ye didn't have **anything**, lass! You were so focused on his--"

There's a muffled whud from the other side of the wall. "Shut the **hell** up, Foxy."

You wheeze, slumping to the tiled floor. You're surrounded on all sides. There's no reason to even look at the computer's power meter -- you know that leaving both doors shut is suicide, and *they* seem to know it as well. You're faintly aware of a distant, humming noise, like TV snow. It seems to be growing louder.

"Listen up, **Schmidt**. Here's the deal," the bear calls out. His authoritative presence silences the squabbling on the other side of your office. "We've had it up to **here** with your insubordination. If you come out now of your own free will, instead of making us drag you out, it'll be **mostly** painless. Or you can wait out the last of your power, and at that point **all bets are off**."

Violet eyes peer in through the east window. "**Awwwww!!** Won't you have a **little** mercy on him, Freddy?"



"It's business, Chica. Don't get involved."

Amid the growing din of static, the banging sound continues against the left door, causing you to jump in place.

"Boy, **that's** showing him, Foxy. You just keep beating your hook into a stump there," the rabbit continues, voice box ruminating with disgust.

"Leave me alone!" Dragging your hands down your face, you stifle a sob. Fear grips your core, choking out any hope you might have left, and as the sounds of static build to a terrible roar around you, you struggle to get the words out. "I'll leave! I promise, I'll leave, I'll *never* come back! I'll find somewhere new -- just let me go!"

All at once there's a deafening electric *pop*, and the static noise drops back to a haunting, empty quiet. Only the scraping shuffle of moving steel and humming servos punctuate the still, until a deep voice returns to break the silence.

"Go? Go *where*, Mike?" Freddy Fazbear asks, seemingly dumbfounded. As if he's oblivious to the agony you're in. "Calm down, nobody's asking you to leave!"

"Yeah, we're not about to let you walk out of here in the condition you're in!" Chica adds.

Of course they won't. You already know what they're planning to do to you.

Trying not to vomit from primal terror, you weigh your options and none of them look viable. Your only chance out is to throw one of the doors open and run for everything you're worth towards the pizza parlor's entrance. West side's not an option -- the fox is faster than you'll ever be. You've got to go out the east door and hope that side's slow enough to react that you can duck and weave past them.

Standing up, you take a deep breath in preparation. Freddy peers in at you through the window, trying to figure out what you're up to.

"Looks like he's coming around," he comments idly. "Mike, are you--"

You pound the door control, sending the metal shutter back into the office ceiling with a whoosh. Before it's even finished lifting, you slide underneath it and shoulder bash the first thing in your way. There's a surprised cry of pain as something soft and feathery collides with you, but you shake whatever it was off and rocket down the hall towards the entrance.

"Ooof! Mike, *why*!?"

Foxy calls out from the other side of the office. "Chica! Are you okay?!"

"Forget me, just stop him before he hurts himself!" she hollers back.

Thirty feet from the entrance. You can do this. Run as fast as you can out of here. No turning back.

"Foxy, you *dumbass!* Hurry!" Bonnie screeches.

Twenty feet. Don't look back, just run. Run and forget.

"Damn it, lass, I'm trying! He's *really* fast for a fat guy!"

Something swipes at your shirt, but just barely misses you.

Ten feet.

"Mike, slow down!"

The exit! You're home free! You reach for the handle, yanking it open -- only for it to catch on the chain latch. Chills run down your spine -- you don't have time to close it, unlatch it, *and* reopen it! Horrified, you slowly turn in place to see the group of shadows have already cornered you.

Long ears.

Broad shoulders.

Sharp teeth.

Glowing eyes.

Hinged jaws.

Torn fabric.

Exposed beams.  
Frayed wires.



"Go easy on him, Fred," Bonnie the bunny grins, twirling a claw around her ribbon bowtie as she observes from a distance. "Try to leave him in good condition."

Chica the chicken spreads her iron wings wide to prevent your escape, smiling. "We're just trying to help. It'll all be over soon, I promise."

"You're a real piece of work, Mike, you know that?" Foxy the pirate fox adds with a scowl as he hooks you by your collar.

Freddy Fazbear stomps forward past the other mascots, the hydraulic motors in his stocky legs whirring as he clanks across the tiled floor for you. He grips both of your shoulders in his burly mitts as Foxy shoves you into the center of their group, his decrepit face mere inches from your own. You can feel their hot breath on your neck as they swarm you like locusts, the stench of pizza grease and machine oil hanging in the air like a poison cloud.

"Relax, Mike. Calm down, there's no reason to be afraid," Freddy ominously intones, blue eyes pulsing in time to a haunting music box melody as he pulls you close.

**"It's me."**

You scream.

You scream even as the robots grab you, pulling you away from the exit.  
You scream even as they carry you kicking and thrashing through the entire length of the dark pizzeria.

You scream even as they pin you to the table in the back, holding your arms and legs down while preparing your grave.

You shriek and wail and cry out, tears flowing in rivulets down your face. You jerk and spasm and twist and lurch and seize up, throwing your full weight against your captors in defiance. They squeeze you tightly enough to cut off the circulation to your limbs, but you don't stop struggling.

You scream bloody murder, because that's exactly what this is.

It's murder.

*Tonight's the night you die.*

**"MIKE!!"**

Fred looks down at you, an uncharacteristic fear in his blue eyes as he holds your struggling frame tight against the bed.

*Fred?* you try to ask, but no sound comes out of your mouth. You attempt again with a bit more effort, managing to finally squeak his name out. "Fred?"

"Mike," he repeats much more calmly, loosening his grip on you just enough to give you breathing room. "If I *let you go*, are you going to pull another stunt like that again?"

"Stunt?" you croak, immediately going limp against his grip. "Wh-what stunt? What're you...?"

You hear him sigh as he slowly sits down on the mattress beside you. You try to sit up, but he places a firm paw on your chest, applying enough pressure to your damaged ribcage to make you whimper.

"*Gentle*, Mr. Fazbear," Chichi says from somewhere off to the side of the room. There's something wrong with her -- she sounds... tired? No, that's not the right word. Dizzy, maybe? "He's still, *um...* fractured...? Remember?"

"I know, Chica," Fred stolidly agrees. "I'm just trying to keep him from clobbering you again."

*Clobbering?*

You reach a hand to your head to wipe some of the fluid out of your eyes and nose, but a rough paw grabs it and jerks it back.

"Foxy, let him go!" Chichi insists. "He's okay now, I think. It... it was just a bad dream. Right, Mike?"

Tilting your head, you catch sight of Rackham standing above you, glaring furiously at you. "Dream?" you manage to choke out. "I -- wh--"

"Must have been a **hell** of a bad dream!" he snarls as he reluctantly lets you free. "You *bowled over* Chica in your sprint to the front door. Where were you off to in such a hurry, you asshole?!"

"Foxy, shut your mouth," a new voice groans from the doorway. Must be Beanie -- nobody else in this house could pack that much vitriol into a sentence. "He might be an idiot, but you don't know what we've been through."

"That's right. Don't hold it against him," Chichi shakily adds. "Let's... just, everyone just calm down, okay?"

Once more you attempt to shift your weight to a sitting position, and this time both Fred and Rackham ease off of you enough so that you can. Dazed, you look around the room, trying to regain your bearings -- you're woozy, and your face is covered in tears, sweat, and snot. You catch a glimpse of yourself in the mirror on Fred's dresser, and your heart sinks.

Whoever the trembling, nerve-wracked, red-eyed man is staring back at you, he's not the Mike Schmidt you know.

"Am -- am I, um," you stutter, disoriented and at a complete loss for rational thought. "My, uh -- what, what happened?"

"You went ballistic," Fred says plainly. "We heard you thumping around in your room, so we went to check on you. I thought you might have fallen out of bed and hurt yourself."

Chichi steps around in front of you, Rackham following her guardedly. He's stone-faced, defying you to try something. The second you turn to focus on Chichi, you realize why: a crimson streak runs from the top of her head down the side of her face, staining her feathers.

"*Chichi?*" you gasp. "What happened to you?!"

"You knocked her into the coffee table in your mad dash is what *happened!*" Rackham barks, teeth bared and good eye bulging. "You damn near split her head open!"

"Foxy, it was *clearly*, um... an accident," Chichi softly pleads as Beanie dabs at her face with a wet towel. "You didn't... I know you didn't mean it, Mike."

"Of c-course not!" you sniffle, wiping your face with the back of your sleeve. Your throat's still hoarse, it's all you can do to get the words out. "I'm so sorry, Chichi. I swear I'd never hurt you on purpose."

At her selfless urging, Rackham backs off, letting you off the bed and onto your feet. He nevertheless remains positioned between her and you, growling quietly. You stumble forward, wincing in pain as your leg protests your weight.

"Come on, let's take this out into the living room," Fred declares, motioning everyone out of his room. "Mike, are you on any medication? Is there anything I need to get you?"

You shake your head. "Carrol's starting me on some, um -- some painkillers tomorrow. Nothing else."

He seems unconvinced, but nods anyway as your group disbands from his bedroom. You follow them out into the common area, taking a seat on the couch. Rackham helps Chichi into her nest of piled blankets while Beanie wraps a bandage around her forehead.

"Whole place has gone to shit in just two days," Beanie dryly comments. It sounds like an attempt at levity, but there's no humor in her tone. "Pretty soon the entire house is going to look like an infirmary."

Fred declines to sit with the others, instead standing in front of you, arms folded in what he likely assumes is a non-intimidating manner. "So Mike, why don't you fill us in on what happened back there?"

You take a deep breath, trying to gather your thoughts. "I... had a nightmare," you begin. You're not quite sure that's the best wording for it, but you don't know how else to define the surreal experience you just endured.

"No shit. That much was obvious," Rackham sputters incredulously. Without warning, Fred whirls and grips his collar, tugging him away from Chichi's side.

**"Enough,"** Fred booms, breathing heavily as Rackham struggles in his chokehold. Fred glares daggers down at Rackham, and the fox instantly wilts under the intimidation of his bloodshot gaze.

"Sorry, Fred!" Rackham wheezes. "I'm -- I was just... *nnggh!* I'm just trying to--"

"Please, Foxy, we *all* know what you're trying to do," Beanie remarks acerbically as Fred deposits Rackham on the seat opposite your own.

"Oww -- wait, we do? What?" Chichi grimaces, pressing a wing to her head.

"Shh," Beanie replies. "I'm gonna go get some aspirin for you."

"Me too," you groan, holding your cramping leg. "Please?"

Beanie nods as she heads to the kitchen. "Yeah, absolutely. Though I doubt it's gonna help much in your case, but anything's better than nothing."

"All right, Mike. You were saying something about a nightmare?" Fred asks, still keeping an eye on Rackham. The fox is suitably cowed, looking as skittish as Haddock would in the middle of a thunderstorm.

"Um, bad -- I think I was just, after today -- you guys were in it, some robots, uh -- you know?" You wave your arms uselessly; you can't even think clearly enough to formulate a proper sentence.

"...not really, no," he replies carefully, his expression earnest and calm. Despite everything that's happened, you can tell Fred really wants to be accommodating. "In your own time, Mike."

Beanie returns with a pill bottle, doling out a round of over-the-counter pain tablets to you and Chichi before taking a pair for herself. You swallow yours dry, grimacing -- the unpleasant aftertaste of the cheese crackers lingers in your mouth from your earlier snack, and it's now mixed with the medication as well.

"I don't really remember much," you lie. Oh, you remember plenty -- being chased through an awful, deadly pizzeria that was somehow even worse than the one you were *actually* in today.

Freddy Fazbear's Pizza.

The name alone feels hauntingly familiar, but you have no idea why. Everyone from this household was there -- in robot form, like strange counterparts to the animatronics at Jeremy Human's. They were trying to shove you into a lethal robot costume, right?

You cast a tired eye over your housemates, studying their alien physiology. The parallels to the ones that were in your nightmare are striking -- even though these people are made of fur and flesh, you can still see the resemblance to the third-rate animal mascots that have been tormenting you in your hallucinations.

"I was at a restaurant like Jeremy's, and some of my friends had been turned into robots." That's close enough to the truth; can't have them thinking you've lost your mind. "And they were trying to turn me into one too."

Beanie's frown lessens as she downs her own pills. "After today, I'd say that's a pretty reasonable nightmare to have," she agrees sympathetically.

"So were you sleepwalking, then?" Fred interjects softly. "Do you have a history of it?"

"Not that I know of. I guess today really messed me up, huh," you chuckle mirthlessly. "That's got to be what it was; I was just trying to get away to safety. A-again, Chichi, I'm -- I'm really sorry."

She takes a deep breath, puffing up her feathery chest before offering you a tearful smile. "At least nobody's seriously hurt. I can handle a little bump on the noggin."

Rackham scratches his forearm idly. "I guess we all have bad days," he murmurs, raising his hook for emphasis. "On that much, you and I can agree, Mike."

"Tomorrow is another day," you agree, echoing Goldie's sentiment from earlier as you stand up. "Sorry for all the trou--"

"Sorry -- *what* did you just say?" Fred rumbles, moving in uncomfortably close.

"I s-said 'tomorrow is another day'?" you cluelessly return, unnerved by his sudden change in behavior.

"Where, uh... where did you hear that, Mike?" Beanie carefully asks, folding her arms around herself as she approaches you from behind Fred. The two of them exchange unreadable expressions, and instantly you know something's up.

"Is that a trick question?" Wincing, you try to retreat, only to back into the couch -- you're pinned. Raising both hands, you respectfully attempt to signal your discomfort. "It's just a saying, isn't it?"

"No. No, of course you're right." Exhaling softly, Fred nods to Beanie as they both move out of your personal space. "Sorry, Mike. It's been -- well, you know."

"Yeah, I do," you concur, suddenly feeling claustrophobic. You quickly move away from the couch, putting some distance between you and everyone else.

"All right, well -- this has all been a riot, but I think I'm going to go crash now." Rackham stands up, yawning and stretching in an almost exaggerated manner as he begins to trot towards his cove. "Have a good night, guys. No hard feelings, Mike?"

"Absolutely, Rackham," you reply with a heavy sigh as the group assembly begins to disperse, everyone headed their separate ways.

"If you need anything, let me know, Mike," Fred offers, the floorboards creaking under his weight as he trudges toward his bedroom.

Looking down at yourself, you frown at the tearstains and dried mucus on your sleeves in disgust, before pulling your shirt off altogether. By now you've completely lost track of how many times you've changed clothes today. Might as well get a shower if nobody else is going to use the bathroom -- it'd probably feel heavenly on your exhausted, tortured body, and it might even help you get to sleep.

"Oh, Mike, you poor thing," Chichi frets, looking at the dark bruises that've formed on your chest. "And not even any fur to hide it with, too..."

"I'll manage," you sigh, looking at the thin layer of yellow down coating the floor, probably from where you crashed into her. "Man, Chichi. Pretty soon we'll *both* look like we've been plucked clean."

"Don't remind me," she giggles. "I'll just vacuum these up and then head to bed."

"Eh, save it for tomorrow," Beanie yawns. "Last thing we want is stir up any *more* noise. We don't need Ms. Presto filing another complaint at the front desk."

"Hey, speaking of noise complaints, where's Goldie?" you ask, wadding your dirty shirt up under your arm. "I figured for sure we'd have woken him up with all that racket."

Silence falls over the room as everyone freezes mid-action, and you're still hypersensitive enough to realize you've just said or done something wrong. Instinctively, you begin backing up, getting in position to head to the door. Beanie hunches forward, mouth agape as if she's just been sucker-punched in the gut.

"*He's seen him!*" she shrieks, voice cracking. "He's seen him too! *Oh, god!*"

"Bonnie, calm down!" Rackham blurts as she begins to shake, yanking roughly at one of her own ears.

"What? Seen who?!" you ask as Fred somberly reaches into his pocket, pulling his cell phone out. He slowly, deliberately presses buttons on the keypad before lifting it up to his face.

"This is Fred. I'm sorry to bother you so late," he murmurs into the mouthpiece. "Come get him."

"Wait, what? What's going on, Fred?" you manage from the end of the east hall. "Come get who? Me? Why, what did I say?!"

"Mike," he replies softly, snapping his phone shut and lowering it to his side, "my brother is dead."

"What the shit -- no, of course he's not **DEAD**," you reply, flabbergasted. "I saw him with my own eyes! Like -- just a few hours ago!"

Rackham and Chichi glare at you as Beanie slams against the couch's backrest.

"I knew it," she half-laughs, half-sobs, kicking her legs frantically. "I *knew* it!"

"Just earlier, he was telling me to get my leg fixed up! Hell, Chichi, you were standing right there! You were in the room with us!" you angrily snap, pointing an accusing finger in the hen's direction. "You were talking with both of us while you bandaged my leg earlier! He told you to use gauze! Don't you remember?!"

"Ohh, no, Chica. Not you too," Fred whispers softly as he and Rackham turn to her in shock.

"Mike, I don't know *what* you're talking about," Chichi adamantly emphasizes, taking great care to enunciate each word as if you're slow. "It was just you and me in that room. *Nobody else was there*. Certainly not... not *Goldie Fazbear*, of all people...!"

This is a setup. It's got to be.

A banging sound at the front door cuts you off before you can let her have it. Torn, Rackham reluctantly leaves Beanie's side, heading to the foyer to open the door. Chiclet and Mangle pour through almost simultaneously, Frederick bringing up the rear. All three of them are in their nightclothes, though Mangle is double-layered with both a bathrobe and a blanket.

"Good heavens, it's a *shambles* in here," Mangle remarks with a yawn, sleepily adjusting an eye mask. "What happened?"

Frederick tips his ever-present tiny hat as he closes the door. "Pardonnez l'intrusion," he babbles.

"Not now dear," Mangle gently corrects, patting his arm. "Do try to read the mood."

"Mike?" Chiclet asks, groggy. "Mr. Fazbear, what's -- mmmmm. What's going on? Do we need to take him to the hospital?"

"No, nothing like that," Fred says, shaking his head. "Carrol Rabbinson already looked him over earlier this evening."

Chiclet runs a wing through her messy headfeathers. "Then I don't understand. If he's fine, why -- sorry, not trying to be rude, but why did you call us over in the middle of the night?"

"I have no idea why he called you either. I'm so sorry, Chiclet," you interject. She gives you an annoyed glance, but says nothing, waiting patiently for a reply.

"Mike had a panic attack earlier, I think," Chichi says defensively, avoiding eye contact with you. "He went to Jeremy Human's today -- Bonnie got trapped there. Long story."

Chiclet's face falls. "Oh, god. I was hoping he wouldn't get mixed up with them. Em, did you know about this when you came by earlier?"

"Not, ah, exactly?" Mangle lies, feigning innocence. "I mean, I'd heard some, mmm -- rumors...? I was rather busy tending to Cheeky's special needs earlier, and I *meant* to mention it when I got home, but--"

"Oh, am I *ever* gonna let you have it later," Chiclet seethes, waving the stuttering fox off. "Damn it. I'd heard he'd gotten into some kind of trouble but I didn't know it was at *Jeremy's*."

"Explains why you didn't come by earlier," you mutter. "I thought for sure Bonbon or someone would've said something."

"Bonbon knew too? Oh, for crying out-- damn it! Nobody keeps me in the loop on anything!" Chiclet stomps her foot, frustrated. "I feel like we're on a desert island over there! Please, Mr. Fazbear, you were saying?"

"I'm told he's been hallucinating vividly ever since he got home," Fred says. "Dr. Rabbinson believes he has some damage to his ribcage, and he sliced his leg crawling through an air vent at the restaurant."

"Through a vent?" Mangle asks with a raised eyebrow.

"Not now, Em." Chiclet self-consciously tugs at her pajama pants, trying to ease them up over her hips a little more. "Unbelievable. Well, we can gather him up and be out in just a few minutes. Do you mind at least telling me why this couldn't have waited until morning, though?"

"It's personal. My... brother," Fred murmurs.

"Oh." Chiclet replies, crestfallen. "No, that's -- that's okay. I understand."

You gawk at her. "Wait, **what?** No! Say *more* Fred! Look, if I said something inappropriate, or I crossed some kind of line, that's one thing -- but Goldie came to *me*, he approached *me*," you argue vehemently. "I saw him with my own eyes! We talked to each other! We had a casual conversation! If he's off-limits, or I'm supposed to leave him alone -- it would have been *damn* nice to know that ahead of time, don't you think?!"

"Holy shit," she gasps, covering her scarred mouth with both wings. "You weren't kidding."

"Chichi, dear?" Mangle adds, eyes wide. "Is there any, um, juice in the refrigerator? Lemonade, or - - or some such?"

"Uh, I think so?" Chichi replies distractedly, rubbing Beanie's trembling shoulders. "You're welcome to go help yourself...?"

Mangle nods, briskly shuffling towards the kitchen. Chiclet strides across the room to you, leaning down until she's at eye level. Ordinarily, you wouldn't take much offense -- you can't help being shorter than her -- but right now, it feels almost condescending, like you're a toddler getting a stern talking-to from your mommy.

"Mike, I *promise* I'll explain everything to you later, but right now we need to get your things and get you home, okay?" she whispers.

"No! You should be more worried about them than me," you reply frustratedly, pulling away from her. "I knocked Chichi over earlier. She clonked her head on the coffee table because I was sleepwalking -- or sleeprunning, I guess. Whatever."

"She'll be fine -- please, let's just go," Chiclet quietly pleads. "Goldie Fazbear's a... taboo subject. I'll fill you in later, but now's not the time."

Before you can make your case, Mangle hastily returns to the common area, toting a glass filled with fruit juice in both paws. "Here you go, sweetheart. Why don't you have a sip?"

"I'm not thirsty right now," you brusquely reply.

"Honey, I insist," Mangle urges, a tight-lipped smile in place. "Trust me, you'll feel loads better!"

You're already prepping a harsher refusal when the realization of this situation dawns on you. You've seen this trick before, right after you first moved in a couple of weeks ago: Bonnibel's panic attack, when you asked her to go out with you and Chiclet. Look up at both of them, you're hurt that they'd even *suggest* you're in the same category as her. You've just been through a traumatic experience, sure, but it's not like you're mentally unstable.

There's a difference.

From the expressions on their faces, it's obvious both Chiclet and Mangle "know that you know". For his part, Frederick has already quietly gathered your bags from the office, and is waiting patiently by the front door, arms folded neatly over his silk pajama shirt.

"This is absurd," you snarl, indignant as you turn to survey the room. You're aware of your face flushing, your cheeks no doubt beet red with humiliation. "You think I'm *crazy*."

"N-nobody said that," Mangle shakily chuckles as you spit the words, forcing an increasingly strained smile. "Nobody said that at all. Right, Chica?"

"Oh, uh, absolutely," Chiclet nervously agrees, lacking all of her trademark aplomb.

Shaking your head, you're practically mad enough to breathe fire. "**No.** Y'know what? No, I'm gonna -- *we're* gonna settle this. I'm gonna go get him, right now."

As you turn to head toward the back of the apartment, Chiclet moves to block your way.

"Mike, that is a *monumentally* bad idea," she forcefully insists.

Mangle tries to grab your shoulder, but you wrest yourself away from both of them. Storming across the apartment, you walk right up to Goldie's bedroom door. Chiclet and Mangle follow you along with a very plain-faced Fred, the others merely observing from the common area, with the exception of Beanie, who seems to have more or less checked out.

"Let's just ask him ourselves, huh?" you whoop, banging twice at Goldie's door before gripping the handle. Without even waiting for him to answer, you throw his bedroom door open with a flourish. "What do you say to *that*, Goldie?!"

Chiclet presses a wing to her face, turning away from you while Mangle watches, cringing. Fred very quietly stands off to the side, head lowered.

Goldie Fazbear's "bedroom" is a linen closet with little more than a few towels and some cleaning supplies.

It's like something out of a dream. No, even worse, it doesn't feel like a dream at all. This is really happening, here and now.

"*No*," you breathe, looking around the hallway as if you somehow opened the wrong door. "No, no. This isn't right, I-- I saw him go in here. This has got to be a mistake."

"Mike, we need to leave **now**." It's obvious from Chiclet's stern tone that she means it this time. "Mr. Fazbear, I can't even *begin* to apologize enough for what's happened here tonight. I had no idea he was going to be this much trouble for you guys."

"It's all right, Ms. Chiclet," Fred replies serenely.

"This isn't -- no, this isn't right!" you laugh, slamming your fist against the wall hard enough to crack the plaster. You're practically boring holes into the closet with your eyes, as if that'll somehow conjure the dandelion bear up all the faster. "*Joke's over*, Goldie! Get your ass out here! Don't you -- d-don't you hang me out to dry like this!"

"Darling, **PLEASE!**" Mangle barks at you, clearly embarrassed. "Enough!"

For once you're not in danger -- no robots real or perceived are trying to kill you, you're not staring down angry foxes or terrible bears, and yet -- this may somehow be the worst thing to happen to you all day. Perhaps even in your lifetime.

Chiclet and Mangle forcibly drag you away from the closet and down the hall as you begin to kick and shake.

"*Freddy?!*" Chiclet calls out as you struggle against them. "Could really use some help here!"

Digging your feet into the carpet, you viciously glare at the closet door as you're hauled away from it. You feel like you've been betrayed -- by yourself, if nothing else.

"I'm not *crazy*!" you argue. "I saw him! I'll draw you a damn **PICTURE** of him if I have to!"

Frederick swoops in behind them, effortlessly pulling you off of your feet. Motioning to your ribcage, Mangle mimics a pained expression, which Frederick immediately understands, taking care as he pulls you close against his chest.

"I'm **NOT!** I'm **NOT CRAZY!!**" you shout at the top of your lungs, struggling and kicking against his impossible strength. You swear, beg, plead, and thrash, but Frederick simply pins you in place as he's done for Bonnibel likely countless times before.

Exactly like Bonnibel, in fact.

Wasn't it Bonnibel who assessed you as "broken"? It makes too much sense now -- she could recognize it in you because she sees it every day in herself.

Confirmation of what you've been denying all this time finally knocks the last bit of wind out of your sails, and halfway through fighting against Frederick, you simply collapse in his arms, clutching at his shirt in unfettered hopelessness. Your voice gives out before you can launch into another anguished tirade.

Your vision's already beginning to blur, but the looks on the faces of every single person gathered will stay with you to the day you die. What bothers you most is that they're not mocking, or even judgmental -- you'd probably be able to handle it better if they were. They're not even overly sympathetic, nor are they condescending. No, their expressions are ones of *understanding*, and that's what really twists the knife in your heart. They simply *know*.

Perhaps they knew all along.

"Michael," Mangle coos softly as Frederick gently releases you, satisfied that you're no longer going to be a problem. You flop onto your knees, unable to make eye contact with anyone. "Why don't you have something to drink now, dear?"

You stare dully at the fruit juice being offered to you. At some point, Mangle even went and got a green paper umbrella, no doubt from Chichi's stash in the kitchen. It's holding a pair of orange slices together, perched on the edge of the glass.

"See?" Mangle prompts, stroking the back of your head with a tender paw. "It's got one of those funny little umbrellas, you know? Oh, isn't it cute?"

"I love those little drink decorations," Chiclet agrees, acting as if nothing's happened in spite of the blatant evidence otherwise. "Goose and I'd make a game out of seeing how many we could collect in a single night whenever we went clubbing."

You know what they're doing. It's your own trick you used the morning of Bonnibel's freakout. Your wounded ego wants to argue against it, to lash out at them for trying to turn your own game on you.

"Oh, and you have to have an olive, too -- it's just not a mixed drink without an olive!" Settling into a familiar pattern, Mangle presses on. "Really, the pimento is the best part. What do you like in your drinks, Rackham?"

"W-well, I'm pretty partial to those little plastic pirate swords, obviously," Rackham replies, slowly catching onto the ruse. "Whenever I hit the bar with a drinking buddy, I'll ask for two and we'll have a duel. Loser buys drinks."

"Oh, that's a good idea," Chiclet grins. "I'll have to remember that one."

You wordlessly take the glass from Mangle. It's an obvious attempt at getting medication down you -- medication you know you don't need. But then again, you've been wrong on just about everything else by now. At this point you're hardly any judge of what's best for you.

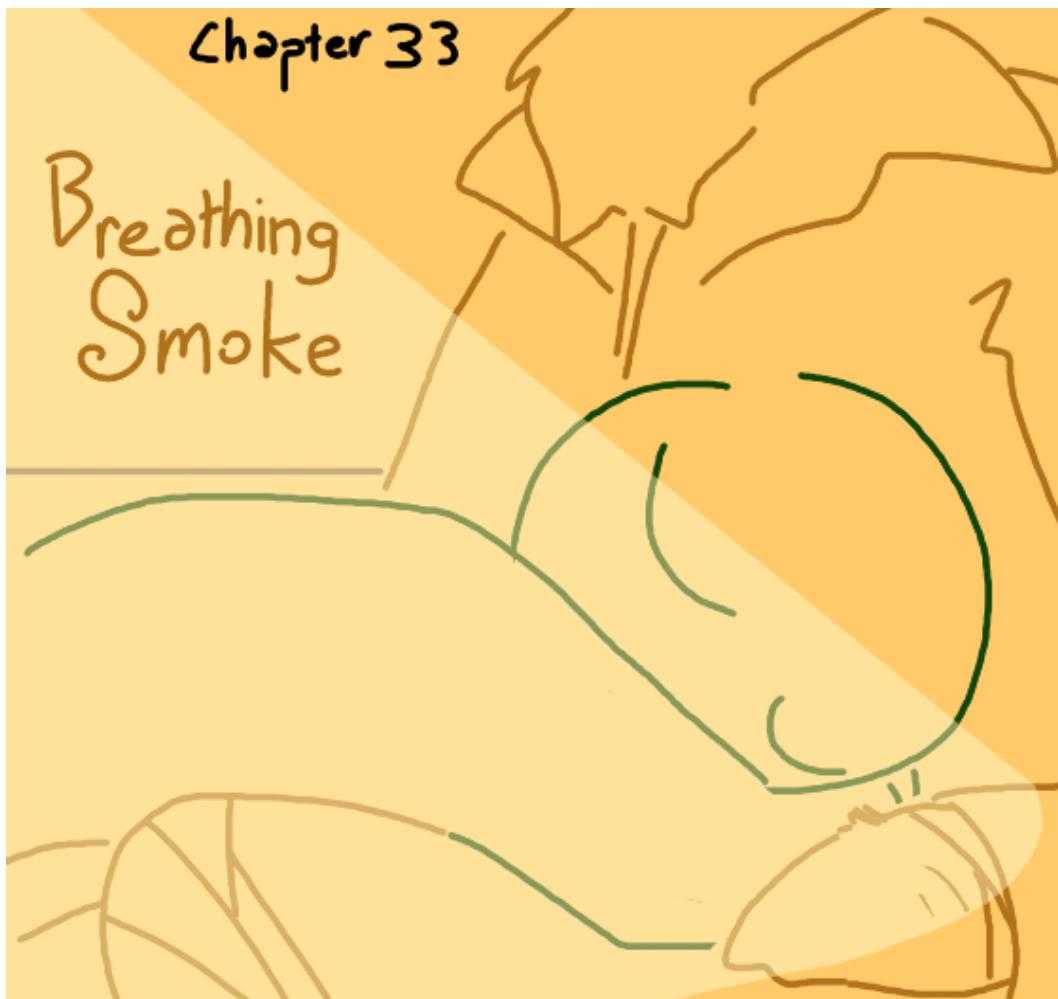
With a sigh, you tip the glass back, letting the cold juice wash the last ashes of your pride away.

Bottoms up.

# Breathing Smoke

## Chapter Summary

While Mike recovers, his friends debate what's best for him.



After consuming whatever Mangle dosed you with, you slept like a rock. You're guessing it's sometime in the early morning, but it's too dark to really tell. Based on the familiar texture of the upholstery underneath you, it looks like you spent the remainder of the night on the living room couch at 87-B. You reposition yourself a little in your makeshift bed to ease some of the pain in your chest. Hopefully Dr. Rabbinson remembers to come by soon with your medication.

Drawing a ragged breath, you catch a whiff of something that smells like fresh rain. It's a familiar scent, bringing back bits and pieces of happier days. You seem to recall standing out on the porch as a child, breathing in the moist air after a springtime sunshower. Hazy, long-buried memories begin to drift in and out of focus from forgotten recesses of your mind. You grasp only bits and pieces, scattered fragments. Hiding behind the hem of Mom's favorite jean skirt. Watching Dad drive off to work in the station wagon. Cheesy Saturday afternoon movies on public access

channels, school lunches and games of tetherball with classmates. Life before the burdens and responsibilities of adulthood.

You inhale deeply, wistfully embracing the smell. Like rain mixed with... smoke, now that you think about it.

*Smoke.*

You remember controlled fires not far from where you grew up, when the trees and the brush would get to be too unruly, and their branches would be gathered and burned. You seem to remember wood being a popular choice for outdoor cookouts, Dad sure loved using it to grill. He never could quite wait for summer to come around; he'd always jump the gun, pulling the barbecue grill out at the first sign of spring. After being rained out enough times, he finally ponied up for a patio cover so that even a downpour couldn't stop him from grilling.

Cookouts usually consisted of Mom's too-sweet potato salad and Dad's overdone burgers. You miss them both -- they might not have tasted all that good to you as a kid, and they were certainly nothing compared to the five-star breakfasts that Frederick prepares on a whim now -- but there's just something about the thought of home cooking that causes your heart to catch in your throat.

You heard about this phenomenon on some TV documentary years ago -- the "Proust effect", if you're remembering the name right. Senses linking to memories. Little bits of the past that somehow come back to life, made more real by a familiar taste or a memorable smell. Admittedly, you haven't thought much about home -- your old home -- since you wound up here. Sure, you remember a few scraps ranging from childhood all the way through to high school, but it feels like the further forward in time you go, the thicker the haze gets. There's a door you just can't seem to unlock once you try to recall the last two or three years of your life.

And if your nightmares are anything to go by, maybe it's for the best that you can't.

Unfortunately, the events of last night sure won't be leaving your consciousness any time soon. Your sinuses begin to burn as you replay the previous day's highlight reel.

Beanie in danger. Busted leg. Fritzine. "Safety Schmidt". Restless sleep. Nightmares. Haunting imagery all evening long. The night shift at "Freddy Fazbear's Pizza". An animal band chasing you, cornering you. Waking up. Chichi being hurt. Chiclet's disappointment. Frederick's tight grip. Mangle's sleepytime cocktail.

*Goldie.*

He was so real, you *still* can't believe you hallucinated the whole thing. You've never seen anything like that, not *ever*. You've never really had an opportunity to do so. No history of drug use -- the D.A.R.E. guys scared you straight on that one as a kid. For better or for worse, your mind's always been your own. Until now, anyway.

The worst part about last night's cavalcade of misery, the absolute final straw that you just couldn't get past? The expressions on their faces. The looks that said they'd seen it all before. As if you throwing the biggest freakout fit of your life was just an average evening. Maybe it was -- for them.

For you, it was hell on earth.

Your cheeks are warm. Reaching a shaky hand to your face, you realize they're wet, too. You don't even know when you started crying. Anger and humiliation begin to wash over you in waves, and the madder you get, the more you start to sob. You hate this feeling of weakness. Helplessness. You were put here to help these people out, to help carry their load -- not to become one yourself. Yeah, you've had some setbacks here and there, but you can still work. You can still be useful.

You're still normal, right?

Well, no. You know now that's really *not* the case. There's no going back; you crossed a line last night when you mentioned Goldie, and any reputation you might have here went up in flames. You already know everyone talks about you behind your back. Even if Fred and Chiclet keep it internalized to just their households, that's still almost ten people that know about your nervous breakdown, and that's to say nothing of nearby neighbors who likely heard the commotion as well. Word travels fast around here -- before sunset, you'll be fully branded as the newest lunatic to move into the asylum.

It's getting harder to stop crying now. Fear, shame, and embarrassment swirl around in your tormented mind. Right now, you want to bury yourself under a rock and never come out. Even *homelessness* was preferable to blowing the one good thing to happen to you in years.

And you were so close to feeling like you were finally home, too.

A pair of furry paws slip around your chest, gently easing you away from your tear-soaked pillow and up into a sitting position on the couch. It's still dark and your vision's blurry, and in a panic you lurch forward only to be pulled into a hug. Strangely, the smell of rain and smoke is stronger than ever as your face brushes against coarse fur and soft fabric.

"No shame in crying," a soft, maternal voice mumbles into your ear. "...done a lot of it lately, myself."

Without a word, you bury your face in April's chest and give into your anguish. She patiently holds you as you slough your melancholy off one sob at a time, expending feelings you hadn't even realized you'd been bottling up. At this point, you don't care who sees you. You don't care if everyone thinks you've lost your mind. Maybe you have.

Maybe *this* is what you need to do to get it back.

April soothes you gently, like a mother comforting a frightened child. It's obvious this is territory she's well experienced in; she patiently whispers calming words to you, her paws tenderly rubbing your back as you pour your heart out to her.

Eventually, you've wept all you can weep, your emotional fuel tank having run dry. Slowly, steadily you pull yourself away from April. You lost track of how much time you spent in her arms, but it was dark when she made her presence known to you, and now, the sun's just beginning to peek out over the horizon.

"Better?" she asks, handing you a tissue box.

Numb, you simply nod, pulling a few tissues and drying the last of your tears. As you turn to face the living room, your jaw nearly hits the floor when you're finally able to see your surroundings clearly.

Frederick's reclining in his chair, politely pretending not to notice you as Bonnibel dozes in his arms, wrapped up in a thick comforter. Chiclet's sprawled across the carpet, half-covered in a sheet from her bed. Her impressive wingspan drapes across the living room floor, her orange feathers warmly reflecting the morning light. To your surprise, even Bonbon's here as well, curled up in the other stuffed chair under a frayed patchwork quilt, her leg warmers and exercise clothes in a sloppy pile on the floor next to her bare feet.

"Wh-what's everyone doing here?" you whisper to April.

"Protecting their wounded," the battered rabbit comments absently, dabbing at the moisture in her dewlap with a tissue.

Stunned, you realize the commonality -- every single one of them is surrounding your couch in an almost strategic fashion. Bonbon to your left. Frederick and Bonnibel to your right. April beside you. Chiclet in the center of it all. They could have slept in the comfort of their own rooms, bundled up safely in their own warm beds -- but they didn't.

In your time of need, they chose to be here for *you*.

"...zzz..."

The sound of faint, whistling snoring draws your attention. You look around the room in bewilderment trying to locate the source of the noise. April points lethargically toward the ceiling, and as you look up, you notice a tiny white snout covered in messy pink lipstick poking out of the overhead vent. A paw with lacquered nails drapes out, twitching gingerly.

"Of course," you murmur, shaking your head.

Leaning back, you observe the scene in quiet, reverent awe. Based on the way everyone appears to be in some state of slumber, they've been here for the entire night -- or what of it was left, by the time you were walked back home from across the street. Frederick's gaze meets yours, and the two of you exchange wordless nods.

Chiclet mumbles to herself, rolling over in her sleep. Her foot brushes against your leg, and apparently the foreign sensation is enough to rouse her. "Oh, hey, Mike," she yawns casually before realization kicks in, causing her to suddenly bolt upright.

"Morning," you whisper.

"...good morning," she warily returns, tossing her sheet aside and standing up to greet you. "How, um -- how're we doing today?"

You close your eyes, genuinely contemplating her question. "Better," you finally answer after several seconds of consideration. "I'm really sorry about everything that happened last night."

"Don't be, Mike. *I'm* the one who should be apologizing to you. You've really had a rough go of it."

"Hey, you don't have to front on my behalf." You lower your head self-consciously. "I know you've got a lot on your plate here -- you don't need me being a burden too."

Chiclet sucks in a sharp breath, flinching as if she's just been struck.

"Wait, you think that's how I see you? As a *burden*?" she asks as indignantly as she can while still keeping her voice low, leaning in close to you. "Mike, *no!*"

"How else would you see it, Chica? I humiliated myself *and* you guys in front of Fred last night."

"Listen to me, Mike," Chiclet responds, taking hold of your arm in her wings. "I don't give half a tailfeather how I look in front of Fred, or anyone else. What I *do* care about is you. You're not in *any way* a burden, or an embarrassment, or -- or an *inconvenience* to me. Or anyone else in this house. Do you understand me?"

You say nothing; in your heart, you don't agree with her.

"This... it's my fault," April interrupts. "Mike wouldn't have--"

"Oh no, don't you go throwing yourself on the grenade either," Chiclet insists, heading April off with a gentle wingtip pressed to the elder rabbit's forehead. "You had no idea what you were coming into. And in hindsight, I probably could've handled this better."

"How, Chica?" you retort. "You did what you thought was best, *I'm* the one who screwed everything up."

"I could've put April in *my* room and taken the couch, or put Bonnie in my room with me and April in hers. But for whatever reason, I figured you'd be more comfortable at Bonworth's, and it just so happened that I ended up entrusting you to people I only barely know. The buck stops with me, guys."

"Oh, *enough* of that now!" Flamboyant, soft giggling echoes from the air vent. "Can we please all just -- enjoy the happy moment? There's no need for melodrama."

"**You're** one to talk about *melodrama*," Chiclet grumbles in annoyance as the candy-colored fox emerges from the aluminum cocoon overhead. "Besides, you're still in trouble after not giving me a heads-up last night, Em."

Yawning, Mangle offers her a sleepy smile. "Learn to let go, Freddy."

"Maybe I should let *you* go -- straight off of the balcony outside and into the parking lot," Chiclet snarks back. There's just enough of a smile at her battered lips that you know she doesn't mean it, but you imagine Mangle's nowhere even close to being off the hook.

"Aheh! Heh, mmm. Funny -- oh, Chica, you're a hoot. So, ahh -- how are you f-feeling this morning, Mike?" Mangle nervously stammers, abruptly switching gears back to you.

You scratch the back of your head. "Still sore, but I guess I'm all right," you respond.

Well, sort of. You're still mortified after that fit you threw, and you have no idea how long it'll be before you can show your face around Fred and the others, but you're at least beginning to feel some emotional catharsis. "I'll talk to Marion today about relocating."

"What the hell for?" Chiclet furrows her brow. "Nobody needs to relocate. Not you, not April. You're both staying right here."

"That's magnanimous of you and all, but we still have the space issues of being six adults in a four-bedroom apartment," you reply. "I'm sure Marion can find somewhere for me to stay a week or two until he gets something sorted out for April."

"If he had somewhere for you..." April hoarsely whispers, trailing off as she points to herself.

Shaking a couple of orange feathers loose from her camisole, Chiclet yawns. "April's right. If Marion had anywhere else to shove someone, she wouldn't be here in the first place. Besides, I'm not letting you out of my sight again -- we'll make it work somehow."

"Actually, I had an idea about that!" Bonbon's up and all smiles, paw raised as if she's a student asking a question in junior high. She tosses her quilt aside, and with a blush you can't help but notice she's wearing a long neon orange tee-shirt and... not terribly much else. As she slowly slips her tights on over her well-toned legs, you can definitely see that all of that exercise hasn't been for nothing.

Without turning her attention from you, Chiclet gives Bonbon a quick dismissive flap of her wing. "Not now, Bonbon -- we're kind of in the middle of it here."

"Oh, lighten up. I've been listening to the two of you have some kind of martyr-off," Bonbon chides, switching from student to teacher in one easy swoop.

Mangle drops down a little from the overhead duct, grinning mischievously. "My sentiments exactly! Mike's home. Why ruin the moment with this heavy-hearted nonsense?"

"He's more than safe, Mike's a *hero!* A real life hero! He saved my best friend's life yesterday, Chiclet!" Bonbon excitedly boasts.

"Saved your best friend's life? What are you--" Chiclet starts to ask, jerking her head back and forth between the two of you in an avian manner. "Wait, so -- Beanie was in trouble yesterday, and then -- Mike, is that what Chichi meant by Beanie getting 'trapped'? At *Jeremy Human's?*!"

Frowning, Bonbon ties her floppy ears up with her sweatband. "Geez, Chiclet! What the hell did you think it meant?"

Instantly, Chiclet's on the defensive with narrowed eyes and a flustered huff. "I saw she had a black eye, but I kind of had a lot on my mind last night. I didn't think to ask in the middle of everything else that was going on."

"Okay, but didn't Mr. Fazbear call you and fill you in?!"

"Not really! He, Mangle, *and you all* neglected to mention anything about Jeremy Human's being involved!" Chiclet answers. "And somehow, you'll forgive me if I really just didn't think to put two and two together!"

April visibly tenses up, but to her credit doesn't say anything. Both Bonbon and Chiclet seem to notice her visible discomfort, lowering their voices accordingly.

"Well, yesterday morning the restaurant was closed," Bonbon says, ramping her energy back down to reasonable levels. "Beanie didn't know when she went in for work. You were one of the engineers there, right? So you know what that means?"

"Oh, shit," Chiclet groans. "Free-roam mode. Ohhh, I don't even want to *think* about what could have happened to Beanie."

"Yeah, but Mike totally swooped in and *Legend of Bob*'d the shit outta 'em," Bonbon cheers as she bounds over to the couch, plopping next to you. "And he never would've ended up at Beanie's apartment *unless* you sent him to Bonworth's apartment in the first place. It's like that old saying about how butterflies flapping their wings start a thousand-mile -- no, wait, that's not how it goes. **Look**, my point is, you're *both* okay in my book."

You shrug, not wanting to relive too much of it. "I was in the right place at the right time."

Snorting, Bonbon throws an arm around your chest obviously, causing you to wince in pain. "*Pfffft*, you are just so stinkin' humble! He army-crawled through the air vents, Chiclet! The freakin' VENTS to get to Beanie!"

"A boy after my own heart," Mangle beams from overhead. "I couldn't be prouder. Aren't you ever the little war hero!"

"Geez, Mike," Chiclet says, nonchalantly prying Bonbon's arm loose from you. "No wonder you were having such a rough night. I gotta hand it to you, that's amazing."

"Um, thanks," you reply.

Despite everything, you can't help but feel a little proud of yourself. It's nice to be appreciated, and more importantly, you're glad nobody's rubbing your blunder in. You sneak a glance over at Frederick who smiles and tips his tiny hat to you.

"Je suis heureux de voir que vous vous sentez bien."

You're not sure of what he said, but it seems well-intentioned. He's probably just trying to tell you he's glad to see you're doing better or something, in his own way.

"Thanks, man," you reply, smiling and nodding back to him. Pleased at his successful communication, he gently eases Bonnibel out of his lap and onto his chair before heading to the kitchen.

"Anyway, I was saying I got an idea," Bonbon continues, retaking the reins of the conversation. "It's simple and nobody gets put out by it: Mike, come stay with me until April gets a place of her own!"

Chiclet shakes her head. "That's really sweet of you to offer, Bonbon, but he'll be fine up here."

The electric blue bunny leans forward, eyebrows raised. "*Whaaaat?* You don't have room for him, I do! What's the problem?"

"...yeah, I dunno know how I feel about this," Chiclet muses. "I don't feel like I can protect him if he ventures too far out of my view."

"What is he, your *egg*?" Scoffing, Bonbon elbows you in the shoulder. "He'll be right underneath you. *Literally*. Our apartment is **LITERALLY** underneath yours. Look, I'll give you a key and you can come visit him anytime you want."

"You already gave me a key before, you dork," Chiclet chuckles, folding her wings. "Remember when you were out of town and asked me to water your plants?"

Scratching the top of her head, Bonbon frowns. "I did?"

"Yes, and your plants had already been dead for months when I went downstairs the very same day."

"...huh. Guess I forgot," Bonbon laughs sheepishly. "Look, Mike, I know it's a lot to take in and all, but it'll be fun! C'mon, it's just for a couple weeks, and Chiclet would be right overhead to check on you. Heck, I spend so much time up here anyway that you probably wouldn't even notice a difference!"

You ponder the decision for a few moments.

The truth is you're not sure how you feel about moving apartments again, despite your earlier bluff of mentioning relocation. You could just as easily return to Bonworth and his crew at 93-B, but though you'd never admit it to Chiclet, you need some distance from those who know you best. After everything that's happened, a place to recuperate away from your friends would make things easier on you -- a change of scenery to get your mind off your recent trauma, a breathing space to recollect yourself. It would be easier to sort through all this around strangers who have nothing to judge you on, nothing to remind you of your fall, than it would around the people so eager to accept a side of yourself you don't really *want* accepted.

It's a bit of a mess, and you don't really know how you could explain it, but an emotional vacation could help this crushing feeling weighing down on you. Worst case scenario, you can always politely beg off after a few days, or just spend enough time visiting friends that it won't be too much of an inconvenience for you until April gets moved into a more permanent residence.

"I... guess I can give it a try," you finally manage. "Would I be staying with Peanut in his room?"

"Nah," Bonbon grins, hopping up from the couch. "You can bunk with me."

"**No good**," April immediately declares with a disapproving nod. "I won't allow it."

Chiclet joins in, shaking her head. "Yeah, that's not happening, bunny girl."

"Over my *dead body*," Mangle adamantly agrees from the ceiling, sniffing in offense. "I won't let you soil Michael's virginity with your -- your *disgraceful* fetish!"

"I'm **not** a virgin," you state flatly.

Mangle reaches down and pats your head condescendingly with one paw while pinching your cheek with the other. "Of course you aren't, dear! You're the *manliest* little man."

"Bonbon, you either put him in with Peanut or no deal," Chiclet intones. "End of story."

"Awww, *come on!*" Bonbon pleads, wringing her paws. "Have you seen his hands?! They're so -- so human-like! Look at his fingers!"

"That's it, I'm staying here," you interrupt.

Moaning, Bonbon throws her arms in the air, conceding defeat. "**UGH. Fiiiiine!** You can stay with Peanut. Just -- please, try it for a week?"

Chiclet turns to you, eyebrows raised. "I'm not gonna tell you what to do, Mike, but I think I've made it clear how I feel."

Sighing, you look Bonbon over, watching her feet work overtime as they rapidly thump up and down on the carpeted floor in excitement. If you didn't know better you'd assume she was trying to send a telegraph with her fuzzy toes.

"Sure," you finally answer, taking pity on the energetic exercise bunny. "I'll bring my stuff down after breakfast. Thanks for having me, Bonbon."

Satisfied she's gotten her way, Bonbon whoops out in delight, causing Bonnibel to nearly jump out of Frederick's chair.

"Huh?! *What?!*" the tinier of the two blue rabbits shrieks, teeth chattering as she jerks her head around in confusion. "Is -- is everything okay? The sky's not falling *again*, is it?! It took **FOREVER** to clean it up last time!"

"Nope, the sky's just fine," Bonbon cheers, snatching her petite counterpart up in a hug. "I got me a new *humie roomie!*"

"I suddenly regret my decision," you mutter to Chiclet with a wry grin.

"Hey, don't look at me. I warned you," she smirks back before making her way into the kitchen to help Frederick prepare breakfast.

To your chagrin, it seems like everyone's going out of their way to make you feel more comfortable -- proving what you feared, and reinforcing your decision to take a temporary move. At breakfast, your appetite's back in full force just in time for another one of Frederick's stellar meals. Realizing how famished you were after watching you attack your first plate, Frederick continues serving you seconds until you've overeaten to the point of misery and have to beg him to stop.

After helping clean up the dishes, Bonbon heads downstairs to make preparations for your stay. The rest of your housemates offer you first use of the shower, and even though you repeatedly decline, they make it clear they want to pamper you in whatever way they can. In response, you try to be conscientious and make your shower as quick as possible, even though the warm water feels amazing on your tortured skin. After you're finished washing up, you step out in front of the mirror to survey your torso. The bruises are now fully visible -- you look like you've been assaulted with a baseball bat thanks to Fritzine. On the plus side, your leg's in far better shape this morning.

Once you're out, Chiclet changes your bandages while Mangle insists on treating you to a hot towel shave and shoulder massage. Out of respect for your fellow roommates, you ask Mangle to shave you in the kitchen so that the hall bathroom can free up for everyone else's use. As you've witnessed before, Mangle's claim of possessing "healing paws" is no joke. You feel like a new man after letting the foppish fox tend to you, and you suspect that it's a way of apologizing for humbling you last night.

Even if it was for your own good.

"I've gotta know, what exactly *did* you drug me with when we were at Fred's?" you ask as Mangle helps you to your feet. You run a hand over your face, surprised at how smooth your skin feels.

"Anti-histamines," Mangle replies casually. "Don't worry, I wouldn't give you anything too strong."

"So not something like, say, Bonnibel's medication then?" you ask, feeling foolish for even considering the notion.

Frowning, Mangle dries off a stray dollop of shaving cream that managed to make it to your eyebrow. "You're not Bonnie, so *no*. Besides, do you really think I ran across the street at, what, two in the morning with a dozen pill bottles tucked into the folds of my robe -- just so I could give you a one-way trip to the emergency room for a stomach pumping?"

You scratch the back of your head. "Point taken."

Mangle gives you a cheeky little nod, patting your rear as you leave the kitchen. "As if that was first time I've had to sedate you."

"Hold up," you reply, whirling in place. "So you *have--*"

"Oooohhh, my! Just look at the time. You'd better be on your way then, Mike!"

Mangle bustles past you with an armful of shaving supplies, retreating down the hall before you can continue your interrogation. With a sigh, you accept defeat for now, walking out of the kitchen. Still creepy as ever. It's nice to know some things, at the very least, haven't changed.

In the common area, Bonnibel's piled up next to a freshly-laundered April, newly showered and re-bandaged with Chiclet's help. As the orange bird disappears for her turn at the bathroom, you realize this is as good an opportunity as any to take care of something genuinely important. Walking across the living room, you tap Bonnibel on the shoulder.

"Can I borrow you a minute?" you ask with a hopeful smile.

"Sure, Mike," Bonnibel replies, matching your smile with one of her own. April gives the two of you a wary look as you follow Bonnibel to her bedroom.

"Door stays open," she instructs.

You turn to give her an incredulous look, but even with three quarters of her face bandaged it's clear from her expression she's serious.

"Yes ma'am. Say, you, uh, you're not upset about me getting snot in your fur earlier, are you?" you joke, hoping to lighten the mood a little. To your satisfaction April laughs; it's a dry giggle laced with pain, but one that you can tell she needed just the same.

"Just looking out for the little one," the matronly rabbit coughs once she's regained her composure. "Rabbit thing."

Ah. That makes sense, sort of.

"I'll try to keep it real fast, then."

It occurs to you that you haven't actually gotten to see the inside of Bonnibel's room until now. Between April's order and Chiclet's own words to you when you first moved in about how "nobody goes in with Bonnie at all", you make sure the door is wide open as you walk inside, to avoid the very *appearance* of impropriety.

Much like its owner, Bonnibel's bedroom is childish and girly. In stark contrast to the mismatched, hodge-podge nature of the furniture throughout the entirety of the apartment, everything in Bonnibel's room at least matches in color and style. You can tell Chiclet tried to reserve the best pieces for her use. Her dresser is covered in handmade dolls and toys, and frilly outfits hang from a wire rack by her closet door -- all of which were likely gifts from Mangle. A four-poster canopy bed takes up the center of the room, a lacy pink sheet draped over its top.

If Chiclet's the queen of this apartment, then Bonnibel is very decidedly its princess.

"I sure am glad you're back," Bonnibel warmly offers as you take a seat next to her at the edge of her bed. Her speech is a little slurred -- you can tell she's already had her pills for the day, and based on the way her eyelids seem to be flickering, she'll probably be out like a light before too long.

"About that -- you heard I'm headed downstairs to stay with Bonbon, right?" you answer. "It's just for a few days, though-- I'll be right underneath you if you want to come visit."

"I meant from Jeremy's, but it's good that you're back over here, too," Bonnibel says, surprising you. "What, um, what was it you wanted to...?"

You nod, trying to piece together what exactly it is that you want to say. She patiently waits, watching as you struggle to form the words in your head before you give voice to them. With Bonnibel, you've got to be especially careful -- the slightest misstep could send her bawling and you're really not up for damage control.

"Do you remember when I first moved in a couple weeks ago, and we were talking over -- gosh, I guess it was our first breakfast together?" you begin carefully, tone even and measured as you recall the event.

She tilts her head, scrunching up her face. "Maybe. What about it?"

Exhaling, you continue. "We were talking about my, uh, skin. And lack of fur? Remember?"

"Ohhh, right," she says, perking up a little. "I still think you're really cute, if that helps."

You chuckle awkwardly. "Um, thanks. I think you're cute too."

She titters affectionately, leaning her head into your lap as you ruffle her headfur.

"So, um, you made a comment about -- me being, uh, 'broken'. Like the rest of... well, like every -- uh..." Squeezing your eyes shut, you will yourself to get the words out as delicately as you can manage. "I really got mad when you said I was 'broken', because at the time, I didn't really think I was. No, I didn't *know* I was."

She looks up at you wordlessly, pressing a paw to your fingers still entwined in her soft blue fur.

"I guess I just wanted to say that I'm sorry," you admit, "I'm sorry that I thought I was better than you and everyone else. It's just, um, I'm realizing now that I've got a lot of problems I still -- I still need to deal with."

"Mike, I don't know if you've noticed or not," she says, pulling away from your hand to look you in the eye. Her entire demeanor has changed. Her usually childish nature is gone in an instant, replaced with a more demure, adult air. "This place is basically where broken people come to live."

At a loss for any way to tactfully reply, you opt to hold your tongue.

"When you moved in, I think we all assumed there had to be *something* you suffered from. That's just how everybody is here. Chica, Freddy, Mangle, and especially me. We're all messed up, Mike. But you know what?" Sitting up, she beams. "That's okay."

You wait for her to continue, but when she doesn't, it becomes apparent that she's said all she needed to say. After taking a moment to mull it over, you get up from her bed, nodding gratefully to her as you make your way out of her room.

"Thanks, Bonnibel."

"Anytime. Oh, and Mike?"

You turn around only for her to embrace you, planting her velvety-soft muzzle against your lips. Before you even realize it, your lips are locked together as she stands on her tip-toes, both paws wrapped around the back of your head to pull you down to her height. The kiss lasts only for a moment, and yet somehow it's long enough for April to have seen everything, peering in with a sharp look on her face. Your eyes like dinner plates, you stick your arms out to either side, flailing to signal your duress. Bonnibel continues to nuzzle obliviously against your cheek, her smile as bright as the midday sun.



"Well, have a good time at Bonbon's," she finally remarks cheerfully, waving you off as you stumble out her bedroom door.

You gently click it shut behind you before turning to face April's wrath. The older rabbit folds her arms, squinting at you through her good eye, clearly waiting for an explanation.

"In *fairness*," you croak, tugging at your collar, "I did leave the door open like you asked me to?"

"Not too late to change your mind," Chiclet grins as she towels off her wet headfeathers.

You shrug before picking up the lighter of your two pieces of luggage. "How bad can it be? Bonbon's pretty nice if not a bit hyper, Peanut seems like a big fuzzy teddy bear. Mango was friendly from what little of her I got to see."

"Oh, sure, until you get to know her," Mangle replies from the couch, voice dripping with disdain.

"They have a bit of a, uh, rivalry," Chiclet stage-whispers to you.

"Heavens! I **sincerely** hope you aren't implying she's even *close* to being my rival," the fashionista sputters, changing the television channel with extreme prejudice. "Hah! I'm only working with the insipid little *drama queen* on Mike's costume as a, a -- why, it's nothing more than a *marriage of convenience!*"

"Drama queen, right," you answer with a wink at Chiclet, who covers her mouth to hide her grin. Mangle catches both your look and tone, turning a furious eye in your direction.

"Something you'd like to share with the class, Michael?" Growling like a mad dog, Mangle grabs and draws back one of the couch's decorative cushions, aiming it at you in a rather literal interpretation of '*throw pillow*'.

"Nope! No, I'm good," you hurriedly protest. "I guess I'll be going then?"

"Good luck, Mike," Chiclet says as you shuffle towards the front door with all of your worldly possessions. "If it gets to be too much for you, our door's open."

"Yeah, I--"

"I *mean it*," she adds firmly.

Tossing a glance over your shoulder at Chiclet, you give her a salute with your free arm. "Message received. I'll go humor her for a bit, and then I'll be back before you know it."

After saying your goodbyes, you head out the door and down the stairs to 87-A, where Bonbon is standing outside on her front doormat with a manic smile.

"**About time!** What *took* you so long?" she whoops, grabbing you by the arm and yanking you inside. "C'mon, roomie!"

You're whisked into the apartment, nearly spilling the contents of your luggage as you trip over the threshold. Already your heart's pounding in your chest -- maybe Chiclet was right, and maybe you really are biting off more than you can chew. But hey, you've parted ways with three completely different apartments full of three completely different sets of strangers, all on amazingly awesome terms, right?

What could go wrong?

# The Careless Friends of 87-A

## Chapter Summary

Mike tries to settle in with yet another set of strange new roommates.



"So I hate to hit you with this up front," Bonbon sheepishly begins as you set your luggage down by the front door.

You instinctively grimace, still clenching your suitcase's handles as you slowly brace yourself for whatever bombshell she's about to drop on you. Now that you're on Bonbon's home turf and she's completely unsupervised, there's no way of telling what's going on in her brain. Considering Chiclet's repeated warnings, as well as Mangle and even *April* expressing concern, you may have just walked into a trap. For all you know, Bonbon could be preparing to ask you to strip to your

underwear and lather barbecue sauce into her fur as part of some "human mating dance" she's seen in her cartoons.

"What's up, Bonbon?" you venture hesitantly as she anxiously dances back and forth in place.

"I know this is all, like, sudden notice and everything, but, uh... I have to go to work," she says with an awkward smile. Wait, that's it? "I mean, don't get me wrong, Mike. Beanie's big 'farewell' to Jeremy Human's was all dramatic and poignant and stuff, and -- and I'm totally all about solidarity! It's just, uh..."

You exhale heavily, releasing your grip on your luggage. "Hey, no, you still have to put food on the table," you respond. The fact that you're somehow put at *ease* by her bringing up that dreaded restaurant isn't lost on you. "I understand. Do what you have to."

"Thanks, Mike," she says, pulling a faded windbreaker out from a pile of clothes on the living room floor. "I won't be long! I'm only working part-time, so I'll be back after lunch. Make yourself at home, there's plenty of food in the fridge."

"Oh, um, thank you."

"*Maaaan*, I hate running out on you without giving you a grand tour and all." Sniffing at her jacket, she makes a sour face before reluctantly slipping it on.

"It's fine," you reply, waving her off. "Mangle kept me a bit longer than I expected anyway."

And then of course there was the conversation you had with Bonnibel, and then Bonnibel kissing you, and then the lecture you got from April about the mating habits of lagomorphs after Bonnibel kissed you...

"Speaking of Mangles, ours is already out for the day. Peanut should be up in a little while. I don't know about Goose, though. Her sleep schedule's kind of all over the place right now, so you might not see her until later tonight. Or tomorrow morning. Or tomorrow night."

"I know what you mean; my own internal clock's shot right now," you begrudgingly admit. "I don't think I could *ever* keep Beanie's schedule -- working midnight to six sounds miserable. Especially in *that* hellhole."

"Eh, it's not so bad during the day. It's kinda boring, actually." Grabbing her change purse from the kitchen counter, Bonbon casually vaults over a pile of trash bags on her way towards the front door. "I just sit up front and stamp wrists all day long. Occasionally they have me go clean out the ball pit or wipe down tables. Not a glamorous job, but probably the safest."

"Good," you answer, relieved. "Just, uh, keep your distance from Fritzine. And really all of the other crazy robots."

Raising an eyebrow, she pauses, one paw on the doorknob.

"Mike."

"What, I don't get to worry about my friends too?" you retort, folding your arms.

"Mike, c'mon now! I'm *fine*!"

You raise a hand pre-emptively before she can talk you down. "I'm just -- I don't think I've got another rescue mission in me," you joke weakly, your voice catching a little.

Sizing you up for a moment, Bonbon nods. "All right, Mike. You don't have to worry about me, though," she says softly. "I'm not about to get my ears ripped off when we've got *HumieCon* right around the corner."

Groaning, you give her a good-natured roll of your eyes. "Of course. You just want to see me try to squeeze into a pair of tights, don't you."

"**Damn right I do!**" she enthuses without a single trace of shame. "When I get home today, we're gonna have a *loooong* talk about your fitness regimen! You're already so many days behind, and I'm willing to let it slide 'cause you've had a lot on your plate and all -- but it just means we're gonna have to work extra hard to get you closer to your ideal weight!"

"Joy. Can we at least wait for my ribs to heal up? I'm not really supposed to be exerting myself--"

"*No good!* HumieCon'll already be over by then!" she gasps, cutting you off. "Shoot, I'm gonna be late! Look, I'll fill Doc Rabbinson in when she swings by with your pain pills tonight and get her to sign off on it. We'll get you in shape but I gotta run right now so see you this afternoon bye!"

You watch helplessly as the door slams shut before casting a forlorn glance to your paunch. Well, it'll do you some good to lose a few pounds. With a sigh, you walk down the hall and into the common area. Might as well kill some time until one of Bonbon's other housemates turns up. You could use the opportunity to clear your head, and besides, you don't want Bonbon to think you're ungrateful for her invitation, either.

The living room's even *more* of a mess than it was the last time you were here, if such a thing were even possible. Dirty laundry's heaped up in piles all over the room, baskets and hampers long since having overflowed. The kitchen table is now surrounded by trash bags, some of which are giving off a decidedly pungent odor. Every available surface is covered in food wrappers, mail (opened and unopened), magazines, stacks of dirty dishes, and other assorted junk.

The couch seems to serve as a sort of community dresser, with clean(?) clothes for each member of the apartment draped over the back and armrests. You recognize Peanut's patchwork suit and soft hat, thinking back with a smile to how bashful he seemed the other day. Bonbon's exercise clothes are wadded up in fluorescent bundles of cotton and spandex. She's got sweatbands, leotards, and leggings in just about every color of the rainbow. Other gaudy articles adorn the furniture, though you're not sure whether they belong to Mango or Goose -- and is that a *flamenco dress*?

You examine the television set; the entertainment center it's resting on is stuffed to overflowing with vintage cassette tapes, most of which seem to be either exercise videos or low-budget action movies. Between the blue and pink neon decor, the tacky modern art paintings hanging on the walls, the splatter-paint curtains and the VHS collection, you really feel like you've walked through a time warp straight into the eighties.

Hefting one of the VHS tapes, you flip it around and skim the back. "RabbitCop," you mutter, reading over the first few lines before shaking your head. "A rabbit that becomes a robotic police officer, huh. *Yeeaaaahh*, little too close for comfort, thanks." You gingerly return it to the shelf, sliding it into its spot next to the live action, family-friendly, pirate-fairytale movie.

Exercise mats are spread across the entirety of the living room, covering up the flooring. You lift at one of them with the tip of your foot only to instantly regret it; underneath it is a thick layer of loose fur in no fewer than three different colors. You can't even tell what the original carpet is supposed to look like.

Fred wasn't joking about this household lacking discipline and clear leadership. If the living room alone is this big of a mess, you shudder to imagine the rest of the apartment.

Sighing, you shuffle over to the couch and move aside a button-up dress shirt only to reveal several pairs of sequin-covered underwear. Narrowing your eyes, you brush at them with one of the pillows before carefully lowering yourself onto the cushion, already feeling like you need another shower. There's not much you can do at this point but patiently wait for the rest of your new "roomies" to arrive.

With a loud noise that's halfway between a growl and a yawn, Peanut stumbles into the living room at half past noon in a white undershirt and flannel pants, lazily scratching at his side.

"*G'mornin', Mike,*" he shouts over the sound of the vacuum cleaner with a tired smile before walking over to the refrigerator, only to stop dead in his tracks as he cartoonishly double-takes at you. "**Mike?!**"

"Hey, Peanut," you reply, switching the vacuum off.

Peanut whirls around the room in complete bewilderment, as if he's woken up in an entirely foreign location. At this point you're not sure that's far off the mark. After you lost track of time waiting in silence in the living room, you decided to busy yourself by neatening up a little. Hours later, the apartment's starting to look more like a typical college dorm and less like a bomb went off inside.

The yoga mats are rolled up neatly in the corner of the room, tucked between the couch and the back wall. All of the trash has been collected from the kitchen and subsequently escorted to the dumpster outside (at the agonizing pace of one bag at a time, due to your chest pain). You've dusted the television and sorted the tape collection, and you're halfway through your third load of dirty dishes. You've had to change the vacuum cleaner bag twice already and it'll probably take at least one more before you're able to lift all of the loose hair and fur up from the carpet.

"Wh-what are you, uh...?" Peanut stammers, spinning around like a top as he tries to take everything in.

"Bonbon insisted I come spend a few days with you guys while we get April's housing situation sorted out, so I thought I'd at least try to make myself useful."

Scratching the back of your head with a nervous chuckle, you only now realize you might've been a bit out of line. While you feel comfortable around Bonbon, it's just occurred to you that there are three other occupants in this house, two of whom you barely know and one you've never met. That's why you left the laundry alone -- it's one thing to vacuum the floor and carry out the trash, but going through someone's personal effects is an entirely different matter.

"I, ah, hope you don't mind," you comment, hoping you haven't just inadvertently brought unwanted wrath down on your own head. "I kind of got carried away."

"Carried away? Are you kidding? This is the cleanest I've seen it in, um -- since we moved in, I guess," he responds, fully awake now. Walking past the kitchen table, Peanut runs a finger across the polished surface of the cupboard before opening it and withdrawing a box of cereal. "I hope you get carried away more often, man. I'm sure the others'll, uh, be just -- wow. This is... wow, Mike."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it's 'wow,'" you laugh.

After finishing the carpets, you put the vacuum away in a closet that's jam-packed with toys, games, and other assorted paraphernalia -- most of which you imagine belongs to Bonbon.

"So, Peanut, I wanted to ask--"

You pause halfway through addressing him only to realize he's not where he was a minute ago. In his place at the table are an empty bowl and cereal box along with a half-finished glass of juice. He's already nestled into a pile of clothes on the couch, watching afternoon television with a contented grin.

"What's that?" he mumbles, attention already focused on the TV screen.

"Uh, never mind."

With a shake of your head, you gather his discarded bowl and cereal to put them away. It's been a while since you ate breakfast and you have worked up an appetite, but cereal doesn't look the least bit appealing. Unfortunately, the fridge is loaded down with almost nothing but fruit and vegetables -- most of which appears inedible, based on the unappetizing colors and smells. Bonworth's fridge was a mess, but this is an entirely new level of irresponsibility bordering on sheer wastefulness.

Checking the clock, you notice that Mango and Bonbon still aren't back yet. If what Bonbon said is accurate, Goose may end up sleeping for a while. Peanut's obviously too absorbed with TV to be much for conversation at the moment. At this point you've done as much as you can to clean, short of gathering the laundry or emptying out the rotten groceries in the refrigerator -- neither of which are something you feel okay doing. You could probably get away with popping upstairs for a quick bite to eat.

"I'll be back in a little bit, Peanut," you call out as you grab your coat from the front door.

"Sure," he says distractedly as he begins flipping channels. "Have a good day at work, Bonnie."

Chuckling to yourself, you zip up your coat and let yourself out.

"Told you so," Chiclet laughs as Frederick serves you a plate. Even though you missed out on their lunch, he still insisted on making something fresh for you to eat. "You'll have your work cut out for you if you think you're just gonna roll in and whip them into shape."

"I'm not sure even *Fred Fazbear* could get that household under control," you quip, dipping your grilled cheese sandwich into the tomato soup. "Oh, um, bon sandwich, Freddy."

Frederick nods approvingly before returning to work cleaning. It amazes you to see how much effort both he and Chichi put into maintaining their respective kitchens, whereas Bonbon's resembles a landfill more than somewhere to prepare and serve food -- and that's to say nothing of

the rest of the place. Clearly, her health-conscious behavior involves spending more time at the gym or practicing yoga than maintaining her apartment. Even still, that doesn't let Mango, Peanut, or the enigmatic Goose off the hook at all -- they're every bit as responsible as she is for the upkeep of their own home.

"I don't get it at all," you continue. "How can anyone *live* like that? I mean, I'm grateful for the, y'know, for Bonbon opening her home up to a complete stranger -- but like, my skin was crawling just *looking* at the carpet."

"Ehhhh, I feel ya. That's what happens when four free spirits shack up together," Chiclet comments as she sips at her coffee.

"Four? So Goose is right in line with the others, then?" you ask between bites.

"You couldn't tell?"

"I still haven't met her, and Mango's apparently out of the house right now. Peanut was the only one around."

"Ahhh. Well, Goose and I are old friends from college. We used to joke that she could detect any party within a five mile radius," Chiclet laughs, running a wing through her headfeathers. "It's like she had some kind of -- *euphoria* radar."

You've now got an amusing mental image of Chiclet running around a city at night with a smaller version of herself acting as some kind of receiver.

"You haven't talked much about her, though."

Shrugging, Chiclet refills her coffee cup from the pot. "We're still close, but our days of hitting up warehouse raves and sorority socials are behind us. Gotta grow up sometime, right?"

"If it helps, I can swing by the store and pick you up some margarita mix and a few cheap bead necklaces," you offer.

Chiclet gives you an incredulous smile, blush playing at her cheeks as she covers her rugged lips with a wing. "Hah, and here I was thinking you were a *total* square. Any time you want to get absolutely shitfaced, little man, I'll drink you under the table."

Thinking back to your trip to the bar, you wince a little. "I'm down to party, but I'll probably hold off on any binge drinking for a while if it's all the same to you."

"Shame," Chiclet says. "I'm gonna hold you to the necklaces, though."

Snorting, you mop up the last of your soup with the remnants of your bread crust. "Tell you what, I'll get a bunch and we can give them out as prizes for our next pajama night together," you reply.

"Kickass." Clinking her coffee mug to your soda cup in a mock toast, Chiclet jerks a thumb at a softly-dozing April. "So, I talked to mama bunny about your little exploit with Bonnie."

"Oh, shit. How much trouble am I in?"

It's obvious she's struggling not to laugh. "Well, rabbits mate for life, you know."

"I've heard," you mutter. "Believe me, I've heard. I now know more about rabbit mating and courtship than I ever wanted to."

"Hah! Well, Bonnie was embarrassed earlier when she told me about it. Apparently she got caught up in the moment -- not that *you'd* know anything about being impulsive, right?"

You stack your plates up to carry to the kitchen sink. "Absolutely not. I'm totally not the type to, oh, I dunno -- start cleaning an apartment for a bunch of people I don't even know."

"Exactly, right?" Chiclet says, eyes wide in mock surprise. "You'd *never* do something like that. Anyway, it's probably for the best if you pretend it never happened."

"The kiss, or cleaning their pad?"

Chiclet presses a wingtip to her front teeth, pretending to consider it before breaking out into a big smile.

"Naaaah, Mike. If you're worried about overstepping your bounds or whatever, don't be. I can tell you right now that Bonbon'll be thrilled, and despite whatever Mangle tells you, Mango's not the devil."

There's a thump overhead as an angry muzzle pokes out of the ceiling. "Of course not! She's just his *bride*," Mangle sniffs.

Chiclet reaches up and closes the air vent cover, sealing the haughty fox in. "Don't you have orders to mail or something, Em?"

"*Fiiine.*"

Turning back to you, the hen raises her coffee mug to her mouth, catching the excess drizzle with a napkin as she takes another drink. "But yeah, they're not the type to get worked up over stuff like that. Besides, Peanut's used to people kind of taking care of him anyway -- he's a little bit, y'know..."

"I got the vibe, yeah," you chuckle as Frederick accepts your plates, loading them into the dishwasher. "Sweet kid, though."

"Oh, he's a softy. Kind of a mess and a bit insecure, but he'd never hurt a fly. Speaking of hurting, how's your chest?"

You lift your shirt, letting Chiclet get an eyeful of the bruises. She cringes in sympathy, gently tracing a wingtip over your torso. "*Harsh*, dude. That's gotta sting like hell."

"It's not comfortable," you agree as you lower your shirt. "As long as I'm real careful when I'm doing anything, I'm all right. Like cleaning earlier was okay because I went slow. Carried trash bags one at a time, that sort of thing. I don't think I could go working out at the gym in the shape I'm in, though -- contrary to what Bonbon seems to believe."

"Don't let her push you, Mike," Chiclet warns. "She'll have you running laps and I don't want you developing like, pneumonia or whatever."

"I'll let you know if she gets too crazy." Glancing at the clock, you realize you've been gone longer than you intended for what was supposed to be a quick lunch. "Anyway, I should probably be

heading back -- Bonbon should be getting home from work by now and I don't want anyone to think I up and ditched them."

"Good idea. I'll see you later, then."

You grab your coat from the rack by the door, waving to Chiclet. "Once more into the fray," you joke before heading outside.

"I'm back, Peanut," you call out as you open the front door to Bonbon's apartment. There's a fresh pile of discarded laundry in the hall including a familiar-looking windbreaker; Bonbon must have returned while you were gone.

"There you are, roomie!" Bonbon playfully chides from the living room, propped against a dozing Peanut with her legs hanging off of the couch. "I told you I'd be back after lunch. Where'd you get off to?"

You point at the ceiling. "Oh, I went to go talk to Chiclet for a bit," you reply evasively, not wanting to have to explain that you left in search of edible food. "Peanut's already passed out again?"

"Well, it's November," she says, affectionately patting his belly with a paw. "You know how that goes."

"...hibernation?" you ask after a moment, realizing what she's alluding to.

"Basically, yeah. He doesn't do the full cryogenic thing, but he does nap a lot more in the winter than normal." Easing off of Peanut, she hops up from the couch and bounds over to you. "But enough of that. I **LOVE** what you've done with the place! This was such a huge treat to come back to!"

Two down, two to go. "Oh, thanks. You might want to take a look inside your fridge sometime, I think a few of your vegetables need to be, uh..."

"Yeah, I've been meaning to clean it out," she says, scratching her head. "I've just been so caught up with HumieCon prep, and work, and then of course exercise and all that. And the new season of *Legend of Bob* just started, and I've also been binge-watching this great new humie show from overseas and it's not even **SUBBED** yet but you can really feel the emotion in the voice acting! Anyway, busy busy! Stuff's just gotten away from me lately."

You're starting to see firsthand what Fred and Chiclet meant. This is the *norm* here: eating cereal, watching cartoons, and then going outside to play. No wonder they work at a kiddie pizzeria -- Bonbon and Peanut are practically the *target audience*.

The front door clicks open before you can respond to her, which is probably for the best.

"I'm home, Bonnie! The twins were *very* hands-on today. Luckily, I've never had a problem handling two at once!" Mango calls out from behind you in the foyer. "Oh, *hello*, Mike!"

"Hello to you too," you reply.

"It's nice to get to see you face-to-face without a flowerbed between us," she titters.

Now that your view isn't obstructed by her window garden, you're finally able to size Mango up a bit more readily. Despite the superficial similarities, their Mangle isn't at all built like yours. If anything, she's more of a match for Cheeky's ample figure, just a little shorter but no less well-endowed.

"Likewise," you respond, politely. "Welcome home, Mango."

"I heard you were involved in an accident -- how are you feeling?"

"Sore, but I can't complain."

You reach toward the pastel-colored fox for a handshake, but she tilts her head quizzically at your proffered hand before giving your palm a tentative lick. The hairs on the back of your neck stand up as you feel her rough, moist canine tongue brush against your skin. You cast a nervous look in Bonbon's direction, but she doesn't seem to notice anything strange about it.

"Mmmm. Well, I'm glad you'll be staying with us for a little while," Mango coyly responds as she dabs at her muzzle. "I've been wanting a chance to measure you for myself, since I don't trust Foxglove."

"Ah, f-for the costume?" You nonchalantly try to brush your hand against your jeans, hoping she doesn't notice you wiping her saliva off.

Mango blinks a few times, seemingly considering the question. "Oh, sure. And just, you know... in general."

There's an awkward pause as you're not certain of what to say in response. She doesn't seem to mind, observing you for several uncomfortable seconds, her smile never faltering.

"Anyway! I'm going to go change and get some supplies so we can get started. I won't be long! Bonnie, sweetheart, can you put on some tea for me, please?"

"Sure," Bonbon chirps as she sprints to the kitchen, yanking the cupboard open. "Mike, you want a cup?"

"I'm, uh -- I'm good, thanks."

"Well then, back in just a moment," Mango says, swinging her broad hips as she sashays off deeper into the apartment.

Ten minutes later, Mango returns to the living room, this time emerging from what you're assuming is her bedroom door in the hallway. She's slowly pushing a small rolling cart loaded down with buckets and plastic organizers full of various craft materials -- sheets of felt, colored foam, glue sticks, tubs of glitter, and so on. As she makes it into the common area, her face lights up.

"Oh my goodness! The place is absolutely pristine!" she declares, absently flicking aside some laundry with her tail. "Bonnie, I *know* this wasn't your doing. Does that mean you're our mystery maid, Mike?"

"Guilty as charged," you reply amiably as you study your new housemate.

Though "Mango Mangle" only comes up to around shoulder height of "Foxglove Mangle", the two foxes do bear some rather noticeable stylistic similarities, especially in their pastel pink and white motifs. Unlike your Mangle's avant-garde sensibilities, Mango's wearing a hideous oversized sweater and a long, fluffy floral skirt with what appears to be a petticoat underneath -- it's noticeably flared, especially around the hips, much moreso than a skirt would normally be on someone of such short stature.

Her eyes are probably her most immediately striking feature -- they seem to be opened at their fullest possible width, as if she's trying to take in as much visual information as possible. Her makeup's more neatly-applied than Foxglove's is, or perhaps it appears to be so because it's simply less caked-on. And while your Mangle's fur is naturally white, Mango looks as if her fur might be dyed or bleached as you can see that her roots are closer to a vibrant pink.

"Well, I've got to give a hand to you, Mike," the pudgy vixen beams as she shoves her cart into the living room. "You haven't even been here a full day and already you're servicing us well! Such a clean, neat atmosphere **reaAAILLY** makes me want to... *create*."

"I'm glad to be appreciated. Believe me, you have no idea how much it means to me after the last few days. So, uh, we doing some arts and crafts here, or what exactly?" you ask, standing up to examine her tray full of supplies. "These are some pretty nice--"

Before you can finish, Mango upends the cart with a flourish, sending everything that was precariously loaded upon it all over the center of the living room floor with a terrific crash. Startled, you nearly leap back in surprise. To his credit, Peanut hasn't even so much as moved, still snoring. Mango begins eagerly digging through the pile with both arms and her tail, tossing pieces around in a seemingly random order until she finds what she's looking for -- a single measuring tape and a pencil.

"Ooooh!" Bonbon cheers from the kitchen, bounding over with a tray of teacups as you stare in complete shock at the chaos Mango's just generated. All that effort cleaning, and she's undone a good half of it in two seconds. "Are we going to get started on the **Bobulator**?!"

"You'd better believe it," Mango replies, her manic grin still firmly in place as she tosses a tube of fabric paint aside.

Pumping her fist in the air, Bonbon nearly upends the tea as she hands Mango her cup. "**SUH-WEEEET!** All right, Mike. We've put this off long enough but tonight, oh! *Tonight* I'm gonna make a *man* outta you," she enthuses, dashing off down the front hallway to her room.

You whirl in place, your heart racing as Mango sips at her tea. "I'm not -- why does everybody keep saying that I'm a *virgin*?" you sputter, annoyed and horrified. "Also, don't I get a say in any of this? Do I need to go get Chiclet?!"

"Virgin?! The heck are you talking about, Mike?" Bonbon shouts from her bedroom. "Get your mind out of the gutter, because we're gonna take you on a magical journey of wholesome family entertainment, good for ages 12 and up! Today's the day you go from being a **BOY**..."

Bonbon jumps, somersaults, and twists into a series of increasingly complex poses before landing in front of you, producing a DVD from behind her back with a flourish.

"...to a **BOB**!"

"Oh, oh good," you sigh in relief, accepting the package from her. "So is this that *Legend of Bob* thing you've been going on and on about?"

"The complete first season! I just got it in the mail a few days ago," Bonbon gushes, teeth gleaming as she scampers around behind you to read the cover over your shoulder. "Original sub *and* the dub if you're a lame-o, but you're a monkey, right? So I'm sure you'd find the dub even more insulting than I do. Mike, I'm telling you now -- this show is going to change. Your. *Life*."

"Change my life, huh," you echo dubiously, looking at the DVD box.

You've seen this character once before, on her cell phone when she showed you the picture of the costume you'd be wearing at the convention's contest. The cover features "Bob Legendmann", a big, muscular human with a neon blue mohawk and a space-age gladiator suit with too many pockets and pouches to count. He's got some kind of strange silver apparatus hooked onto his left arm, though you can't tell what it's supposed to be. Next to him is a dumpy-looking human child in overalls with a propeller hat and a balloon.

"Who's this guy?" you ask, pointing to the pathetic, wall-eyed figure that more closely resembles a cheap Playskool toy than an actual human being.

"Uuuuuggghhh. **That** fu--" Catching a sharp look from Mango, Bonbon hastily corrects her language. "--*errrrr*; that's 'Balloon Boy', his sidekick! He's introduced in episode two, but he doesn't contribute anything to the plot. He, uh, mostly just stands around and laughs."

"Sounds exciting. So this balloon cartoon is your favorite thing to watch right now?" you ask, flipping the DVD case over to read the back.

"It's not about balloons and it's not a cartoon," Bonbon scoffs, plucking it out of your hands before you can get too engrossed. "It's a superior show from a superior overseas animation studio. Besides, don't let the cover turn you off, this isn't exactly an authorized copy, anyway. They had to use fanart."

Perking up from holding her measuring tape to your knee, Mango frowns. "Bonnie! Did you purchase *another* bootleg again? You know you should support the official release! How do you think the artists feel knowing that good money is being thrown after bad?"

"I wasn't gonna wait six months for them to get it onto DVD over here just to watch it," Bonbon whines, stomping her foot. "Besides! I'll definitely buy the retail release when it's out. I promise!"

"Hnnnh. You'd better. Craftsmen are worthy of their wage, you know."

Nodding, Bonbon sprints over to the TV and shoves a stack of VHS tapes aside to reveal a DVD player underneath the VCR. "If we hurry, Mike, we can get through the first thirteen episodes before dinner, and then I can start catching you up on season two!"

"Thirteen-- oh, wow," you choke, laughing worriedly. "I'm not so sure about that, uh..."

You never imagined you'd be spending your evening binge-watching bizarre alien anime, but Bonbon seems enthusiastic as she looks at you with pleading eyes.

"How else are you supposed to know how to act in character, Mike?" she appeals, wringing her paws. "This is it! I'm telling you now, **EVERYONE** is gonna be talking about *Legend of Bob*!"

Heck, I even convinced the guy in charge of acquisitions at Jeremy Human's to import an arcade cabinet from another frickin' *CONTINENT* it's so good!"

You make a show of considering it as Mango quietly sips her tea.

"Ah, fine. I'll give it a couple episodes to see--"

"Thanks so much Mike! I know you won't regret it!" she whoops, slamming the disc into the tray with extreme prejudice.

"I, uh, I guess I'll stand here and watch while you get the measurements you need, Mango?"

"Sounds good," she says, setting her teacup aside as Bonbon turns up the TV volume. "If you need to take a break at any time, just let me know since I'll be very... *thorough*."

With one smooth motion, Mango unfastens your belt buckle, dropping your jeans to the ground and exposing your boxers.

"Break!" you yelp in alarm. "*Break!!*"

"Oh, Mike! You're so funny," Mango laughs as she presses the tape measure to your cheeks while Bonbon wolf-whistles from the couch. "Let's get started!"

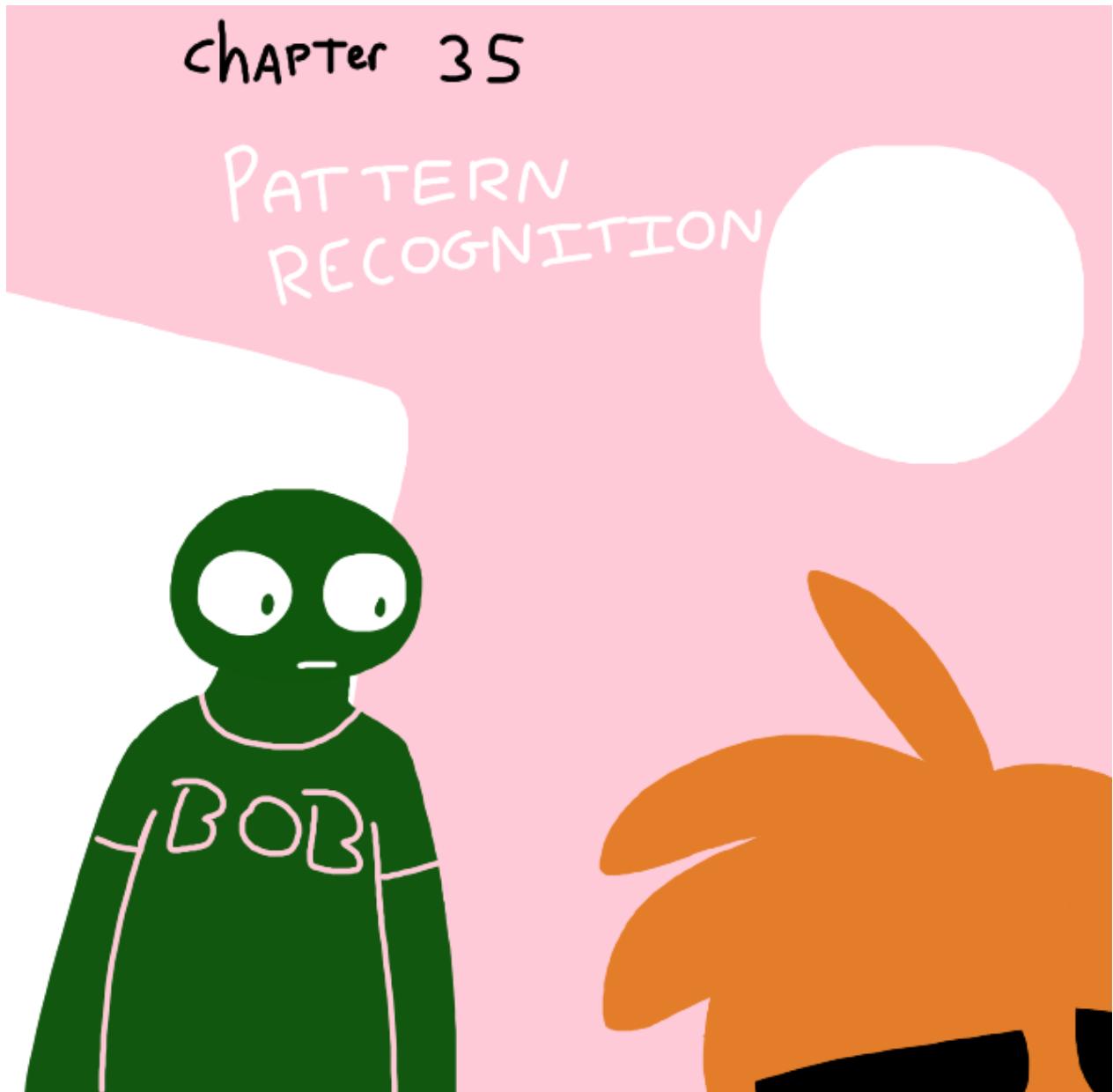
# Pattern Recognition

## Chapter Summary

Mike shares a couch and a meal with his new roommates, and manages to get some chores done between watching cartoons.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



You're not even three full episodes into *Legend of Bob*, yet you've already begun to observe multiple patterns forming.

The first thing you've noticed is that the show's writers seem utterly *compelled* to pummel into the viewers' minds that these characters are *humans*. Almost every single line of dialogue out of each human character's mouth is some kind of banal, human-centric slang; bizarre turns of phrase like "everyhuman" instead of just "everyone", and "on the other human hand" instead of simply "on the other hand". While you're not really surprised that a culture of exclusively animal people have no idea of what humans are *actually* like, it does make the cartoon unwieldy and jarring. Even the Smurfs' lingo sounds more natural and less forced by comparison.

The main character "Bob Legendmann" is a typically boisterous, over-the-top action hero -- but a curiously pacifistic one. Bob prefers to talk, beg, or bribe his way out of every situation he gets into, only resorting to violence if he's exhausted all other possibilities. A running gag is that a fair number of his dilemmas tend to be self-inflicted, usually after he's run his mouth off -- or in at least one case, after his sidekick's gotten him into trouble. (You're also starting to see why Bonbon utterly despises the "Balloon Boy" character. If anything, she might have understated how useless he truly is.)

The most interesting part of all, however: Bob's constant, unwavering drive to be the champion of every miserable, downtrodden character-of-the-week he comes across. While he seems decidedly cognizant of the fact that he's the designated hero of his own story (even going so far as to lean on the fourth wall from time to time to establish to the audience that he knows he's a cartoon character), he's deeply empathetic and a borderline obsessive "fixer". Bob Legendmann's simply not happy until he's rescued every poor unfortunate from their circumstances, even if it comes at great personal cost to himself.

Sure, *Legend of Bob* is formulaic and predictable. That doesn't come as too much of a surprise. For starters, it *is* just a cartoon, and it is marketed predominately towards children -- regardless of how Bonbon wants to spin it. Of course it's going to be formulaic -- you expected as much going into it. What you **didn't** expect was just how much you'd actually enjoy watching it. For whatever insane reason, you're having fun sitting on the couch with your mostly-new friends, watching a cartoon about a fictionalized version of humans in a language you can't even begin to understand. Fortunately, the subtitles make it easy enough to follow along while offering commentary.

"Hah! Oh, man, they really *do* eat their fries with barbecue sauce," you chuckle as the credits begin to roll. "I can't believe you were serious about that."

"Are you for real, Mike?" Bonbon asks as she and Mango help themselves to gobs of buttered popcorn from the bowl in your lap. "That's standard in like, every humie cartoon."

"I thought you said this *wasn't* a cartoon," you jab back, glancing over at Mango innocently licking butter off of her paws and muzzle.

"Ugh! I mean, like, okay -- so it's animated," she groans. "It's an animated show and I *guess* that *technically* makes it a cartoon, but it's not like the kiddie cartoons *we* make, you know?"

""We'?" you ask.

"*Our* country's cartoons are way worse than this! They're full of stupid gross-out humor only little kids are gonna laugh at, and they rely *way* too much on sight gags, and--"

"In the last episode, the stupid sidekick character *literally* dropped his pants and farted into a balloon so that they could escape from the crazy scientist's lair," you interrupt, laughing. "That's pretty much the *definition* of 'gross-out humor'. Hell, they even showed his butt."

"But that's a *cultural* thing!" she whines, yanking at both of her ears out of frustration. "It doesn't really translate well overseas, that's just their sophisticated sense of humor! Besides, the censor-happy suits ended up cutting it from the dub *anyway!*"

Mango rolls her eyes knowingly as she raises her glass of water.

"Face it, Bonnie: Mike's right. Flatulence is flatulence *regardless* of culture, and I'd argue that a toot joke is about as unsophisticated as it gets," she says before dipping her tongue into her glass and lapping away at the contents within. You're trying your hardest not to laugh -- she's one to talk about sophistication. Especially considering how much time she spent measuring your glutes.

"Don't get me wrong, Bonbon," you quickly add, noticing the blue rabbit's building consternation. "I'm still enjoying it, even if it is kinda -- uh, out there."

"Good! It gets way **WAY** better as the series goes on."

You ease back, scratching your leg idly as Peanut dozes next to you. The four of you are heaped up together on the living room couch in an almost intimate pile. Peanut's snoozing to your left while Bonbon cozies up noticeably close to you, with Mango stretched out over the top of the couch underneath a blanket. Every so often the craftsy vixen will lean down and scoop up popcorn with a flick of her tail in an impressive display of dexterity.

Ordinarily, you'd be nervous and extremely restless in an unfamiliar place (a topic you're well-versed in after moving in and out of three apartments in less than a month), but now that you've had a little while to unwind, somehow you're not particularly uneasy here. Even after having been given a *thoroughly* exhaustive measuring by Mango while Bonbon playfully ogled you, and even as awkward and irresponsible as just about everyone in this room is, you can't help but feel comfortable around them. Maybe it helps that you're already familiar with Peanut and Bonbon, maybe you see some of your previous roommates in them.

Or maybe it's just because they're nice folks. But then, has anyone here *not* been nice to you? You can't think of even one truly malevolent or disingenuous person you've met since day one. Mangle rubbed you raw at first but then quickly grew on you, and even as seemingly hostile as Fred and Rackham were at times, they still gave you a chance. Besides, you don't get the feeling that Fred having you leave was intended to be any kind of slight against you as a person.

Speaking of the inhabitants of 93-A, you make a mental note to stop by in a couple of days to check up on everyone. Beanie looked like she was in a bad way when you were dragged off kicking and screaming, and if nothing else, you feel like you should clear the air.

"Ready for episode four?" Bonbon cheers, interrupting your thoughts with a loud clap. You take a deep breath and shift on the couch a little to ease your achy chest before nodding.

"Sure."

Over four hours of *Legend of Bob* later (with intermittent bathroom breaks and an extremely brief visit from Dr. Rabbinson to check up on you and drop off your painkillers), you've almost finished binge watching the first season. Despite Bonbon's insistence to "see the job through just like Bob would", you argue that you'd like to save the last few episodes for a later viewing. While you are enjoying the extended screening, you've also been sitting for hours and your chest pain isn't getting

better. And since your medication needs to be taken with food, now seems like a good time for a respite.

Having considered the perishable contents of the refrigerator to be almost a complete write-off (save for a few stalks of celery and a green pepper that hadn't yet given way to mold), you resorted to sifting through the cabinets to help fix dinner while Bonbon ran to the corner store for a few things to help supplement. It's not a Michelin star feast, but frozen fish baked in the oven and cold macaroni salad will fill everyone up until you've had time to properly clean and stock the kitchen.

Peanut plops down at the table with a gaping yawn. It was nice of Bonbon to wake him so that he wouldn't miss out on dinner, even if her method of shaking him like a ragdoll seemed a bit rough. Goose is still nowhere to be seen, leaving Mango the last to arrive as she shuffles over to claim the table's remaining fourth seat.

"So Mike! What do you thiiiink?" Bonbon grins in a sing-song tone as she sets a plate of macaroni salad down in front of you. You shrug and dip your fork into it to take a bite.

"Not half bad," you reply. "I probably should have been a little more generous with the vinegar, but at least it's edible."

"Silly. That's not what I'm talking about," she says teasingly, leaning into you. You pause mid-chew -- both she and Mango are staring at you very expectantly with equally wide-eyed expressions.

You look over your shoulder at the TV with a raised eyebrow. "What, about Bob?"

"Noooooooo," Bonbon coaxes with a sweeping wave of her paw as she leans over the table. "Something even *more* cool and awesome...?"

"Okay, *now* you're scaring me," you chuckle nervously. "Also, lean back. You're getting mayo all over yourself."

She looks down at her shirt with a frown, realizing she's wearing most of her dinner. "Shoot. Anyway, I'm talking about the apartment, you dingus. What do you think of the place?"

"Uh, well, I think you guys could benefit from a trip to the laundromat," you joke as she dabs awkwardly at her *Fun Fun Race for the Cure '07* shirt.

"No need! We've got a washer and dryer here!" Dropping her napkin on the carpet, she leans back in her chair with a relieved sigh and a huge smile. "Man, I'm glad you said something. I didn't wanna ask, but it's *huge* of you to volunteer! Thank you!"

Mango's eyes light up. "Oooh! Do my laundry for me too, Mike! I'm just about out of clean clothes for the week and my best blouse has *so* many stains on it. Boys will be boys," she grins.

"Gosh, thanks," Peanut adds between a mouthful of fish. "Um, my suits require real TLC to get clean, you know? If you could get some of the honey mustard out of the collar of my dress shirt, that'd be great too."

"Uh. Yeah. Okay, I guess," you reply with a frown. Volunteer? More like *voluntold*. Hell, if they're *that* comfortable with you going through their stuff... "But, yeah, Bonbon, it's real nice and cozy here. Thank you for having me, guys."

"Aww, we're just glad to, y'know, help out however we can," Peanut chimes in as he continues attacking his plate. Of course he's glad -- they're practically getting a brand new live-in maid...!

"Likewise. I heard about what happened last night -- well, bits and pieces anyway from Foxglove," Mango adds, slicing away at her fish with her knife and fork while filling her glass with juice. "Even though I never do know quite what to believe with that horrid gossip..."

"Hear tell, you two have some kind of personal blood feud going on," you ask with a smile, forking into your own fish. "What's up with you and Mangle anyway?"

Huh. *Mangle*. Not Foxglove, still Mangle.

You smile inwardly. At least that's *one* tiny piece of your own personal puzzle down.

"Blood feud" might be a teensy bit overdramatic," Mango admits with a wag of her bushy tail. "Then again, Foxglove is overdramatic, so it... fits."

"Believe me, I know," you smirk. "Some kind of professional thing?"

"More like *unprofessional*," Bonbon mutters, rolling her eyes. Even Peanut seems amused as the three of you turn your attention to the flustered shortstack of a vixen.

"Conflict of interests. There was a trade show of sorts a while back," Mango replies, blushing as she sets her juice glass down. "I've lost count of the details, but let's just say that both of us had, hmmmm, similar ideas and it didn't go so well. There were some... accusations."

"Oooh boy," you grimace. "Who, uh, who was at fault?"

"**Foxglove**," Mango replies automatically, dragging her knife across her plate with a loud screech. "*Absolutely Foxglove.*"

You grin, knowing full well what the answer would be if you were to ask Mangle the same question. Now you're starting to get somewhere.

"So, how about a more pleasant topic of discussion?" she asks abruptly. "Freddy, I can't help but notice you were here for most of the day. Did you call into work?"

Peanut's sleepy, contented smile is immediately replaced with a look of panic. "Huh oh. I -- oh, no! I'm supposed to be on closing shift today! Oh man, the boss is gonna kill me...!"

So much for a "more pleasant topic". The poor slob looks like he's about to pass a kidney stone, his cheeks are so red.

"That's the third time this *month*, Freddy!" Mango gasps as Peanut stumbles out of his chair towards the couch, digging underneath piles of clothes for his tattered suit.

"Oh, geez! I know, Mangle, I'm just -- oh, this is just nuts!" he moans, tugging his slacks on. "It's this darned torpor -- it's gonna get me fired! Where are my *dress socks*?!"

Honestly, worse things could happen to someone than getting sacked from Jeremy Human's. Like winning a million dollars, for instance. That'd be horrible by comparison.

"What's torpor?" you ask, scratching your head.

"It's when an animal slows down during the winter," Mango quickly explains as she pushes her chair away from the table. Ah, so that's what Bonbon meant by him not doing the "full cryogenic thing".

"Dammit, Peanut! You've gotta be to work in twenty minutes, there's no **WAY** you'll make it downtown in time!" Bonbon shrieks.

She sprints around the table in a panic, tossing underwear and tee shirts left and right trying to find his socks. A sequin bra flutters down, landing on top of your head with a soft *pomf*. Your appetite sufficiently diminished, you gently pluck it by its strap and lower it to the floor, doing your best to maintain a straight face as these three yahoos flail and run in circles.

"Socks!" Bonbon announces, waving silky pink fabric around in the air. "I found some -- no, wait, these are Goose's socks! Err, why does she *have* socks, anyway? She's a chicken. Do chickens wear socks...?"

"Who knows?!" Peanut cries. "Bears wear socks, and this bear can't find his! Oh, this is a disaster!"

Yes it is, but not for the reason he's thinking of. While Mango scurries underneath the table, you stand up and limp over to the kitchen counter, pulling the telephone off of the handset. A memo pad by the phone has a list of important telephone numbers written down in what you're sure is Chiclet's writing, since you recognize it from her photo collection. After finding the number you want, you cradle the phone in your neck so that you have both hands free to twist the cap off of your medicine bottle.

"*Fazbear*."

You nearly choke swallowing your pills dry, not having expected him to answer before the first ring finished.

"Fred. It's Mike," you manage, watching as Bonbon and Peanut furiously swim around in the craft supplies Mango dumped all over the living room floor.

There's an awkward pause followed by the swift intake of air on the other end of the line. "Mike. Hello."

A muffled scream draws your attention -- somehow, Peanut's gotten himself stuck underneath the couch. Bonbon dashes down the hallway to the bathroom before coming back with a tub of petroleum jelly.

"What was that noise?" Fred asks warily. "Are you all right?"

"Oh, it's nothing. Hey, listen -- you're the manager over at Jeremy's, right?"

"Regional manager," he smoothly corrects, though you can still sense some strain in his voice. "But yes, I oversee all of the stores in the state."

Stores, plural. Meaning *more of them*. You remember Cheeky and Bonworth mentioning something about another location, but the thought of a legion of pizzeria androids marching down the streets of major cities...

"Th-then you have some pull, I'd imagine," you croak, forcing the horrifying mental image out of your mind. "Uh, look. Peanut overslept and he's gonna miss his shift tonight because of the... torpor? Is that right?" Well, torpor sounds like a better excuse than "he can't find his argyle socks", anyway.

"Correct. Bears don't hibernate, but that one makes a good argument otherwise. It'd help if he'd switch from chamomile to coffee like I keep telling him." You hear the phone rustling against his fur as he shifts it around. "I'll call the shift manager and let them know he's running late. He's *only* running late this time, right?"

"Yeah. He's on his way now. Thanks, Fred," you reply, lowering the handset to the base.

"Oh, and Mike?"

You yank it back to your ear. "Yes?"

"I've... got something I'd like to show you. Let's have lunch out tomorrow. My treat."

"Seriously? After last--" you begin to reply, but before you can finish your ear's filled with a throaty growl on the other end of the line; it's a low, weighty rumble like the idling sound of a motorcycle engine. "I, I mean -- absolutely. Yes sir. I'd love to. Tomorrow's fantastic, m-my schedule's clear."

**Perfect.** I'll pick you up at eleven."

Exhaling heavily, you hang up and turn to the living room where a dejected Peanut is looking at the floor, a pair of threadbare dress socks hanging pathetically from one paw. Bonbon and Mango have collapsed on the couch, wheezing -- all three of them look totally frazzled. Slumping onto his rear, Peanut buries his head in his paws as he begins to rock back and forth.

"I'm never gonna make it in time for my shift! Maaaaan, I'm so fired...!"

"Maybe not. I just got off the phone with Fred, and he's calling the manager now," you interrupt. "I think you'll be all right if you pull yourself together and hurry down there."

Perking up, he looks at you. "Oh man, Mike!" he gasps, clearly ecstatic. "I can't -- gosh, I can't thank you enough!"

"Wow, Mike," Bonbon adds sympathetically. "That had to be pretty uncomfortable for you, huh."

"It's fine," you reply with a tired smile. "I needed to talk to him sooner or later anyway. You'd better get going, though."

Peanut nods, hastily throwing the rest of his clothes on and running for the door. "I'll be back later tonight, guys! See you!" he says, holding his floppy hat to his head as he barrels out the front entrance.

"Well, crisis averted. With that, I'm going to head to my room and lay down for a little while," Mango yawns, stepping over the disaster area of craft supplies she created without so much as flinching. "I'm exhausted."

"Yeah, I've gotta run too, Mike," Bonbon quickly adds, dashing around Mango. "I'm supposed to be online for a very important chat session. If you can take care of the dishes that'd be great. I'll be

back as soon as our RP-- uh, as soon as our *discussion meeting* is finished, okay? Might be a few hours though so don't worry about me!"

You give both of them a withering look as they cheerfully frolic towards their separate bedrooms without a care in the world. Looks like *Legend of Bob* isn't the only formulaic thing going on in this household.

It's well after dark by the time you've finished clearing off the dinner table, gathering and sorting the laundry, and packing all of Mango's craft supplies into their proper containers -- and you still haven't even started on the nightmare refrigerator from hell yet. One of Mango's packages of glitter broke open as you were returning it to the cart, spraying the repulsive plastic pixie dust all over the living room carpet. It took you an hour and a half just to vacuum it up and you're still not sure you got all of it.

Currently, you're in the laundry room in the back of the apartment. You're halfway through your third comic book and your fifth load of laundry. Although you're certain it's just an illusion of your tired mind, the piles of clothes seem to be getting bigger rather than smaller no matter how many loads you wash and dry.

It's easy enough to separate everything out for washing (you're no expert but you know enough about laundry to know not to throw white shirts in with denims) but assigning them to the correct owner once they've come *out* of the wash proves a much bigger challenge. The oversized masculine shirts and dress slacks are clearly Peanut's, and you're positive the exercise duds can only belong to Bonbon, but other garments are harder to decipher. For instance, the babydoll cut tee shirts with girly sayings and patterns could belong to any of the girls, and you've lost count of how many pairs of panties you've folded in styles ranging from too cutesy to too racy.

Well, whatever. They can claim their stuff themselves -- you want to be a good houseguest during your stay, but you can't help but feel like you're running a daycare right now. With a grunt, you finish filling the next laundry basket with folded clothes before heading back out to the common area to grab something to drink.

When you went into the laundry room, it was early evening, but now that it's late at night and most of the lights are out in the household, you can't see anything as you stumble down the hall. Thus, you're legitimately alarmed when you hear rustling noises coming from the kitchen. Your heart begins to race as you grope around in the dark for a light switch or a flashlight or something. Shades of your nightmares and hallucinations come back to torment you -- visions of being haunted by terrifying robotic versions of your friends as you flee for safety in a pitch-black family restaurant--

Oh thank god, you've found the kitchen light switch. Clicking it on, you squint as your eyes adjust to the light. You're bracing yourself for a fight in case a burglar has snuck in.

...huh. Well, if this person's a burglar, she's not a very observant one.

A hen with feathers the color of ripe apricots stands in the center of the kitchen with her back to you, obviously rummaging through the cupboards. She's a touch on the short side -- probably right at or close to Chichi's height, certainly nowhere near Chiclet's considerable stature. You blush as you realize all she's wearing is a white cutoff tee with a confetti-print pattern and a pair of fuchsia rhumba panties covered in flashy sequins.

Guess that answers *one* of the questions that's been rattling around in the back of your head.

Based on the way she's perhaps unconsciously wiggling her tailfeathers, the chicken seems to have found something that interests her. Pulling a box of powdered dishwasher detergent out of the cupboard, she opens it and takes a hesitant sniff before coughing and returning it to the shelf. Reluctantly, she closes the door with a frustrated sigh before standing up.

"You must be Goose," you offer with a smile, feeling more than a little silly for having let yourself get so panicked. "Hungry?"

Whirling, Goose looks around to see who's snuck up on her before locking onto you. She cautiously moves forward, studying your face with intent.

"Sorry, that was pretty mean," you chuckle self-admonishingly, raising your hands. "We haven't met yet. I'm Mike, I'll be-- *mmmprrhh*."

Your face is suddenly filled with feathers as she wraps you in an embrace, feeling you up with her wingtips as if she's dusting off a piece of furniture.

"...mmm, nice to meet you, Mike," she replies.

In stark contrast to Chiclet's loud, frank demeanor, Goose is quiet and breathy -- her voice as soft as the feathers she's fondling your head with. You're frozen in a mixture of alarm and discomfort as she systematically works her wings from your head to your waist.

"H-he, hel-hello," you stutter like a loon, your cheeks beet red. Just when you start to see them as normal people, they always manage to do something to surprise you. Are *all* chickens like this?

Stepping back, Goose quietly shuffles over to the kitchen table, carefully pulling a chair away and falling into it. "Yeah, I am hungry," she says. "Is there anything leftover from dinner? I was looking for cereal, but I couldn't find any."

*Cereal?* What the hell did she want with *dish detergent* then?

"I made some, um, some macaroni salad. Is that all right, or do you want some--"

"Oh, that's perfect," Goose replies easily, slumping against the table with a yawn. "I'm so hungry I'd eat a *shoe* right now. I'm starving."



"One macaroni-and-shoe salad coming up," you joke.

She chuckles quietly, apparently not the expressive type. With that lazy, low-key demeanor, she almost gives the impression of a more outgoing, touchy-feely chicken version of Beanie.

"Man. I'm so screwed up on my sleep schedule right now. What time is it, Mike?"

You check the clock directly over her head. "...it's almost ten. Uh, is soda okay or do you want water?"

"Whatever," she says amiably. "I'm easy to please."

Shrugging, you plug your nose as you open the fridge to pluck a cola from the soda drawer -- the last refuge of consumable goods not yet overrun by slime. "I'll keep that in mind."

As you scoop the leftover macaroni salad onto a plate for her, you take a moment to study Goose. In a sense, she really does seem like a smaller Chiclet. If you were to describe her as a beaked Chiclet having been shrunk down to a few inches under your own height, you probably wouldn't be too far off the mark. Her face is rounder, her feathers are lighter, and she's thicker in the middle compared to Chiclet's hourglass figure -- but otherwise, they could be sisters.

Apart from, you know, the whole lethargic, sloth-like behavior versus Chiclet's high energy.

"So, Goose, I'll be staying with you guys for a few days. I hope that's all right?"

"More the merrier," she replies, lolling out on the table. "I've heard a lot about this interesting new guy that just moved in upstairs. You're a human, right?"

The blood in your veins freezes for several seconds before she breaks out into a laughing fit.

"Sorry. That was pretty mean," she deliberately echoes, pulling herself into a sitting position. "Chichi told me you might be a little sensitive about your fur thing, but Bonnie's spent so much

time talking it up. She really digs your look, man. And I mean... she *really* digs it."

"I can tell," you laugh nervously. "She sure is into the whole 'humie' thing, right?"

"Oh, I wonder if all of us weren't at some point or another. Couldn't pull shift after shift at the big J's without at least a passing curiosity in 'em. Still, uh -- no offense," she remarks, waving a wing in your direction.

You set the soda can and plate down in front of her, taking a seat next to her at the table. "None taken. Besides, what if I told you I *was* a human?"

"What, like you told Bonnie when the two of you first met?" she snickers, playfully chewing on one of her feathertips. You slap your forehead, groaning -- you *did* cop to that, didn't you. Damn good thing Bonbon didn't take you seriously at the time. "Yeah, Mike. She talked about that little gem for hours, but I'd like to think she's *juuuust* rooted enough in reality to know you were joking."

You weren't.

Chuckling nervously, you busy yourself with folding napkins while she stares at the ceiling. "She's only *barely* rooted though, right?"

"Hah! Yeah," Goose agrees. "That girl's got her head in the clouds. Honestly, I wouldn't care one way or the other. If you *were* a human, I mean. I think it'd be kinda cool to have a mythical beast for a roommate."

*Mythical beast*, huh. Good to know you're officially regarded to be in the same tier as phoenixes and centaurs. Hell, for all you know *those* are real here.

A small rumbling noise interrupts the flow of conversation, and you realize it's her stomach growling. "So, did I mention I haven't eaten in like, two days?" she says with a nervous smile.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Don't let me stop you, Goose," you reply, gesturing to her plate. She sits up straight, leaning back against her chair as she extends her wings straight forward. You watch with curiosity as she retains the pose for several seconds before realization hits you like a ton of bricks.

Standing in the middle of the kitchen in the dark. Confusing a detergent box for cereal. Feeling you with her wings. Missing the clock. Ignoring the food after mentioning she was practically starving.

*Of course.*

After missing a beat, you carefully take one of her wings in your hand and press the soda can against it. She takes it from you, feeling the tab until she's satisfied it's facing the right way before opening it with a grateful nod. Holding it as far away from her face as possible, she cautiously tugs at the tab to release pressure on the can so that she doesn't get sprayed in case of carbonation buildup.

After she takes a sip and shakily returns it to the table, you slide her fork into her wingtips, then gently turn it in her grip so that the tines skewer a good chunk of her salad.

"Thanks," Goose says quietly as she slowly raises her fork to her beak. "Oh, and, um... sorry for the trouble."

Looking around the room that you've spent almost the entire day rigorously cleaning multiple times, you take a deep breath before patting her shoulder. She smiles in your direction, and you smile back out of reflex, even if she can't see it. She'll hear it in your voice, and that's enough.

"No trouble at all," you reply.

And you mean it.

#### Chapter End Notes

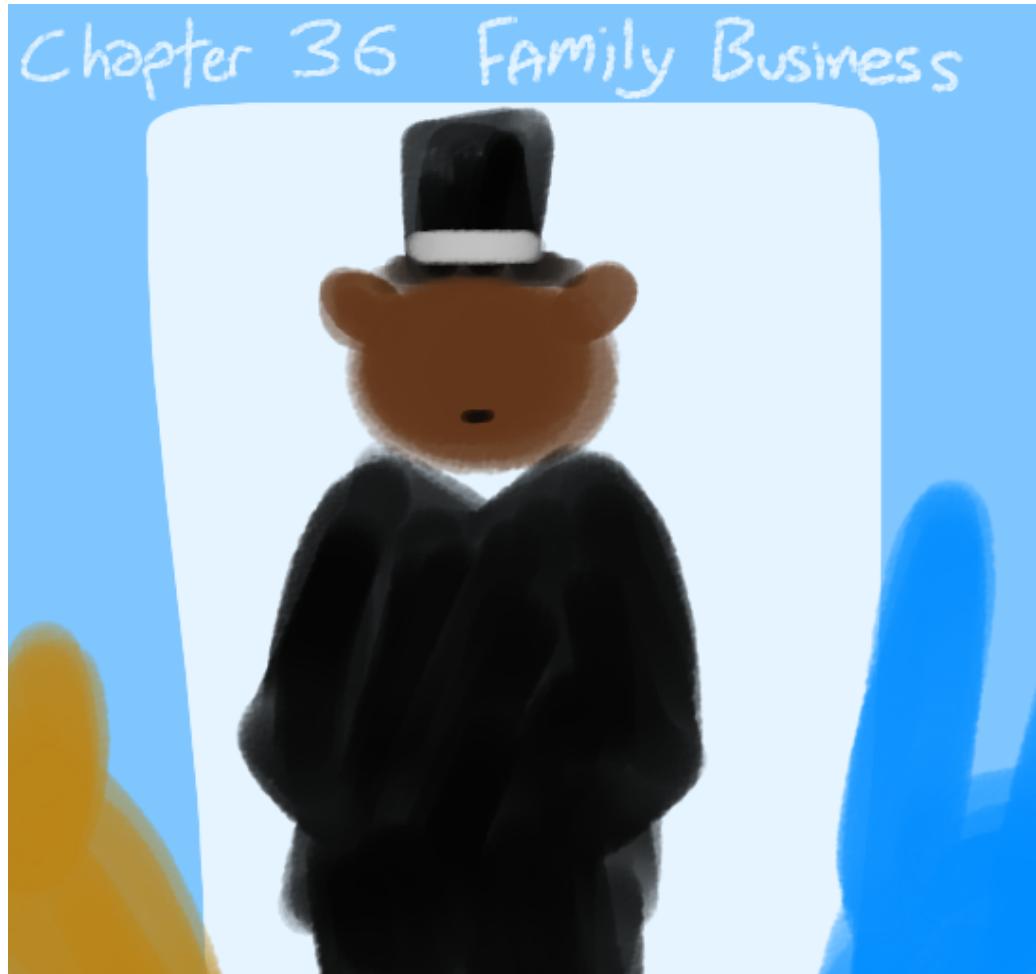
Hello, dear readers. Because some people have asked for a quick reference for use in referring to Mike's various neighbors and roommates, we've produced this handy guide. Presented here for your consideration.

[\*\*Click here for a quick guide to the apartment's local cast.\*\*](#)

## Family Business

### Chapter Summary

Still getting used to his new surroundings, Mike worries about his upcoming lunch with Fred.



Having finished her midnight snack, Goose has since retreated to the comfort of the living room couch. For your own part, you're pretty fatigued after a full day of work cleaning the apartment, but you don't feel right ditching the poor girl after just having met her. So for now, you've taken up a seat in the living room to keep her company.

Of all the "Chicas" in the apartment complex, you'd surely have pegged Cheeky as the most casual and mellow, by far. Having met Goose, however, Cheeky seems positively high-strung by comparison. Not that you're complaining, of course. A bit of chill sounds heavenly right about now. You know deep down that you've only buried yourself in chores all day in a desperate attempt to cling to normalcy.

You wonder if your less fortunate neighbors and friends don't wake up every morning feeling the exact same way. Your confrontation with Bonworth, Faz, and Cheeky has taken on an entirely different light. The non-disclosure agreements were just an excuse to ignore delving into their own uncomfortable truths.

Shame washes over you anew. No, not shame, exactly...

Rather, empathy?

The fact of the matter is, you don't really want to talk about what happened at Fred's any more than Faz wants to talk about the "turn-key" animatronic costume that put him in permanent hospice. If you never see Jeremy Human or his house of horrors again, it'll *still* be too soon -- and that's to say *nothing* of Goldie Fazbear.

Right now, more than anything else, you just want to forget everything that's happened this last week and get back to status quo. Indulging Bonnibel as she frets over simple concerns, watching Frederick cook delicious food, listening to Haddock's pirate yarns that never quite go anywhere. Exchanging flirty jokes with Cheeky, going shopping for mundane items with Beanie. Trussing yourself up in flannel pajamas and settling in for awful romantic comedies under the playfully-stern direction of Chiclet.

Knowing what you know now, you envy the days when your biggest hurdles to overcome were Mangle's disregard for your personal space and Bonworth's graceless jokes at your expense.

Unfortunately for your pride, it's *in for a penny, in for a pound*. For whatever reason, you've been shipwrecked on the island of misfit toys, and in the process you've become one of them. The one thing you've got going for you is that you know they're not going to judge you for your recent dive off the deep end; the hardest part is figuring out how not to judge yourself.

"Listen, new guy." Goose rolls over on her side to "look" in your direction. "You seem nice and all, but I'm gonna have to ask you to shut up. You talk *way* too much."

Jarred from your thoughts, you jerk your head up, chuckling awkwardly.

"Oh man, I *did* kind of blank out there for a minute."

"It's fine," she says with a sleepy grin. "I was like, 'uh oh, he didn't get up and leave, did he?' You'd be surprised how often Bonnie does that without warning me."

"She *does* seem like the kind that's, uh, easily distracted. Case in point, she's been holed up in her room since dinner -- which was hours ago."

"That makes sense." Goose seems to count something off on her feathertips before nodding. "It's her roleplaying night. She sits around in a chat room with her buddies online and they pretend to be humans or something. You into that kind of thing too?"

"Who, me?" You smirk and roll your eyes, only to remember that such expression is lost on her. "Nah, Goose, I can't say I'm in the habit of hanging out online with other lonely animals, pretending to be something I'm not."

You decline to mention that you do enough of that in real life.

"Shame. I think I'd have a lot of fun in one of those groups. Not the humie thing, but like, I could imagine myself as some mystic Egyptian queen or something. I always thought those old *Arabian Night* kinda stories were interesting, and admit it -- I could *totally* rock a pair of harem pants."

She wiggles her hips coyly for emphasis, and you clap appreciatively.

"*Absolutely*. Just have one of our resident artisans whip you up a silk pair with some sequins, and you'd be good to go."

Goose laughs a particularly avian-sounding trill as she reclines on the couch. "Yep, that's me all right."

"I was going to ask, actually. What's up with the sequin thing?" you inquire, idly scratching at your leg's bandages.

"Eh, I just like the way they feel." Goose runs a wingtip lazily along the carpet, perking up as she seems to realize something. "Oh, wow -- the floor. I *knew* something felt different."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. I can actually *feel* the carpet for the first time in, um -- wow, I've lost track." She sniffs at the air before turning to you. "Smells better in here, too. Did Bonnie spruce up?"

You cast a glance around the entirety of the apartment, chest swelling with pride as you gaze upon the fruit of your labor.

"N-no, not -- not exactly. I might've, uh, *pitched in* a bit and done some spring cleaning. ...in November."

Stretching a little, Goose cocks her head in your general direction. "I was gonna say, I'd have been surprised. She's not much of one for keeping our place, y'know..."

"Orderly?" you offer.

Laughing out loud, the orange hen reaches behind her head to adjust the throw pillow she's propped against. "I was going to say *livable*, but I think yours sounds better."

Considering what a disaster zone it was -- clumps of unread mail, piles of laundry, sacks overflowing with trash -- apartment 87-A wouldn't exactly make for a very hospitable or accessible place for a blind person to roam. You're imagining Goose stumbling over junk trying to get to anywhere she'd need to go within the apartment, and suddenly your cheeks begin to burn with righteous indignation. Bonbon and the others are way past innocent irresponsibility and are instead straight-up neglecting the needs of their fellow housemate.

At this point, it's bordering on cruelty.

"Is it always like that here?" you ask quietly. She notices the shift in your tone, and her own smile falters.

"Not -- you know, it's not so bad." She's obviously attempting damage control to cover for her friends. "Bonnie's a good roommate, she just stays so busy taking care of everything here. Gotta keep them plates spinning."

"Busy. Right."

Yeah, Bonbon's *busy*. Every day she's got a full schedule of playing and watching cartoons, while her roommates are preoccupied with the mission-critical tasks of napping and finger painting.

Catching yourself, you raise a hand to your forehead, exhaling deeply as you will yourself to not lose your temper.

You've only been here for less than a day and they *are* doing you a favor, regardless of the fact that it was unsolicited. You're in no position to pass railing judgment on these folks. For all you know, Bonbon and company really *do* have a very good excuse for letting their household fall apart around them, all the while their disabled friend suffers in silence.

You can't possibly think of what such an excuse might *be*, but you acknowledge the fact that it could exist. Hypothetically speaking. Maybe.

"Yeah, exactly," Goose says, seemingly content that you're not going to press the issue. "So like, that's super big of you to just come in and get started helping out. I know *I* appreciate it."

"It's my pleasure," you politely return. "Glad I could be of some use. Um, I'll be here for a few days while the whole, y'know, tenant overflow situation gets straightened out upstairs."

"Sounds like fun. Whose room are you staying in while you're here?"

"Oh, uh, I'm staying with Peanut." You scratch your head, trying to figure out why she'd even bother asking such a question. Clucking slightly as she reclines, Goose's beak twists into a saucy smile. Uh oh. You can feel this one coming.

"Well, that's very progressive of you to sleep with another guy, Mike," she says coolly, closing her eyes and tucking her wings across her stomach.

Aaaand *there* it is.

You're halfway through thinking up a counter-zinger when a noise like a wood chipper malfunctioning tears through the quiet of the apartment, causing you to nearly leap out of your seat in a panic. Goose, on the other hand, doesn't so much as twitch.

"What the *hell* was that?!" you blurt, looking around in bewilderment.

"Oh, did I mention that when he's in a *real* deep sleep, he snores?" She giggles a little. "I mean, it's kinda cute once you get used to it."

That was a *snore*!?

How did you *never* hear that during your stay overhead? Casting a hesitant look in the direction of Peanut's room, you swallow nervously. They say you don't appreciate what you've got until you lose it. Compared to whatever's waiting for you behind that door, Fred's cramped office seems like the executive suite at a five-star hotel.

"Well, I guess I'd better get some sleep." Rubbing your achy sides, you slowly slide out of the chair and onto your feet. "Will you be all right out here by yourself?"

"Sure. I'm just gonna chill out -- it's nice to have some 'me time' if you know what I mean," she says. "Have a good night, Mike."

Nodding mostly to yourself, you gently pat one of her wings as you pass by on your way to Peanut's room.

"Thanks, Goose. Take it easy."

"Morning, Mike! How did you sleep?" Bonbon asks as she fiddles with the coffee maker. "I trust you're all good and well-rested?"

For once, you're *not* up at six on the dot; it's half past ten as you tumble into your seat at the breakfast table. You gaze over at an oblivious Peanut mindlessly chewing through his cereal. He looks up, sees you staring, and gives you a timid smile and wave before resuming his breakfast. All you can muster up is a grunt in response.

Your first night's stay in Peanut's room was... *interesting*.

At least Bonbon wasn't lying when she said you'd have your own bed. Fortunately for you, Peanut also has a set of bunk beds similar to Frederick's setup -- *unfortunately* for you, he was already asleep in the top bunk, having apparently gotten home from work while you were trapped in laundry purgatory. You spent the majority of the night alternating between worrying about the creaking noises the bed frame was making as it struggled under his weight, and being jolted awake by his chainsaw snoring every so often.

"Good to hear!" Bonbon obviously burbles, pulling a set of mismatched mugs out of the cupboards. "*Oooohhh!* I almost forgot to tell you. Fred called this morning and wanted to let you know he'd be right on time for your lunch appointment!"

"Oh, you're goin' to have lunch with the big bear?" Peanut whispers, awed. "That's so cool. Where are you guys going?"

"Couldn't tell you," you mutter as you accept your coffee from Bonbon.

Looking down at the contents of the cup, it's full of what appears to be milk with maybe just a teaspoon or two of coffee for color. Taking a sip, you feel your face contorting against your will. Correction: half milk, half sugar.

"Fixed it just the way I like mine! Bottoms up!" Bonbon grins as she plops into her own chair. You watch with an awkward grimace as she chugs her mug full of *fauxfee*.

"So, Peanut -- you're up a little earlier than yesterday," you comment. "How was work? Did they give you a hard time for showing up late?"

"Nah, I got off easy," Peanut replies bashfully, smiling at you from behind his cereal bowl. "Mr. Fazbear sorted things out for me. Well, I guess you did, actually. Um, thanks for taking care of that."

"No pair of socks is worth losing your job over," you reply with a tired smile of your own, lifting your mug of sugary cream in a mock toast. "Speaking of which..."

You trail off as you look around the room, noticing that little messes are already beginning to pile up here and there -- discarded clothes, more unopened mail, a half-full garbage bag nestled next to the television set. It's like they have no interest in maintenance whatsoever.

"Lemme just stop you there, Mike," Bonbon says with a completely serious expression, holding up a paw. "I already know what you're gonna ask -- and the answer is yes, I've got plenty of shows to keep us entertained after we're done with the first season of *Legend of Bob*. There are a few fansubbed episodes of season two airing right now, and man, let me just tell you, the first episode's a **REAL** shocker! The new season's off to a bang already!"

Shaking your head, you set your sugar milk aside. Her making the mental leap from Peanut's socks to *Legend of Bob* shows just where her priorities lie.

"Not quite what I had in mind -- *nngngh!*" You wince at a sudden shooting pain in your chest. Placing a hand on your side, you force a pained smile; you can't wait for lunch so you can take another round of painkillers. If this is how Cheeky feels every day, you feel even sorrier for her. "I was just going to mention that I did most of the laundry last night, but you guys are going to have to collect your clothes yourselves since I wasn't quite sure of who owned what."

"Oh, that won't be a problem at all, Mike!" Bonbon enthuses. "We'll prolly just shop out of the baskets for whatever we need."

Ah, of course. That's clearly the easier (and far less responsible) option. You're not even sure why you expected otherwise.

A sing-song, flighty voice from down the hallway announces the arrival of Mango. "Mike! Good morning," she titters, waddling out of her room and into the hall. She's wrapped in a heavy blanket, which she's clutching to her chest with one paw, while carrying a box of craft supplies in the other. "I'm glad you're finally awake! I need you for just a few moments if you can spare some... *personal time?*"

"Sure, why not," you return. "What do you need me for?"

"Well, Foxglove is having some difficulty with where your costume and props merge -- bless the little idiot's dried-up heart, at least now we all know who slept through *Armscyes 101*." Mango clicks her tongue in a condescending manner. "Basically, I need to borrow your arm to make a mockup so that I don't have to spend the rest of the day arguing with a certain *someone* over measurements."

As she settles down into her chair next to you, Mango drops her supply box onto the table's surface, producing a patchy roll of felt.

"Felt? Is this what the prop will be made out of?" you ask as she begins wrapping it around your arm. Curious, you pinch a portion of it between your thumb and index finger to get a feel for the texture.

"Gosh, no," Mango replies as she leans in, pulling a few hatpins from her box. "Maybe some of the jointing might be fabric, but I plan on making the entire thing out of molded acrylic. This is just flexible material so we can get a rough idea of the size of the Bobulator."

Squinting, you try to figure out what the hell she's talking about. "The Bobula-- *oohhh*, that's the silver thing on his arm that doesn't seem to do anything, right?"

"Yet," Bonbon says with a cryptic smile. "But in episode three of--"

"Three! That reminds me!" Peanut excitedly interrupts. "It's *Three for Three Thursday* over at Candy's today! We should totally go get ice cream later tonight, Bonnie!"

Bonbon shakes her head in disgust. "Already? But you're so close to your goal weight for the week! You just need to lose fifteen pounds by Sunday! Ice cream would *totally* kick you out of keto."

"He's eating *cereal*," Mango interjects with a smile as she begins wrapping a strip of grey felt around your right forearm. "I'm pretty sure ketosis is long off the table."

"That's not true, Mangle," Peanut argues as he shovels another lump of 'Crispy-Sweet Marshmallow Party Poppers' into his mouth. "I just need to, you know, take a break from all the kale every once in a while."

Something sharp suddenly pinches your elbow, and you instinctively yelp in pain.

"Ow! Easy, Mango!"

"Sorry, my paws slipped," Mango frustratingly returns, yanking a straight pin out of your arm. She tugs the coarse fabric loose from your arm, sighing as a tiny dollop of blood begins to form around your elbow from where you were just punctured. "Oooh, it's not as bad as it looks. Just give me a minute here..."

"Sit tight, I'll go grab you a bandage, Mike." Bonbon hops up from her chair, scooting into the kitchen. While she's busy rummaging around in the cabinets for first aid supplies, the doorbell chimes. "Oh, that must be Fred!"

Bonbon quickly reverses course out of the kitchen, skipping down the hallway to answer the front door.

Sure enough, Fred Fazbear waits on the porch outside, dressed in formal wear. His usual porkpie has been swapped out for an elegant top hat, and accentuating his typical dress shirt is a black bow tie and a matching tailor-made silk vest, complete with a gold pocketwatch chain. If you didn't know better, you'd assume you were off to the opera instead of having lunch out.

Then again, nothing around here surprises you anymore -- you very well *could* be headed to the opera.

"Good morning." Fred waves politely to everyone inside, tipping his hat. Peanut instantly sets his cereal bowl down on the table, wiping his mouth on the back of his shirt sleeve.

"Mornin', sir," the smaller of the two bears calls out, suddenly all-business. His paws are clasped in front of his chest and his gaze is steeled, as if he's being interviewed for a job. "Thanks for, um, for the assistance yesterday."

"It's fine. Just don't make a habit of it," Fred says dismissively. "Mike, get your coat; we're going."

You nod apologetically to Mango. "Sorry, we'll finish this later. Hang in there -- I know Mangle can be a handful," you chuckle as you pull away from the shorter fox and head for the front door.

"Oh, it's fine. I'll figure something out," she replies with a good-natured sigh.

Grabbing your pills from the kitchen counter, you head for the front door coat rack to retrieve your jacket. As you're reaching for it, Bonbon hastily applies a children's bandage to your arm. You spare a glance at the cartoonish piece of adhesive she's plastered on you, raising an eyebrow at her.

"Hot pink hearts and smiley faces?"

"Pfffft. You'll be fine, tough guy," she says with a toothy grin. "You boys have fun today, all right?"

"We will," Fred chuckles. "I'm all about fun. In fact, I'm practically *the face* of family fun."

With a sigh, you give the others a parting wave as you follow him outside. You'd be lying if you said you shared any of his optimism.

The sun's especially bright today, making for pleasant contrast with the chill of the late November cold. Fred's car is a far more comfortable ride as well, now that you're not crammed into the back of the vehicle. The front seats are soft and plush, far more gentle on your sore chest.

"So, Mike." Fred awkwardly tilts his head towards you while keeping his eyes on the road. "How are you fitting in?"

"Oh my god, I thought you'd never ask. I'm trapped in an apartment with Bonbon. Send help," you reply with a dry smile.

Clearly that must have struck him as humorous; he lets loose a bark of a laugh, a smirk flashing across his lips so quickly you almost question whether it was there at all.

"Seriously, they're not that bad," you continue, massaging your leg, "but you sure weren't kidding when you said their household was lacking in discipline."

"Sure. Peanut seems to handle guidance well, but he lacks ambition. Bonbon's the exact opposite. For as long as I've known her, I've never been able to tell her *anything*."

"Chiclet described them as 'free spirits'. Do you think that's a fair assessment?" you ask.

"More like a *generous* assessment," Fred replies without hesitation.

Considering the filthy state of the apartment when you arrived, for once, you have to agree Fred's *not* exaggerating or leaping to conclusions. Bonbon and the others are *slobs*. Lovable, friendly, comfy slobs, but slobs nonetheless. Their cozy, inviting atmosphere is a double-edged sword; without clear leadership or direction, nothing's ever going to get done.

Conversation peters off afterwards. Fred seems slightly preoccupied this morning, his expression distant as he skillfully navigates along back roads and winding lanes. Based on what little you know of the surrounding area, you're likely headed downtown. A knot begins to form in the pit of your stomach -- surely he wouldn't be taking you back *there* of all places, right? He wouldn't do that to you, would he?

"Fred, where are we going for lunch?" you ask, your voice strained.

Without taking his eyes off the road, Fred exhales deeply through his nose. He doesn't say anything.

He doesn't need to.

"You know what, I don't -- I don't think I'm up to going out today," you continue, an overwhelming feeling of restlessness taking hold of you. "Turn around and take me back, please."

"Settle down, Mike."

**"What?!"** *Settle down?!* Fred, no! I'm not going back to Jeremy's!" You look up at him in shock, your expression that of a deer caught in the headlights. "Look, I've had it with that place! Take me back to Bonbon's, right now!"

Your pleas fall on deaf ears. Fred continues to drive on, pointedly ignoring you as the car weaves through a wooded section of town before turning onto the all-too familiar main street that leads to Jeremy's. Your heart's pumping overtime as the unwelcome yellow and purple marquee fades into view.

Instead of stopping on the street in front of the pizzeria like you're expecting him to, however, Fred continues on for now, sparing it only a passing glance.

Turning the corner, Fred parks the car in front of a small teahouse. As he shifts in his seat to face you, you're already bracing yourself for a glare and sharp words to put you in your place -- but against all expectations, he looks at you with the same placid features he had the other night when you bared your soul and let loose in front of his linen closet. He draws a deep breath, drumming his fingers against the steering wheel as he considers what he wants to say.

"This is... probably a better place to talk, now that I think about it," he says. "Quiet, out of the way. I'll go get us a table. Come on inside when you've stopped shaking."

Indeed, you hadn't even noticed, but your knees are knocking and you're gripping the door handle so hard that the plastic's showing signs of fatigue. Forcing yourself to calm down, you slowly open the passenger door and stumble out onto your feet, traipsing into the teahouse behind Fred.

It's dead as a doornail inside, which is good because there are maybe seven or eight tables in the entire restaurant. It's warm and comfortable, though, and anything's better than the alternative. The waitress, a mauve-furred, middle-aged vixen with caked-on makeup seats the two of you together at a table in the corner of the room, handing each of you a menu. As you read over the specials, you're inwardly glad Fred's treating; the price for appetizers alone is more than you'd spend on an entire dinner.

For two.

If he's bothered by the hefty price tags, however, he doesn't seem to show it. Out of courtesy to his wallet, you resolve to order whatever the cheapest thing is on the menu, regardless of how appealing it might actually sound. You can eat your fill later on your own dime.

Doffing his hat, Fred skims the menu before folding it up and placing it on the table.

"Sixteen ounce sirloin, medium-rare," he begins, rattling off a rapid-fire order to the waitress. "Loaded baked potato. Seasonal vegetables. And yes, I'm fine with the extra charge. My friend will have the same. Mike, how do you take your steak?"

You blink. So much for the cheapest thing on the menu. "Oh, no, Fred, I'm fine with just a salad, or--"

"No you're not," Fred gruffly interrupts. "You're a man and you're living with *degenerates* who eat only literal rabbit food. Tell the lady how you want your steak cooked."

Pressing the back of your hand to your forehead, you only just now realize the reason you're so warm is that the heater's on full blast in here and you haven't even taken your coat off. Oh, and also Fred just ordered you half a cow to eat.

"Medium-well?" you manage to reply as you strip off your jacket, laying it across the back of your chair. "Really, though, sixteen ounces is *way* too much steak, Fred."

"Fine. The eight ounce for him, then. Oh, and we'll have an order of the mussels in white wine sauce to start," Fred adds, smirking at you.

You're not even sure you know what mussels are, but you nod appreciatively. The vixen jots everything down in her notepad with a pleasant smile before retreating to the kitchen.

"Fred, I don't know what to say."

You feel vastly underdressed, sitting across from the bear in formal clothes ordering up an expensive lunch. Fred simply nods in response, taking his hat in his paws as the two of you relax at your table. He holds it for a long while, tracing his finger along the brim thoughtfully. It's not until your appetizer's served that he finally sets it aside on the seat of one of the unused chairs.

The two of you eat in silence. The mussels are delicious, albeit a little tricky to figure out at first; you could see Frederick preparing a fancy dish like this with ease. The steaks are served not long after, and you gratefully set to work polishing your plate off both out of hunger as well as a desire to not offend your benefactor.

Eventually, all that's left of both plates is a handful of crumbs. Satisfied, Fred reclines in his chair.

"Dessert?"

"Please, god, no," you chuckle. "I already feel like I've gained two full pants sizes."

Snorting, Fred settles the check with the server before clasping his paws in an imitation of Peanut's pose at the breakfast table. Actually, it's more likely *Peanut* was imitating *Fred* now that you think about it. The air's taken on a heavy tone, and after a couple of false starts, Fred finally seems to find the words he wants to say.

"He'd just finished college," Fred begins softly. "I was too busy with more... hedonistic pursuits to even consider higher education. Cares of the world, the stupidity of rebellious youth. *Distractions*."

Your expression turns somber as you listen to him speak; it's only when your chest begins to ache that you realize you've been holding in your breath in for fear of throwing him off of his stride. Exhaling gently, you lean in, paying rapt attention to whatever he has to say. This is a rare side of Fred Fazbear, and you don't intend to squander the opportunity.

"It was around summer, I think, when he and his business partner came into our parents' home to lay out their plan for a restaurant with an old-fashioned arcade, good food, and a stage for live

music and performances." He laughs a raspy, dry laugh, and for a moment he looks decades older than he actually is. His eyebrows furrow upwards in a mix of recalled emotions. "The mascots would be added later on; my father's 401k wasn't a sizable enough loan to spring for such state-of-the-art equipment."

Stiffening, you realize what this means. Before you can give voice to inquiry, though, Fred presses on.

"My brother put his heart and his soul into building that pizzeria from the ground up. Some of our mutual friends -- even a few faces you'd know -- were part of the operation from as far back as seeing the ground broken and the foundation poured."

Your sinuses are beginning to burn -- reaching up to your face, you realize your eyes are starting to water.

"A *family business*," you murmur. No wonder damn near everyone you've met has worked there.

"In the truest sense of the words." Rubbing the bridge of his nose, Fred sighs. "Listen -- I asked you to lunch for two reasons, Mike. The first of which was to apologize to you for asking you to exit my home."

"Fred--"

"*Let me finish*," he interrupts. "You did my household -- no, my *family* a service. You were not asked, but you rose to the occasion and put your wellbeing on the line for someone who wasn't your own. And in your hour of need, when it came time to return the favor, I threw you out on your ass. Believe me when I say that **all** of my housemates had strong words for me yesterday morning."

Even *Rackham* came to your defense?

You maintain a neutral expression, but internally you wish you could have been a fly on the wall for *that* conversation. Beanie and Chichi sticking up for you isn't too surprising, but the idea of Fred being outnumbered three-to-one is an amusing and also frightening thought.

Coughing awkwardly, he extends his paw to you. "No lunch can repay what you did for Bonnie. I've never in my life misjudged the character of a man's heart as badly as I did with you. For that and more, I'm sorry, Mike."

You extend your hand across the table, grasping his paw and shaking it firmly.

"I've got a lot to be sorry about, myself. I wasn't in a good place mentally, and I inadvertently stirred a lot of shit up that you'd just as soon have left alone. Besides, you still took in a stranger into your home -- and for all you know I could have been a threat. So we're a little more even than you might think."

"I appreciate you being gracious about it." Fred nods his head toward you as the two of you break contact. "The second reason I called you here today is what I'd started to mention when we were on the phone last night. I *do* want to show you something."

Warily, he gauges your face, and you remain silent.

"It's... it's important to me that you see the business that my brother built, as it was *intended* to be seen."

Gazing down the street, you swallow; suddenly your food feels like it might be ready to come back up.

"I'm not ready to go back, Fred," you hoarsely whisper. It's an appeal from primal fear; more of an entreaty than an actual statement.

"And you never *will* be," Fred says simply. "But I've watched too many good people -- friends and family alike -- fall victim to this imaginary curse that hangs over our family's work. Jeremy Human's pizzeria, for better or for worse, is Goldie's legacy. It's too late for Bonworth and Faz, but it's not too late for you, Mike."

Standing up from the table, Fred collects his hat and places it upon his head, leaving a generous sum of cash behind as a tip. You shakily push yourself to your legs, retrieving your coat from the back of your chair as you follow Fred to his car.

"I'll be with you every step of the way, Mike," Fred says, opening the door to his car. "And if you're still too uncomfortable, then I'll have someone come pick you up and escort you home. But you *are* going to go conquer your fears. Do you understand?"

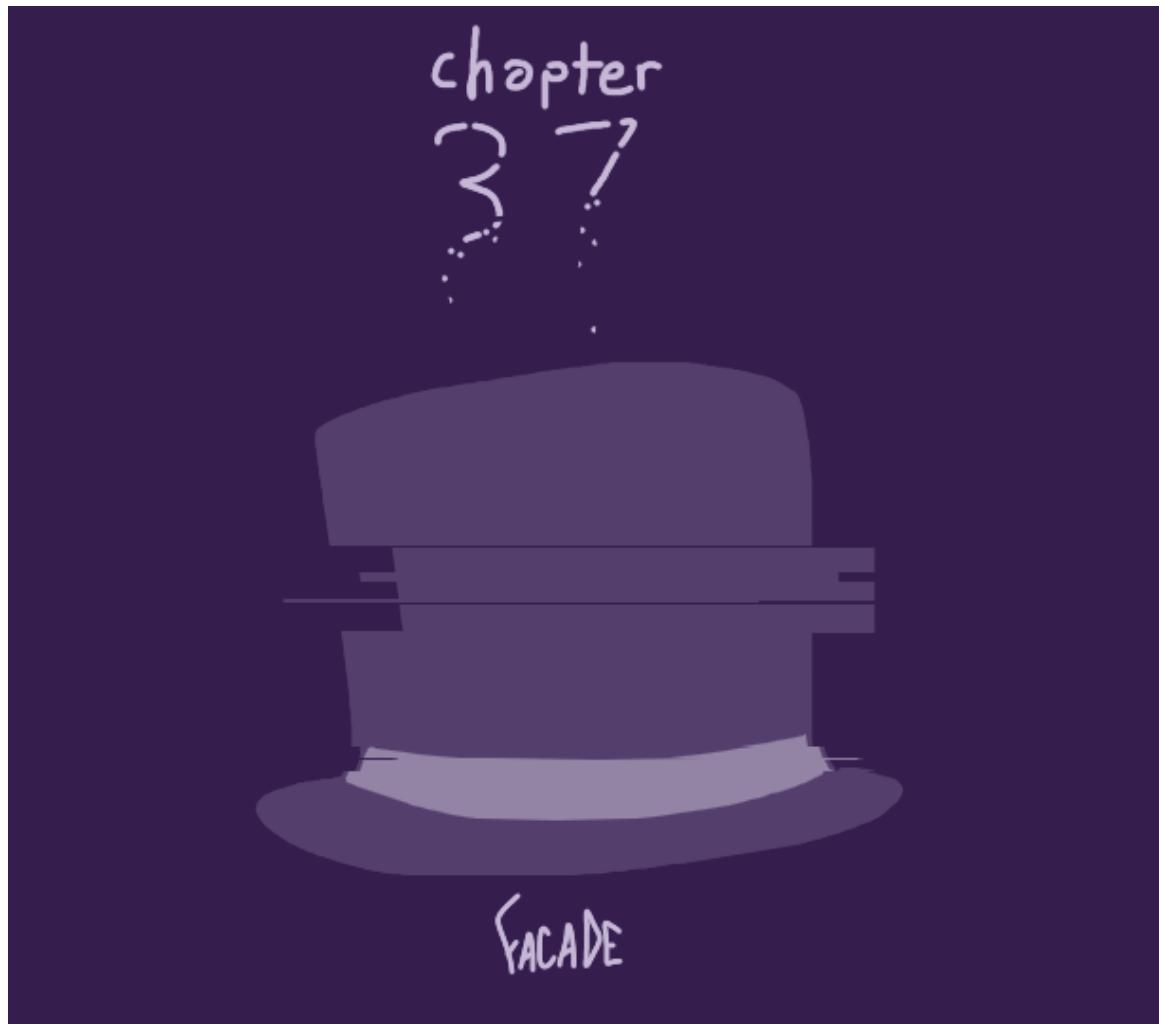
"Yeah," you glumly respond, looking down the street. "Let's go get this over with."

"There, that's the spirit."

# Facade

## Chapter Summary

On a visit to the restaurant with Fred Fazbear, Mike sees a new side of things.



The saying "as different as night and day" has never been more applicable than it is right now.

Unlike your previous visits, Jeremy Human's is bustling with patronage during the day shift. Animal children of varying species run to and fro with all the fervor of tiny soldiers off to war, with their cardboard marching band hats and rings of prize counter tickets draped over their shoulders like bandoliers. Workers run, gallop, and hop around the restaurant with platters full of pizza and soft drinks, struggling to keep pace with the endless deluge of fussy kids and fussier helicopter parents. Confetti flutters and streamers twirl as the restaurant's dining hall proceeds in full swing with the day's scheduled events.

You fearfully observe the cheerful chaos from your vantage point just inside, near the front door. It was all you could do just to climb out of Fred's car and drag yourself into the building. The dread of having to come back so soon after swearing this hellhole off made every step across the parking lot sheer agony. To his credit, Fred was patient with you, far moreso than he's ever been. If you didn't know better, you'd assume he was someone else entirely; someone far gentler and much more understanding than the gruff, stern, all-business bear you're accustomed to dealing with.

Then again, it wouldn't be the first time you've confused him with someone else.

Even though you've taken your pain medication, your chest's still aching. You're not sure whether it's psychosomatic or if you're getting worse, but the cold weather's probably not doing your body any favors. You'd much rather be nestled up at home under a blanket. Any home, in fact. At this point you're not picky: literally anywhere would beat standing in the middle of a deafening restaurant with robotic mascots that could pop out from around the corner and gut you at the drop of a hat.

Right now, you have a deep appreciation for exactly how physically frail and vulnerable you truly are as a human. Fred could crush you in his enormous paws or rip you to pieces with his sharp teeth without breaking a sweat. And yet, you wonder if he'd be able to hold out for even a few minutes against just one of the "humanimatronic" mascots. Though the circumstances in which it happened might have been different, even Faz was ultimately reduced to his current state by one of these things.

Fred glances at you askew as he straightens his tie and cuffs.

"You've come this far," you hear him rumble to you over the din. "Don't turn back now."

You scan the crowd for the fiftieth time in the last two minutes only to find that there's still no sign of the infernal machines anywhere. With a reluctant breath you shakily nod the affirmative. Fred wraps an arm around your shoulders, keeping you close like so many of the fathers in this restaurant are doing with their own children. Looking up, you see something in his eyes -- some brief shimmer of expression that doesn't quite fit into easy terms, but it's familiar. You've seen that same look on April's and Chiclet's faces whenever they're looking at Bonnibel. You saw it again in Faz when he towered over you during your blowup with Cheeky and Bonworth at 93-B.

It's the look of someone forced to grow up far too soon, thrust into maturity well ahead of his time. It's hard to believe that you and Fred aren't even a year apart in terms of actual age.

"Nothing's going to happen to you," he says, conviction thick in his voice.

Conviction, not condescension. Completely devoid of his usual accusatory tone. He's not trying to convince himself. He's stating it as declaration of fact -- no, rather, declaration of *intent*. He's not just *saying* nothing will happen to you, he's letting you know he'll enforce that promise.

Your mental theater's filled with an image of Fred seizing Jeremy Human by the ankles and viciously hurling the tin demon into oncoming traffic.

Suddenly, you don't feel *quite* as defenseless next to the behemoth of a bear.

"Let's make this quick," you reply quietly.

Satisfied, Fred grips your shoulder, serving the role of both bodyguard and shield. He politely makes his way past a row of people lined up at the child check-in station, waiting their turn to get into the restaurant proper. A single employee stands by the front counter -- a lanky teenage fruit bat, wearing the Jeremy Human's employee uniform. Of particular note is a pair of 3D glasses pushed up into his messy headfur.

"Back from lunch already, Mr. Fazbear?" he asks with a laid-back smile as he gently presses his wrist stamper against the ink pad on his podium.

Fred tips his hat to him as the two of you pass by. "We're the face of family fun for this town; timeliness is everything. Keep up the good work."

"Yessir, Mr. F," the bat says with a lazy salute as you and Fred press on into the dining hall.

"He seems nice," you mutter nervously, dodging a wandering rabbit kit obviously nibbling on a slice of cheese pizza.

"Yeah, he's a good kid." Fred sweeps the massive room with a piercing gaze, looking at the rows and rows of full tables before turning back to you. "None of us thought he'd last longer than a week, and yet he's been with us almost two years. Loves video games, so an arcade was practically his dream job."

You look over your shoulder at the bat. He's managed to make it here for *two years*? The guy must have nerves of steel.

"Speaking of jobs, I need to do mine." Fred pats his pocketwatch for emphasis. "I rearranged my schedule so I'll get off in an hour or so. You can take a seat out here with the customers if you want, or you can go spend some time in the arcade."

"I'd -- I'd actually prefer to stay with you," you reply, deliberately avoiding looking at the hallway leading off to the show stage.

"All right. If anyone asks, just say you're in training. You might be expected to refill drinks and bus tables, though."

You nod, taking off your jacket and rolling up your sleeves only for Fred to nudge your forearm with a half-smirk -- probably as close as he gets to a playful smile.

"I'm *joking*. You're my guest, not an employee. You aren't going to be exerting yourself here."

"O-oh, right," you chuckle weakly. "Sorry, force of habit after staying with Bonbon. Her place is kind of, *y'know...*"

"God. I can't even begin to imagine," he mutters, smoothing out his waistcoat. "Well then, let's get right to it."

As much as you want to stay close to Fred, he's clearly in far better shape than you are, *and* he doesn't have cracked ribs and a sore leg slowing him down. After twenty minutes of hobbling around behind him, you're eventually forced to confine yourself to one of the empty tables against the front wall of the restaurant.

Music blares from the adjacent stage, and you can vaguely make out the racket of the mascots screeching along to one of their insipid child-friendly songs. Clutching the edge of the table, you try to keep your attention fixed solely on Fred, watching him expertly duck and weave through the room. You're no calmer now than you were when you walked in, but you at least have something to focus on and that should get you through the rest of his shift.

For his part, Fred's the model manager. He's obviously been doing this for a while -- employees listen to his every word as he calls out directions and orders. Nobody in the house is a harder worker than he is, and even young teenagers struggle to match his level of energy. Watching him, it's probably an overstatement to say he seems happy, but he clearly possesses genuine enthusiasm for his job.

"We should be running low on paper towels, make sure a buy order's placed for them before close of day," he tells one of the waitresses, a fresh-faced sloth girl with a retainer jutting out of her mouth. She doesn't even look old enough to work here -- probably a student hired on as part-time seasonal help. "Tables eight and fourteen need a refill on pepper flakes and grated parmesan, and six is out of ketchup."

"Underthtood, Mr. Fathbear," she eagerly lisps, slowly trundling off towards the supply room to get the necessary condiments.

A tall deer shouts out to Fred from the far corner of the room. "*Boss!* These folks want the manager's special for their birthday party. How many arcade tokens come with it, twenty-five?"

"Make it thirty," Fred hollers back over the ambient noise. "And wish them a happy birthday."

"Gotcha!"

In spite of keeping busy, he still manages to find time to break away every so often to check on you. "How're you holding up?" he asks as he bustles past your table with a birthday cake on a tray. "Want anything to drink? Soda, malt maybe?"

You gingerly uncross your leg to help stimulate the blood flow. "I'm all right for now, thank you. Last thing my heart needs is more sugar or caffeine."

"Hm. I don't say this callously, Mike: you're strong-willed. The others would've run screaming by now." Leaning down, he spends just a moment sizing you up. "It's your choice to believe me, but this *is* helping you overcome."

"As long as you don't expect me to go hug it out with the band." You force a shaky smile that probably looks more like a worried grimace. "At that point I'm out of here even if I have to *run* home."

Snorting, he hefts his platter over his head. "Sense of humor's still intact. Good sign. I'll be back shortly."

You watch him take off for one of the adjacent private party rooms, only for another employee to accost him by the hall. You're not sure what the hell species she even is -- she's got ears and a tail like a fox, but the shape of her face and muzzle seems closer to that of a dog's. It's impossible to make out what they're saying, but this canine (debatable) lady (also debatable) is screaming and waving her arms incessantly. The only thing about her that's clear is that something's got her flustered.

It's hard not to stare, and the drama is a welcome distraction from your fears right now. Just by the way she's carrying on, it's blatant to you and probably anyone else who's spectating that this girl has no idea who she's trying to go toe-to-toe with. You begin to wait with bated breath as if you were watching a soap opera. You're practically giddy, silently rooting for Fred to lose his temper and lower the boom on her.

"How *disrespectful*," an older bunny comments from the table next to yours. He looks like he's probably some kid's grandfather, with his thick wrinkles, wiry white moustache, and old-fashioned clothes; not unlike you'd imagine Bonworth might look when he's well advanced in his years. "Kids these days have absolutely no respect for the working class. *None*."

"Don't stare, Pap," a young mother anxiously whispers next to him -- probably his daughter or daughter-in-law, if you had to guess. The clueless rabbit kit you saw earlier is now seated in a high chair next to her, still gnawing on what appears to be the same piece of pizza, having worked most of its sauce and cheese into her fur.

"When I was her age, my parents would have given me two black eyes for talking to a superior that way, regardless of whether I was in the right or not. Deference and humility, that's what mama always used to say." The grandfather rabbit grips his walking stick with white knuckles as he leans forward, growling under his breath. "Look at that uppity *mutt*."

Raising a paw to her mouth, the mother hisses at him. "*Pap!* This isn't the forties! You can't say that word in public anymore!"

Groaning, he leans back in his chair, rubbing his temples out of frustration while you bite your tongue trying not to laugh. You've grown mostly desensitized to being around animal people, but every now and again the culture shock has a way of sneaking up on you. In this case, you realize *that* particular word would indeed have a different connotation here than back home. You make a mental note to try to hold back on animal insults; last thing you want is to be branded a specist.

As you continue to observe Fred and the disgruntled employee, you realize he's visibly fighting to keep his calm while addressing her. It's to the point where the din in the restaurant is beginning to taper off as families and other employees turn to stare. The smile playing at your lips dies in an instant as the gravity of the situation hits you -- this isn't funny anymore. Fred really *is* just moments away from blowing his top and doing something he'll regret later.



"Sorry to interrupt, but I think you raise a good point, sir," you interject, standing up from your table. "How about I head on over there and go see what the trouble is?"

"Please do, son," the rabbit huffs as he looks up at you. "That poor bear's done *nothing* to deserve that kind of ire. If she has a problem with him, you send her my way and I'll deal with her myself."

"Pappy, *please!* That's enough!"

The mother's now completely red in the face as she scrambles to reel her spitfire of a senior citizen in. You quickly get up from your table, collecting your jacket from the back of your chair. By the time you make it over to Fred, having gone the long way around to avoid the stage room, the two of them are bickering loudly enough that nearly everyone in the vicinity has stopped what they're doing to spectate.

"I'm not going to tell you again! Put the cake down, *pal!* That's **NOT** your job!!" the canine -- "Roth" if her name tag's to be believed -- squeals, standing on the tips of her feet to try to get close to Fred's imposing height.

"It's *been* my job to take cake to the children since before you were out of middle school, 'pal!'" Fred vehemently fires back. The veins in his forehead and neck look like they're going to burst open, and his cheeks are flushed red with rage. "My brother built this chain years ago from *nothing*. You don't tell me what my role here is. Go to your locker and pack up your things, your services are *no longer required!*"

Leaning around him, you place a hand on his shoulder in an attempt to calm him down. He whirls around in anger, though his face relaxes almost immediately when he realizes it's just you.

"It's just me, Fred," you whisper. "What's, uh, what's going on here, Roth...?"

"It's *Ruth*. My **name** is *Ruth!* I think the guy that does the tags is **frickin' blind** and typed an 'O' by mistake!!" Ruth continues to shriek, clearly unfamiliar with the concept of an indoor voice. "And what's going **on** here is that this guy doesn't **work** for us, he's **not** in uniform, *and* he's trying to **ruin our guest experience!** Only authorized Jeremy Human's employees are allowed to carry the birthday cake, and **HE AIN'T AUTHORIZED!**"

"You see the *nonsense* I have to deal with?" Fred barks a little too loudly, teeth bared. "I'm the *regional manager*. That means I'm the one who authorizes *everything* here, from purchase orders to the color of the plastic fringe on our *toothpicks* -- and that goes for every other location in the *state*. See why they say good help's so hard to find, Mike?"

"Good help?! **GOOD HELP?!** I read the employee manual cover-to-cover *twice!* Do you have any idea how hard it is to *get a job in this economy?*" She's practically foaming at the mouth as she tugs at her frazzled headfur. "I'm not about to let some-- some **LUNATIC** get me fired just because I'm being pranked! What are you, his accomplice? Is this a hidden camera show?! You gonna blame the missing animatronic on *me* now?!"

Raising a hand, you get between her and Fred before he loses it and punches her into the ceiling. "Lady, you *really* need to settle down," you warn. "I'm sure whatever's going on here is a huge misunderstanding. Look, you're new, right?"

"That's right," Ruth snaps back at you. "But I know everyone here. I memorized all the faces in the employee registry and I didn't see his *anywhere*. Or *yours* for that matter."

Okay, she's obviously crazy *and* hostile. Good combination.

"That's because he's a guest, and I don't work exclusively at this location." Fred reaches a free paw up to his tie, tugging his collar loose to vent some steam. "I work for corporate, and I'm registered in the corporate database. This is the store closest to my home, though, and I spend the majority of my time here."

"See? There's your answer," you add in what you're hoping sounds like an agreeable tone.

"**Bullshit.**" Ruth folds her arms, stalking off towards the front of the restaurant. "I'm going to go get the day shift manager."

Fred waits until she's gone before saying anything else. Exhaling deeply through his nose, he glances over at you. "Misguided kid. Sorry you had to see that. Now, I need to get this cake along to the birthday boy before the candles burn down any further."

"No need to be sorry," you calmly reply as he shifts the cake tray around in his arms. "You didn't do anything wrong."

Shaking his head in disgust, Fred takes a breath before affixing himself with a more pleasant expression. Gone in an instant is all of his rage and frustration, replaced with the friendly and gentle Fred you saw accompanying you into the restaurant. It's like someone just flipped a switch and he's suddenly a completely new man. Stepping inside the party room, he's greeted by a chorus of cheers and laughter. You keep your distance out in the hall as he delivers the birthday cake to the enthusiastic partygoers, brandishing a polished cake cutter. Paper plates begin circulation around the room as Fred quickly and efficiently doles out generous servings of the sugary pastry.

You'd never have pegged a grump like Fred for it -- the same Fred who refers to his own neighbors and friends as "degenerates" -- but watching him almost smiling, he seems truly alive. This is unquestionably his calling in life, and it's hard to despise him for it when he's so good at his chosen line of work. Maybe those same feelings of family and companionship are why most of this place's victims toughed it out as long as they did.

Thinking back to what Fred said during lunch, you're beginning to understand the appeal of Jeremy Human's even if you'd still just as soon bulldoze the place, "humanimatronics" and all. This is his brother's work, and it's probably all he has left of Goldie. You can see why he's not ready to throw it all away. Hell, with a little remodeling, it could be made into a nice, *safe* venue. The local music community would probably *love* a shot at performing on a live stage again, once *certain* undesirable elements were removed. The families that are here certainly seem to enjoy it anyway, based on how packed it is even now.

Wait a second.

This place *is* packed, isn't it. Like, almost to *bursting*. There was a line to get in, and the dining hall's filled to capacity. In fact, the table you were at has already been claimed by a family of four just in the time you've been away from it. Glancing down the corridor, there are kids and teenagers of just about every species you can think of running amok in the arcade, riding rides and playing games.

So why the hell does this place have so many cut corners? Something doesn't quite add up here -- there's no conceivable reason Jeremy Human's should be in the state it's in now. It should be turning an *insane* profit and expanding its business, not just scraping by with faulty, ramshackle equipment and the most basic of accommodations. For instance, even *without* the murderous robots stalking the halls at night, the guard room's an absolute deathtrap between the leaky ceiling and the rat's nest of cables and wires covering the floor. It's a wonder the building hasn't gone up in an electrical fire yet.

And speaking of the animatronics, unless one's turned up in the last day or two, a replacement for the missing "Schmidt" robot still hasn't been ordered in. Not that you want any more of the damn things running around, but that's not the point. Even "Safety" Schmidt's temporary replacement, Darky, was in run-down condition. The company could've *at least* touched up his costume before bringing him out of "retirement".

After Fred makes his excuses and leaves the party room, he checks his watch as he greets you in the hallway. "We're getting close to the end of my shift. You look like you're doing better."

"I could say the same about you," you retort good-naturedly. "That whackjob had you looking like you were going to blow a gasket."

"I'm not going to lie, I almost went off on her," Fred admits as he fidgets with his vest. "Anyway, I just need to make sure the kitchen staff has everything they need for the dinner hour. We'll be out of here in no time."

Another song starts up from the show stage, and you can hear Fritzine breaking into a yodel even over the noise of the crowd. Chills run down your spine as her grating southern twang reverberates through you.

"S-sounds good, Fred."

As Fred pushes into the kitchen, you turn to limp off towards the dining hall, only to immediately run into something warm and soft. You trip to the ground in a tangle with another person, and in the process of tripping, you smack your wounded shin against a nearby chair. Between the physical pain and your already frayed nerves, it's enough to cause you to cry out in alarm.

"My goodness! I'm so, so sorry!" a bubbly, gossamer-soft voice coos from underneath you.

Looking down, you blush as you realize you've come face-to-face with an ample set of mammarys wrapped in a very snug-fitting business jacket.

"No -- my fault," you sputter, exerting all of your strength just to force yourself off the ground. Your leg's screaming at you in protest, and your fractured ribcage isn't thrilled either, even though it was mostly cushioned by the other party. "I wasn't watching where I was going. You okay?"

Your fellow crash victim turns out to be a harried-looking female black bear. While you're getting better at guessing animal ages, you're not quite sure of how old she is, but Beanie and Chiclet would look young next to her. As you help the bear to her feet, it quickly becomes apparent that she's significantly taller than you; not quite April's height, but certainly close.

Her figure is more curvy than trim, though she's by no means obese. Her face is round and gentle, with pale blush coloring her cheeks and a hearty application of gold lipstick. Her black fur's as dark as the night sky, standing in sharp contrast to both her expressive rose-colored eyes and her vibrant locks of golden headfur. She's wearing a banana yellow business suit that just *barely* fits her, and adorning the top of her head is a matching tea hat with a black flower tucked into its ribbon band.

"I'm fine, Mr. Schmidt," she titters softly as she tries to straighten herself out, still looking a little dazed from having just been bowled over.

"Um, have we met?" you ask, knowing full well you haven't. Then again, there's a lot of things you thought you knew until just recently.

"*Ahhhnnn*, not -- um, not *personally*, no?" the lady bear mumbles as she tucks the clipboard she's carrying under her arm, tugging her skirt back down not-so-subtly. "I'm, mmhm. My name's Nisha. I work at the corporate office."

That explains the outfit, anyway -- she's probably higher up in the company than the wage slaves running around here. Maybe someone's secretary or something.

"Ah, well, nice to meet you, Nisha," you respond, still a little wary of how she knew your name.

"Likewise!" Nisha responds bashfully, smoothing out the rest of her clothes before tending to her messy hair and misaligned hat. "I've, *ahhn*, I've heard a little bit about you from him, actually. Mr. Fazbear, I mean. You're, hmmmm... just a *teensy* bit different than how he described you to me."

Gee, thanks, Fred.



"Hopefully you've only heard the good." You muster up a weak, hesitant laugh. She smiles in kind, gently prodding the tip of her muzzle with the end of her ink pen.

"Oh! No, no -- don't worry. He's the perfect gentleman," she insists.

"Perfect employee, too. I overheard one of the customers in the dining room earlier, and he, y'know, he seemed really impressed with Fred -- had all kinds of glowing praise for him." You nod appreciatively in his direction as Fred exits the kitchen, stopping to answer questions from the sloth girl from earlier. With a smirk you notice she's just now making it back towards the tables with the parmesan and other things Fred sent her for. "I'd ignore whatever you hear from 'Ruth'. She obviously doesn't know him."

Nisha draws a deep breath as she observes Fred, smoothing out her headfur. "Ohhh. That's... kind of a shame."

"Yeah, I agree," you reply, slipping a hand inside your jacket to discreetly massage your sore chest. Standing up for so long is causing your muscles to ache, and your fall just now only amplified the pain. "Everyone else seems to be super friendly to him, and I mean, I know he's kind of a gruff guy sometimes, but he's--"

"Ummm...! N-no, sorry, that's not quite what I meant," Nisha falteringly interjects as she turns her focus back to you. "I mean it's a shame about him being a perfect employee. Um -- considering he

really *isn't* one. Technically speaking."

"Sorry, what?" you ask, not quite taking her meaning. "Well, yeah, I mean -- he's not really a *regular* employee because he's from corporate, but you know what I mean. Regional manager. Whatever."

"*Former* regional manager," she replies softly. Her knees knock together as she leans down to you, lowering her voice cautiously. "He -- he took early retirement some time ago. After the founder -- I mean, um, his brother's..."

You blink, tilting your head at her. Shades of protesting to everyone about Goldie the other night are coming back to you.

"So let me get this straight," you interrupt. Swallowing, you point an unsteady finger in Fred's direction. "Y-- you, you're saying Fred's not employed here. But he works here anyway."

"Ahhhn, yes, that's -- that's what I'm saying, correct. Goodness, when you put it that way..." Nisha makes a sour face like she's just now realizing she let something slip she shouldn't have. "His doctor told us that he has -- ohhhh, I don't have the paperwork in front of me, but it's basically like -- she explained it as, ah, some kind of *clinical denial*, I think. After his break-- sorry. I'm sorry. After his -- well, he's kind of blocked some things out of his mind...?"

You're suddenly wishing you had a thicker jacket, since the blood in your veins feels like it's turned from hot to cold.

"Out of consideration to his late brother, the company founder, the board allows Mr. Fazbear to work here as a special dispensation -- hoping that in some way it'll, you know, help him come to terms with, uh, *it*. And move on." Nisha smiles apologetically as she stumbles over her words. "It became -- ahhhmmm, it was easier than having to have security escort him out every time he'd come in trying to do his old job."

"I think... I think I've heard enough, thank you," you mutter, still trying to absorb the information you've just been given. Hanging her head in embarrassment, Nisha awkwardly takes a sudden interest in her clipboard.

"So-sorry. I, um, I'm so sorry. That all -- it just came out of nowhere. I should've... used more discretion, I'm always just going off at the mouth and I--"

"It's fine." You fake a smile you don't feel, gently brushing a straw wrapper off of the forearm of this babbling, vivacious stranger. "It's fine, you didn't -- you didn't know that *I* didn't know. Haha, um, I just need some time to kinda -- look, it's been a *real* rough week."

Nisha shyly nods, stepping back politely. "Sure. I, um, I -- I kinda need to get back to headquarters, too. It's a long drive, I just had to stop in for a few things. It was nice meeting you, Mr. Schmidt...?"

"Mike." You extend a hand to her. "Please, just Mike."

Smiling, she shakes your hand with a blush. "All right then. Mike. I like that better; I'll have an easier time keeping you separate from our character in my head. Say, speaking of which -- have you seen our band sing? They've, ah, they've got a great interactive show going on right now if you wanted to watch...?"

Your eye twitches and your heart begins to palpitate at the mention of the dancing droids one room over. "I'm good," you reply forcefully. "Hey, um, don't let me hold you up. I'm sure you've got a ton of work to do, right?"

"O-ohh, right. *Ahhnn*. H-have a nice day then, Mike," she says, expression drooping a little as she collects herself to leave.

Unable to keep your facade going, you turn on your heel to seek Fred out in the crowd. You've had enough conversation, enough *overcoming* for one day. Right now, you just want to bail out and head home.

Making your way through customers and patrons flitting about obliviously, you're forced to pass by the stage room. You don't even have to look to know that the humanimatronic band is still out on their stage, performing for a sizable throng of colorful animal people. As you pass by, you try to keep your head down -- but in a spill on the tiled floor, you can just barely make out the reflection of Jeremy's face in your peripheral vision.

Startled, you involuntarily jerk your head up to look at him. He's in the middle of a solo performance, marching in place to the beat of the music as Fritzine bangs a drum and Darky pretends to play a flute. As Jeremy continues to dance, he cranes his neck ever so slightly until he's looking dead in your direction. The crowd doesn't seem to notice as they laugh and clap along to the music, but you've frozen in place like a deer caught in the headlights. Jeremy's usual dark-tinted lenses obscure the majority of his synthetic face, but for a fraction of a second you catch sight of the twin red beacons underneath his visor glimmering. It's all you need to know exactly what he's thinking.

### **I see you.**

All at once, he turns back to the crowd to finish his routine with a flourish. Tearing your gaze away from him after several moments of breathless gawking, you redouble your efforts to hurry to safety.

# Honesty is the Best Policy

## Chapter Summary

Recognizing a growing threat to his friends, Mike rallies the apartment to take action.



The car ride home is spent mostly in silence. Fred isn't the type for conversation unless he has something he needs to say, and right now, that suits you fine. You've got too much on your mind to feel up to small talk anyway.

Nisha's revelation to you about his condition came completely out of left field. Someone as stalwart and seemingly unflappable as Fred Fazbear having a severe psychiatric disorder comes as such a shock, you're not even sure you fully *understand* the information you've been given about him. Bonnibel's myriad of crippling neuroses and Haddock's faltering, childlike personality make their issues easy enough to identify and respond to, but Fred being able to hide it so well feels like an entirely new level of unstable you weren't aware existed. No wonder he was so quick to usher you

out after Goldiegate. It probably set off some deep-seated psychological time bomb he'd otherwise been able to compartmentalize for years.

It's not until the car drives over the speedbumps at the front of the complex and the wrought iron gate is firmly in the rear-view mirror that Fred finally breaks the quiet.

"Thanks for coming along, Mike," he carefully ventures, sounding almost optimistic. "Have to say, you're looking better. Wasn't so bad, right?"

Your stomach turns. In spite of everything that's transpired from the moment you entered his household to the moment you left, he's *still* trying to help you out, even though he needs it far more than you do. Taking a breath, you carefully measure your reply, formulating your words in advance.

"I appreciated our conversation today, especially you filling me in on some of the history of the place," you finally manage as his car pulls up to Building 8. "And, um, lunch was -- it was really amazing, Fred. That was a real treat. Thank you again."

"Don't mention it," he grunts with an amiable wave of his paw. Even though you blatantly dodged his question, your answer seems to have satisfied him. "Oh, and Mike..."

Opening the door, you step outside onto the pavement, your jacket folded over your arm. "Yeah, Fred?"

"If..." He shrugs, exhaling heavily through his nose. "If you need a place to stay until things clear up with your old apartment..."

You watch as a cloud of your own breath escapes your mouth, disappearing into the afternoon sky.

"You know, I really do appreciate the invitation, but these guys need me to stick around and give them a hand." You rub the back of your head sheepishly, winking at him. "Bonbon and Peanut aren't exactly the, uh, leadership types, you know?"

Fred rests both paws on his steering wheel, shifting a little in his seat to look up at you with a hint of a relief on his tired face. You can't blame him for not really wanting you back, but it was big of him to offer.

"Hah. Of course. Well then, I'm counting on you to teach them some responsibility."

"Hey, now. I never said I was a miracle worker," you immediately return.

The two of you share a polite laugh together before he puts his car into gear, driving across the street to his own home. Finally left to your own devices, you turn to Building 8 and begin the climb up the staircase only to remember halfway up that 87-A is on the ground floor, *not* the upper level.

With a sigh, you turn around, trudging back down the stairs.

There's still work yet to be done before you can *finally* head home.

"Hey guys, I'm back," you call out upon arriving at the correct apartment. Stepping into the foyer, you immediately strike your good leg against a pile of refuse in the middle of the entryway, knocking soda cans and carryout containers across the floor. "What the hell...?"

The apartment's almost as bad as it was the first day you arrived. Just in the short amount of time you've been gone, messes have already begun accumulating in bizarre locations. You don't even want to know how a bra ended up hanging from the light sconce by the front door, though the familiar sequin pattern makes it easy enough to assume who put it there. A trail of glitter and fabric scraps runs from Mango's bedroom to the common area, as if she somehow emanates an aura of craft supplies like a slug secretes slime.

Frowning, you scrape some of the rubbish in the entryway into a trash bag before tying it off. The living room's no better than the rest of the apartment, with a half-finished bag of potato chips and a few juice boxes strewn around the couch. Peanut must have surfaced for air just long enough to consume all the junk food Bonbon doesn't let him eat, before returning to his bedroom for hibernation (or torpor, or whatever). Nobody's present to take responsibility for their messes, but it's not hard to piece together the evidence when you've got four viable culprits.

You hang your jacket up on the coat rack by the door, glaring at the mound of coats in a graceless jumble directly underneath said rack. Peanut's tuxedo and Bonbon's windbreaker are present, and you're guessing the garish mauve wool overcoat with huge hand-sewn wooden buttons likely belongs to Goose. That leaves the equally hideous gingham blazer to Mango, who's proven that she's not even close to Mangle's level of fashion-conscious. Then again, teachers aren't known for being snappy dressers, so maybe the flighty vixen's simply playing to type.

Regardless, there's no excuse for *all* of the coats to be on the floor. The rack is more than sturdy enough to support the weight of all of them considering it's bolted to the wall. This entire display is so completely typical of this apartment's collective mindset: do a job about a third of the way, and then move onto whatever the newest shiny, glistening distraction is.

This is ridiculous. Your first apartment was eclectic and mismatched, and it wasn't 100% spotless, but for the most part everything had a semblance of order. You wouldn't open the broom closet to find a carton of milk, or have to pull a paperback book out of the VCR just to watch a movie. This place, on the other hand, stands as a monument to both coziness *and* chaos. While the atmosphere is warm and inviting, it's also badly lacking in discipline. And while you really don't relish the thought of having to take charge -- you're a natural follower, not a leader -- it's plain as day that these guys need a little tough love. You're not sure you're the type to believe in fate, but maybe the entire reason you were brought to this world was to teach these poor clods how to pick up after themselves.

Well, that's probably an overstatement. Probably.

Grimacing, you dodge the minefield of junk as you make your way to the couch, snagging a few of Bonbon's comic books off the living room table to serve as a timewaster until everyone's back home. If you're going to stay here, you'll need to have a little heart-to-heart with your new roomies -- for their own good, if nothing else.

A good twenty minutes has passed when Bonbon finally bounces into the living room wearing a baggy tee and a pair of gym shorts. Looks like she just got out of the shower, since she's dabbing at her ears with a towel.

"Oh, hey, Mike! When'd you get back?" she asks.

"Not too long ago," you respond tersely, setting issue #54 of *Strange Humans* aside. "Do you guys have work today?"

"Nooope, we're not scheduled today," Bonbon says, checking the wall calendar hanging in the kitchen. "Good thing, too! Peanut's in the middle of one of his afternoon naps -- but forget him, I was thinking we could finish up the rest of *Legend of Bob* this afternoon so that you'll be synced up with me!"

Frowning, you bring yourself to a proper sitting position as Bonbon eagerly bounds over to the living room, plopping down close enough to you that you can feel her slightly-damp fur bristling through your clothes. Surprisingly, she smells like blue raspberry candy -- probably her body wash, if you had to guess. It's not a bad scent for her. A bit juvenile, but that comes with the territory around here.

"So, roomie, what episode did we last leave off on--"

"You mind if I interject something serious real quick?"

"Oh, sorry! Not at all. What's up, Mike?" She pays you rapt attention, giving you a buck-toothed grin as she finishes toweling off her ears, before pulling them up into their usual style with a clean athletic band. She seems like she's in a good mood, so it's probably the best time to get the unpleasant "talk" out of the way so you can both enjoy the rest of the evening.

"I didn't want to have to have this conversation with you, but we really need to get some stuff straightened out if I'm going to stay here."

Her face falls as she pulls away from you abruptly, eyebrows turned upward.

"No," she half-whispers, her smile starting to tremble. "No, Mike, not you too."

"Bonbon, I'm sorry, but this entire lifestyle's not healthy!" you reply a bit more firmly, waving an arm around the apartment. "I really don't mean to tell you your business, but it's causing problems for your other housemates. I mean, what about Goose?"

You reach for her paw, but she jerks away like she's just been burned, scooting to the end of the couch.

"What **ABOUT** her? Mike, *no!* This happens every time we have someone new come in! And I just, I don't, you know, it's like -- like, I figured when you moved in you'd be cool with who I am! Goose has never given me a hard time about it, and Peanut and Mango don't mind either!"

Of course they don't mind. They're the other three pieces of the four-piece puzzle.

"Bonbon, I'm not saying it's *entirely* your fault," you protest. "They're responsible for their part in it, too."

She stares at you in shock, her voice softening. "Mike, what *changed*? When we first met, you seemed totally on board! We were joking about it and everything."

"Wait, when we met? Joking about what...?" you wonder aloud. What could she be...

Oh, of course! It suddenly clicks in your head -- she thinks you're giving her a hard time about her human fetish. She's *totally* misinterpreted your meaning! You're struggling to keep a straight face,

but you also know that if you start laughing right now, she's going to freak out.

You glance up at Bonbon, who's now stumbling through her words. "I thought-- you and I-- I thought we had something special, Mike!"

She's beginning to tear up, and suddenly the humor of the moment is gone. You feel a small pang of guilt as you realize how serious this is to her -- poor girl really is deep into this whole "humie" thing. She's just as deluded as those lonely guys from your world that obsessed over girls' cartoons about magical singing horses.

"Of course we do," you begin to reply, but she's in full panic mode now. Her pupils are beginning to dilate. Her breath's coming in quick, short bursts. She's not hyperventilating, but damn if she isn't close. Running a nervous paw through her headfur, she laughs anxiously as she continues to ramble.

"I thought we could be like, friends, Mike! And you know -- you know what, I'm not going to apologize!!"

"Nobody's *asking* you to apologize!" you return hastily, leaning forward a little. Bonbon tucks her legs up underneath herself, grabbing a pillow and squeezing it close to her chest. "You *completely* misunderstand what I'm trying to tell you! Of course we're friends--"

"**I'm a humie!**" she blurts out. She's practically shrieking now. "So *what*?! I think humans are *awesome*, okay?! I want to rub my fur against their soft, smooth skin, Mike! I want humans to pet my feet with their fingers, and massage my ears! And I just assumed you were into them too!"

"Bonbon, listen." You look her in the eye, taking care to speak slowly and clearly so that there's no chance of her misinterpreting. "Let me just nip this in the bud here and now: I have no problem with you being a 'humie' or any of that, okay? Hell, I like humans myself. Probably not, uh, in quite the same way you do, but you know, I mean -- I don't *mind* them."

"Then why are you... what's this whole thing about?" Bonbon asks guardedly, clearly hurt but wanting to understand.

"I was going to kind of try to, y'know, *ease* you into it, but I can see now that wasn't the right idea." If you can at all avoid it, you really don't want a repeat of what happened with Mangle. "So I'll cut to the chase. Your apartment's a mess, and you guys need to get your shit together before Goose slips on a banana peel and breaks her neck."

She stops, freezing in place, and squints just slightly. You can almost imagine a loading bar popping up next to her brain as she stops to parse what you're saying, and only after several moments does she finally arrive at the conclusion that you aren't, in fact, telling her she's a degenerate with a repulsive, insane fetish.

"Wait, that's *it*?" she breathes, sniffing a little. "*That's* what you were trying to tell me about my 'unhealthy lifestyle'?"

"I'm sorry for the misunderstanding. Honest, I am, but that really was all I wanted to say. You know, I was going to say it more eloquently, kind of pitch it to you softball style, but uh..."

"*Ohhhh, wow,*" Bonbon says, a smile returning to her face as she slowly throttles down. "Mike, for a minute there you *really* had me worried. But you're okay with the humie thing? Really? You don't

-- you don't think I'm weird for it?"

Honestly, you're not even sure that's the most bizarre thing about her.

"Everyone's at least a little weird in their own way. I'm weird, Chiclet's weird. Bonworth is *super* weird. If human stuff's your thing, Bonbon, I ain't gonna judge you for it. I like you for who you are."

Without any provocation, Bonbon suddenly springs forward and wraps you in a hug, running her paws through your hair. "Oh, Mike, it means a lot to hear you say that! Really!"

"I'm just sorry for making you think I was -- judging you...!" you grunt wincing as she presses herself against your sore chest. "I'm really not--"

The candy-scented blue bunny pulls back just enough to shove her mouth against your cheek, gripping your head in both paws as she kisses you breathlessly. Your heartbeat quickens as her lips tap against your skin, her eyelids squeezed shut as she trembles in excitement. She's even an energetic, kinetic kisser.

Speaking of which, what *is* it with these rabbits suddenly smooching you out of nowhere?! Of course, unlike Bonnibel's heat-of-the-moment power kiss, this is more of a "just friends" type deal. You hope. Either that, or she's marking you as hers with her blue raspberry scent.

"S-so like I was saying, I just think you guys could, y'know, be a little bit better about cleaning your apartment," you shakily offer as she finally looses you, sliding back onto the couch. "That's it."

Bonbon lets out a stressed laugh -- it's a little shaky and kind of forced, but you can tell she's relieved to hear you don't hate her for her unusual interests.

"All right, Mike. So we can still watch cartoons together?"

"Absolutely, I promise I'll still be your cartoon buddy. I actually kind of enjoy it!" Your expression turns slightly more serious. "But there's more to life than cartoons and exercise, Bonbon. Goose is *blind* -- nobody volunteered that information to me when I moved in, I had to figure it out on my own."

"Yeah. We, we don't really like to talk about it," she answers, sobering up a little.

"I understand, but it's still a reality. You guys can't leave stuff out in the middle of the floor. She could get seriously hurt on something. Would you be able to live with yourself if she fell out a window or broke a leg because nobody felt like taking their trash to the dumpster?"

You fold your arms over your chest as she lowers her head in defeat, looking like a scolded child returning from the principal's office.

"No, you're right. I just... you know, sometimes we get distracted, and Mango's usually out of the house a lot, and then Peanut and I work, and, and since Goose can't *see*, she can't really do a lot to help out, so her share kinda falls onto us..." Bonbon gazes at you apologetically; clearly these thoughts are a sore subject. Tugging at her earband, she continues in a bashful, lowered voice. "I'm glad you're calling us out on all this. This stuff's super important, and we've really dropped the ball. I just need a little *help*, Mike."

Well, obviously she gets the picture, so you decide to let her off the hook gently. No sense in continuing to flagellate her over a what-if that hasn't even happened yet.

"Well, it's not too late, Bonbon. We can fix all this super easy. I've got a couple ideas if you want to hear 'em. Maybe even make a game out of it...?"

"Ooh, that sounds fun! I'm all ears!" she responds eagerly.

"...nah, I don't think so," you chuckle, leaning back. "More like maybe... twenty, twenty-five percent ears at the most."

"Wow, *rude*. So, what've you got in mind?"

"All right, ladies and gents! Let me have your attention please," Bonbon announces exuberantly. "Mike and I have sort of a presentation to give you guys!"

Everyone's grouped around the living room table, hungrily surrounding a vast spread of fresh Chinese takeout. The scent of food was enough to rouse Goose, who's awake a little bit earlier tonight than she was last night.

"Is there going to be a quiz?" Goose lazily cracks from her spot between Peanut and Mango. "Because if so, can it wait until *after* I've had some fried rice and cream cheese puffs?"

"Um, no quiz," you answer, eyeing the easel Frederick was kind enough to loan you and Bonbon for your presentation. "But there'll be practical application of the knowledge you gain. This is very hands-on kind of stuff here. And yes, we can eat in just a second."

Mango takes a sip of her tea, beaming at you and Bonbon. "Ooooh. I'm all for hands-on learning," she says eagerly. "I prefer keeping the little ones very close to the vest and staying very, very involved in their education process. I'm all about *show and tell*."

"You know what, that's a good point, actually! Mango, you work with kids. You've probably got an idea of what this is, then."

With a deliberately cheesy flourish, you flip over the thick slab you and Bonbon spent the better part of the last two hours designing while everyone else was either asleep or out of the house.

"Of course!" The vixen sets her teacup down on the coffee table, standing up from her overstuffed cushion. "I've seen those in just about every household I tutor at!"

"Sure, I'll play." Snorting through her beak, Goose leans forward, wings clasped in a display of mock seriousness. "Is it an animal, vegetable, or mineral?"

"Tee hee~! It's a *chore chart*, Chica!" Mango hastily shuffles over to the board with one paw clutched around her afghan, inspecting your workmanship. "And a very well-constructed one, too! Using *premium* craft supplies that I'm sure weren't *at all* lifted from my stock!"

"Well, we *are* on a budget, and we all have to make sacrifices, Mango." Bonbon winks at you. "I'm glad you approve!"

"Hmm! Well, if it's for the good of the team," Mango giggles.

Peanut scratches one of his ears with the end of his chopsticks, head tilted quizzically. "Um, it's real nice and all, but -- what do we need a, uh, a chore chart for? Isn't that like, for little kids?" The irony of this statement coming from the literal teddy bear in pajamas who just woke up from a juice box-induced sugar crash...

"Well, Mike raised some valid concerns, guys," Bonbon says nervously, wringing her paws as she looks to you for moral support. You flash her a thumbs-up, leaning against the TV set. "The way things are around here, you know... we've talked about getting better about cleaning, and doing dishes and chores and stuff, but uh, he's a little worried about, you know, messy things being in places that would be hard for someone to... anticipate."

Goose shifts in her seat. She seems uncomfortable as she listens in on the conversation. Peanut and Mango exchange hesitant, guilty glances with each other.

"S-so a chore chart seemed like a fun and easy way to keep the place neat and orderly!" She taps her paws together, and you realize she's floundering.

"All right, I'll go ahead and say it," you interrupt with an overly dramatic sigh. Tapping Goose's wing to get her attention (and also to alert her to your presence as you pass by), you take a stand by Bonbon at the chore chart. "I've already got one set of cracked ribs and a busted leg. I'd just like to keep further damage to a minimum."

Polite laughter fills the room, and Goose herself looks especially grateful for the clever misdirection. There's no need to say out loud what everybody's thinking, and a little humor can go a long way towards making an unpleasant situation more palatable. Besides, they're probably *already* feeling embarrassed enough as it is -- having to have a relative stranger sort them out like a day care worker.

"So this isn't really your ordinary chore chart," you continue. "First of all, we're going to hang it right in the middle of the fridge where everyone can get to it, and that'll also help because we've got these great magnets here that I made using some foam shapes from Mango's collection. Thank you, Mango."

"You used my *foam shapes* too?" Mango folds her arms as she sits back down, playfully feigning irritation. "I'm going to be reimbursed for all of this, right?"

"Sure. You can have the fortune cookie that came with my dinner," you reply.

She makes a show of considering it but quickly folds, her tail wagging. "Oooh. *Deal.*"

"So these little magnets here, everyone gets some, and they're all different shapes." You hold up the plastic bags full of shapes for the chore chart. "Let's see, we've got crescent moons, stars, plain old circles, squares, and triangles. You can pick whichever ones you guys want."

One of Goose's wings rockets towards the ceiling. "Dibs on the crescent moons, those sound awesome. What color are they?"

"Um, they're yellow," you respond, pulling out the zippered sandwich bag full of the moon magnets you made, handing them to her. She pops the pouch open, pulling them out to feel. "We picked shapes so they'd be easy for everyone to tell apart."

"Sweet," she coos. "I'm into this."

"So on the board, everyone'll have certain chores they're expected to do and you'll put a shape in your box when you've done it," Bonbon says, pointing excitedly to the chore board. "Like laundry and emptying the garbage from your room, everyone has to do their own. Goose won't be expected to do Mango's laundry, and I won't be getting rid of Peanut's trash, you know?"

"Sounds reasonable," Peanut interjects hungrily, tugging open one of the takeout containers. "All right, let's eat!"

"Hang tough, Peanut, we're almost done," you reply, causing him to let out a frustrated whimper. "Everyone's got their own individual chores, but certain tasks are going to be a single person's responsibility. We've split those up so that everyone has something that they'll be expected to do for the benefit of the whole apartment, and we'll go over those after dinner."

"But guys, you haven't heard the best part!" Bonbon says as she sits down on the floor next to Mango. "Mike's talking about coming up with a reward system. Right, Mike?"

"Yeah, you know, just something small. Make a little competition out of it, treat yourselves when you've gotten all of your chores done. Doesn't have to be a big deal. Maybe cake and ice cream, or a pay-per-view movie night. I'm sure you guys can come up with ideas, right?"

"That *is* a pretty good idea," Mango murmurs. "One family I know has a corkboard they pin dollar bills to along with a chore written on a sticky note. Every time one of their children knocks out a chore, they get to pull a dollar off the board. It's a clever twist on the idea of an allowance, and it teaches them the importance of hard work."

You begin cracking open the takeout containers, scooping paper plates full of food for each of your new roommates. "See? You could do something like that. It's kind of stupid to put your own money you've worked for up on the board, but maybe little favor coupons for chores that help out someone else."

"Obviously you've put a ton of thought into this, Mike," Goose responds as she accepts her plate from you, licking the tips of her beak. "I'm pretty impressed."

"I just have one question. Obviously we're not, ahuh, *neat freak* sorts, and I'll be the first to admit that bad habits are hard to break." Mango glances worriedly around the room, as if she's taking everything in for the first time. "How exactly are we going to, um, *enforce* all of this chore business?"

"Right?" Peanut laughs, sounding skeptical. "I mean, we're all, uh, y'know, adults here, but it's so easy to get distracted, and like you said, we *do* work for a living, Mike."

"That's the one thing you and I *didn't* discuss earlier," Bonbon chips in, pouring herself a cup full of wonton soup before passing Peanut the rest of the container. "How are we gonna turn over a new leaf and make sure it *stays* turned over?"

Sitting back with your own portion -- admittedly a much smaller one than the others as you're still full from lunch -- you grin knowingly, tapping the side of your head.

"Oh, that's the easiest part of all. I've got a guaranteed way to make sure the chore chart works flawlessly, and it'll be a great motivator for everyone here."

"Well don't go telling us all at once!" Bonbon laughs, popping the tab on her soda can. "What's your plan for keeping us delinquents on the straight and narrow, boss man?"

"Simple," you reply. "I'll tell Fred on you."

## The Calm

### Chapter Summary

Mike ruminates on recent tribulations while settling in to a pleasant winter calm.



It's still dark outside, but today you're up early anyway. It's nice to simply bask in the quiet of the morning for once. The apartment's usual daily hustle and bustle will begin soon enough; for now, you aim to enjoy the peace.

The living room's mostly immaculate, having been freshly vacuumed shortly before everyone went to bed. The kitchen table's been wiped clean, and the dishes are resting neatly in the drying rack on the counter. Hanging on the door of the refrigerator is the chore chart you and Bonbon made together. Each column is full of colored shapes signifying that everyone's duties were taken care of by day's end. Opening the door to the fridge, you observe with pride that it's been stripped,

scrubbed, and restocked with fresh groceries. Looks like Bonbon got her "community task" for the week knocked out early.

A bowl of cereal sounds great right about now, and you need something on your stomach in order to take your pain pills. Unscrewing the cap to the milk carton, you take a whiff only to immediately regret doing so. Looks like Bonbon wasn't *quite* so thorough in her cleaning after all. You replace the cap and toss the container of rotten dairy sludge in the kitchen trash can, deciding to settle for a bowl of microwave oatmeal instead.

It's been several days since you came to stay with the residents of 87-A, and you're finally into December now. Turning over the calendar page from November felt like a massive burden being lifted from your shoulders. The good and the bad aside, you're content just to put last month behind you. Of course, you can't help but note with mixed feelings that the bright red circles on the paper indicate HumieCon's not far away.

That'll be... fun.

Not that you need the calendar to remind you, considering that every morning Bonbon hurls Peanut's door open, enthusiastically screaming the countdown out to both of you at the top of her lungs. You're glad to have beaten her to the punch on waking up for once -- it's not even five AM yet, and she's still snoozing away in her bedroom. The temptation to kick *her* bedroom door in and shout in her ears is real, but you'll be nice and spare her.

For now, anyway.

Torn between maple and brown sugar or apple cinnamon oatmeal, you eventually decide that you're in more of a maple mood. After microwaving and eating your meal without even bothering to sit down, you rinse out your bowl, pop your pills, and head to the bathroom to get ready for your morning. As long as you're up early, you might as well make the most of it.

You're showered, shaved, and dressed before half past five, and nobody's so much as made a peep. Fine by you -- you have someone you want to visit today anyway. Bonbon and the others will survive without you for a few hours. After tending to your bandages and collecting your coat -- noting with a smile that the others are still hanging their coats properly -- you head outside into the snow.

The winter weather's finally begun to make the shift from "cold but invigorating" to "spring can't get here fast enough", so you don't want to be out in the white stuff any longer than you have to be. You've heard so many horror stories about "the big freeze" that you've started to grow paranoid. Fortunately, it's a short walk over to Building 9, and Marion's been diligent about keeping the community's roads clear, partially because of all of the service trucks that have been in and out of the complex working on renovations.

Before the end of the year, April Marchand May will finally have an apartment to call her own, and you'll be able to move back home.

Climbing up the stairs to Building 9, you steel your nerves as you stand in front of 93-B. You've been so busy lately -- your all-day lunch outing with Fred, helping out around the new apartment, bouncing back and forth between both Mangles for costume prep, and being held captive for binge watching Bonbon's humie cartoons -- that you haven't even called, let alone visited here since your "episode".

Raising your fist to the door, you gently pound twice before burying your hands in your pockets. Heavy, muffled thuds ring out from within the apartment. You cringe as the familiar sound of metal rhythmically striking fills your ears, slowly getting louder on the approach. Swallowing, you resist the urge to back up out of instinct.

Here, it's normal. Here, it's okay.

The front door swings open, and a bleary-eyed, housecoat-frocked rabbit looks up to greet you with a yawn.

"I'm awful sorry 'bout the noise, Ms. Presto, but for the last time, I can't -- *Mike*?"

"Hi, Bonworth," you reply with a smile, tugging your jacket collar down. "Sorry for showing up so early without warning."

His ears snap straight up as he lurches toward you, enveloping you in a tight hug.

"Not at all, Mike! We've been beside ourselves fretting about you," Bonworth murmurs worriedly, the metal in his arms digging so tightly into your back that you *know* he has to be in discomfort himself. "Only hearing bits and pieces, never gettin' the full story..."

"I'm sorry for not reaching out sooner."

"Mike, I -- I don't know what kinda hell you've been through," he says, releasing you, "but you never had to go it alone."

"I didn't. I've... had a little help here and there," you respond quietly. "I'm getting better, though."

Bonworth motions for you to step inside, closing the door behind you once you're in. "Come on in an' tell us all about it. I'll go get Chica up," he says, limping towards her door.

"Nah, don't wake her up on my account, Bonworth," you reply, taking a seat in the living room.

"Sorry, Mike. Made her a promise that as soon as I heard anythin', I'd let her know immediately. Can't see anyone better to give her the skinny than the fella in question."

He raps twice at her door before letting himself into her bedroom. Seconds later, you hear an excited squawk and a pair of thumps as Cheeky hurries out into the living room in a threadbare shirt, a red-faced Bonworth following right after.

"Well I had to put *something* on," she mutters back to him. Aaaaand *that* explains his expression. "Mike! Oh, sweetie, how are you?"

"I'm getting by," you answer as she hurries over beside you, plopping down next to you on the sofa. "What was the last thing you guys heard?"

Cheeky and Bonworth exchange looks before she finally decides to take the lead.

"We heard there was an... outburst," Cheeky says slowly. "Fred Fazbear made it clear the next morning for everyone to kind of, you know, give you some time and distance to recover. I've wanted to come over and visit, but he didn't think that was a good idea."

"Been awful hard keeping quiet over here," Bonworth cautiously chimes in. "I mean, we wanted to come and drag you over here to our place where we could keep you safe. I sure didn't want you to think I only cared about you rescuin' my little sister, Mike -- but the way this has all shaken out, I feel like we went and left you in the cold."

"I wouldn't have minded. You guys could've come over any time," you reply, frowning a little in the direction of the downstairs apartment. "I'm not sure why Fred would -- actually, no, scratch that. I know *exactly* why Fred would say something like that. I'm not going to lie, we didn't, uh -- we didn't part on the greatest of terms."

"I've heard." Bonworth settles into his usual chair, looking at you with genuine concern. "Would it be too untoward of me to ask you for your side of the story, then?"

"Not at all. You guys are my friends, I figure you have every right to know." You unzip your jacket and gently drape it over Cheeky's lap as she nestles in next to you, wrapping a wing around your shoulders. "Hey, this is pretty comfy."

"I'm all *about* comfy," she grins before turning serious. "But really, Mike, if you don't want to talk about it..."

You gently shake your head. "As long as I don't get too caught up in the details, I'll be okay. So, um... you know Bonworth and I had gone to the restaurant with Fred, and then you both were there when we brought Beanie back to Fred's apartment, uh... Mangle came and got you for the massage. How was that, by the way?"

"Holy shit, Mike, you weren't kidding. It was unbelievable," Cheeky gleefully boasts. "I slept like a freakin' brick after that. When I woke up, my feathers were all soft as down, and all the tightness in my chest was gone."

"She raved about it for days," Bonworth adds with a grin.

"The massage," Cheeky quickly adds, coyly. "Not my chest."

Chuckling, you're glad to know the gesture wasn't wasted on her. Thinking back to your own impromptu, unsolicited massage, it *did* feel pretty amazing even if Mangle's approach... needed some work.

"Chalk it up to those infamous 'healing paws', I guess."

"You're telling me." She yawns, wiping some of the smeared makeup from her eyes with the back of her fist. "Mike, you've *gotta* get me onto Foxglove's regular client list. For, uh, you know -- physical therapy purposes, of course."

"Of course. I'll see if I can't pull some strings," you reply with a wink.

"Awesome. But you were sayin', though?"

"Right. I guess we're picking up after everyone left for the night. Let's see..."

You proceed to give Bonworth and Cheeky an abridged version of the events that followed, sparing as much intimate detail as you can while making sure they get the gist of what went on. You touch

only briefly on your nightmares and hallucinations, explaining most of it away as the aftershock of your ordeal at Jeremy Human's -- a mutual trauma you know they'll be able to empathize with.

With reluctance, you finally force yourself to the end of the recap in which you offhandedly mentioned Goldie in front of everyone, culminating in your public sedation and subsequent ousting from 93-A. Bonworth and Cheeky listen ashen-faced to your entire retelling, not interrupting you even once.

"And then I ended up heading back home to my old apartment for the night before moving in with Bonbon the next day. I've been at her place since," you finish, drumming your fingers on your lap. "That's pretty much everything."

"Ugh. I feel horrible." Cheeky pulls you close, resting your head on her soft down. "I knew it. I knew I should've never gone and left you that night. I bet you could have avoided so much of this mess."

"It's probably for the best; it was bound to come up sooner or later." Sighing, you lean into her, staring out the window. It's still dark as pitch; the sun won't be rising for another hour or so. "I know that, logically, I must have just... seen him on one of the photos on Fred's corkboard collage, and somehow he got stuck in my head. Leaked into my subconscious. But I still can't shake the feeling that it *wasn't* just a hallucination. I mean, you could have convinced me I was actually talking to Goldie Fazbear. He looked as real to me as either of you do right now."

Quiet settles over the room. Bonworth seems lost in thought, while Cheeky's simply content to hold you close.

"What was he like?" you murmur after a while. "Goldie, I mean. When he 'appeared' to me -- he seemed like a calm, professional, level-headed kind of guy. Soft-spoken but confident."

Cheeky nods in agreement as you ease off of her shoulder. "That sounds about like him, yeah. Goldie was a consummate professional -- hell of a nice guy, too. He was the one who hired me on. Did my interview and everything."

"Same," Bonworth adds, pulling himself up from his seat. "'Course, it helped that I was a mutual friend of the owner's brother."

He ducks into his bedroom for a few moments before coming back with a photo album. You scoot over on the sofa to give him room to sit between you and Cheeky; it's a snug, but not uncomfortable fit.

"Here we are," he says, laying the album across his lap.

Bonworth flips through the pages with surprising proficiency, quickly moving past family photos to an unlabeled section all the way in the back of the book. You recognize a few of the photos from Fred's office message board, but as he reaches the end of the album you recoil upon seeing a large-scale print that takes up the entirety of the last page.

A pair of familiar faces are posing together for a group picture. On the left side of the photograph is an easily-recognized Bonworth, albeit younger and wearing the standard-issue Jeremy Human's employee uniform. On the far right side of the picture is a large cardboard cutout of the smiling, cheerful cartoon version of Jeremy Human (obviously off-model), but the person in the center of the group is the one your eye can't help but be drawn to.

Goldie Fazbear stands prominently in the middle of the picture, staring into the camera with tired eyes and a hesitant smile. His vivid yellow fur shines like his namesake, almost sparkling in the camera's flash. His purple silk hat rests neatly over his chest, supported by one paw while the other is placed on Bonworth's shoulder. He's dressed very nicely in a fancy violet outfit, not unlike Fred's own choice of formal attire when he was "working" his shift as the manager.

Looking at the photo for reference, it's amazing how accurate your perception of him was. He looks exactly the way you remember seeing him.

Maybe that means your unconscious brain really did conjure him up from a passing glimpse.

"*Opening Day*," you murmur, tracing a finger along the labeled edge of the photo.

"He was so damn proud of that place," Cheeky quips as she squints down at the page. "You wanna talk about someone who was married to their work? Goldie spent every waking moment walking the halls, mopping floors, waiting tables, filing paperwork -- even when the franchise expanded he was still magnetically drawn to that building downtown."

You nod, taking this information in. "So that's where Fred got it from?"

"Sorta. Fred was kind of rambunctious before Goldie died. Something in him changed afterward, though." Cheeky fiddles with some loose thread at the hem of her shirt. "But that's not really my business to comment on, so I'll leave it there."

"Y'know, it's peculiar to me." Bonworth taps the picture idly, but his own gaze is elsewhere. "You and my little bun seeing the same thing. It's somethin' of a corker, since she swears she hadn't been talkin' to you about it, so I'm not really sure why it's *Goldie Fazbear* of all people you're seeing."

"What're you thinking, Bonnie? Our apartment complex is haunted by the ghost of Fred's brother?" Cheeky deadpans, coughing slightly. There's a little bit of unevenness to her voice, as if she's struggling to decide whether she finds it funny or not. "I never, uh -- never really figured you for the superstitious type, Bon."

"I ain't," he says quickly. "No, no. Look, I know my little sister has her burdens to bear. But hearin' Mike say all this? It just sounds so much like everything she's been tellin' me for ages. Like I'm hearing it all over again."

"Yeah, but her situation's different from Mike's." Cheeky chews at the tip of one of her wrist feathers in thought before making a face and plucking it loose from her wing. "Isn't it?"

Bonworth turns to her, a shaky smile on his mouth. "Right, sure. She's... been through a lot. Not that you haven't, too, Mike! But as much as I know she has some trouble telling what's real when it comes to him, Chica, she's never been a liar. Not to me. You ain't heard the things she's told me in confidence."

Laughing nervously, he pulls at his ear the way you've seen him and nearly all of the other rabbits do in moments of stress or pressure.

"I mean, in a way, she ain't lying, right? If she says she's seen Goldie, I know that, at the very least, she believes she has. And I'm sure Mike believes it, too."

Frustrated, you lean back against the sofa. "At this point I don't know *what* the hell to believe."

"It's not real," Cheeky adds, warily.

Bonworth immediately nods agreement. "Yeah. Yeah, I ain't saying it is. But it's real to them."

"Maybe I should talk to Beanie about it," you interject. "It'd do some good for the two of us to get in touch anyway, since I haven't seen her after... well, everything."

"Yeah, maybe," Bonworth somberly echoes. "But... look, be careful, okay Mike? While I could see her gettin' some catharsis outta having someone to commiserate with, she probably wants to put it all behind her. And the truth is I don't rightly know what'd be better for her. All I know is we're not supposed to be feeding her... delusions."

"What about your mom? She's a doctor, so maybe she'd know something?" you ask.

"Doctorin' is a broad field. She's a small town physician, not a shrink."

"Speaking of shrinks..." Sighing, you scratch your head as you mull over the photo of Goldie one more time. "Do you guys think I'm crazy?"

"Nope," Cheeky drawls. "Do I think you've been through some crazy shit? Yeah, I'd say so. Do I think you're crazy for it? Not unless you want to be."

"Mike, I don't think my little sister's off her rocker, and she's been tellin' me stories like this for I don't know how long. You had a rough couple of nights. Sometimes bad things happen to good people, but havin' a few bad encounters, that doesn't change what you are." Bonworth nudges your shoulder with a wink. "Me, I say you're what you do, not what you think. Now if you start actin' loopy, *then* maybe we'll see 'bout getting you fit for a straitjacket."

"Oooh! Let's get him one anyway!" Cheeky claps her wings, rubbing her wingtips together with a fiendish smile. "Then I can wear my nurse outfit and we can crash Marion's next costume party!"

"Oh, god." You're imagining her pushing you around the room in a wheelchair while you try to eat cocktail sausages off the snack bar without the use of your hands. "If it's all the same I think I'd rather borrow Carrol's stethoscope and just go as a doctor instead."

Winking, Cheeky reaches around Bonworth to tease your cheek with a feathertip. "I'll play doctor with you anytime if you'd like, Mikey."

"Why, Nurse Cheeky, I thought you'd never ask. I didn't get my medical license for nothing, you know. In fact, I didn't get my medical license at all!" You raise an eyebrow, rubbing your chin in an exaggerated display of comical lechery as Bonworth groans.

"Lord help me, there's *two* of 'em now," he chuckles, closing the photo album and setting it on the coffee table. "Y'know, Chica, you reminded me -- speakin' of ol' Marion, I imagine he could probably use some help down at the front desk again, so I'd better get dressed."

"Oh, you're still working down there? Good for you, Bonworth," you reply.

He shrugs, tightening the straps on his prosthetics before standing up with gentle assistance from Cheeky.

"Something to keep busy, I suppose," he says, ambling towards his bedroom door. "All that being said, maybe you're right, Mike. Might be good for you to swing on by an' talk to the lil bunny later,

even if it's only to say hello. She hasn't mentioned anything to me, but I imagine she's probably worried about you too."

You nod, making a note to visit Beanie later. The thought's occurred to you a couple of times over the last few days, but Bonbon's crew has kept you so busy you haven't had much time for yourself at all. Hence why you're up and out so early this morning.

"Will do, Bonworth. Have a good day at work, then," you offer, standing up from the sofa. Cheeky pulls your jacket off of her lap, brushing one of her loose feathers off of the left cuff before handing it back to you. "Oh, thanks. I guess I'd better get running too, then."

"Sure thing. Get well soon, so we can start hanging out again, and by hanging out I mean having you cook for me. I miss having a steady source of edible, non-frozen food."

Snorting, you slip your jacket on with a smile as you head for the entrance. "Glad to know I'm appreciated. See you later, guys!"

"See ya, Mike!"

"Yup. Later, Mikey."

The first thing you smell upon returning to Bonbon's apartment is the stench of spray paint. It's strong, too; the fumes are nearly enough to make you gag as you walk inside. Covering your mouth with your sleeve, you press forward into the common area to see a masked Mango hunched over the kitchen table, furiously shellacking the acrylic components for your costume with chrome spray paint. You note with a twinge of pride that newspaper and cardboard are spread around neatly in an effort to contain the mess.

They're learning.

"Oh, hello, Mike!" she calls out, her voice faintly muffled by her mask. "I didn't know you'd gone out. You're up early today!"

"Good morning, Mango. I went to visit some friends in the other apartment." You quickly hang your coat up before snagging a clean shop rag to use as a makeshift breather. "I don't suppose we could take this *outside* so we don't stink up the house with paint fumes?"

"I'm afraid not. Between the cold and the snow, the paint would ruin," she laments, adjusting the nozzle on her spray can. "It has to be done in here where it's warm and dry. I'm almost done, though!"

You nod, keeping your distance as she resumes her frenetic, energized painting. True to her word, she's finished with the task within a few minutes.

"The laundry room's well-insulated and I don't think anyone will be using it today, so would you mind setting these in there to dry while I clear the table?" Mango asks after doffing her mask.

"Not a problem. What is all this stuff, anyway? Looks like the Bobulator, maybe?"

"That's right." She pulls a reference picture of Bob out of one of the pockets on her painter's smock to show you. "Once the paint dries I'll be able to assemble it all together using cyanoacrylate."

"Cyano-- what? Acrylic?" you ask, hefting the cardboard tray.

"*Cyanoacrylate*. But you probably know it better as 'super glue' -- it's that really strong glue that comes in the little metal tube? It's powerful adhesive, but I wouldn't want to risk using anything else unless you want your costume to *literally* fall apart at the seams."

"Ah, gotcha. I think I remember my dad once trying to fix the broken handle on our old refrigerator using that stuff." You smile wryly, thinking back to the incident. "He ended up giving up after gluing his work glove to the fridge instead. That thing was stuck there for eons."

"Ah, is that all? Sounds like he came out of the exchange better than poor Freddy did last time he tried using it."

You wince, pausing halfway to the laundry room. "Oh no. Do I even *want* to know what happened?"

"He popped a seam in his favorite pair of trousers right before his shift and decided to repair it with glue. We ended up having to take him over to see Dr. Rabbinson." Pressing a clawtip to her messy lipstick (most of which seems to have rubbed off inside her mask), Mango smiles lightheartedly. "Let's just say that he'll use a needle and a thread next time."

"Yikes."

"Mmhm."

You deposit the slab full of painted pieces on top of the washing machine's lid before returning to the living room to finish helping Mango neaten up the table.

"So, Mango, we haven't really had much opportunity to get to know each other as much as I'd like since I moved in. You're usually gone from the house all day and then, you know, we typically end up watching whatever Bonbon wants to watch on TV when you get home."

"That's a good point! We haven't really talked much, have we? I confess, I've been pretty curious about you, since you're new to the community and all."

The vixen takes off her smock, revealing a teal-and-white paisley-patterned dress underneath. Tossing the used smock in the laundry hamper designated for her use (as part of establishing boundaries for household chores, every member of the apartment now has their own laundry basket stationed directly outside their bedroom door), she proceeds to the kitchen.

"I suppose we could do what I do with my kids," Mango muses aloud as she turns the sink faucet on, lathering her paws with lemon-scented soap while the water warms up. "We take turns asking and answering questions about each other. Why don't you start by asking me a question, and then I'll do the same?"

Sounds easy enough. "All right. So are you a private tutor, then? Or do you work at a school?"

"It's personal, private tutoring; I prefer a hands-on, one-on-one approach to teaching," Mango replies as she dries her paws off on a towel hanging from the oven door handle. "I run a regular ad in the community newsletter, and I'll answer just about any job, even if it's something as simple as babysitting."

You lean against the kitchen counter while she begins ferreting around in the cupboards for a coffee mug.

"That's pretty cool! You seem like the type that'd be good with kids." Mostly because the entire apartment might as well be full of children. "Okay, your turn."

"Hmm. Let's start off with something simple. Do you have any hobbies?" She pauses from filling the coffee maker, tail swishing behind herself. "Or anything you like to do for fun?"

"Well, I do like movies. I'm pretty interested in all the behind the scenes stuff, too, like camerawork and cinematography. That's not to say I'm really knowledgeable or anything, though." Not about *this world's* movies, anyway. Back home, you were brutal at trivia games whenever it came to film questions. "Uh, what else -- oh, apparently I'm a fashion model for your rival."

She rolls her eyes as she turns the coffee pot on to percolate before resting against the counter to face you. "Yes, I've seen Foxglove's so-called 'high fashion' line," she mutters in disgust. "I've also seen some of Foxglove's other 'business endeavors', but let's not go there."

"Huh. Okay." You make a mental note to head upstairs and pick Mangle's brain sometime for details on their feud, if for no other reason than the fact it's entertaining as hell watching both foxes getting worked up over each other. Better drama than any soap opera on television, guaranteed. "So I take it then that fashion design's not your thing?"

"I prefer to exercise my creativity in *positive* ways," she remarks, waving a paw to the splatter-paint canvas curtains in the living room. "I find I get more smiles with crafts and costumes than clothes. Hopefully that remains true in your case!"

"Honestly, I'm not that thrilled about stuffing into a pair of tights, but Bonbon was pretty keen on it, and I'm told there's a costume contest with a pretty nice prize. Which I'll be sharing with you *and* Mangle when I win," you add with a chuckle. "After all, I owe you guys something for the materials and labor you've put into making this thing."

Mango smiles. "That's very generous of you, but I had so many of the odds and ends leftover from previous projects that it was really no trouble. You don't need to give me any reward -- certainly not *money*, anyway! I wouldn't say no to a piece of red velvet cake, though!"

"I'll do you one better. I'll go ask Chichi to make you an *entire* red velvet cake. She's quite the baker, if you haven't noticed."

"Oooh, believe me, I've noticed." She pats her hips with an embarrassed smile. "Unfortunately, most of those cakes tend to go straight here, and I'm finding it a little harder to squeeze into my corset these days. Might be time to break out my yoga mat again and let Bonnie put me through the paces."

"Lady, I hear you," you grin. "This spare tire I've picked up isn't getting any smaller with all of Freddy's fattening food. I'll probably be joining you guys on the mats for jazzercise or crunches or whatever it is Bonbon does."

Speaking of the devil, one of the hall doors opens and Bonbon trots out in her nightgown. Apparently not having noticed you, she rubs her eyes before creeping over to the room you share with Peanut, wearing a barely-contained smile on her face. You can clearly see her biting her lower lip as she prepares for her morning routine of screaming out the number of days left till the

convention. You press a finger to your lips as a signal to Mango before sneaking up behind the blue rabbit.

As Bonbon opens the door to the room and draws a deep breath, you grab her shoulder, spinning her around with a manic grin on your face.

"**THREE DAYS TILL HUMIECON!!**" you shout, startling her.

Shrieking in surprise, she jumps high enough off the floor that her ears smack against the ceiling with a pair of dual whaps before gravity kicks in, sending her plummeting to the ground like a cartoon character.

"Mike, that was vicious!" she gasps after catching her breath. Her face quickly reverts to her usual chipper expression, however. "But I *like* the fact you're as excited about it as I am! We'll make a humie out of you yet!"

"Well, I don't know about *that*," you reply with a grin. "But yeah, I admit it: I'm looking forward to it."

Looking forward to it being *over*; mostly, but you might as well have fun while you're there. Extending a hand to her, you help her off the ground as Mango begins pouring coffee for everyone -- a full cup for herself, a full cup for you, and a teaspoon for Bonbon.

"Sweet. That's what I wanna hear. Mornin', Mango!"

"Morning, Bonnie!"

"Hey, Mike, can you grab me a big bowl for some cereal?" Bonbon asks as she prances into the living room to spread out her exercise mat. "I'm *extra* hungry today."

You cast a nervous glance in the direction of the trash can with the long-expired milk carton that was on its way to gaining sentience before turning back to her.

"Cereal? Uh, not such a good idea, Bonbon. How about some oatmeal instead?"

# An Unwelcome Visit

## Chapter Summary

Loose ends require tying.



Having spent so much time with sentient animal people, you're starting to wonder if you're developing animal-like traits of your own. Maybe it's wishful thinking, maybe it's Stockholm syndrome, but you can't deny that you're appreciating certain facets of life in ways you never would have back in your old world.

For instance, as you hop around from apartment to apartment, you're beginning to take note of the varying *smells* you've come to associate with each one. 87-B's an eclectic collection of cozy scents: Mangle's exotic lotions and Frederick's decadent cooking both come to mind, but even April herself isn't unpleasant to be around, with her earthy musk reminiscent of smoke and springtime rain.

Your current temporary residence reeked of trash and unwashed laundry until just recently. Now that your newest roommates are making an actual effort towards cleanliness, Bonbon's playful blue raspberry shampoo has replaced the lingering odors of garbage and expired food. Not ones to be left out, Goose and Mango -- both devoted coffee and tea enthusiasts -- keep the kettle and coffee maker running nearly 24/7. The mellow hen and shortstack vixen frequently meet throughout the day to sample and discuss various aromatic flavors.

Even the usually sterile, hospice-like environment that is home to Bonworth and his housemates has its own unique olfactory signature. The strong lemon-scented cleaners used to keep the bathroom and kitchen immaculate (which helps Haddock and Faz avoid infection) can be smelled clear to Cheeky's room, and of course, Cheeky herself is no stranger to liberal application of perfume to go with her makeup.

And though you haven't been gone all that long, one thing you'll readily admit you've missed as you step inside into Fred Fazbear's home is the scent of Chichi's baking. Today's no exception; you'd recognize that mouth-watering smell of homemade, oven-baked sugar cookies anywhere.

The bird in question greets you with her usual warm smile, though it seems somewhat strained today. The molting process looks like it's been taking its toll on her feathers since you last saw her; small patches of skin are visible around her neck, wrists, and even her face. She's wearing an oversized, high-collared sweater and a long skirt in an obvious effort to hide it.

"Thanks for stopping by, Mike," Chichi says as you hang your coat up.

"No problem. I'm sorry I haven't done so before now." The two of you exchange a brief hug in the foyer before making your way into the common area. "So, you look like you're doing better from where I, uh... ran you over."

"Oh, stop beating yourself up over it! That was an accident," Chichi nervously titters, blushing as she presses the back of her wing to her forehead. "Dr. Rabbinson looked me over and said I was fine. Just a little bump. Why, I don't even feel it anymore!"

"I'm certainly glad to hear it."

The two of you hover awkwardly in the living room, seemingly at a loss for words. Fred clearly must be at "work" while Rackham and Beanie are otherwise occupied. Poor Chichi's probably doing everything she can to stay sane after what happened at Jeremy's. You wouldn't be surprised to find out that the stress is accelerating her feather loss.

"Um, so -- how is she?" you ask, inclining your head towards Beanie's room.

Chichi wipes what's left of her wings on a towel, pondering the question.

"Hmm. Mopey, lethargic. Trouble sleeping. Her days and nights are still mixed up." She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath, holding it for a few seconds before letting go. "And of course, the nightmares."

*There's something about this apartment you didn't miss.*

"Yeah, I can relate, though I've been pretty fortunate since I moved out. Mine've mostly settled down." You can't help but wonder if there's some correlation between the two.

Chichi gives you a quiet nod, rubbing one of the thin spots on her wing self-consciously. "She's awake right now. I'll go let her know you're here, then, if you want to have a seat...?"

"Sure. Thanks, Chichi."

You pad over to the couch, nestling into the corner seat while Chichi nervously teeters off to go fetch Beanie.

The last time you were sitting here, you were borderline delirious. Hallucinations and false sights hounded your nerve-wracked, trauma-addled brain. *Everything* felt like it was out to get you. Today, the atmosphere feels calmer, as if it's completely transformed. Whatever negative pressure was weighing you down has lifted. Now, you couldn't be more in control of your mind and your emotions.

Everything's going to be okay.

A loud yawn from somewhere behind you heralds the arrival of one Bonita Lilac Rabbinson, who unceremoniously plops down at the opposite end of the couch.

"Hey," Beanie greets disinterestedly.

"Hey yourself," you respond, turning your attention to her as Chichi excuses herself from the living room.

Beanie looks like a nervous wreck. Her eyes are completely bloodshot, and her fur is oily and disheveled. You don't need your aforementioned heightened awareness of smell to know that she hasn't had a shower in days. She's wearing a pair of baggy sweatpants and a skin-tight camisole, and one of her ears is pressed flat against the back of her head while the other stands up, straight as a board. In her paws is the same portable video game you saw her with the very first night you came to stay here, its upbeat electronic music heavily contrasting her gloomy demeanor.

Fishing around in her pocket, Beanie produces a crumpled, worn scrap of paper, pressing it firmly into your hands.

"Here."

As you accept it from her, your stomach flops; it's the HumieCon ticket she received from Bonbon.

"Why're you giving me this? You know I've already got one," you joke, despite knowing exactly what the gesture entails.

"I'm not going," she replies flatly, her voice devoid of what little energy it typically possesses. "I don't feel up to it. Give it to someone else."

"...that's a shame. You're gonna break Bonbon's heart, you know." You gently lay the ticket aside on the coffee table as she buries her face in her game. "She's been looking forward to all of us going. Talks about it every day."

"She'll get over it."

Beanie continues to button-mash away, pointedly avoiding any eye contact with you. You toss a glance over your shoulder at the kitchen where Chichi fretfully watches from behind the swinging saloon doors.

Biting your lip, you run through a number of possible conversation starters in your mind, ruling each of them out one by one. The truth is, you still don't know Beanie well enough to have any idea of what'll pull her out of the doldrums. You want to help, but you don't want to overstep your bounds. After several minutes of awkward silence, the only noise being the game's music and the distant rattling of pots and pans, you feel the overwhelming urge to do *anything* just to break the ice.

"You know, we should hold another game night soon. Maybe like what we did at your brother's apartment?"

She tilts the screen of her video game down just enough to look at you out of the corner of her eye.

"Yeah, I mean -- I think it'd be kind of nice," you continue, acting like you didn't notice. "Maybe after the convention? Think the others would want to get together and do something like that?"

Beanie snorts before returning focus to her toy. "*Maybe.*"

"I think so. Hey, Chichi! We're gonna have a game night!" you holler at the kitchen. "Probably after the convention or so! Would you be up to baking some cookies for us then?"

"Sure!" she calls back. "What kind of game?"

You lean over and tap Beanie's knee in an effort to engage her. "Chichi wants to know what kind of game," you blithely repeat. *This* gets you the undivided attention of the acerbic rabbit, who fixes you with a withering glare.

"You know I can hear her from here. I'm *literally* right next to you."

"What kind of games could we do?" you ask again, deliberately playing dumb. "Video games? Tabletop stuff? I'm asking for a friend who wants to know, since she might be joining us."

Beanie's visibly fighting a smirk, dragging her paw down her face. "*Maybe Strongholds and Sapiens.*"

"*Strongholds and Sapiens!!*" you immediately call out to Chichi with overwhelming enthusiasm while Beanie groans.

"Ooooh. Okay! Yeah, I can do that," the hen shouts back before disappearing into the kitchen. "Maybe I'll make my snickerdoodle cookies!"

"She's going to make cookies, Beanie. Snickerdoodle, sounds like."

"*Oh my god.* You might be a complete idiot," Beanie mutters.

"I get that a lot."

"Mike, why are you here?"

Sighing, you let your smile relax as she stares at you, her video game left forgotten in her paws. You gently ease the gadget from her grip, folding its screen shut to put it into standby mode. She doesn't protest, instead leaning back against the couch's armrest.

"I was worried about you," you reply. "Still am, actually."

"I'm fine."

"That would explain why you smell like a homeless person then," you quip. "A topic I'm quite knowledgeable about, by the way."

Beanie folds her arms defiantly, but it's clear her heart's not in it. She draws a deep breath in through her mouth and exhales heavily through her nose before replying.

"All right, Mike. Yeah. You got me. I'm *scared to death*, okay? I can't close my eyes without... without seeing *Fritzine*. Standing over me in the lab, clutching a damn jigsaw. Ready to dissect me and, and -- *sort me* into her collection."

You repress the urge to voice agreement or chime in with her. You know exactly where she's coming from, but right now, it's not about you; you've got her talking and that's all that matters at the moment.

"And even though I'm home and I'm secure, you know? The thought of what *could've* happened if you hadn't shown up to save me is -- it's gonna be with me for a long time, Mike, and I just..." She sniffs, raising the back of her paw to her eyes to stave off the flow of tears. "I wish I'd quit a long time ago, but... I **hate** running from things. I'm **not** a quitter. And then Fred, you know..."

"Sure. You hung in there for his sake too," you murmur softly, recalling Fred's words about the restaurant chain being his brother's legacy.

She nods, sniffling. "Yeah. And most nights it wa-wasn't so bad. I had a knack for keeping *them* away. Jeremy had only shown up once in my office, not long after I first started."

You remember Rackham telling you as much the night you ordered pizza in for everybody; Beanie having to call in sick, being completely unable to sleep -- doesn't sound all that different from right now.

"That's why I offered to take you in on a ride-along, you know," she continues. "I never thought it'd be -- never expected to have another close call like that."

"I understand."

"I'm sorry, Mike." She hangs her head mournfully, shoulders shuddering as she talks. "I really am. I thought maybe you could kind of see what it was all about. I knew it might be scary, but they're not usually-- I just-- I really thought it was nothing we couldn't handle."

You wrap your arm around her shivering body, drawing the lavender rabbit close to your chest. She nods numbly, leaning in as you gently rub the back of her head.

"I wanted to see it for myself, Beanie," you reply. "You just provided an easy opportunity for me to see the place first-hand, but I'd have eventually gone there with *or* without you."

"Maybe, but I still feel like **shit** for putting you in danger on my account. *Twice*, actually."

"Hey, no, quit that." She looks up into your face, her entire countenance exuding remorse. It's plain as day that she's rattled by this entire turn of events. "I'm *not* gonna let you carry that burden. You think I didn't know there was *some* kind of danger attached to that building? I could tell just by the

way everyone upstairs shut me down on it that *something* was going on there. Yeah, the animatronics came as a surprise, but we made it out, didn't we?"

"I still--"

"*Nope.* Don't tear yourself up with 'what-ifs'. We're here, we're alive and well. We're the ones that got away, Beanie. That's what matters."

Scoffing, Beanie wipes her face with a nearby tissue pulled from a box on the coffee table. "*Alive,* yeah. *Well?* No, not so much."

"Hey, I'm not *that* bad." You take her paw, pressing it lightly against your bruised ribs for emphasis. "These'll heal. And my leg's already much better."

"I mean what happened the other night," she mumbles.

"Who, *Goldie?*" Beanie flinches visibly at the mere mention of his name, jerking her paw away from you as her eyes widen in terror. "Hey, look. For whatever it's worth, I mean, it's not like I'm -- like he's haunting me, or whatever."

Beanie lowers her head, processing what you're saying. "But you really have seen him," she whispers. "It's not just me."

"Tall, stocky gold bear with fancy purple duds? Looks pretty much like the spitting image of Fred?" you offer. "Yeah. He was actually pretty normal -- that's why I didn't really think much about it at the time."

"So I'm not... I'm not *crazy* then. We really did see the same thing."

You think back to your conversation with Bonworth and Cheeky this morning. Both of them seemed pretty quick to remind you that it's 'not real' and that you shouldn't 'feed her delusions'. Unfortunately, that puts you in an impossible spot -- either you admit *you've* completely lost your mind, or you give Beanie false hope and possibly undo years of therapy. Neither of which seem like particularly viable options.

"I don't know what to tell you," you carefully reply, "but he seemed real enough to me that I was willing to humiliate myself in front of everyone to prove it. Whatever the case may be, at least you and I are in the same boat together."

"All right then," she says. "Thanks, Mike."

"Mmhm."

The two of you sit in shared silence for a while, Beanie propped against your side. You close your eyes as you feel the rise and fall of her chest against yours. Even in this world, it seems rabbits are still fragile creatures. Not in a million years would you ever have guessed just by looking at her that Bonbon was the most "together" of all of the bunnies you'd meet during your stay in these tenements.

"I still want you to know I'm sorry," she murmurs drowsily.

"...I'll accept your apology on one condition," you respond with a smile, looking down at her. "You have to go to *HumieCon*."

"I... I guess. I mean, I'd already planned--"

"...dressed as my sidekick, Balloon Boy."

She narrows her eyes at you, jerking her head up in alarm. "That little *troglobyte* from that stupid cartoon Bonbon likes? **Hell no.** You're a monster, Mike."

"Hah! Yeah, no, I'm just kidding. I wouldn't wish that fate on my worst enemy."

Stroking her chin, Beanie grins mischievously. "I would. I'd totally make Bonbon go dressed as him."

"Okay, yeah, that *is* pretty tempting."

Chichi walks out into the living room with a small plate of warm sugar cookies and two mugs full of hot cocoa, depositing them on the coffee table with a wink. The smiling hen excuses herself out the front door to make a delivery, whereupon Beanie quickly consumes the lion's share of cookies, only stopping to apologize after realizing she ate five of the six Chichi brought out.

"All that sugar's gonna have you climbing the walls," you joke.

"Sorry. I haven't, um... eaten much lately." She blushes, wiping a few stray sprinkles from her muzzle.

"Hey, I've got an idea. How about you go get a shower, pack your bag, and come stay over at Bonbon's place with us till after the 'con? I think a change of scenery'll do you some good, maybe lift your spirits?"

"*Bonbon's?* Dude, her apartment's a disaster area," Beanie gripes. "I don't see *how* that's gonna 'lift my spirits' at all."

"Give her a chance. I think you might just be pleasantly surprised."

She gives you a dubious look, cleaning some of the excess sugar from her paws with another tissue. "If you say so. I *guess* I can go rinse off and throw some stuff together. I started packing my convention bag but never finished."

"And here you were, trying to pawn your ticket off in a fit of melodrama when you knew, *in your heart of hearts*, how badly you *really* wanted to go," you reply, clicking your tongue in mock disapproval. "For *shame*, Rabbinson."

"Pfft. Don't be an obnoxious little Schmidt," she retorts, easing off of the couch and heading for the bathroom.

"Wow. *Rude.*"

As she thumps down the hall, you stand up and stretch your legs, gathering the empty mugs and cookie plate to return to the kitchen. While you wait for Beanie to finish showering and packing her bags, you might as well pitch in and help Chichi out by cleaning up after yourselves; after all, it's the least you can do since she took the time to fix you both a snack. Plus, considering the baker

most likely had to leave in a hurry to deliver her order, she'll probably enjoy coming back to a tidied up kitchen.

You hand wash the dishes off in the sink before depositing them in the drying rack on the countertop. Not much point in starting the dishwasher for two mugs and a plate, after all. The rest of the kitchen's actually surprisingly clean. Chichi must have been neatening up as she went along. There are still some loose items that could stand to be returned to their proper spots in the pantry, though -- containers of flour and sugar, some cooking utensils, and a mixing bowl that appears to have been unneeded.

You scoop the baking supplies up and carry them over to the pantry, nudging the door open with your foot and turning the lights on with the tip of your elbow. Chichi's pantry is as organized as ever. She really does take extensive pride in her kitchen. It's heartwarming to see someone who loves their work so much. Maybe she takes after Fred in that regard?

As you begin offloading the supplies one at a time into the pantry, you take great care to not to drop anything. You don't even *want* to imagine the potential fallout of a half-gallon plastic container full of flour hitting the floor and exploding. Once you've finished returning everything to the pantry, you close the door and reach for the light switch, only for the bulb inside to stay lit. Frowning, you flip the switch a few times to no avail.

Huh.

This is something new. You've seen lights that won't turn on before, but ones that won't turn *off*? Maybe you're flipping the wrong switch, or maybe some iffy wiring is keeping the light on when another, different switch has to be turned off first. Scratching your head in befuddlement, you turn around, only to realize you're not alone in the kitchen.

"Mike."

Goldie Fazbear stands in the middle of the room, staring at you with a doleful expression. He's hunched over slightly, arms hanging heavy at either of his sides.

"*No.*" Your voice is barely above a whisper as chills run from your neck to your feet. Your entire body feels putty-limp, as if you could just flop onto the floor and die right here on the spot. "No, not again. You're -- you aren't *real*."

"**Mike,**" Goldie repeats more forcefully. There's a fever pitch to his tone, as if he's panic-stricken. You can sure as hell relate. That's got to be why he's appearing in front of you again: there must be something buried in your psyche you haven't overcome. He's a manifestation of your own anxiety.

"I'm *not* seeing this." You squeeze your eyes shut. "I'm not -- I'm **NOT** crazy."



With your hands pressed against the sides of your head, you try to walk past him. As you attempt to flee the kitchen to the safety of the living room, or even outside, your knees buckle and give out underneath you. You lurch forward only to be grabbed right before slamming face-first into the cabinet.

Ice-cold arms covered in coarse, bristly fur haul you to your feet, one wrapped around your torso while the other's gripping the collar of your shirt. You open your eyes to see Goldie's disfigured visage mere inches from your own face.

His once-pristine fur has discolored, turning a pale, sickly olive. His head's tilted at an unnatural angle, his jaw hanging detached from the rest of his skull, split in a crimson smear of gore as if his face had been torn apart by a hacksaw. His eye sockets are empty, dark pits that seem to draw you in like black holes. His left ear is completely missing, leaving tattered bits of sinew and muscle dangling from the open wound in its place.

Opening your mouth, you try to scream, but no sound comes out. Your body begins to shake and convulse involuntarily in his frigid grip as you stare into the endless voids where his eyes should be. Goldie's broken jaw opens even wider, and a noxious stench like the smell of death escapes from the back of his throat in a dry huff as he begins to speak.

**"YOU HAVE TO STOP IT"**

In the fraction of a second it takes you to blink, he's gone.

When you finally come to your senses, you're laying on your side on the cold kitchen floor, sweat dripping down your face and back. Even though you feel like you're freezing, you're still panting heavily.

The lights are out in the kitchen pantry. All of the supplies and ingredients are neatly put away; the only thing out of order in the entire kitchen is the shell-shocked human in the middle of the floor, trying his damnedest not to have a coronary.

The sound of clicking across the floor draws your attention; you wrack your brain trying to place the noise before you realize what you're hearing is the sound of high heels or pumps. The saloon doors swing open and you hear a male voice gasp.

You crane your neck to look up at Rackham standing over you. He's wearing a bright yellow jumper dress with a white confetti-print blouse underneath. His dress is clearly padded around the bust, though to his credit, he at least fills the hips out nicely. Orange high heels and matching lipstick meticulously applied to his muzzle serve to complete his outfit.

"Everything okay?! I heard someone screaming-- *Mike*?"

"Rackham...?" you cautiously return.

"...Why are you all sweaty and laying on the kitchen floor?" he asks warily, blinking his eyeshadow-covered good eye.

"Gee, I don't know," you rasp, flopping over to face him. "Why are you wearing drag?"

The two of you have a brief staring contest as both of you inwardly try to decide who's in more of an awkward position at the moment.

"So, um, I never saw any of this," Rackham finally says.

"And I never saw any of... whatever's going on there," you return, gesturing uselessly to his 'costume'.

He nods quickly, raises his good paw to his muzzle to cover a nervous cough, and slowly backs out of the kitchen only for one of his heels to snap off as he trips over the threshold. You wince as he tumbles backwards through the swinging doors, falling on his ass out in the hallway with a loud thud.

"Oww! Dammit!"

"You all right, Rackham?" you call out from your spot on the kitchen floor.

"Uggh. Yeah, I -- I'm fine, Mike," he groans shakily before picking himself up and limping off to the privacy of his bedroom.

With a grimace, you grab onto the kitchen counter and slowly hoist yourself to your feet. You only wish that was the craziest encounter you'd had in this very room today.

Brushing dust and crumbs from the kitchen floor off of yourself -- as well as a few stray yellow feathers that managed to embed themselves in your shirt -- you walk over to the kitchen sink and

wash your face, slicking water through your hair as you try to calm down. After drying off with a paper towel, you straighten out your shirt and head into the sanctuary of the living room.

Apparently, your timing's perfect, since Beanie's seated outside, having since showered and changed into her day clothes. On the floor next to her feet is a small backpack and a rolling suitcase. Rackham must have just missed her.

"You ready to go, Mike?" she asks, seemingly much more alert. "I gotta tell you, I *am* feeling a lot better. I'm glad I let you talk me into this."

Tossing a nervous look over your shoulder at the kitchen as the saloon doors swing shut behind you, you force a smile at her.

"Y-yeah. Me too."

# Bell Pepper Night

## Chapter Summary

Surrounded by friends, Mike prepares a warm dinner on a cold night.



As you stand at the kitchen sink washing vegetables for tonight's dinner, you're almost *disturbed* at how well your psyche is handling everything that happened back at 93-A. If you had to put it into words, the fact that you're feeling all right doesn't really feel all right.

You decide to hold off on mentioning anything about your newest Goldie encounter to anyone, especially Beanie. It's not because you're afraid you'll have another "episode" that'll end with more ostracized friends and another serving of Mangle's Special Naptime Blend. Rather, you just don't see what you have to gain by bringing it up. Ever since you brought her back to Bonbon's a few hours ago, Beanie's general mood has been improving substantially. The last thing the poor girl needs is to hear about another "sighting". Bonworth and Cheeky made that point *very* clear.

As for telling the others, there isn't much they can do for you beyond providing comfort. And though a hug and some kind words would've been nice right after it happened, the initial shock of seeing Goldie again has since passed. Plus, you run the risk of your potential confidants not being so understanding this time around, and you're not in the market for a one-way trip to see a head

doctor. Similarly to Beanie, everyone's starting to act normal around you again after your meltdown last month. No need to rock the boat.

While it seems illogical to try and approach this logically, the Goldie Dilemma is obviously a localized problem. Whatever the hell he may be -- a vengeful ghost, a familiar spirit, or just a *very* persuasive hallucination caused by poor ventilation that somehow only affects you and Beanie -- he doesn't seem to show up outside of Fred Fazbear's apartment. He can't get you while you're here, and if it's the same for Beanie, she should be fine for a while too. You're not sure you believe in phantoms and the like, but this *is* a world where seven-foot tall chickens and neon blue rabbits are standard-issue. Anything's possible, as they say.

As for the content of his "message" to you, "*you have to stop it*"? There are numerous things he could be referencing. For instance, something going on in that household, maybe with one of the tenants? It's not impossible, but if that's the case, he sure didn't give you much to go off of. It could also be interpreted literally: something *you* specifically are doing wrong that you have to stop. But no, he seemed too panic-stricken, too pleading, almost as if he was begging you to intervene. If it was a fault of your own, surely he'd be sternly reprimanding you instead.

No, it's got to have something to do with Jeremy Human's. Fred mentioned that the pizzeria chain is what's left of his late brother's legacy, and that makes it the most likely choice -- but then, that's its own can of worms entirely. Where would you even *start* with trying to decipher what Goldie could be referring to?

Fritzine's brutal dismemberment of unfortunate employees?

Dangerous "humanimatronic" performers not only being marketed to children, but allowed near them?

The restaurant's history of faulty equipment and "accidents"?

The corporate cover-ups and shady NDA silencing of anyone involved in said "accidents"?

And just what makes Goldie think *you* have any pull there? If anything, wouldn't Fred be a better choice considering his "favored status" with the company in spite of his condition? Then again, you don't get the feeling Fred's been dealt into Goldie's game. Maybe that's exactly why it's you instead: Fred's so close to the restaurant, he can't see the forest for the trees.

Wait a minute. Are you seriously trying to make sense of a *hallucination*?

"Now I know I'm losing it," you mutter, shaking your head. What a thoroughly insane twist to what started off as such a pleasant day.

You shut the faucet off and set the last of the bell peppers aside in a bowl to be cut and stuffed. With the convention in less than three days and the holidays soon to follow, you've got little choice but to back-burner Goldie's cryptic bullshit for now. Right now, you need your mind clear of distractions so that you can focus on more pressing concerns: making sure Beanie stays in good spirits, keeping this household from devolving into a landfill again, and most importantly, psyching yourself up to squeeze into a pair of superhero tights.

"Mmmm. *Somethin'* smells good. I'm going to guess we're having... tacos?"

You look up from the sink to see Goose lazily propped against the refrigerator, fumbling with her crescent moon magnets as she marks off one of her chores.

"Stuffed bell peppers, actually," you respond pleasantly, grateful for the diversion. Even though she can't see your smile, you know she'll hear it in your voice. "That all right with you?"

"Absolutely. I *love* peppers," she answers.

She places a crescent moon upside-down on the chore board, then clicks her beak in absent frustration. Seems she can tell something's not quite right. Pressing a feather against the magnet, she spins it counter-clockwise a few times before pulling away, deciding she's satisfied with its placement on the chore chart.

And yet, the magnet's still upside-down.

Stifling an amused giggle, you lean around the counter into the living room to check up on Beanie. She's still asleep on the couch, having passed out while waiting for everyone to get home from work. Her face is the most peaceful and content you think you've ever seen her, a half-smile on her lips as she gently dozes.

"Beanie's going to be staying over for a few days because of the 'con. She's sleeping in the living room right now," you murmur to Goose as you begin chopping the peppers in half.

"Ooh, okay. I'll try to be quiet then," the hen remarks. "Anything I can do to help with dinner?"

Casting a glance around the kitchen, you quickly rule out just about every task that remains, considering her disability. Goose waits patiently for your reply, wings clasped and head tilted to one angle as you struggle to think of something for her to do that isn't too difficult, yet won't be so easy it's patronizing.

"Actually, I think I've got dinner under control, but there is something else I could use your help with." You grab a clean washcloth and lightly dampen it in the sink before pressing it into her wings. "Can you wipe down the table? Looks like it didn't get cleaned off after lunch."

"Sure," Goose whispers.

Taking the rag from you, she slowly moves over to the table. She walks very deliberately, lifting her feet a little higher with each step than they really need to be -- probably because until just recently she had to wade through trash and laundry to get anywhere without stubbing her toes. Must be force of habit.

Once she's made it to the table, she gently runs a wing across the tabletop to ensure there isn't anything she'll be knocking over before clumsily dragging the cloth across the surface. Her movements are stiff and jerky, and there are a few times in which she looks like she's second-guessing her work -- it's apparent this isn't a task she regularly performs, so she's taking something that would otherwise be simple very seriously.

"All finished," Goose announces with a twinge of pride, tossing the rag into one of the hall laundry baskets. "Anything else?"

"Nah, we're good for now," you reply, eyeing the recipe book in front of you.

While you'll admit you aren't much of a cook, Chichi and Frederick have inspired you to step up your culinary game so that you'll have more non-pancake dishes to prepare next time you visit

Cheeky and Faz. Speaking of the big bear, you need to figure out a salmon recipe as well. He'd probably appreciate a nice home-cooked dinner for a change.

"Hey Goose, you want me to put you on some tea or coffee or something?"

"Oh, no thanks. I'll wait until after dinner. Besides, Mangle'll be home soon anyway and she'll want a cup too, I'm sure."

"All righty."

"So how's your convention prep coming along?" she asks, plopping down at the kitchen table. "You ready to be poked and prodded for two days straight?"

You jerk your head up from the recipe book. "Poked and prodded?" That's something you've been trying to avoid, actually.

"Mmm, so I've heard. Bonnie says those humie types can be *real* touchy-feely." Goose raises both wings to her face, drowsily massaging her temples. "She's always telling me some story or another 'bout them getting too close to one of the costumed folks and -- well, you know."

"N-no, I *don't* know," you return, alarm creeping into your voice. "I figured it'd probably be like your usual geek convention, maybe some *eccentric* people there, but, uh..."

Mostly, you've been imagining HumieCon as an auditorium full of Bonbons, which in and of itself brings its own sense of dread. One Bonbon's more than enough for this world; an auditorium full of grabby, aggressive Bonbons is enough to make your skin crawl.

"Ohhhh, shit. So she hasn't warned you. Yeah, last year she was telling me about how there was this big blow-up about a couple of monkeys who'd waxed their fur and gotten some cosmetic surgery done to look all 'humanoid' or whatever. Total fanatics, you know." Surgery? Yeah, no kidding. "Anyway, I guess the crowd decided they wanted to cop a feel. Like, all at once."

"Wow," you manage, suddenly *very* self-conscious as you examine the bare skin on your arms. "I guess that didn't go over well."

"Not really, no. Apparently the convention organizers had to be shut down due to sexual harassment and assault suits. Made the nightly news." Shrugging, Goose leans back in her seat, wings folded across her belly. "But hey, creepers gonna creep, right?"

You cough awkwardly, making a mental note to pick up some pepper spray or something before wading into the fray. Maybe it's not too late to buy a ticket for Frederick and ask him to be your bodyguard.

"What do you think about your costume so far?" she asks. "How's it look?"

"So far so good, but it's still being assembled. Probably could use a few more sequins for your taste, though," you chuckle.

"Everything *always* needs more sequins."

"Both my Mangle and yours have really worked hard to get it done." Turning the heat on the stove up, you begin browning the ground beef. "Which I realize is probably a huge sacrifice for them, seeing as how they can't stand each other."

"Hah. Yeah, those two and their grudge. Whole thing's silly if you ask me, but whatever," she giggles, tracing her feathertips around the edge of the table. "I get along with everybody. Life's too short to spend fighting over stupid stuff. I think it'd do them *both* some good just to kiss and make up already."

With everything you know about Mangle as well as everything you've been told about Mango, you're not sure how much of a stretch 'kiss and make up' would be. You allow yourself to indulge in *that* particular mental image for just a few seconds too long before realizing the ground beef in the skillet's starting to overcook. Blushing, you grab a spatula and quickly resume stirring it.

Speaking of Mangles, the front door swings open and in shuffles this apartment's resident half of the drama duo. She kicks some snow loose from her pumps with a pleasant smile.

"I'm home, everyone," she announces, taking her jacket off while locking the door behind herself. The vixen deftly flicks her coat onto the rack by the door before ambling into the hallway. "My, something smells *delicious*!"

"Yep," Goose whispers, turning her head in Mango's vague direction. "Be quiet though, Mangle. Beanie's asleep in the living room."

"Oh! Sorry, I didn't realize," she mumbles, comically covering her muzzle with both paws.

"Naaah, it's all right. I needed to get up anyway," Beanie sleepily groans from the couch before rolling off of it and onto her feet. Standing up, she collects her hoodie from the armrest and slips it back on over her babydoll tee. "Oh shit, Mike, did you make stuffed bell peppers? Is that what I've been smelling?"

"I did indeed! Hope you're hungry."

You slide two cookie sheets loaded with the things into the oven before wiping your hands on a towel. You probably made too much food for everyone, but nobody here seems opposed to leftovers at all, and Peanut *is* a pretty big eater. Actually, on second thought, you might not have made *enough*.

"You're damn right I'm hungry, Mike. Hungry enough to fight everyone at the table for theirs," Beanie replies enthusiastically, sliding into one of the kitchen table's empty seats. "Sorry, Goose, but that means you too."

"Beanie, you're a darling, but you lay a paw on my dinner and I'll kick your cotton-covered ass," Goose returns with a devilish smile, puffing up her feathers. You get that it's probably something birds do to seem intimidating, but she just comes off looking like an adorable orange blowfish.

"Now now, girls, I know you're both in a jovial mood, but there's no need for crude language," Mango says sternly, trotting into the kitchen to begin preparing a fresh pot of coffee.

"Yes ma'am," Beanie and Goose echo in perfect unison, looking suitably cowed.

Ah, the power only a teacher used to dealing with rowdy kids can wield. You're not even part of this scolding and you involuntarily feel the need to stand up straighter and look more studious. Fortunately, Bonbon chooses this exact moment to pop into the house with a lethargic Peanut in tow, sparing all of you from having to write out *I will not say swear words* on the blackboard a hundred times.

"Hi everyone, we're back from work! Oh, hey, Beanie! What're you doin' here?" Bonbon asks as she and Peanut begin shedding their extra layers by the door.

"Uh, Mike invited me over," Beanie remarks. "I hope that's okay."

"Beanie's really been looking forward to the convention, so I assumed it'd be easier for everyone if she stayed over for the next few days," you kick in, winking at Beanie. As long as you're avoiding discussing your earlier visit to 93-A, you figure there's no need to bring up her trying to give you back her con ticket.

"Yup, that's exactly it," Beanie says, giving you a subtle nod.

"Hey, awesome! The more the merrier," Bonbon whoops.

Delicately wrapping both arms around her friend's shoulders, Bonbon excitedly nuzzles Beanie's face. While she tries to look put out by the unnecessary public display of affection, the smile on Beanie's face betrays her true feelings.

"Agreed. I, for one, welcome it," Mango enthuses, tail wagging. "Having guests over is so much fun, and it's been wonderful having Mike here. We've both gotten to do all sorts of... *favors* for each other."

Beanie whistles, casting her gaze around the apartment before offering an approving nod. "Yeah, no kidding. This place looks like a showroom compared to the last time I saw it. You guys *have* to feel better not wading through all that shi-- *crap*."

"It's pretty sweet, not gonna lie," Goose proudly boasts. "Cozy, too! I'm finding all sorts of great snoozing spots that I never knew about."

"Oh, man, I didn't even think of that...! Some serious napping real estate's opened up!" Peanut eagerly adds, trundling over to the oven and peering in through the window. "Mmm, stuffed bell peppers? They look great."

"Thanks. They seem to be a hit with everyone already, so I hope they live up to the hype," you reply.

"So many, too," the pudgy bear continues as he washes his paws in the sink. "We'll have leftovers for sure."

You breathe an inward sigh of relief; if *he* thinks there'll be a surplus, you've made plenty after all.

"Yeah, well, I figured we'd have a big crowd, so more seemed better than less. The recipe looked simple enough and we had almost all of the ingredients on-hand. Well, minus the actual bell peppers themselves."

"Only Mike would look through a cookbook and go 'this is it, this is the one' in spite of missing *literally* the main ingredient," Beanie snorts.

"I'll take that as you complimenting my innovativeness," you retort, theatrically puffing your chest up in a remarkably Goose-like gesture. "Besides, I had to run to the corner store to grab some stuff for my travel bag while you were asleep anyway, so I went to pick up what we needed to finish the dinner. Figured I might as well kill two birds with one stone, y'know."

The levity in the room deflates like a punctured hot air balloon. Goose's beak hangs slack in shock. Mango lets out an appalled gasp while both rabbits and even *Peanut* glare at you in disgust. Clearly nobody's amused at all.

"Wow, Mike," Goose coughs, fanning her face with a wing. "That's a pretty harsh, um..."

"Yeeeeah," Peanut adds, shaking his head disapprovingly. "What an inappropriate statement to make. C'mon, Mike. You're better than that."

"Yeah, Mike, rise above," Bonbon admonishes. "Geez."

You dip your head apologetically, realizing your mistake only far too late. And to think, you even made the conscious thought to *avoid* animal-related idioms and slurs after overhearing the elder rabbit at Jeremy Human's.

"Man, guys, I'm -- I'm *really* sorry," you stammer, hands raised as you back up a half-step. "I didn't... it's, I wasn't trying to -- *look*, it's just a stupid saying from where I'm from."

"From where you're *from*?" Bonbon asks, face scrunched up. "Yikes! They must *really* hate birds there."

"I never would've pegged you for a *specist* at all, Mike," Mango says, shaking her head in sad disapproval.

"I didn't mean anything by it at all, Goose, I *promise*. I love birds," you insist, backpedaling.

"Oh, sure, sure," Beanie adds, propping her face up on one arm with a smirk as you squirm. "And I'm sure you've got plenty of friends who are birds too -- right, Mike?"

Cutting your eyes at her, you fold your arms in a huff. "Of course I have friends that are birds, you *smartass*. Literally all of us do."

"Well, I know he's got at least one," Goose says benevolently, clumsily patting Beanie with one of her wings.

"Thanks, Goose," you reply, glad she's at least downplaying your gaffe. "It really was just a stupid joke. I'm sorry."

Beanie bobs her head up and down, ears swaying as she plasters on only the fakest of smiles. "Yeah, and Mike can't help being stupid, you know. Seeing as how he's a monkey and all."

Groaning, you shake your head as the room erupts into snickering and giggles at your expense. Even Mango, who seems like she'd frown on this kind of behavior, can't help but laugh along with the rest of them. Still, you can't bring yourself to really be much more than slightly annoyed -- seeing Beanie back to her usual wisecracking, snarky self is a very welcome change from watching her spiral into depression. Your initial assessment was right; she really did need to get out of that apartment and into safer territory for a while.

After a while's passed and everyone's settled down, you check the oven. Looks like dinner's ready. Sliding the trays out with a pair of potholders, you quickly get to plating food, taking great care to make sure that everyone gets their fair share.

Well, *almost* everyone.

"Wait a minute," Beanie grunts as she looks at her snack-sized portion of half a stuffed bell pepper. "They all got more than I did."

"Oh, really?" you ask, playing dumb as you slide into your seat at the table. "You sure? I mean, all the plates look the same to me..."

"Like **fu**-- uhh, *fun* they do!" Jabbing her finger towards Peanut's plate first, Beanie goes clockwise around the table. "Peanut got three, Mango got three, three for Goose, Bonbon, *even you...* and I got one!! And -- hang on, this isn't even a *whole pepper!* You cut it in **half!!**"

"Wow. How about that." You shrug, taking a sip of your soda as Bonbon and Goose strain to keep straight faces. "Man, could've sworn everyone got the same portion. But hey, what do I know? I'm just a *stupid monkey* after all."

"Eh, looks pfff-- p-pretty f-fair to me," Bonbon chokes, doing everything she can to avoid breaking out into a fit of laughter. "Besides, you k-kind'a need to work off some of that -- pffffft, pu-pudge -- now that you've quit your job, Be-beanie!"

Nope. Unable to contain herself, Bonbon buries her face in her placemat, letting out a howl of laughter.

Face souring, Beanie stands up with a loud, pronounced sigh. "There'd *better* be more of these in the kitchen or I'm eating yours."

"Whose? Bonbon's or Mike's?" Mango asks as you maintain an innocent smile.

"**Yes.**"

One very lively dinner later, Peanut begs off for an early bedtime due to torpor and work leaving him exhausted.

"Thanks for the great dinner, Mike!" Bonbon blithely carries a stack of dishes to the sink to rinse and run through the dishwasher. "After I'm done cleaning up the kitchen, do you want to finish getting caught up on *Legend of Bob*? I don't think we have that many episodes left!"

"Yeah, sounds good," you respond, wiping the table down. "Beanie, you in?"

Looking up from her game in the living room, Beanie gives you a passive shrug. "Sure, what the hell."

A rattling sound announces the arrival of Mango's rolling supply cart as she shoves it out of her bedroom and into the living room. You inwardly cringe, half-expecting for her to dump her art supplies out onto the floor again, but she pleasantly surprises you, pushing it over to the table and setting up a neat work area to minimize the mess. You pull her seat out for her, causing her to blush and smile.

"Oh, I knew you were a gentleman after all, Mike. Say, as long as I'm troubling you, can you start the coffee maker?" the vixen asks as she starts to unpack the bits and pieces of the Bobulator onto the table, laying them out in neat rows atop a strip of discarded newspaper.

"No problem," you reply, walking over to the coffee pot and flipping it on.

"Thanks. I have a busy schedule over the next week, so I'd really like to get the accessories for your costume finished tonight. A little liquid motivation will help get the last of the kinks worked out. Chica, you want to join me for a cup?"

"Um, I'll pass tonight," Goose yawns, feeling her way over to the front door. She runs her wings across the coat rack before finding her thick wool overcoat. "I was actually thinking about heading upstairs, to go catch up with Chiclet."

"I... understand. No no, that's all right," Mango huffs, failing to fully conceal her genuine disappointment. Seems she takes her coffee and teatime bonding ritual with Goose very seriously.

Smirking, Goose carefully fumbles with her coat's wooden buttons. "Don't pout, Mangle. Maybe if you're still up when I get back, we can have some peppermint chamomile tea to celebrate."

*"Hmmpf."*

Coughing, Goose raises a wing, still hovering in the foyer. "Hey, uh, does someone mind walking me up the stairs?" she asks with an apologetic smile. "It's, um, I think it's snowing out, so..."

"Sure, I'll run you up there real fast, Goose," you offer, slipping your shoes on and grabbing your coat.

"Go ahead and send for Foxglove while you're up there, Mike," Mango dourly says, shaking a container of fabric paint. "Loathe as I am to admit it, I'm going to need the little imp's help making sure this thing attaches properly to the sleeve of your suit. We've been avoiding having to meet in person as much as possible, but I might as well quit stalling the inevitable."

"You sure, Mango?" you ask, tilting your head at her.

"Before I change my mind, if you would please."

"Okay then. Let's go, Goose."



Sure enough, the snow's really beginning to come down outside. If the winter freezes are as bad as they've been made out to be, you're going to need a heavier coat, and fast, because your current garb isn't doing much to insulate you from the cold. Maybe you can get Foxglove to make you a scarf or something in the meantime. Your monthly stipend should be coming up soon, and even then, you can't imagine the fashionista would charge you too much for a simple muffler.

Fortunately, the staircase leading to the upper level is well-covered, so there's only snow on the bottom step. You carefully help Goose over the hazard, supporting her as she slowly ascends the stairs. She clutches the handrail with one wing, lifting her legs and setting them down one-at-a-time to avoid slipping and falling. It takes a couple of minutes to make it up just one flight of stairs due to Goose's steady pace.

"Thanks, Mike. S-sorry about the trouble," she says, shivering a little as she walks out onto the upper landing. "It's not so bad in the summer, but with the snow and the ice, you know..."

"You don't have anything to apologize for." You reach around her head to give her shoulder a gentle squeeze. "We're almost there."

Instead of walking forward with you, Goose stops in place, as if she's frozen in time. She doesn't move from her spot on the landing. Her head's pointed straight ahead, but her eyes are completely unfocused. You turn to look at her, wrapping your arms around yourself.

"Goose? Everything okay?" you prod gently.

"*Why*, Mike?"

"Why what, Goose?" you venture, teeth chattering slightly. She leans into your chest for warmth, burying her head against your shoulder. "You mean that comment I made earlier about--"

"No, I mean -- what is it about you that's so... *different?*" she mumbles.

"Wh-what do you mean?"

Closing her eyes, she exhales through her nostrils, sending twin plumes of warm breath skyward.

"Everyone around here just, it's like..." She seems to be struggling to find the words she wants to say. "I haven't ever witnessed anything like it, but, whenever someone needs something, you're *right there*, immediately helping out. Whether it's something simple like making dinner, or something big like helping clean and organize an entire apartment full of adults. Or carrying an overweight blind girl up a flight of stairs in the middle of winter."

"Goose, c'mon. Don't be that way."

Looking up near your face, Goose sighs aloud. "I just want to know why you give so much of a shit about a bunch of complete strangers."

A blast of cold wind blows through the hallway of the upper level, ruffling your own hair and knocking one of her feathers loose. It tumbles through the night sky, riding the current like a tiny golden kite without a string. You take her wing and gently ease her aside out of the direct path of the wind and into the doorway of one of the nearby apartments, shielding her body with your own.

"I don't really know how to describe it, Goose," you begin carefully. "But my memories are like... well, it's like a puzzle that I've only got *maybe* a tenth of the pieces for. Little bits here and there to get the gist, but I don't have the full picture."

"...not sure I understand. What's that got to do with anything?"

"Some way or another... *haaahhh*, this is going to sound *really* weird, and I don't imagine you'll understand it at all, but..." You close your own eyes. "You're not a bunch of 'strangers'. In my mind, I... there's something so familiar about this. Even though I only just started meeting everyone a month or so ago, I feel like we've known each other for a long time."

"Like what, *reincarnation* or something? We knew each other in a past life?"

"Maybe, I guess? I'm not usually the type to believe in that mystic kinda stuff." Although that's really been put to the test lately, thanks to a certain golden apparition. "This is gonna sound really arrogant, but -- I feel like maybe coming here was fate, for me. Maybe I was put here to, you know, look out for everyone."

"Like what, our caretaker?" she asks skeptically.

"N-not, no, not exactly. More like, um... well, like a *guardian*."

"...so we're a burden to you then," Goose says.

**"Absolutely not,"** you reply firmly, stomping your foot on the landing. "You, and everyone else here -- you guys *aren't* a burden to me. You're my friends."

"Mike, you don't have to--"

**"No,** Goose. Not a single one of you is a burden, and certainly not you." Chuckling a little, you soften your voice to allay her fears. "And believe me, I know *all about* being a burden. They had to

dope me and drag my ass out of Fred's in the middle of the night."

She laughs softly to herself, her familiar easygoing smile settling right back in place. "Hey, you got spooked is all. Jeremy's got that effect on people."

"Man, you aren't kidding. He most *certainly* does."

Running a wing through her headfeathers, she begins waddling down the upper hall with you towards 87-B. "Well, for whatever it's worth, Mike, I can't speak for the others but I know what *I* really appreciate about you," she says as you reach up and knock at the door to Chiclet's apartment.

"And what's that, Goose?" you ask with an earnest smile.

Something soft grazes the right side of your leg, quickly working its way up your thigh before terminating in a brief, sharp pain in your right buttock, just as the front door opens.

"Ah, right on time! Good evening," Mangle grins as you struggle to keep your face from contorting, due to the hen's surprise attack on your posterior. "Oh *my*. That's certainly a most *interesting* face you're making, Bonnie...!"

"Let's... just say I see where she got the name 'Goose' from," you mutter good-naturedly.

# Ladies Night

## Chapter Summary

Foxglove Mangle and Mango Mangle attempt to work together to finalize Mike's costume, while Mike weighs options on appearances.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



"Good grief, Foxglove! It's *just* a simple overlocking seam," Mango chides in a condescending tone, sipping at her coffee mug. "You *have* used a serger before, haven't you?"

"I know this may be a *difficult* concept for you to comprehend, but since I'm a *grown-up*, I'm allowed to purchase and operate my very own equipment," Mangle retorts, both eyes narrowed to slits. "Of course, I'm sure someone such as yourself would be *flabbergasted* by such a notion, when

the only experience she's had operating a sewing machine is under strict adult supervision at the *community college*."

"Then explain to me, *oh great fabricmancer*, why Mike's arm weapon doesn't properly attach to the sleeve using the measurements *you gave me*?" Mango tilts her head sweetly, paws clasped. "Or is it that you've never learned *how* to measure since the muumuu in your Itsy store are all 'one-size-fits-some'?"

"Hmph. I'm not surprised someone with such *atrocious* taste in clothing would associate high fashion with a 'muumuu'."

"Oh, 'high' fashion? So called because you were smoking the devil's lettuce when you came up with half of those designs?" Mango heatedly returns.

"Not all of us can pull off the brilliance of coordinating paisley and *gingham*!" Mangle screeches, jabbing a finger at Mango's eyesore of a blazer hanging on the coat rack.

Mango's jaw falls slack, looking up at her taller counterpart like she's just been slapped.

"Hey, I happen to get plenty of compliments on my clothes!"

"I don't doubt it," Mangle snarls. "I'm certain you're the envy of every *picnic table* in town."

Raising a pawful of popcorn to her mouth, Bonbon excitedly leans closer to the TV, bouncing up and down in her seat.

"I *love* this episode," she grins.

"Me too," you and Beanie reply in near-perfect sync, as you both continue to spectate the Mangles' feud.

This is the third or fourth such outburst from them, and Foxglove hasn't even been here for half an hour. Any assumption you might have made about their grudge being played up or exaggerated for laughs is completely out of the question now. Watching them interact, it's a wonder one of them hasn't flipped the table.

Scooting closer to you on the couch, Beanie nudges your side as she begins raiding your popcorn bowl. "So, five bucks on Foxglove?"

"That's a sucker's bet. Mangle's *minutes* away from losing it and stabbing Mango with a hatpin if we don't get involved."

Chewing thoughtfully on one of the buttery popped kernels, Beanie looks over her shoulder at you.

"Hey, Mike," she murmurs, voice lowered.

"Yeah?"

"Thanks... for getting me out of there earlier." Between the bickering vulpines and *Legend of Bob* on full blast, you have to strain to make her out over the din. "I've actually kind of had fun today."

"Hey, no problem." You set the nearly-empty bowl in her lap for her to finish off, wiping the excess butter from your hands onto your jeans. "We both needed a break from, y'know... all of *that*."

"Yeah. Yeah, absolutely."

Turning your attention back to the squabbling twosome, you notice Mangle's blush looking several shades redder than usual.

--have the unmitigated *gall* to dare accuse *me* of not understanding basic design sense, when, when -- everything in your closet looks like a ***TEST PATTERN!***"

"Function over ***FORM!***" Mango shouts back, fangs bared as she shoves the nearly-completed Bobulator pieces aside. "At least I fill out everything I wear without needing *padding*!"

Reeling, Mangle gasps loudly and theatrically, to make sure everyone in the room takes notice of the accusation. "Pa-- *padding*! Y-you think I have to, to -- *pad* my ensembles! **Hah!**"

"*Ouch,*" Beanie mutters sympathetically. "That burn was so bad *I* felt it."

Folding her arms underneath her considerable chest as if to emphasize her natural assets, Mango smugly cocks her head at her rival.

"Are you denying it, Foxglove?"

"Why, I *categorically* deny it, you, you -- wanton *strumpet!*" Mangle snaps back.

"'Strumpet'? Who even *talks* that way?!"

"Someone capable of a higher reading level than a *preschooler*, you obese hag!"

Somehow, they both know this is their cue. With uncanny timing, both of them lunge for each other across the table, sending sewing notions and costume components flying. You scramble to catch up, hurriedly squeezing between them before they have the chance to destroy weeks of hard work in a fit of rage.

"Am I gonna have to *separate* you two?!" you grunt as Beanie joins in to help you pull apart the tangle of Mangles. "Geez! We don't, nngh -- we don't need to go breaking everything to settle our differences! Why don't you two hotheads cool off and start over?"

"Yeah, and maybe switch to decaf?" Beanie grunts, wrapping her arms around Mangle's torso. "That's like your fourth or fifth cup tonight, Mango!"

"I want you to know that I hold my caffeine very well, Bonita!" Mango whines, thrashing furiously as you forcibly drag the heavier of the two foxes back to her seat.

Beanie cuts her eyes at the surly vixen, clearly in total disbelief. "Your *tail* is shaking."

"It does that! Sometimes..."

"Uh huh."

"*Hmmph*, I suppose as long as we're all being *honest* with each other, let the record state that I think this entire thing is silly," Mangle huffs in a transparent and frankly shameless bid for the high ground. "I don't see why Mango can't act like a *mature*, responsi--"

"**Don't,**" Beanie interrupts.

"But you didn't let even me finish!"

Shaking her head, the lilac rabbit shoves Mangle into one of the kitchen chairs. "Just don't."

Both foxes reluctantly slink down into their seats with a pout, arms crossed like spoiled children. Beanie hovers over both of them with a smirk; she especially seems to be enjoying the role reversal considering that she was on the receiving end of it from Mango right before dinner.

"Now then, how're we gonna fix all this?" Beanie asks, settling into the teacher's role. Judging by the dour look on Mango's face, the irony of the situation isn't at all lost on the actual teacher herself.

"I... I suppose it wouldn't be too much trouble to simply redo the seam," Mangle finally manages, sniffing haughtily. "At this point, I fail to see what sort of difference a little extra effort will make. After all, we want to, *err*; ensure a proper fit."

"And, um... if I have to adjust the strap fittings, I guess I can," Mango adds warily, side-eyeing Beanie. "Be kind of pointless to get this far in the race only to break down before the finish line."

"Very good!" Beanie snarkily claps, grin splitting her face wide. "Now, was that *so* difficult?"

"Seriously, thank you both," you interject, dipping your head apologetically as Mangle begins working on one of the sleeves with a seam ripper. "I can tell you two have a hard time working together."

"Understatement of the year," Mango mutters under her breath.

"I don't really know what your history entails, but I appreciate you trying to put your differences aside to make sure this whole costume thing's accurate," you continue. "When I win the prize money -- and I *will* win the prize money -- I'm paying both of you back, and then some."

Mangle looks up at you with tired, half-lidded eyes and a gentle smile. "Oh, no need to be so generous. For you, Chica, I'd move the world. Besides, with your boyishly good looks, I'm sure you'll be the belle of the ball. Err, so to speak."

"For once, Foxglove has a good point," Mango comments, chewing on a pencil as she turns the Bobulator over in her paws, comparing it to the back of the DVD box for reference. "Mike, we're going out of our way for accuracy, but, um... what're you going to do about your headfur?"

"Oh, we figured we'd get him a wig or something," Beanie says, picking up a few stray pieces of popcorn off of the floor.

"A wig? For a *mohawk*?" Mango skeptically raises both eyebrows at the rabbit. "Surely not! Why wouldn't he simply shave his head?"

"Not happening," you interrupt bluntly. "I refuse to dye or shave my hair. That's over the line."

"It *would* be a shame to butcher such exquisite headfur," Mangle agrees, "especially with regards to his condition. Poor dear needs to keep all he's got."

"Yeah, exactly. Besides, they make bald wigs, so I'm sure a mohawk wig wouldn't be that hard to find. Heck, they even sell costume pieces at the conventions for the cosplayers," Beanie replies, seemingly puzzled. "Why, what's the problem?"

"Well, one problem I foresee is that specialty costume wigs are *dreadfully* expensive." Mangle reaches a paw up to your head, carefully feeling one of your thick locks. "Especially if you plan on picking one up at the convention, where you're probably going to pay exorbitant scalper prices. Pardon the unintended pun."

"If the goal is to do this for a contest, accuracy is key. You'd need a talented makeup artist and hours of preparation to make the bald 'skin' portion of the wig match your actual skin tone, and it would have to be done on the day of the contest," Mango says, shaking her head. "That's really not the sort of thing you could do the night before and then sleep on it."

"That's... aggh, I didn't think about any of that," you mutter.

"I suppose it's ultimately your call to make, Mike," she continues, "but if you want my advice, the most painless option would be to go all in on the trim."

Glancing over at Bonbon, you notice that she's still glued to the television set, obviously humming along with the theme song to *Legend of Bob* as if nothing's happened. With a flustered sigh, you run your hands through your hair. In all of the recent chaos and the resulting drama, the mohawk dilemma has been on your mental back burner.

Unfortunately, now you're out of time. The convention's in a couple of days, and now you've got to pay the piper. Either you gamble on all of the conditions being right for you to find the perfect costume wig at an affordable price *and* somehow manage to make it look good (all in one day, no less), *or* you bite the bullet and ask Mangle to shave and dye your hair.

Mangle, Mango, and even Bonbon have put a considerable amount of effort into making a custom-tailored costume for a relative stranger. Free of charge, no less. You can't help but feel the selfish option would be to hold onto your hair to appease your dignity. Besides, it's not like you'll look any less stupid in a wig; if anything, you'd look *worse*.

"Mike! Beanie!" Bonbon calls out, finally realizing she's been abandoned. "Get over here, you're missing out on all the drama!"

Somehow, you doubt that.

"And that's all of it that's out so far," Bonbon says with a tired yawn as the credits begin to roll on the last episode. "What'd you guys think?"

"I haven't really been following this Bob thing as devotedly as you have, but it's decent, I guess," Beanie replies. "But you know me, I've never been much into the whole import cartoon scene the way you are."

"It's... pretty interesting," you add, trying to stifle your inner film snob long enough to offer a layman's 'critique'. "The main character's pretty likeable and the animation's really good. Not too big on the sidekick, though."

"That makes two of us," Bonbon says, tiredly pumping her fist into the air as she slowly flops off of the couch. This is probably the lowest energy you've ever seen her -- she must've had a long day at work, or maybe burning the candle at both ends has finally caught up with her. "Whenever you're ready, Beanie, you can come crawl in bed with me."

"All right. I'll be up for a little while longer, since that nap gave me my second wind," Beanie says, standing up to hug her friend goodnight. "Thanks for letting me stay over."

Smiling, Bonbon embraces her right back. "No problem. Do it more often. Like, all the time."

"Now that your house isn't a Class III biohazard? Yeah, absolutely."

After Bonbon heads off to bed, Beanie sets about neatening up the living room, gathering up the empty snack bowls and discarded soda cans. Meanwhile, you decide to wander over to the kitchen table to see if there's anything you can do to help the foxes, both of whom have been eerily quiet ever since you and Beanie "scolded" them earlier.

"How's everything going over here?" you ask, eyeing what appears to be the completed Bobulator properly attached to the sleeve. "You two've been awful quiet."

"We're almost finished," Mango murmurs, holding a length of fabric while Mangle finishes neatening up a seam by paw. "We've been aiming to keep conversation neutral for the last hour or two, and so far, it's working."

"That'd explain why I haven't heard anyone scream the word 'strumpet' recently," Beanie cracks as she trots by with a sack full of trash, depositing it by the front door to be put out in the morning.

"So, have you put any more thought into this latest dilemma, Mike?" Mangle asks, shooting a glare at the back of the smug rabbit's head.

"Yeah, actually. I don't want to, but I'm going to bite the bullet and go for the shave. It's the only way we're gonna make any of this work."

Mangle lowers the top half of the costume to the table before pivoting to look up at you.

"Wise choice, though I can't say I blame you for your hesitancy. It feels so... *alien*, I suppose. To completely shave your fur off, I mean. I can understand a little *trim* here and there, of course -- and as you said you prefer not to keep a beard, which I can respect, considering. But still..."

"I think you'll be better off for it, Mike," Mango says, nodding. "Even if it's not what you want to do. Plus I'm guessing your condition doesn't spread to your head, so it'll grow back soon enough, right?"

You laugh awkwardly, looking down at the faint hair on your arms. "Yeah, my head'll be fine. My pride? Not so much. But as long as I'm being a pain in the ass, would you be willing to take care of it tonight before you head back upstairs, Mangle?"

Scooting away from the table, Mangle stands up and stretches gracefully. "No trouble at all, dear. Worried about getting cold feet, as it were?"

"You got me," you admit with a wry grin. "I'm afraid if I go to bed, I might not have the nerve for it in the morning."

"Oh man, this I *gotta* see," Beanie pipes up from the kitchen, leaning over the counter excitedly. "Need me to run upstairs and get anything, Foxglove? Clippers? Razor? Shave cream?"

Throwing her a look, you start to feel an uneasiness in the pit of your stomach. "You're way, *way* too hyped for this."

Mango grins, quickly poking your hair with her clawtip before yanking her paw back like a child surprised by popping a bubble.

"It is a little exciting," she giggles. "You have to promise me you'll let me feel it. I've never known any men who are shavers."

"All right then," Mangle sighs, putting away some of the loose sewing tools scattered about the table. "I can see we're not going to get any more work done on this outfit tonight, since everyone's too excited to watch me destroy your beautiful headfur. Might as well get this over with, shall we?"

Cringing, you steel yourself as you follow the small group towards the hall bathroom. "Let's."

"All finished, dear. Fur cut and a shave, that'll be two bits," Mangle jokes, spinning your chair around with a flourish. "What a shame to see so much of that beautiful headfur vamoose, but alas -- the suffering we undergo for our art."

"I can't believe you actually had the guts to go through with it," Beanie says, clearly impressed.

"I can't believe he didn't run out of here screaming," Mango titters, smothering her girlish laughter with the tip of her tail.

"I can't believe both of you felt the need to cram into this tiny bathroom to spectate," you groan as Mangle unhooks the barber cape from your shoulders. "It's *only* a haircut."

Mango leans forward from her perch on the edge of the bathtub, poking and prodding your freshly-shorn scalp with her paws. Her fur tickles the bald sides of your head, producing a bizarre sensation against your skin; she clearly wasn't kidding about wanting to feel it.

"*Only* a haircut, huh?" Beanie asks as you squirm in your chair. "I dunno, Mike. This seems like devotion on another level entirely. I never expected you to develop the hots *this* bad for Bonbon. She's gonna *flip* when she sees this."

Mango rolls her eyes, clicking her tongue in a disapproving manner while continuing to rub both sides of your head. "Oh, stop, you. I think it's cute, in a punkish sort of way. Only Mike could pull something like this off, though -- imagine how bizarre poor Freddy would look."

"To say nothing of our *own* Freddy," Mangle adds with a wry smile. "Or even your brother for that matter, Bonita."

"Oh geez, *there's* a thought." Choking back a laugh, Beanie curiously presses the back of her paw against your skin. "Bonworth's as old-fashioned as they come. He still uses that waxy pomade stuff and everything."

"Hmm! I think it suits him, though," Mangle comments, brushing a bit of excess hair off of your neck. "There's nothing wrong with being a little old-fashioned here and there. It's refreshing, actually."

Politely prying yourself loose from everyone's clutches, you stand up from your seat to examine your head in the mirror. Running your fingers along your scalp, you're left to marvel once again at

Mangle's talents. Your new hairstyle is such a clean, smooth razor cut you can barely feel the stubble at all. Even though you look like a doofus, you can't help but be impressed.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to help you much on the color, dear," Mangle sighs, putting the electric clippers away in their carrying case. "Fur color's messy business, and I'm afraid I might ruin what little you've got left by attempting permanent dye. I suspect you might be better off using temporary color gel, which you should be able to obtain inexpensively from any beauty supply store."

"Yeah, definitely the way to go. Back towards the end of high school, I went through a really rebellious phase and thought I could get away with dying my fur," Beanie says, grimacing a little. "Mom never let me hear the end of it when I came home looking like I'd been covered in tar."

Bobbing her head sympathetically, Mango pushes herself to her feet, ducking past the three of you to head out into the hallway.

"Oh, don't feel bad, Beanie." Dusting some towel lint from the seat of her skirt, the shorter fox smiles. "We all did silly things we regret at that age. Recently one of the boys I tutor in this very complex decided to do some... 'artistic' experimentation with indelible markers, using his own fur as the canvas. *That* was fun trying to explain to his mother."

"Hmmph. I don't at all envy you on that," Mangle groans.

"Thank you for everything as always, Mangle." You tilt your head back and forth to look at yourself from all angles in the mirror. "Can't say this is my cup of tea, but you did a great job. I'll be the best-looking Bob Legendmann in the convention hall."

"The best-looking overweight, underheight simian dressed up as Bob Legendmann anyway," Beanie jokes, prodding your gut. "At least Bonbon didn't saddle you with having to go as that stupid balloon guy."

You wince at Beanie's assessment, looking down at your stomach self-consciously. "Ouch. On all counts."

"How cruel!" Mango declares, cheeks flushing. "Attacking a man on his height?! Are you trying to give him a *complex*? He's plenty tall enough -- certainly taller than you or I, Beanie!"

"For once, I agree with Mango. Besides, Michael's not overweight, he's, ah, pleasantly chubby." Mangle leans across your shoulders, playfully swatting Beanie on the nose with the tip of the gel bottle. "So hush, you rabblerouser."

Raising her paws in mock surrender, Beanie steps back. "Sorry, Mike. Didn't mean anything by it."

"It's cool. Seems like almost *everyone* here has said something they didn't mean tonight," you chuckle. "Might be something in the air."

"Indeed. Must be cabin fever's already begun to set in," Mangle agrees amicably. "Now all of you skedaddle while I neaten up in here. Mind the loose fur shavings on the floor; you don't want to track them through the house -- like *someone* is doing this *very* moment!"

"Whoopsy," Mango titters sheepishly from the kitchen.

"I swear, she'd forget her own tail if it weren't attached," the fox grumbles, hefting a broom and dust pan to sweep up the mess as Beanie tiptoes out of the bathroom. Instead of immediately following her out, however, you stick around while Mangle begins the cleanup.

"No need to stay on my account, dear. I've got this under control."

"Ah, I don't mind, I'm grateful for the opportunity to talk for a bit," you reply, taking the dust pan from Mangle and kneeling down to the ground. "It's been a while since you and I really had a serious one-on-one conversation. How's everything going back home?"

Sweeping clump after clump of your erstwhile hair into the pan, Mangle carefully shuffles around the bathroom while formulating a reply to your question.

"Business as usual, I suppose," the fox quietly says at length. "Most everyone is doing well, though I think Bonnie seems a bit more melancholy than usual these days. She's expressed to me that she's beginning to miss a certain someone."

"I'm not surprised. I'm told rabbits mate for life," you joke as you dump a panful of hair clippings into the wastebin.

"Foxes too, supposedly. I've yet to see any proof of it, though," Mangle grins, blowing you a kiss. "And how about yourself, Freddy? I take it you're somehow managing to survive the harsh, unforgiving environment of 87-A?"

"Y'know, it's not all that bad here. These guys are pretty easy to get along with -- yes, even Mango -- and the place is pretty cozy, though I will admit the lack of quality breakfasts does sting. Frederick's really spoiled me."

Chuckling, Mangle stashes the broom back in the linen closet. "I can assure you that he has that effect on *all* of us, Michael. It's all I can do to keep my slender figure on that kind of diet."

"You'll have to teach me your secrets. I'm willing to try anything as long as it doesn't involve crawling through any more vents." Standing up from the floor, you brush your knees off, leaning against the counter to face Mangle. "But yeah, other than missing out on his unbeatable 5,000 calorie meals, I'd say I'm doing really well all things considered."

"No more, ahuh, 'episodes'?" Mangle asks warily, gauging your face for a reaction. "Any recent... *developments* we should be made aware of?"

You force a smile, shaking your head emphatically. "Nothing worth mentioning," you lie.

It's obvious from Mangle's expression your half-truth isn't fooling anyone. "I've spent the majority of my life lying through my teeth. I lie about damned near everything, so I've grown very good at spotting it in others. Now, when and where?"

You flinch at the abruptness of the question.

"Today. At Fred's apartment, in the kitchen. I was putting some stuff up for Chichi and he was... standing there. Right in the center of the room."

"...and how bad was it this time?"

You lower your head, avoiding eye contact with the fox. "It was pretty real. He talked to me for a bit -- and for the first time, I could *feel* him. His touch was cold, like ice, and -- I guess I screamed and passed out. Rackham came running from across the house to check on me."

"...I see."

"**Please** don't tell anyone," you murmur, your stomach twisting into knots. "I don't want to have to go to some shrink and get a psych eval. I don't want to be put on medicine or get shipped off to a nuthouse, Mangle -- I just want to get on with life."

"Goodness, Mike, you're a functional adult!" Mangle laughs incredulously, like you've just told the most bizarre joke ever. "First of all, that's not how *anything* works, and secondly even if it was, we wouldn't have you *committed* over -- over a handful of isolated hallucinations. All of which seem to take place in the *exact same apartment*."

You look up at Mangle as realization slowly dawns on you. "So you... you don't think I'm crazy."

"Of course not. I think you're *haunted*, troubled maybe -- but I definitely don't believe you're unhinged at all. To be honest, I don't think Bonnie is either, and she's seen more than her fair share of spectres and boogymen. We haven't had her sent away to the loony bin, so why would we do that to you?"

"Because I'm *broken*," you reply. "Bonnie told me herself, right after we first met."

"Really? Beanie told you that you were 'broken'?"

You shake your head with a tired smile in spite of the situation. "N-no, sorry. I meant Bonnibel."

"Wait, so you're saying the hyperactive girl with the frankly *bizarre* human fetish had the audacity to tell you that *you* were 'broken'?"

Burying your face in your palms, you try not to burst out laughing. "Bonnibel is the one *you* live with. Short little sleepy bunny girl with no indoor voice?"

"Chica, *darling*, of course I know who my own roommate is!"

"*Chica*?! Mangle, I'm Mike! I'm literally the *only* Mike! I'm the unique one here! If anything, my name should be the easiest to remember!"

The fox groans in frustration. "How can you possibly expect me to keep all of their names straight?!"

"Ugh, I... guess I see where you're coming from," you begrudgingly admit. "It still throws me hearing someone say 'Bonnie' or 'Freddy' and not *immediately* knowing who they're referring to. It's a little difficult remembering whose Chica is whose, and so on. And after a whole night of trying to manage two Mangles..."

"You don't know the half of it, Foxglove," Mangle says, letting loose a long, operatic sigh.

"Foxgl-- you did that on *purpose*," you snap.

"Pfft...! W-well, regardless, perhaps we're all *broken* in some way or another, Mike," Mangle replies, straightening up a little. "But broken can still be beautiful, you know."

"Man, you're one to talk." You gently take a hold of Mangle's paw, your hand brushing against the fox's thick robed blanket. "You're beautiful yourself, but you hide away from the world, like, like -- a pristine car, or fancy sailboat kept under a tarp in some rich guy's garage."

Huffing, Mangle pulls away from you. "Oh, quit trying to flatter me. I'm not someone to be... ogled."

There's that same exposed nerve again. "You think Chiclet likes people 'ogling' her scars?" Shifting your weight off of your sore leg, you turn to stare Mangle in the eye. "You think Bonworth feels good hobbling around on stilts, knowing everyone's watching him?"

"Michael! Where is this coming from?!" Mangle angrily blurts. "How could you -- make fun of them like that? They can't help their conditions!"

"But I'm not. That's the point I'm trying to make," you insist firmly. "Chiclet's still pretty, beak or no beak. And all right, maybe he's not my type, Bonworth's still a handsome guy, regardless of his legs."

"What are you trying to say, then...?"

"Mangle, look. You might be comfortable lying all the time, but you're not going to guilt me into saying it's anything other than a damn shame that someone as cute as you doesn't, y'know... share the view with everyone else, a little more often."

"That-- you-- **ooohhh!!**" Blushing furiously, Mangle stumbles around for words. "You really are an **oaf**, Mike!"

"Please, as if we didn't both already know that. Like I said, I'm not gonna lie. I enjoy a good set of hips."

Sucking in a sharp breath, Mangle gives your shoulder a playful shove, looking absolutely incredulous. "Michael! You incorrigible *profligate!* Libertine! You absolute *rake!* How could you?!"

"Hey, you're the one who gave a man in the middle of the desert a sip and expected that to quench his thirst!"

Mangle smirks suddenly. "You know, that wouldn't be the first time I've heard you described as thirsty."

"Look," you chuckle, deflecting, "No one's gonna push you. All I'm saying is you don't have to hide who you are under all this. Because -- and I think I know you well enough by now to say this -- who you are is pretty great."

"I'll... think about it," the fox mutters, fighting the beginnings of a smile. "Tell you the truth, with the heater cranked up now that we're solidly into winter, I do tend to, ah, perspire under these thick blankets."

"See, there you go. Baby steps. Switch to a bathrobe or loose pajamas first; the sling bikini can wait until you're comfortable."

"Oh, that's incredibly vulgar! There's no way I could *ever* pull off something so-- so daring..." Mangle breathes, stifling a laugh with one paw while looking at you with wide eyes and bright red cheeks.

"So you're more into the two-piece swimsuits then? Hey, I won't judge you."

"Freddy, it's *December* and my winter coat's running behind this year! You simply *must* be reasonable here."

"Can't blame a guy for thinking ahead to the future," you grin, folding your arms. "Don't worry, though; I'm a gentleman. Your secrets are safe with me. I promise I won't tell *anyone* about those long, slender legs of yours."

"Okay, **now** you're pushing it," Mangle scoffs. "Besides, you've got it backwards. A gentleman's not supposed to ask; it's the lady who isn't supposed to tell."

"Yeah? And which one are you?"

Winking, Mangle opens the bathroom door and steps out into the hallway.

"Oh, please. A lady has to have *some* secrets, Mike."

#### Chapter End Notes

This chapter is followed by a **Roommates Mini Chapter**, which we recommend you should read if you're following the story chronologically!

Before proceeding to the next chapter in the main series, [click here for the next part, Mini 8: Funtime Foxglove](#).

# **HumieCon!**

## Chapter Summary

Can you believe it?! It's hands-down *the* event of the year for human enthusiasts! I'm so excited!

## Chapter Notes

Two points we'd like to raise for our readers. First, and most importantly, a reminder that there's a special "Mini" chapter between this one and the last! If you haven't read the Mini, "*Funtime Foxglove*", you can find it [here](#).

Secondly, this is a special double feature chapter!

HumieCon was originally meant to be split into two full-length chapters, but we've decided instead to compile them into a single double-length chapter all at once. So please, grab your badge, bring some spending cash, and get ready for *HumieCon*!

Chapter 43:

# HUMIECON

PART 1



Looks like there are more than just a *few* folks in this world who share Bonbon's eclectic taste.

The downtown convention center (an ample venue in and of itself) is teeming with hundreds, or possibly even *thousands* of human-crazed lunatics who showed up for HumieCon. You recognize an alarming number of Bob Legendmann cosplayers milling around the crowd. Seems that's very much the flavor-of-the-month when it comes to costume choices.

"Who knew our town was such a mecca for weirdness?" Beanie mutters.

"Well c'mon, you've *been* to Jeremy Human's, haven't you?" you answer with a good-natured smirk.

"Right. Fair point."

You're not the only "hairless ape" here: primate "humies" sporting awful shave jobs flex, pose, and dance for awestruck bystanders. Even more alarming are the clearly in-too-deep enthusiasts wrapped up in rubbery "skinsuits" of varying quality. Unfortunately for them, the *uncanny valley*

effect is in full force: rather than resembling anything close to a human, most of these folks look like they cut open a blow-up doll and crammed themselves into it.

As a precaution to stave off unwanted attention (for your own safety, of course), you tore a page from the Bonita Rabbinson fashion catalog this morning. Your attire consists of baggy jeans and a thick hooded sweatshirt, which you've pulled over your head to cover most of your face. So far, so good. You're not sure what you're going to do when it's time to put on the Bob costume and walk around amongst these "degenerates" (as Fred might call them), but you figure you'll burn that bridge when you get there.

Right now, both you and Beanie are plodding along behind an overclocked Bonbon, who's eagerly skipping past the line up to the front of the building, earning your group plenty of scorn and derision from the other con-goers.

"Bonbon, you know the line starts at the other end of the block, right?" you call out, trying to avoid making direct eye contact with the throng of excited, jittery animals waiting their turn in the queue. "Why are we moving in the *opposite* direction?"

"*You'll see!*" she shouts back as the three of you begin dragging your luggage up the steps leading to the convention center's entrance.

"Bonbon's not really about to cut in front of *this* crowd, is she?" you ask Beanie. "You know her better than I do, but that actually seems like something she'd try to pull."

"Beats me, but if she ends up making me turn around and walk all the way back to the end of that line, *just* so I can stand in the freaking December cold for *hours*, I'm going to slap the shit out of her."

Without even so much as an "excuse me", Bonbon shoves her way up to the check-in station. She enthusiastically slams the trio of tickets down on the counter, much to the consternation of the fans you skipped ahead of. Before anyone has the chance to lose their cool and do something regrettable, the con staff quickly intervenes, opening the front doors and ushering your small group inside with a smile.

"**Platinum** VIP passes," the energetic blue rabbit gleefully boasts as you all head inside the building. "The Day Owl *really* came through for us!"

"Hey, I ain't complaining," you holler back over the din inside the lobby. "I'm just grateful to be out of the cold and in here, where it's nice and warm."

While Bonbon's golden -- or rather, *platinum* tickets were enough to get you past the hours-long wait outside, the three of you still have to obtain your badges to move freely around the con proper. Fortunately, this line's far shorter and moving much more quickly, so it's only a few minutes before your turn comes up at the desk.

As Bonbon and Beanie go ahead of you through the turnstile, you make your way forward to the counter. A bright-eyed, exuberant male squirrel sits behind a folding table labeled "Badge Distribution". In one of his paws is a small yellow gadget that looks vaguely like a label maker, and in front of him in a large bin on the desk are lanyards and rows of plastic HumieCon-branded ID cards.

"Welcome to HumieCon," the squirrel shouts cheerfully over the noise as you sidle up to the table.  
"Can I get a name for your badge?"

"Mike Schmidt."

"Gotcha!"

He grabs one of the plastic badges and shoves it into a port on his device. The machine beeps and whirrs for a few seconds before ejecting your newly-printed ID, which he hands back to you along with a complimentary lanyard bearing HumieCon's logo. You accept both from him with a grateful nod, hooking your badge to the lanyard and slipping it around your neck.

"Next in line," he calls out, motioning you through the turnstile and into the main convention hall, where an amused Beanie and a very exuberant Bonbon await.

"All right, so let's--" Beanie stops mid-sentence, a smile creeping up her face as she looks at your chest. Leaning around Beanie, Bonbon breaks out laughing as she reads your badge.

"You, uh -- you actually *look* at that thing before you put it on?" Beanie asks.

"Why? What's wrong?" You take a hold of your badge, turning it around so you can read the label. "HumieCon VIP Guest, name... '*Eggs Benedict*'? Oh, for cryin' out loud."

"Obviously he must've misheard you," Bonbon giggles.

"*How*?! That doesn't even *sound* like 'Mike Schmidt'!"

"Actually, if you say it fast, it kinda does," Beanie snorts.

Bonbon bites her lower lip in a desperate attempt to stem the tide of snickering. "Awww, don't look so glum. We're here to have a good time, Eggs!"

You give her a withering look, flipping your badge around to hide the name. Sure, you could go back through and get him to change it, but you're only here for a day or two. Besides, maybe it's a blessing in disguise; the last thing you want is any of the *really* obsessive goofballs here tracking you back to where you live and stalking you.

"Anyway, enough of that! I'm gonna drop off the bags in our suite, then hit up the dealers' room! Text me if you need me!" Rubbing her paws together excitedly, Bonbon slings her gym bag over her shoulder, setting off down the hall.

"Her con money's been burning a hole in her pocket for weeks," Beanie stage-whispers. "She's gonna blow it all at the first booth with Bob merch she sees."

"Oh, I'd guarantee it," you agree, the two of you watching her practically sprinting away.

The first thing you notice once you're in the hall proper with the rest of the con-goers is the overpowering smell.

It's not a horrible, rank stench -- you've long grown used to the scents of animal people -- but it's *far* from pleasant. If anything, you're reminded of the way pet supply stores smelled when you'd

visit as a kid to pick up cat food for the neighborhood strays. It's a primal, earthy mix of musks and scents. You suppose geeks aren't exactly known for their hygiene.

"Two hundred bucks? For *that* thing? The one Mango made you looks ten times better," Beanie scoffs, sizing up a replica Bobulator at a nearby dealer's table, prominently-displayed like it's a high class work of art. "And she cobbled it together in her living room with a can of spray paint and some scraps."

"Yeah, she's really talented," you agree, eyeballing the cheap, consumer-grade toy. "That one just looks kind of sad, honestly."

The banners hanging from the ceiling of the convention hall proudly proclaim that HumieCon is home to the largest dealers' room of any humie enthusiast convention -- an overly narrow superlative if you've ever heard one. What they fail to mention is that the dealers' room also happens to be the majority of the convention itself. Nearly the entirety of the main hall seems to be dedicated exclusively to hosting booths for retailers and vendors to hawk their wares. Action figures, comic books, costume accessories, and other numerous pieces of humie-related paraphernalia clog the aisles, piled up on top of tables and hanging from display stands in veritable mountains of brightly-colored kitsch. With all the obsessed fans just begging to be parted from their money at the slightest show of pandering, it's no wonder this thing is so well funded. Every sponsor is probably making a mint exploiting this "fandom".

Cosplayers wander about, snapping photos of themselves and each other. Most of the attendees are shopping to kill time while waiting for discussion panels, autograph signings, and other events of interest. Loud, colorful video games blare away on wall-mounted displays at the far end of the huge room; looks like some kind of competition or tech demo is going on. Several advertisers wander the crowd with bags and boxes of trinkets to pass out as freebies. Thinking quickly, Beanie grabs a pair of large plastic bags bearing cartoon logos from a nearby kiosk, handing one off to you.

"Swag bag, Eggs?"

You accept it from her with a roll of your eyes, sliding your arm through the handles.

"Don't mind if I do! If they're giving this crap away for free, who am I to decline?" You snag a couple of foam stress balls from a passing vendor's bowl, tossing one back to Beanie who dunks it into her bag with a flourish.

"Bitten by the humie bug already, huh?" Beanie jokes.

"Nah, I'm not interested in any of this stuff, I'm just here for the costume contest. But since Bonbon shared her tickets with us, I figure the least I can do is pad her haul a bit."

"Awww, that's sweet of you, Mike. She'll be thrilled," Beanie replies. "Hell, let's make a game of it. How about you and I split up and get as much free shit as we can, then meet at the food court at noon? Whoever brings back the least swag buys lunch."

"A good old-fashioned treasure hunt, huh? Works for me!"

You and Beanie exchange fistbumps before heading off in your separate directions to begin scavenging for loot.

Most of the advertisers are pretty friendly, and it's not long before you learn that you can wheedle extra freebies out of them if you're willing to spend the time to listen to their sales pitches. A short, chipper pig girl compliments your "look" as she hoofs over a comic book and a pair of 3D glasses. Shortly after, an over-caffeinated coyote in a business suit enthusiastically coughs up three keychains, thanking you for hearing out his startup's idea for a new online RPG. You're not the least bit picky about what you're taking, either. Sure, you doubt Bonbon'll be too thrilled about a package of crayons and a coloring book, but the three *Legend of Bob* sticker sheets you swiped should make up for it.

To your surprise, even some of the attendees in the crowd are pretty helpful. Apparently, con goodies are *serious business*, and there are a number of collectors willing to trade well, just because the freebie they wanted wasn't the one they got. You pawn off a mini poster to a rooster in a varsity jacket, in exchange for two duplicate comic books. You then swap one of the comics to a frazzled mother and her overjoyed fox cub for a pencil bag and a figurine as thanks for completing the boy's comic set.

Within a half-hour, you feel like you've begun mastering the art of swag hunting. Between shrewd trading and diligent scouring, you've already filled your first bag to maximum capacity, and you're well on your way to finishing a second one. You've hit up just about everyone in the center of the room, but there's still a little time left before you have to meet back up with Beanie. You decide to branch out to the back aisles of the convention hall, foraging for any last-minute giveaways that might be off the beaten path.

Once you manage to break loose of the pack, you quickly realize that you should have started at the edge of the room and worked your way inward, rather than going about it the other way around. There's even *more* stuff to be had on the outskirts, and far less competition for it due to the majority of attendees staying near the center of the hall.

"Oooh! Mr. Schmidt, is that you? Over here, when you have a moment!"

Hearing your name, you pause halfway through collecting a handful of small rubber pencil toppers from an unattended bowl, turning around to look for whoever's spotted you.

A tall, curvy lady bear with jet-black fur waves to you from a nearby booth loaded down with flyers and cheap, carnival-quality toys. Next to her is a portly individual wearing an ill-fitting marching band coat and a goofy, familiar-looking rubber human mask. You blanch as you recognize the gaudy yellow-and-purple marquee logo embellished with the cartoon version of Jeremy Human's smug, obnoxious face.

"Hi there, Nisha," you greet from across the aisle, discreetly stashing your latest conquests in your bag. Even though you know it's not the real thing, you're still at least a little unsettled by the Jeremy suit next to her -- if not for what it is, then at the very least for what it represents.

"Oooh, you were right! It was him," Nisha titters to her companion before turning her attention back to you. "Nice to see you! Ummm...! Are you having a good time, Mr. Schmidt?"

Scratching the back of your head with your free arm, you nod, keeping a wary eye on the mascot beside her.

"We just got here not too long ago, but so far it's been all right. And please, *really*, just Mike is fine."

"Force of habit," she smiles. "Ahhm, why not come on over here and get some goodies for your bag? We've got all kinds of fun stuff!"

As you make your way over to her booth, perhaps sensing your discomfort, the performer dressed as Jeremy quickly pops his mask off. You're surprised to see Peanut's tired, sweaty face underneath. Heavy bags hang under his watery eyes, and his cheeks are flushed red. The poor guy looks exhausted and miserable. Between his thick fur, the bright lights overhead, and the central heat in the building blazing away, he's got to be melting in that heavy costume.



"Hi, Mike," he pants, reaching out to shake your hand. "I was wondering when I could expect to see one of you guys show up!"

"Oh, hey, Peanut! I wasn't expecting to see *you* at all!" you reply, shaking his sweaty paw.

"Awww, I'm just filling in for the guy who was supposed to come down here. He, uh, had to go to the hospital this morning, and ended up calling in short notice."

"*Ouch.* Come down with the flu or something?"

"Nah. Just taking some time off for physical therapy," the pudgy bear remarks, fanning himself with one of the coupon sheets. "Shouldn't be too long, though. The doctors said he'd be back to work in a month or so."

You're not really sure what you were expecting.

"S-so, uh, what're you two doing here, anyway?" you ask, trying not to dwell on what you've just heard. "Does Fred have you guys acting on some kind of marketing idea he came up with or something?"

"Not Mr. Fazbear, no," Nisha replies. "Ahhhhmm... corporate's running an advertising campaign for our new line of holiday pizzas, you know? So Peanut -- or should I say 'Jeremy' and I are doing just that! It really is amazing how these folks sure do love the whole human thing."

Now that you think about it, they still are a human-themed restaurant, after all. Hell, it's even part of the name.

"Have you guys been getting much interest?" you ask, looking their sparsely-decorated booth over.

"Two bites so far." Sighing, Peanut wipes the inside of the mask out with a paper towel. "We, uh, kind of got shoved back here out of the way, so there hasn't been a lotta traffic over here yet."

"That's the problem with making last-minute reservations," Nisha laments. She 'helps' Peanut tug his mask back on before turning back to you. "The prime real estate was reaaaally expensive. But oooh, please -- since you're here, Mike, why not take a coupon and a Jeremy mask?"

Glancing down at the table, you notice that this booth's giveaway items are a stack of plastic Jeremy masks, exactly like the ones that you and Beanie used. They didn't even bother having anything custom-made for the event. It figures that corporate would just cheap out and have them bring expendable, throwaway arcade prizes they already had. With a sigh, you pluck one from the table, tucking it and a coupon sheet into your bag so that you aren't rude.

"I guess I'd better get back to it then," Peanut sighs, picking up a stack of flyers from the table. "Kinda wish I was wearing my usual clothes. I feel silly in this getup."

"Oh, hush! You look cute," Nisha playfully huffs, patting his shoulder. "Honestly, Mike, I've been trying to get him to live it up a little, but he's Mr. All-Business. I guess that's Fred Fazbear's star pupil for you, though!"

You can practically see Peanut blushing through the rubber mask.

"Well, it was nice chatting with you guys, but I gotta get moving too since I'm kind of pressed for time today," you offer. "I'll see you back home, Peanut?"

"See ya later, Mike," Peanut says as he trudges off with the flyers.

With a polite nod to you, Nisha settles into her seat, straightening up the stack of coupons on her table as attendees begin to trickle down the aisle.

"Oooh! Mr. Schmi-- ahhhn, Mike! One more thing if you would," she suddenly calls out as you start to head to the next vendor's table. "If you don't mind, can you pass a message on to Ms. Rabbinson to let her know I'll be stopping by in the next few days? Corporate asked me to drop off some paperwork for her to sign."

"Ms. Rabbinson?" you reply. "Oh, you mean Bean-- uh, Bonita?"

"That's right. Peanut said she's staying with you, I believe?"

"Yeah, she is," you answer agreeably. "I'll let her know."

"Thank you! Enjoy the rest of the convention!"

As soon as you're around the corner and out of eyesight, you fish out the Jeremy mask and advertising materials, tossing them into a wastebin without a second's hesitation.

"Aaaaaand this HumieCon memo pad makes one hundred and thirty-seven!" Beanie begins scooping her haul back into her bags. "I believe that's just barely enough to put me over the top."

"Sure enough," you reply, looking at the scrap of notebook paper that's served as your score sheet.

In the end, it was close, but you lost by one item. Both of you are loaded down with three huge plastic loot bags each. The dealers on the outskirts of the hall were *exceedingly* generous; prizes you would've had to work for early on were practically being thrown at you by comparison. Unfortunately for your wallet, Beanie figured that angle out sooner than you did.

"Man, I even traded with people too, just to get ahead," you comment, conceding defeat with a grin. "Still, a deal's a deal."

"Ahh, shit! You did like a swap meet kinda thing? Ugh! I didn't even *think* about doing that!" she groans, yanking at her ears in frustration. "I just played stupid with all the male vendors and they were foisting stuff on me like they were going out of business. I'm surprised you didn't use *your* 'look' to milk these loonies."

"I won't lie, I thought long and hard about it. There *was* an indie artist who thought I was kind of cute," you confess, thinking back to the pig girl who gave you one of her comic books. "But I didn't want to have an unfair advantage."

Nor did you want a bunch of crazed fanboys and fangirls pawing at you, either.

"That's sporting of you. Guess I'll text Bonbon to reel her in," Beanie comments, licking her lips. "They have some pretty good looking *bulgogi* hot dogs at a stand over there, and all this running around's worked up a mighty appetite in me."

"Bulgogi?" you ask.

"Korean beef," she grins. "Think like a chili dog, but so much better. The smell alone had my mouth watering."

"Huh. Fair enough. But if I'm paying, you're fetching," you reply, handing her a few bills from your wallet.

"I can live with that."

Eventually, Bonbon manages to find your table in the crowded dining area. She arrives loaded down with plenty of purchases, covered head-to-toe in convention exclusive merchandise, toting armfuls of stuffed toys and action figures. You can barely see her buried beneath everything she's carrying.

"Someone's been busy," Beanie remarks dryly as the blue rabbit flops onto the bench next to her, plushies spilling across the table.

"Oh my god, Beanie, there's so much great stuff here!!" Bonbon chitters excitedly, eyeing your own loot bags. "I see *you've* been making out like bandits, too! How much did all that stuff cost?"

"Not a cent. Besides, it's all yours anyway," you reply, tossing your bags next to her spoils. "We figured we'd just go around and gather it up for you."

"Se-seriously? You're sharing your stuff with me?" she asks, her voice dropping to a hushed whisper. "Awww, wow! You guys are the freakin' best!"

"Don't worry about it," Beanie says.

The purple rabbit starts to slip out of her seat at the table to go stand in line for food, but she only makes it about half a step before being tugged back by Bonbon, who enthusiastically draws the two of you into a rib-crackingly tight hug. You're seeing stars as she applies pressure to your still-sore chest, but you grin and bear it for the sake of her feelings. She's genuinely touched, and you don't want to ruin the moment over something as trivial as debilitating, crippling pain.

Eventually, after what feels like an eternity of being squeezed like a ketchup bottle, the dynamo of a rabbit lets you two loose, her smile spanning ear to ear.

"Man, guys, I don't know what to say!"

"Well, I do. And since Cheeky's not here, I'll say it for her: *let's eat!*" Beanie quips, giving you a sympathetic look as you struggle to regain your breath. "Bonbon, why don't you set all that crap aside and come stand in line with me while Mike rests a bit? He can watch it for you."

"Oh, okay," Bonbon says as she stands up. "Really -- I can't thank you enough for everything, guys. I'm so glad you both tagged along with me."

"Not a problem," you respond as both girls head off to wait their turn in line.

You shakily reach into your hoodie pocket, furtively rummaging around for your pain pills. You really should wait until after you've eaten, but you're in too much pain. After downing your medication, you gather all of Bonbon's stuff together to carry back to your suite after lunch. No sense dragging it all around in such a huge crowd.

Once you've got everything in a neat pile on the bench next to you, you relax and begin to let your meds work their magic on your throbbing ribcage. The queue outside must be moving, because the convention hall is really beginning to get busy. Attendees are bumping into each other, fighting for supremacy at displays and booths, crowding around points of interest. An army of hungry fans in search of a hot lunch pour into the food court, sizing the kiosks up. More than a few pushy folks try to sit at your table, only for you to have to shoo them away, insisting (much to their chagrin) that the seats are taken.

Beanie and Bonbon are still a few people away from being served, so to kill time (and avoid eye contact with interlopers trying to stake a claim at your table) you busy yourself with spectating some of the cosplayers. As you saw outside, a few Bob Legendmanns are roaming around in here now, all of which pale in comparison to your own costume.

It's a rather uncanny feeling, seeing so many weird animal folks dressing up as -- well, like normal people. Surging throngs of upright animal people in costume just to look like ordinary humans. While observing the con-goer costumes, you notice several exotic and imaginative cosplay designs such as "ordinary businessman wearing a tie", "Italian chef with a huge mustache", and "literally just some guy in an a-shirt".

Of course, they're not all mundane, either. More of the frightening "skinsuits" are beginning to show up, stumbling around like weird vinyl zombies. It's bizarre and more than a little terrifying to see something with a mostly-humanoid face draped over the frame of an elephant or a zebra. The thought comes at an especially appropriate time, as another con-goer of indeterminate species shuffles past you in a grotesquely lumpy skinsuit and a party hat, making quiet, strained noises with every step.

Surprisingly, for a convention devoted to "celebrating human culture", there are a large number of non-human costumes roving the halls. You suppose it never really occurred to you that some of these cartoons and games would have animal people in them as supporting characters, but it makes sense that they would have to be *somewhat* grounded in reality. Even if said "reality" is one where purple rabbits and orange hens are run-of-the-mill.

Speaking of purple rabbits...

"*Whew.* This place sure filled up fast, didn't it," Beanie observes as she eyes the ever-widening influx of people, lowering a plastic tray full of hot dogs and chips onto the table.

"You ain't kidding," you respond, taking a hot dog from the tray as Bonbon settles in next to her, passing out soft drinks.

"So what is this stuff we got, anyway?" Bonbon asks. "Is it like a chili dog?"

"Sort of. It's marinated beef draped over a hot dog. So yeah, close enough to a chili dog, kinda," Beanie says, brushing her ears back as she picks one up for herself. "Oh, man -- it tastes even better than I imagined. You gotta try this."

Sinking your teeth into it, you can't help but be inclined to agree. "Damn, this *is* tasty."

"Good, because they were like eight bucks each," Beanie cracks. "I hope you weren't expecting any change back."

Looks like your ribs weren't the only part of you that just got squeezed.

"Ah well. I'll make it back in spades later."

"That's the spirit!" she says. "Oh, and -- thanks for lunch, Mike."

"Yeah, thank you!" Bonbon pipes up. "So, funny story: while I was out shopping, I saw a Bobulator on one of the tables. You know how much they wanted for it?"

"Two hundred," you reply, cutting her off. "Beanie and I already saw that overpriced thing earlier."

"What a *ripoff*, am I right?! I mean, I love the show and all, but you could tell it was obviously a bootleg," she says, taking a sip of her soda through her commemorative HumieCon straw. "Some people will waste money on *anything*."

After lunch, it's Beanie's turn to part ways with the group, citing interest in attending a panel on tabletop gaming. You and Bonbon use the opportunity to haul her merch back to the hotel suite, dumping it all off next to your luggage.

"So, now what?" you ask, flipping your hood back and running your hands through your sweaty mohawk. "Surely you aren't going to buy any *more* stuff."

"Not until the end of the day, when they start putting it on sale," she replies, washing her paws in the bathroom sink. "There are two times to buy: as soon as you get to the convention so you have your pick of the rarest items, and then again at the end when the dealers are torn between taking a hit and hauling home all the crap they couldn't sell!"

"Pretty smart. That still gives us a lot of time to kill, though. Heck, I might just take a nap."

"Ahahaha!! Oh, you *kidder*," Bonbon squeals, grabbing you by your arm and yanking you towards the door. "There's no way in heck I'd let you sleep through the best freakin' part of the convention!"

"The costume contest isn't until this afternoon, though. I've got plenty of time to snooze, shower, get dressed and fix my hair before--"

"Never mind all that! You and I are heading over to the *Legend of Bob* panel where they're going to live-screen the *new episode!* Even some of the dub voice actors are gonna be there and you know I guess that's cool and all for the nerds who prefer the dub but I mean *new episode!!*" she shrieks, half-dragging you out of the suite and slamming the door shut before you have a chance to protest. "It starts in twenty minutes so we'd better hurry if we want decent seats! Frickin' *everyone* is gonna be there!"

"Bonbon, I--"

### **"NEW EPISODE!!"**

Sighing, you take off with the cackling, gleeful march hare into the convention hall, hustling past the horde of guests to make it to the screening panel. Once Bonbon gets something in her mind, she's pretty much unstoppable. She's charging ahead like a locomotive at full steam, nearly knocking several people over in her frenzied rush. Try as you might, you can't really keep up with her, and in no time at all Bonbon's disappeared into the crowd, leaving you behind.

With no other options, you decide to flag down a staff member to see where exactly the screening's supposed to take place. After a few minutes of wandering around in the crowd trying to spot someone who looks official, you figure you might have an easier time asking a Bob cosplayer -- after all, true fans wouldn't want to miss a new episode, would they? Unfortunately, the problem with your plan quickly makes itself apparent: most Bob cosplayers are "true fans", and thus they're already at the screening panel. You don't see a single mohawk in the vicinity at all, neon blue or otherwise.

Stepping over to the back wall of a booth selling tee shirts, you pause for a moment to catch your breath and massage your leg, which is starting to ache from so much walking around. It's been nice to get some exercise, but you're still recovering from your wounds inflicted upon you at Jeremy's. As you slump to the floor to rest, something bright flickers at the very edge of your peripheral vision, causing you to jerk your head up involuntarily. You'd recognize that unsettling shade of yellow anywhere.

Or to be more precise, *gold*.

Suddenly focused, you catch a glimpse of a large, bulky golden-furred figure rounding the corner at the end of the vendors' aisle. Though you didn't get a good look at him from the front, you've got a

sneaking suspicion you already know who it is. Forcing yourself to your feet, you stumble after him, panic rising in your chest. Seeing Goldie outside of his "natural habitat" of Fred's apartment doesn't bode well for you; up until now, these visions/hallucinations/whatever have remained thoroughly isolated. Today, however, it looks like the game has changed.

You have to find him.

You break out into a dead run to the end of the aisle in pursuit of your quarry, shoving past people with no regard for anything but chasing the truth. On approaching the edge of the walkway you overhear him musing to himself, giving you brief pause.

"Yeah, **this'll** work. Well, not looking like this, but I'll work **something** out," he states in an unfamiliar, yet still chilling tone.

As you cautiously turn the corner, your target comes into full view. Towering over most of the nearby attendees is indeed a yellow-furred bear sporting a top hat -- just not the one you're looking for. As you wander up, he turns to face you, and in so doing you realize that not only is he not who you were looking for, he's not even organic at all.

Or at least the shell he's wearing isn't, anyway.

You stare up at a vaguely bear-like costume, made out of metal plates covered in yellow fake fur with visible gaps to allow the wearer freedom of movement. A few stray strands of wire dangle limply from an exposed joint in the head -- looks like he lost one of his ears and had to do a hasty patch job, covering it over with a small black hat. Even still, the head has some impressive mechanical elements for something clearly cobbled together by an amateur in his garage. You can't even make out his eyes in the costume.

Stepping back, you exhale in relief. Not Goldie, just another cosplayer with an unfortunate choice in attire. Your sanity lives to fight another day.

"Oh. You okay? You're not about to **pass out** on me now, are you?" he asks, straightening his necktie as you lean against a nearby supporting pillar to shift your weight off of your throbbing leg. "That'd be bad, and you're looking **kinda--**"

"I'm fine," you interrupt, shaking your head as the chill passes. "Sorry, you looked like someone I, uh -- kind of like someone I know."

"Oh, yeah, I get that a **lot**," he chuckles, waving you off. "Welp, I've got things to do, so -- have yourself a good time now."

"Thanks. You too."

Turning around, you begin limping back down the aisle the way you came, head low to the ground. Time to find Bonbon.

As soon as you make it to the screening room, Bonbon frantically motions you over. Looks like she's camped out in the front row.

"Where *were* you, Mike?" she asks, yanking you into your seat. "I never thought you were gonna show up!"

"Sorry. I got separated from you and ended up having to track convention staff down for directions. Took me forever to find someone. Did I miss much?"

You glance over at the panel of guests, all of whom look like pretty average joes. Most of them are felines -- a snow leopard and a couple of other cats of indeterminate species -- but to your surprise there's a single primate at the end of the table with his name on a placard, written in characters from a language you can't hope to read. Apparently these people are really famous to the audience, though, since there are plenty of attendees in the room lined up to ask them questions and have autographs signed.

"Thankfully it hasn't started yet, they're running a bit behind. I came in during the tail end of the last panel and just never left, and I ended up getting the best spots in the house -- everyone's been fighting me for your seat!"

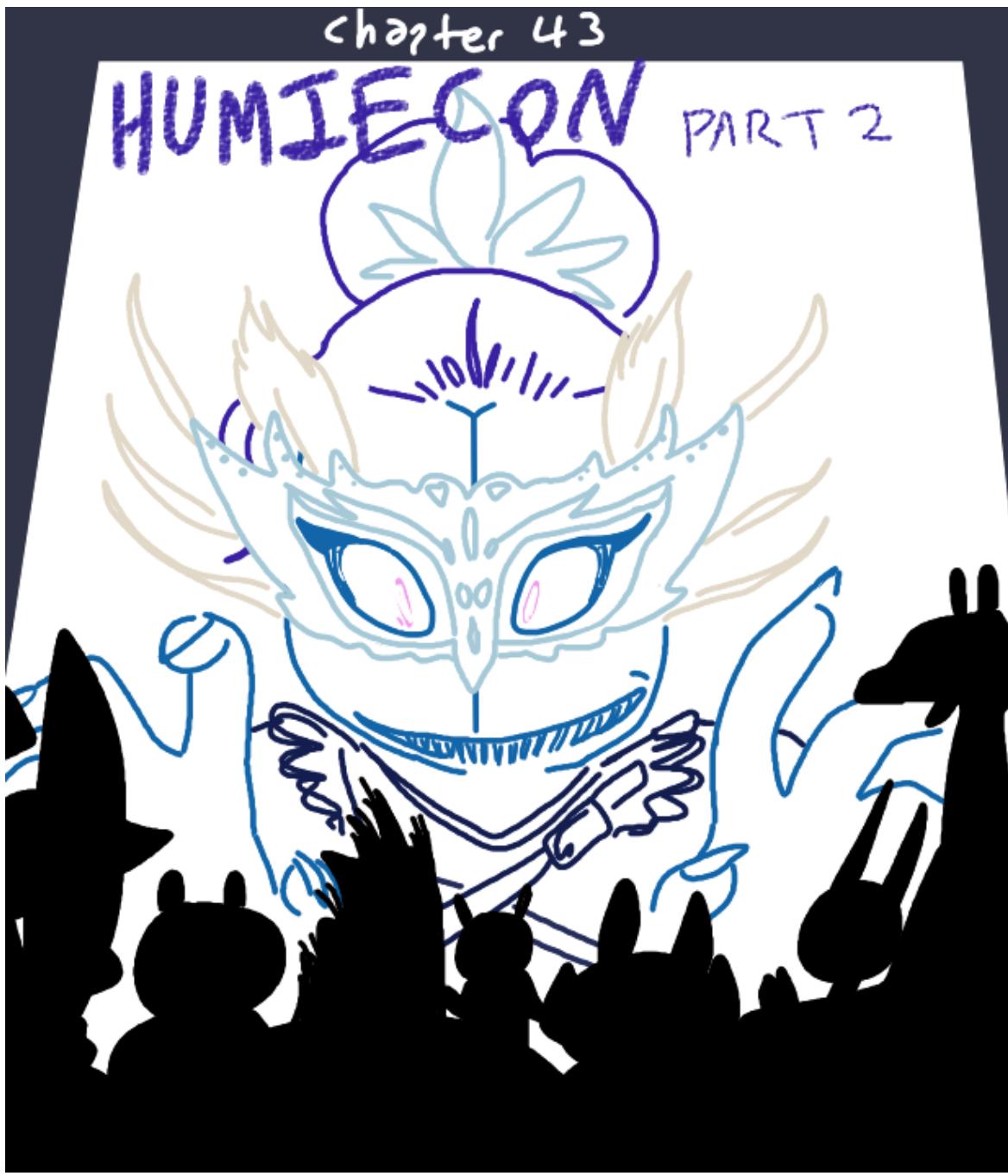
"Tell me about it. Well, I'm here now," you reply. "You looking forward to this?"

"Oh, *hell* yeah," she grins, throwing her arm around your shoulders and snuggling in close.

You blush a little as she does; mostly out of surprise rather than discomfort. You suppose you don't mind, though. Not like she's hurting anything. Wrapping your arm around her waist, you pull her close to you as she rests her head on your shoulder, her eartips brushing against the back of your hood.

"Thank you for your patience! The show will begin momentarily; everyone, please stay in your seats," one of the voice actresses at the panel announces over the microphone system. Everyone at the desk quickly disperses, heading back to where they were sitting.

Finally feeling some semblance of comfort, you settle in and prepare yourself for what's to come. Even though you're not some devoted humie the way literally everyone else here is, you're kind of looking forward to this. If nothing else, watching a cartoon with a buddy will be a nice breather and a way to shake the constant nagging reminders of Jeremy's loose from your mind.



Bonbon's practically shaking with excitement. All things being equal, you've got to give her credit for showing such self-restraint in this environment. You'd have figured by now she'd have been bouncing off the walls. Maybe she's still taking it all in, or maybe she just wants to try to prove she can be mature.

Or maybe Beanie had Foxglove dose her before coming in. That might explain why her head hasn't exploded yet.

The lights in the panel room dim slightly as the *Legend of Bob* theme song begins playing over the speakers. The voice actors begin hastily gathering their notes, all the while smiling for the cameraphones being held up like lighters at a rock concert. The large wall-mounted screens flicker to life, displaying the cartoon's animated opening sequence (which always looks better than the show itself does).

"We're going to do something a little special for this event," the leopard actress announces over the PA system, an odd reverence in her voice as the room begins to sing along to the insufferable theme. "Since the subtitles won't be available online until later tonight, we'll be reading translations *in-character* as *Legend of Bob* airs in real time overseas. We probably won't be able to do every line, but we'll try to get the gist for you. Please bear with us!"

"This is *so cool!*!" Bonbon excitedly murmurs in your ear. "There's been a lot of speculation circulating on the 'net that today's episode's a shocker!"

"Neat," you reply.

The episode opens up about where the last one left off: with Bob and his sidekick infiltrating the villain's secret mountain base. The entirety of season two has presented itself thus far as some kind of "revenge arc" for the main hero, though it's not exactly clear what he's been trying to get revenge for. Regardless of what Bonbon says, though, it's a kid's cartoon. You don't expect Emmy-winning writing from it.

According to the *very* thin translation the voice actors are providing (they almost seem more caught up in the show than the fans are), in this episode Bob is trying to make it to the "mountain control room" to stop the volcano from erupting. Seems volcanoes in the world of *Legend of Bob* come equipped with a handy on/off switch.

However, the first several minutes of the episode are nothing but the Balloon Boy sidekick inadvertently botching the hero's plans to sneak further into the villain's lair. Every time Bob goes to crawl through a vent or lockpick a door, Balloon Boy only ends up drawing the attention of guards or accidentally destroying the vital tool Bob needs to save the day.

"Bob, we have to get to the *control panel!*!" the voice actor playing Balloon Boy shrieks for what has to be the sixth or seventh time by now.

"Good work, Balloon Boy," Bob's actor replies in a stalwart, heroic tone, right as the cartoon version slips on a banana peel Balloon Boy has "helpfully" discarded. It's painfully obvious to you that they're relying on guesswork here. Between that and the nervous glances they're sharing, you wonder if there's something wrong with their notes.

"Bob! We *have* to get to the control *panel!*" Balloon Boy's actor agrees nervously, making a show of shuffling his papers around.

Despite the character's utterly bizarre ineptitude and the panel's complete lack of competence, the audience is enraptured by watching Balloon Boy on the screen, as if he's somehow the one they really showed up to root for. For whatever reason, he's a total dark horse. The crowd's eating him up even as he continuously screws Bob over every chance he gets.

"I can't believe they like this guy," you mutter to Bonbon.

"God, I know," she hisses back, jerking a thumb at a Balloon Boy cosplayer two seats over from her. "I hate this show's fandom so much. Bob's the real hero."

"Yeah, he's pretty patie-- *ow!*" You feel a jolt as you suddenly take a rough elbow to your shoulder from a bull sitting next to you.

"Hush!" he snorts. "Your chatter's ruining it for the rest of us!"

Halfway through the episode, Bob Legendmann comes across a ravine (inside a lair that doubles as a laboratory built into a mountain that's also a volcano) that he can't cross. It's not even a particularly wide ravine, either. Hell, *you* could probably leap across it if you had enough of a head start.

"Running jump?" Bonbon whispers to you.

"Can't he fly?" you whisper back, glaring at the bull defiantly as if daring him to shove you again.

Scrunching up her face, Bonbon huffs. "...shit, I don't remember."

Apparently Bob doesn't remember if he can fly either, because he turns to Balloon Boy for assistance in making it across the chasm.

"Balloon Boy, only you can help us now," Bob's actor declares triumphantly, even as the character on-screen looks like he's pleading with his recalcitrant sidekick.

"Bob, we have to get to the control -- wait, wrong line, uh..." Flipping through his notes, the feline voicing Balloon Boy looks up sheepishly. "Um, I'll sell you one of my balloons, Bob!"

Dropping to his knees, Bob grips both of Balloon Boy's shoulders.

"Now's not the time to be stingy!" he argues.

"Balloon Boy will provide the life-saving balloon they need to cross the uncrossable gap," the lead actress clumsily declares, as an over-complicated diagram pops up on the screen, showing a pie chart and about twelve paragraphs of unnecessary data. "For the life-saving balloon, it'll cost Bob exactly 4000 Humyen -- which is about thirty-eight dollars and forty cents of our real world money!"

"You've got to be *shitting* me," you groan.

Defeated, Bob pulls out a wad of cash and presses it into Balloon Boy's hand, who greedily pockets the money before producing a comically small balloon from a pouch on his waist. Once fully inflated, the balloon's not more than the size of a basketball, but somehow a grown man and a -- whatever the hell Balloon Boy is -- are able to use it to cross the gap with ease. The panel and the fans erupt into cheers at this laughably asinine display as the heroes continue on their journey.

"This might be the worst episode ever," Bonbon grumbles, slinking into her seat like she's embarrassed to be here.

Eventually, in spite of his sidekick, Bob manages to make it to the objective they've spent the majority of the episode looking for. Before he can be sabotaged any further, he performs a tactical roll up to the controls, yanking the switch to activate the emergency stop for the volcano. The moment he disarms the system, klaxons and warning lights begin going off inside the control room.

"The control panel was a *trap*, Bob!" the actor for Balloon Boy squeaks. You're impressed -- he actually manages to sound surprised, like he didn't know it was coming.

A skylight in the center of the room opens up, revealing a shadowy feminine figure against the backdrop of the sky. You're not entirely sure *why* there's a skylight in the middle of a volcano. Nor do you have any idea of how it has such a perfect view of the clear sky overhead, despite the fact

they should be buried under literal miles of rock. You're just glad to see something other than Bob's moron of a sidekick torpedoing their mission. Anything to advance the plot can only be good in your eyes.

"Suddenly, the mastermind appears!" the leopard actress breathes in a hushed tone, before covering her mic with a paw. "Wait, is, is this, uh -- is this one supposed to be me? Am I supposed to play her? Is it even a *her*?"

"That's definitely a dude. You can tell by the long, flowing tassels and the ultra-manly ballet tutu," Bob's actor quips out-of-character, raising a laugh from everyone in the room.

Dropping down from the sky, the villain -- or villainess, you suppose -- alights on the control room floor in an elegant three-point landing, revealing herself with a haughty smile and an obnoxious "oh-hoh hoh hoh" noblewoman's laugh. Like Bob, she's a human herself, though not quite "on-model", as you've come to expect by now.

Her skin is solid porcelain white, wrapped in impossibly tight-fitting clothes that look like a leather ballet outfit with way, *way* too many belt buckles. Her proportions seem improbable even by animation standards: her legs are freakishly long, and she boasts a literal hourglass figure with breasts and hips that seem to imply a total lack of a ribcage. Her violet hair's pulled up into a tight, embellished bun, whereas her face is mostly obscured by a frilly, feathery mask like the kind you might see a performer wear at an opera or fancy party.

It's clear the studio saved their animation budget exclusively for this moment as she pulls herself to standing, surrounded by conspicuous amounts of lens flare and other visual effects. Staring down Bob with a cocky smile, she breaks into a rambling, lengthy diatribe that nobody in the crowd seems able to understand. The actors at the panel exchange nervous glances with each other before the leopard finally takes the reins.

"So you've made it to my lair at last, Bob Legendmann!" Yeah, you're pretty sure that's a completely accurate translation.

"Yeah, that's right, I have made it here," Bob's actor stammers, right as Balloon Boy starts talking on-screen.

They're completely off the rails at this point. Glancing over at the primate gentleman at the far end of the desk, you notice he's fallen asleep. Meanwhile, everyone else in the auditorium is on the edge of their seat with anticipation. Even the snarky bull who was chiding you for being "loud" earlier is glued to the screen. You're pretty sure a *bomb* could go off in here and nobody'd notice it.

Pointing his Bobulator at the ballerina, Bob opens fire with a huge particle beam that blows a tractor-sized hole in the wall behind her, filling the room with smoke from the debris. As the dust clears, however, you notice the villainess doesn't even seem fazed by it, folding her arms triumphantly. The actors aren't even bothering to keep up at this point, focusing exclusively on the developing confrontation. Bonbon's plush feet are thumping overtime against the floor like a jackhammer, her nose twitching in excitement.

You're surprised to find even *yourself* tensing up a bit.

Balloon Boy starts to draw his own weapon, but before he can even unholster it, the villainess's mask splits open to reveal mechanical parts and circuitry embedded in her face.

You lean toward Bonbon. "Wait, is she a *cyborg*?"

"Shhhh!" the nearby viewers return instantly.

With a flash from her "eyes", she fires a volley of lasers directly at Balloon Boy. He staggers backwards before collapsing in slow-motion. The animators clearly wanted this to be a "wham shot", as you get to see it three times from multiple angles. Finally, he crashes to the ground.

For a long moment, nobody seems to react. The show has no shortage of random energy blasts of indeterminate power, and one more doesn't seem remarkable enough to warrant so many replays.

...until you notice the blood.

The diminutive sidekick's not just hurt: he's *dying*. Bob's on him in seconds trying to revive him, but it does no good. The screen fades to monochrome as Balloon Boy gasps for breath. And just in case there was any ambiguity left, another sudden volley of lasers comes from offscreen, interrupting the "emotional" scene with almost comedic timing. Balloon Boy's head explodes in a shower of gore that's frankly jarring for the tone of the entire series. Bob clutches the air with bloodstained hands and lets out a mournful wail just as the "TO BE CONTINUED" stinger cuts the scene into freeze-frame while the credits quickly roll.

"*Oh my god,*" Bonbon gasps as she stands up, yanking at both of her ears in ecstatic surprise. "Oh my god, oh my **GOD!!**"

"Holy *shit!*" you join in, pushing yourself out of your seat to high-five Bonbon.

"He's dead!" she gestures excitedly.

**"FINALLY!"**

**"HELL YEAH!"** Jumping up and down like she's on a pogo stick, Bonbon performs a celebratory jig. "I've been waiting for *months* to see him finally get his! *Kickass!* Best episode ever!"

"My thoughts exactly!" you cheer. "That ballerina cyborg lady with the laser eyes? Best character! Ten out of ten!"

As you turn to look at the audience to gauge their reaction, there's not a single dry eye in the room. The fans are awash with mixtures of sadness and anger, burning holes into both of you with their glares. Even the panel's guests are all frowning or otherwise upset.

Clearly, the two of you have ruined the precious moment.

Balloon Boy's voice actor wipes his tears and leans forward into his microphone, still sniffling as he pulls it close to his mouth.

"Security?" he rasps.

"So wait. You guys *actually* got thrown out of the panel," Beanie deadpans, continuing to work the sticky blue gel into your hair, teasing what's left of it into thick spikes. "You're joking."

"The guy that does the voice for Balloon Boy was the one that blew the whistle on us," you reply, shifting in your chair so that she can get the back of your head. "He seemed pretty pissed off."

"Well, of course he was pissed off. He'd just found out he was out of a job."

"You had to see it, Beanie!" Bonbon gushes as she bounces up and down on the bed. "She nuked him with lasers from her *eyes!* It was so freakin' cool!"

"You two're gonna have to show me a replay when we get home, that *does* sound awesome." Shaking her head, Beanie rips off her rubber gloves and heads to the suite's bathroom to wash her paws. "All right, Mike. You're all finished over here."

As you turn around to look at yourself in the mirror, you can't help but pose heroically, admiring your completed costume. You were already aware that the Mangles did a great job on it, but after seeing the quality of some of the competitors roaming the convention hall, there's no way you're anything other than an absolute shoe-in. Between Foxglove's custom embroidery on the jumpsuit sleeves and Mango's brilliant paint application to the Bobulator to give it a "battle-scarred" look, you could practically be starring in a studio-quality film production. Their skills are wasted on online retail and babysitting -- they need to be working for Hollywood.

"Thanks, Beanie, you did a fantastic job on the mohawk!" You heft your Bobulator from the table, slinging it over your shoulder dramatically. "I guess I'm ready to go whenever you two are, then. I figure it's better that we're a bit early than late, right?"

"Hey, before you go?" Bonbon whips out her phone with a grin, motioning for you to turn around. "Could I get a few pics of that pose you were doing just now? You know, for posterity's sake?"

"Oh, I think you've got plenty of that already. Besides, don't you mean 'posterity's sake'?" you ask with a smirk, puffing up your chest.

"Ha ha, ha, uh, *whaaaaat?*" the blue bunny croaks, tugging at her shirt's collar.

You lean in, giving her a knowing smile. "You must not know Em as well as I do."

She stammers in your face for a second, eyes wide as dinnerplates as sweat pours down her face. "M-M-Mike, uh--"

"Save it for the runway, you two," Beanie interjects, poking her head out of the bathroom and pointing to her watch. "The contest starts soon and Mike's still gotta get registered."

"R-right!" Chuckling shakily, Bonbon pockets her phone.

"Aw, don't look so nervous, I'm sure Mike'll do great." Opening the door, Beanie ushers the two of you outside and into the hallway. "Let's get going."

"Would you *look* at this guy? Looks *just* like a real human," a donkey covered in plastic wrap next to you jealously remarks.

"That's because he *is* a real human!" one of the audience members spectating from the front row shouts back at her.

"Yeah, I wish!" Shaking her head, the donkey looks you up and down approvingly, ogling you like you're a choice cut of meat in a butcher's display case. You wonder if she's even aware of your sentience based on the way she's talking about you. "No, he's gotta be a monkey with the best plastic surgeon ever. Right...?"

"Gotta be. I mean, humans aren't real -- yet," a male contestant of some indeterminate species pipes up from the very end of the front row. "Imagine that, though. Humans in *our* lifetime."

"Mmn. What a time to be alive."

You're starting to empathize with Peanut more and more by the second. Up on the center stage, under bright lights and intense scrutiny from the onlookers that have amassed to observe the contest, you feel like you're an ant under a magnifying glass on a hot summer day. The audience seems enamored with your likeness as well, snapping off photos and video left and right. You're not too surprised, since the contest you're competing in is "Most Realistic Human".

Even the other contestants are turned to gawk, marveling at your "pro makeup job" and "amazing dedication" to your "craft". You've had to politely ask the skinsuit-clad canine behind you to stop touching your arms at least three times now, but for whatever reason she just can't seem to take the hint that you don't want to be fondled.

So far, you've breezed through all of the preliminary rounds as you'd expect. The rules are simple: for all of the prelims, the audience votes for their favorite participant via a mobile app, and the winners of each bracket go on to the next round. The winner of the final round is decided by a panel of judges, with the first place finisher taking home the grand prize of a thousand dollars.

To avoid allegations of judge favoritism or specism, the participants were divided into arbitrary categories based on their costume's genre. Because of your Bob costume, you were placed in the "action/superhero" genre bracket. So far, you've won four rounds in your division, and based on the overhead display behind you, you're set to win this one as well.

"Hey, Eggs," a shaved gorilla in front of you calls out, turning in place to make eye contact. "That's your name, right? Eggs?"

The poor guy's had to slather himself in makeup to hide the waxing rash on his neck and face. You can tell that at one time he must've been purple, because he's still got a few patches of fur he didn't quite manage to get rid of near the back. You can only imagine how sore he's going to be after today.

"Uh, nickname, but yeah," you respond, reaching over to shake his hand. "And you are...?"

"Wilson," he replies, offering a nearly crushing handshake. "Wilson Munch. I have to hand it to you, man, you look real great."

"Thanks, Wilson. I appreciate it. I had a lot of help from my friends for this."

"I can see that. You've got the look down pat, dude." Wilson nods as he admires the paint work on your Bobulator, scratching at one of his wrists. "Honestly, I'm surprised at how accurate your costume is, considering the obvious limitations."

"Limitations?"

"Oh, you know," he comments idly. "The lack of a tail, for one."

*Tail?*

The plastic-wrapped donkey crosses her arms in irritation. "Bob Legendmann doesn't have a tail...!"

"Yeah, but humans do. If he's going for accuracy, that overrides canon," Wilson calmly explains, nodding to you like this is the most obvious thing in the world.

"*Strongholds and Sapiens* didn't invent humans, though," she argues, visibly growing flustered. "They're not some -- monster or species that was made up for the sake of pop culture. They're-- they're ancient *folklore*, with a tenuously-defined description at best! There's no proof they *ever* were intended to have tails!"

"Ahhhh, you're one of *those* old mythology lore types," he patronizingly replies. "Look, even if *S&S* didn't depict humans as having tails, there are just as many ancient occidental depictions and illustrations showing them with tails as there are without."

"Hey, I gotta know," the dog in the skinsuit asks, interrupting their nerd duel. "Were you with that bunny over at the *Legend of Bob* panel that got escorted out? That *was* you, right?"

"Guilty as charged," you admit to her, struggling not to laugh. "There's no love lost for that balloon guy in our camp."

"Man, don't be sorry. I'll never understand why idiot fans latch onto a series' worst character and parade 'em around like they're the greatest thing since sliced bananas," Wilson says with an easygoing grin, ignoring the frustrated donkey next to you. "Anyway, enjoy your victory, my brother. I'm real shaggy, so going 'smooth-style' was a personal sacrifice. Against anyone else, I'd be livid after all the work I put into my costume; losing to a fellow primate makes it easier, though."

Primate solidarity, huh? In a way, it's almost kind of charming.

"Thanks for being gracious about it," you reply earnestly, flashing him a thumbs-up.

Seconds later the round timer buzzes on the scoreboard, and you've once again defeated everyone standing on the stage, guaranteeing yourself a spot in the finals. As the group disperses to make way for the next set of challengers (but not before the skinsuit dog has a chance to grope your flesh one more time), you make your way down the staircase and over to the side to visit with your friends.

"You're killin' it, Mike!" Bonbon whoops from behind the partition set up between the stage and the spectators. You're willing to bet that if she had a set of pom-poms, she'd be doing actual cheerleading for you right now.

"Thanks, Bonbon," you reply, approaching the divider to give her a high-five. "Where'd Beanie go?"

"Uh, food court I think -- but never mind her! Dude, you're so close to the finish line! *Oooooh*, I'm so freakin' excited! How're you feel-- *mmpfh!*"

Cutting her off mid-sentence, an eager mob of avian humies swarms past her, trying to get to you. Leading their group seems to be a young hen with brilliant white feathers and a thick mop of salt-and-pepper hair pulled back in pigtails. You're surprised to see a bird with hair of really *any* kind, until you get close enough to realize it's a costume wig. Half of the "hair strands" are actually just shiny silver tinsel. The chicken in question places both of her wings on the rail, standing on the tips of her toes.



"Eggs Benedict, right?" she clucks excitedly, her blue-green eyes dangerously wide.

You ignore her at first, leaning over the rail to reach out to Bonbon, but you quickly lose sight of her in the mass of technicolor feathers and fur. Claws, wings, paws, and hooves from other sweaty, smelly guests begin to poke, grope, and rub against your flesh. Everyone wants a piece of you. You're forced to quickly jerk away from them to avoid being mauled.

"I've been watching you this entire time, Eggs, and -- haha, oh *wow!* Your costume? *On point!*" the white hen continues to babble, vaulting over the partition to get up-close and personal. "You've got to tell me your secrets!"

Bonbon's been shoved further and further back by other interested fans hoping to check you out; all you can make out of her are the tips of her long blue ears.

"Uhhh, thanks," you answer, raising a hand to shield yourself from the phones being thrust into your face. "Listen, I don't mean to be rude, but--"

"Oh, you're not being rude at all, Eggs," the hen replies, tossing a wing around your shoulders. "I'm Helen, you're Eggs, that means we're friends now! Friends, see? So look, Eggs -- Egg? Can I call you Egg for short?"

For short? Isn't that actually *more* to say than just 'Eggs'?

"Anyways Eggy, I just want you to know that I'm a *big* fan of the skinsuit you've got," Helen blithely chitters. "It's so realistiiii--"

As her wingtips begin to tease your exposed skin, Helen's pupils shrink to pinpricks. She jolts her head back in surprise, her beak dangling open in shock like a largemouth bass. Even the other birds standing near her quit trying to swipe at you with their wings upon seeing their leader's face.

"Holy shit. This is *real*," she breathes.

All at once, her enthusiasm renews itself tenfold as she's gripping your hands with surprising strength, pinching and feeling your skin. You've grown so accustomed to the way the hens you know "feel" using their feathers, that you're surprised to find out it freaking *hurts* to be pinched by a chicken.

"Ow! Little rough there, Helen!"

"*Oh. My. GOD.* This *isn't* a skinsuit! This is actually your real skin!" She wrenches your arm up at an unnatural angle, pushing your sleeve aside to get a better look at your flesh. "No stubble. No rash at all. Some baby-fine fur here and there, but that can be overlooked."

"Gee, thanks," you grunt, trying to pull out of her grip.

"What is it? What's your secret?! Laser fur removal? Cream? Because this is *way* too good for a simple shave or wax. I gotta know, how'd you manage it?"

Jerking your arm away from the crazed fetishist, you tug your sleeve back down as you take a wary step back.

"Could you *please* not? And no, it's just a skin condition!"

"Skin condition my feathered *ass*, this is positively flawless!"

Not taking no for an answer, Helen lunges forward, gripping your collar and leaning close into your face. She's examining your skin so intensely that you can feel the tips of her eyelashes fluttering against your cheek, her beak jabbing against your neck.

"I've been thinking about plucking, but *screw that*. Whatever you've got going here? I want to try it first."

"Helen, I'm *really* not comfortable with any of this," you respond more forcefully, shoving away from her as security finally manages to make it over to you, apparently having taken their sweet time.

"Please refrain from making unwanted contact with other attendees, ma'am," one of the two guards insists as he escorts her across the barrier. "Sir, are you all right?"

"I'm fine," you gasp, nodding to Helen as she's forcefully dragged backwards away from you. "Guys, be gentle! Don't hurt her, she's just... curious. I think."

"Hit me up after you win, Eggy!" Helen screeches as she's pushed back into the audience to share her experience with her friends.

As you head to the stage for the final round, you finally catch sight of Bonbon standing in the audience, having been pushed all the way over to the side. You give her a grin and a wave as you climb the steps.

She doesn't wave back.

"And the winner of this year's 'Most Realistic Human' trophy and \$1,000 cash prize is..."

As you wait for your "name" to be called, you offer the starry field of camera flashes in front of you yet another heroic pose. You won every round you competed in up to this point with ease, thanks to the audience vote, and now it's the judges' turn to select an overall winner based on the final lineup. You're not sure why they did it this way -- it seems a little unusual that they wouldn't just let the audience vote all the way through. Or, at the very least, why not have the judge involvement be early on, rather than late-game? Still, you're pretty sure it won't affect anything either way--

"...contestant #18, Ms. Dolli Dimples!"

With your grinning expression frozen on your face, you slowly turn to look at the announcer. That's funny, that didn't sound at all like "Eggs Benedict".

"Hell no! Are you *kidding* me?!" a guy in the front row howls. "I call shenanigans!"

"Yeah, he deserved to win! Screw you guys!"

"The judges do this every year! Every **FREAKIN'** year!!"

The audience erupts into a chorus of boos and infuriated jeering as a hefty, busty hippo lady giddily clomps past you to claim her reward. Her "human" look is borderline insulting, and the spectators aren't struggling at all to make their feelings heard about it. It's obvious that she just drenched herself in vaguely flesh-toned bodypaint and tossed a wig on. Even the remaining competitors next to you seem puzzled by your abrupt loss.

"Freakin' sham contest," a pint-sized wolf in some kind of medieval outfit huffs as he awkwardly nudges your side. "Sorry, man. I know you musta put a lot of work into that look. You'da got my vote."

The ignominy of being an *actual human* losing at a contest for the "most realistic human" in a building full of animals... well, you're not sure whether to shout or laugh out loud. Sighing, you meet somewhere in the middle and give the wolf an appreciative smile, trying not to let your dejection show through.

"The second and third place winners will receive \$250 and \$100 respectively, in the form of merchandise vouchers to be redeemed in our impressive dealers' room," one of the judges announces over the speakers. "Contestants #3 and #6, congratulations! Please come accept your prizes."

Looking down at the sheet of paper hanging from your shirt with the number five printed on it, you shoot the oblivious judges a glare as a giraffe and a mouse wander off the stage to go collect their vouchers, each of them giving you a sheepish, apologetic nod.

Unbelievable. After going through all this trouble, you can't help but feel like you've been robbed. Attending a con you otherwise would have ignored in the first place, making a public spectacle of yourself, being borderline *molested* by half the people you've seen, even shaving your head into an idiotic haircut -- and all of it for nothing.

Tired, stiff, and achy from your injuries as well as walking around all day, you accept the setback with all the grace you can muster. Might as well go change back into your day clothes, find the girls, and soothe your brutalized ego with some overpriced junk food before calling it a night.

As you exit the stage and begin to work your way through the crowd, Helen immediately comes running up to you.

"Hold up, Eggy! The judges had this for you. All of the runners-up still get something!" she trills, foisting a gift bag into your hands. "I wouldn't get too excited about it, though. Looks like only the top three got any kind of monetary comp -- voucher or otherwise."

"Thanks, Helen. Anything's better than nothing," you answer cautiously, accepting your consolation prize.

Her wide eyes go even wider and she claps her wings to her face in excitement. "You remembered my name!"

"Yeah, I-- sorry, I really need to get back to my suite. It was, uh -- interesting meeting you."

"Hey, that's fine, I'll join you," she smoothly replies. "It'd be a perfect opportunity for us to exchange some techniques, too."

With absolutely no forewarning, something grips your bicep hard enough to nearly rip the stitching in your sleeve. Even Helen steps back a little in surprise as Bonbon surges forward. She's got a crazed, vehement look in her eyes like you've never seen before. Her fur's bristling from ear to toe. The arm she's *not* using to clutch you is visibly shaking, her free paw clenched into a tight fist.

"Bonbon, you okay?" you inquire, slyly positioning yourself between them.

"Forget the stupid contest. We're **leaving**," Bonbon snarls, glaring at Helen the entire time from behind you. "**You -- beat it.**"

"*Ex-cuse* me?" Helen scoffs, scooting closer as she leans over you to leer down at Bonbon. "And who the hell are *you*, kiddo? Can't you see Eggs and I were in the middle of having an adult conversation?"

"I'm *not* a kid, and that's my **friend** you're just casually feather-dusting," the rabbit heatedly retorts. "Keep your grubby wings to yourself."

"Oh, sorry. I just assumed you were a child." Helen tucks a wing underneath her chest, tauntingly pushing her chicken breasts up for emphasis. "Considering you're built like one *and* acting like one."

"Oh yeah?! You can pose all you want, but at the end of the day, you're going home *alone* and *he's going home with me!*" Bonbon snaps, yanking you away with her and flipping the bird the -- well, the bird. Even in this bizarre world, some things remain truly universal. "That's right, lady! I'm **LIVING THE DREAM!!**"

Helen watches you head off, shaking with impotent rage. The last you see of the hen, she's ripping her wig off and throwing it angrily to the floor. You offer a final, contrite nod to the furious chicken before Bonbon forcibly disappears the two of you into the crowd, beating a hasty retreat to the safety of your room.

Once you're back in your suite, Bonbon animatedly unzips her duffel bag. She begins picking up her con purchases, violently slamming them into her luggage. Her heaping pile of stuffed toys is far too huge to fit into a single bag that's already almost full, and she's growing more frustrated by the second trying to force them in.

"Bonbon?" you venture carefully, having just finished changing out of your Bob costume and back into your street clothes. "Can we just slow down a sec here and talk?"

"What's there to talk about? Everything's just *frickin'* fine," Bonbon huffs, squeezing one of her plushes tight enough you're wondering if its stuffing is going to burst loose. "It's all just fine and dandy, Mike! *Living the dream*, remember?"

As you slowly move towards her, she's getting increasingly more frantic, quivering as she struggles to make everything fit neatly into her bag. If you were in a more eloquent frame of mind, you could almost draw some kind of analogy there. Instead, you simply place a gentle hand on the top of her duffel bag in an attempt to calm her down.

"Bonbon," you try again. "Let me in here. Are you still upset about that hen from earlier? Talk to me."

"Y'know what, yeah! Yeah, I'm '**still upset!**'" Bonbon backhands the remaining toys off of the bed, sending them flying across the room in a juvenile uproar. "That stupid *chickenshit* and then that **joke** of a contest -- it got me all worked up! Okay, Mike?"

"Oh, the money would've been really nice to have, but I'll get by without it," you respond plainly. "And as for Helen, she's no big deal. Just some crazy fangirl type who doesn't understand the concept of personal space. Nothing you need to worry about, I promise."

"But that's just *it*, Mike." Panting, Bonbon slumps against you, refusing to make eye contact. In the warm, soft glow of the lamp on the nightstand, you see her lips begin to tremble. "Watching her just sit there and, and -- just *feel* you up, close enough she could *kiss* you! She didn't care anything about *you* as a person at all, she just -- she just wanted to rub her slimy feathers all over you, like you were her toy! Like you were merchandise or something!"

"Honestly, Bonbon, I'm tougher than I look," you reply, hugging her close. "I wasn't really bothered by her, and neither should you--"

Bonbon suddenly lurches away from you, eyes brimming with tears.

"You don't get it, Mike! I'm *not* bothered by her, I'm bothered by *me!* It was like looking into a mirror!"

You start to ask her what she means, but instead you hold your tongue. This is one of those times where it'll be better to listen than lecture. Bonbon wipes her eyes on the back of her sleeve, furrowing her brow. She looks torn between wanting to cry and wanting to punch something.

"I saw *me* in that hen," she admits, choking up. "I saw someone who, who -- had been given a chance at something wonderful! Something really truly amazing, and she let it *slip by* because she was so, so frickin' **OBSESSED** with instant gratification that she forgot there was a person underneath the skin!"

Burying her face in her paws, Bonbon's petite frame shudders as she fights back violent sobs.

"And it re, remm-- reminded me! Of the things I've done! Heck, all the way back to the d-day I met you, Mike! I looked up, and I saw you and, I went -- I went '*LOOK, A HUMAN!*' and ev-everything else went out the wi-window!" Forcing a wobbly smile she blatantly doesn't feel, Bonbon smacks her fists against the mattress. "And I coulda lo-lost the chance to get to know someone who'd become an *amazing* friend, someone who'd step in and help me t-turn my life around! Be-because all I cared about was wh-what you *looked like!*"

"But I'm still here. You didn't lose anything. We're friends, we're having a fun time right now. It's been an *up day*, Bonbon -- well, apart from me looking like a dipshit in front of hundreds of people on stage, anyway," you weakly joke.

"But I'm *still* messing it up." she whispers, voice breaking. "What if you don't forgive me next time? Wh-what if you turn me away? Like you turned Helen away?"

You wrap your arms around her shoulders, pulling her close to you once more.

"Bonbon, you can 'what if' yourself right into the loony bin." You sigh. "What if I'd been too slow getting to Beanie? What if Bonworth hadn't thought to have us check in on her in the first place?"

Bonbon whimpers, pressing her face against your chest. She nods weakly, too busy emotionally releasing to formulate a response.

"You can worry yourself sick over things that didn't ever happen, y'know?" you continue. "But you and I, we're friends anyway because of -- or even in *spite* of everything that's happened."

You gently stroke the back of her head, chuckling softly.

"And anyway, Helen's a bit-- uhhh, a *very* rude girl. You aren't. So I don't think you have nearly as much to worry about as you think you do," you add.

She freezes, her paws clutching your shirt. "Even after the, um, with Foxglove...?"

"If it means Mangle keeps cutting me in enough to afford bulgogi," you smirk.

"...I know you're trying to cheer me up," she mumbles, "but it was too real."

The two of you sit together in the quiet of the room for a while. While Bonbon's slowly ramping down, her mood isn't really lifting. You struggle to think of a way to raise her spirits -- to get her back to her normal, bouncy self, when eventually, an idea strikes you.

"You know, Bonbon, unrelated to anything we've been discussing... I'm reminded of something you recently admitted to me."

"...yeah?" she mumbles.

"I'm gonna do something for you, but you gotta promise me you won't make this weird. This isn't, like... a sex thing."

Reaching your hand up to her elastic sweatband, you gently tease it off of her head, letting her lop ears flop loose. She looks up at you questioningly before her face abruptly changes to awestruck as you begin to massage her ears. Slowly, you work your fingers from where they connect at the base of her scalp all the way to the tips. She falls back against the edge of the mattress, her right foot beginning to involuntarily bash against the carpet, revving up like an outboard motor the longer you massage her.

"*Miiiii-IiiiiIIIII-kk-kuh...!*" she chokes, nearly drooling. "I'm beggin' ya -- with, with everything I've... mmmh. **DON'T** stop."

"Bonbon, remember what I asked," you cough. Her entire body's gone stiff as a board, her left eyelid twitching as you continue to squeeze her ears. "Maybe, uh, maybe tone the weird faces down just a touch. You look like you're being tased."

"Can't help it," she coos, blushing feverishly. "Rabbit ears are like, *super* sensitive. Like twenty thousand more sensitive."

"*Twenty thousand more sensitive,*" you reply dubiously. "Was that a complete thought? Feels like a couple words might've been missing there."

"Ears," she clarifies.

"Yeeaaah. I'll take that as a no."

Without warning, the suite door suddenly flings open. Beanie trots inside with a pizza box and a two-liter of soda cradled in her arms.

"Hey guys, how come no one text--"

She stops cold right as Bonbon lets out a shuddering, porn star moan, all the while both of her ears are clenched in your hands like handlebars on a bicycle.

"I'll... *uhhhhh,*" Beanie blinks, frozen in the doorway with a blank expression like she's a computer program that's just crashed.

You splutter helplessly. "Wait, Beanie--"

"I'll just, uh. I'm sorry. I'll leave you two alone." She spins on her heel, still carrying the food and drink as she heads outside.

"No, Beanie, don't leave!" you insist, dropping Bonbon onto the bed with a soft thump as you chase after her.

"Yeah, join me instead." Bonbon's purring so much she sounds woozy. "It feels *amaaaazing.*"

"Oh my **GOD**, you two," Beanie groans, red in the face herself as the door clicks shut behind her.

After chasing Beanie down and clearing up the misunderstanding (as well as remembering to pass on Nisha's message to her), the three of you return to the suite to enjoy a late dinner together. Some much-needed lighthearted conversation and an hour or so of TV later, it's time to wind down for the night. You dispose of the pizza box and the paper plates from your meal before heading into the bathroom to rinse the messy blue gel out of your hair. One quick shower later, you begin collecting Bonbon's previously discarded toys and merchandise to store in your luggage.

"You all right, Mike?" Bonbon asks as she fiddles with her phone, looking up from her spot in bed. She's sitting upright next to Beanie, who's already on the verge of passing out. "You don't have to fuss with all that stuff right now, we can deal with it in the morning."

"It'll only take a minute," you yawn, unzipping your own duffel bag and loading her toys in. "You're out of room in your luggage anyway, right? So I'll just stash your leftovers in my bags for you, and you can snag 'em from me when we get home."

"Hey, thanks," she grins.

"No prob. Soon as I'm done here, I'm gonna crash on the couch. G'night, girls."

"*Mmnngh*. Wha' couch?" Beanie mumbles.

You turn to gesture to an empty wall. It's only just now that you realize for the first time since you got here that your luxurious, all-expenses paid, Platinum VIP suite is not equipped with a couch, but rather a table and four stiff-looking wooden chairs.

"...ah," you mutter, realizing all too late what this entails.

"C'mon, quit bein' weird," Beanie continues, rolling over onto her pillow. "*Sleep*. Busy day t'morrow."

"Yeah, Mike, we're only here for the one night, y'know?" Bonbon adds, patting a space between herself and Beanie that's *just* barely big enough for you to squeeze in. "And I still wanna hit the resellers' room one more time on my way out for any last-minute deals."

Making a bed out of wooden chairs doesn't sound pleasant, and it won't do your mending ribs any favors to sleep on the floor. Glancing over at the oblivious bunnies, you nervously roll up your pajama sleeves before making the decision to nestle in between them.

Well, if nothing else, at least it's a *really* comfy bed.



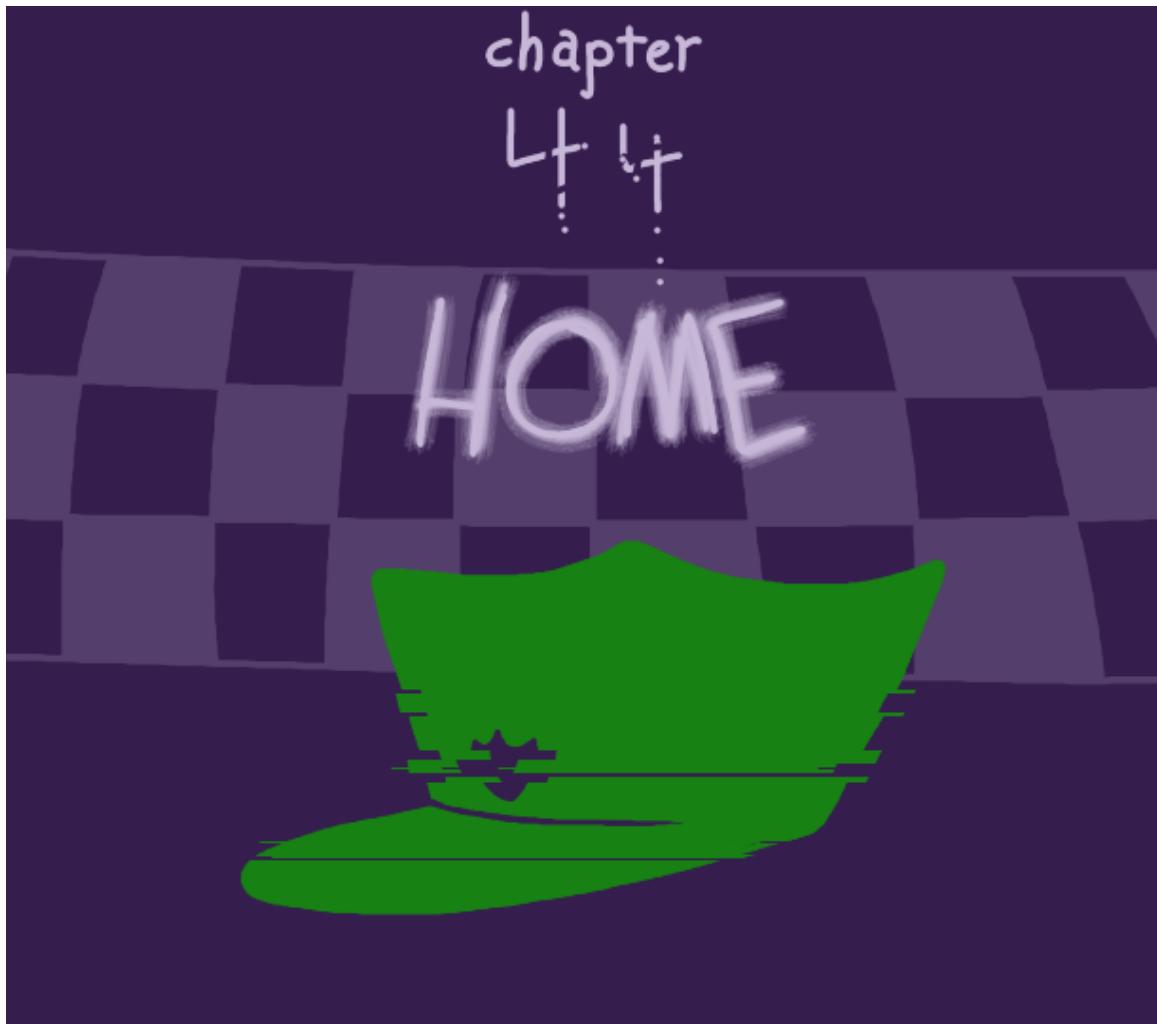
# HOME

## Chapter Summary

*Are you coming home*

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



"So how was the convention?" Goose asks the empty chair next to you.

"Y'know, I suppose it wasn't all that bad," you reply, speaking up a little for her benefit. Quickly realizing her estimate was off, she shifts to better face your direction. "Seems everyone had a good time for the most part. Heck, I kind of enjoyed it, even if I didn't win the contest."

"I *still* say you were robbed." Mango trundles out of the kitchen, putting her paws on her hips in disgust. "I can't help but wonder if there's *anything* Foxglove or I could've done differently."

"Nah, the costume was fantastic. You two did an amazing job, and I got a ton of compliments on it. I swept all the audience rounds, but when it came down to the judge vote, they just... gave it to someone else. Everyone was shocked by their decision."

"Awww. That sucks, man." Goose offers up a breathy, sympathetic sigh, clumsily patting you on the arm. "I think you're plenty human-like. Or at least, all the good stuff, anyway. I'm kind of an expert on the topic, too. I used to work around real ones every day."

Rolling her eyes, Mango tousles Goose's headfeathers as she takes a seat. "Silly Goose, the ones at Jeremy's aren't real."

"*Hmmph.*" Goose defiantly runs her wings across her head to smooth out her feathers. "If anything I'd say they were *too* real."

After enjoying a quiet but cozy winter breakfast together, both girls beg off to take care of some housework. You figure now's as good a time as any to unpack your luggage. You, Beanie, and Bonbon all came back from HumieCon exhausted, so you haven't even had the opportunity to unload Bonbon's swag from your suitcases. Besides, considering you don't have so much as a piece of furniture to your name yet, you need your suitcase and duffel to keep what few possessions you have organized.

Making your way into the bedroom you're sharing with Peanut, you set about unpacking Bonbon's overflow of HumieCon loot. If you didn't know better, you'd assume her merchandise was somehow multiplying. Figurines, comic books, vinyl toys, plushes -- it feels like every time you take your eyes off of it, the pile gets bigger. No telling *how* much money she spent in there.

You pick up a stuffed toy of Bob and give his nose an experimental poke. It makes an oddly satisfying honking sound. Grinning like a dope, you carry it and an armful of her other toys to her bedroom door, gingerly placing them inside her empty laundry basket. You briefly consider leaving the items inside her room, but you figure that even as tempting as it may be in light of recent events, it's better to err on the side of caution and respect her privacy. At least for now.

On your last trip to drop off her bounty, you stumble across the gift bag containing your consolation prize. You got so distracted having to calm Bonbon down after the contest, you never got around to seeing what it was. Not that you expect much. It's probably a coffee mug or some other trinket with HumieCon branding. As you pull the tissue paper away, though, you're surprised to see that inside the bag is a cardboard box with bright colors, illegible foreign print, and the *Legend of Bob* series' logo.

"Ohhhh boy," you groan.

Your recompense for humiliating yourself in front of thousands of strangers: a Balloon Boy action figure.

To add insult to injury, the damn thing doesn't even *look* like the character it's supposed to be. It's done up in hideous neon pink and lime green paint. Some kind of knockoff, maybe? If it didn't say **BALON BOY** in large block letters underneath the show's logo, you almost wouldn't be able to tell what it was supposed to be. Shaking your head, you scratch out a note to Bonbon, informing her that she's now its proud owner before dumping the fluorescent abomination in the pile with the rest of her plunder.

Turning back to your mostly-emptied luggage, you look at the state of your clothes with dismay. Having to share space with all of the convention merchandise left just about every article of clothing you own badly wrinkled. Not only that, it seems some of your dirty clothes got mixed in with clean, if the smell wafting out of your suitcase is anything to go by. Like it or not, at this point you're going to have to wash everything.

Unfortunately, a cursory examination of the laundry room reveals that Mango and Goose have already staked it out. Judging by the baskets full of laundry, it's obvious they're not going anywhere anytime soon. Goose is reclining in a bean bag chair on the floor with a pair of earphones pressed to her head while Mango skims a women's magazine.

"Freddy and Bonnie are working late today," Mango says as you walk in. "We're doing their laundry for them as a favor, since they're almost out of fresh clothes. Do you want us to take care of yours, too?"

"No, that's okay! You've got enough on your plate as it is. I'll run across the street and ask Bonworth or Fred if I can do laundry at their place."

Scratching her head, Mango nods. "Oh! Well, if you're sure, then."

Little point in procrastinating. You're already showered and dressed for the day, might as well go knock laundry out since you've got literally nothing better to do. Slipping your boots and coat on, you heft your luggage and set off across the street to Building 9.

"I'm sorry to stop by so abruptly, Bonworth."

"Don't you worry about that, Mike! I'm just glad you caught me before I headed out to work." The homespun rabbit fidgets with his vest as you drag your luggage inside. "Come to stay the night?"

"Actually, I just need to take care of some laundry, if that'd be okay?" you ask.

"Oh, you don't even need to ask!" Bonworth grins. "Everything you need's on the top shelf in the laundry room, whether it's suds or bleach or what have you. I'd love to stick around and catch up, but I'm afraid it'll have to wait 'till I get home. Will you be all right?"

Eyeing the top shelf, it looks like he really *does* have everything you could possibly need: bleach, detergent, fabric softener, even stain remover.

"Absolutely. Thanks, Bonworth!"

"Sure thing! Everyone's out like a light right now. I think that torpor business might be contagious," he jokes with a silly smile. "Just call the front desk if you need anything, Mike, and I'll come on over."

"Will do, Bonworth. Have a good day at work, then!" you answer.

He gives you a wave before setting off, leaving you alone in the sterile, lemon-scented serenity of 93-B once more.

It's almost like you never left.

Dropping to your knees, you begin pulling out your clothes to sort into piles. You spend time making sure they're properly separated. Last thing you want is to accidentally turn half your wardrobe pink because a red shirt slipped through. On the plus side, just about everything you have is wash and wear, so you won't have to iron anything out. You decide to start by washing your socks and underwear first, as you're not keen on the idea of leaving a pile of boxer shorts in the middle of the hallway.

"Don't want Cheeky getting the wrong idea," you chuckle quietly to yourself as you start the washing machine.

Once you've got your first load going, you wheel your empty luggage into the living room, taking a seat in one of the chairs. It's been a while since you've cleaned these things out, and they've accumulated their fair share of dust and grime from your travels. Your rolling suitcase is definitely showing signs of fatigue. Both it *and* your duffel bag could probably stand to be retired.

Still, you might as well take care of what you've got for now. As you run a damp cloth around the interior of your suitcase, your hand catches on something sewn into the lining. Curious, you run your fingers back and forth over it a couple of times. Eventually you realize the entire back wall of the suitcase itself (or the "bottom" if it's laid on its back) is actually just a large storage pocket.

"Would've been nice to know about this at the convention," you mutter, reaching your hand inside to see if anything's in the pouch.

Sure enough, after rummaging around, you retrieve a thin manila envelope, one of those old-fashioned types that seals shut with a piece of string. You toss the cleaning cloth aside, your previous task all but forgotten as you recline in your seat to examine this new find. Wherever it's from, it doesn't look terribly familiar. You're not even sure you've seen it before.

Come to think of it, did you get this suitcase used? It could be something left behind, unnoticed by the previous owner. You've had this thing for as long as you can remember -- long before you moved into the complex, anyway. Flipping the envelope over, it doesn't seem to be marked or stamped on either side, unless you count the lovely decorative coffee ring adorning the back. Untying the envelope, you tip it upside down and shake its contents loose onto the table.

A bundle of newspaper clippings and other small scraps held together with a paperclip slides out of the envelope, landing on the table with a dull plop. Picking the stack up with interest, you pull the paperclip off and begin to skim the first article in the pile. As soon as you do, however, you can practically feel the color draining from your face.

Your breakfast instantly comes surging up your throat, and it's all you can do to keep from projectile vomiting all over the living room carpet. Next thing you know, you're hunched over your open suitcase, hacking and gagging uncontrollably. You spend the next few minutes evacuating the contents of your stomach before your body *finally* decides it's had enough; gasping for breath, you squeamishly close the lid of your bag, zipping it shut and dragging it over to the front door to be disposed of in the dumpster outside.

Looks like you'll be getting a new one sooner than you thought.

You barely blink and find yourself in the kitchen, splashing your face with cold water. Your veins are pumping ice and your shirt clings wetly to your back. Everything's clammy and gross. Sweat's pouring down your face. Only after a long moment spent clutching the edge of the sink do you finally turn back to the living room, burning curiosity overcoming your fear.

You have to know. You have to be sure.

You stumble back to the living room to re-examine your terrible discovery. At a glance, it's just an innocuous classified ad from a local paper, but the alarmingly familiar face in the picture proves it's anything but another mundane job listing. A stocky, husky bear with sunken, moody eyes and a false smile stares back at you. His head's graced with a classy top hat and his chest is adorned with a black ribbon bowtie, evoking the image of a circus ringleader or perhaps a master of ceremonies.

Even though the likeness in the photo is irrevocably Fred's, there are too many tells betraying its robotic nature: uniformly-sized fake plastic teeth; bolts holding his hinged jaw onto his head; exposed wires and metal framework visible in his arms from where the costume's fake fur doesn't quite cover everything underneath. His eyes might be plastic and lifeless, but there's something deeper in them too. This thing's more than just a puppet on a stage.

While it's hard to make all of the fine details out in the grainy photo, there's no mistaking it: this is the mechanical, "animatronic" version of Fred Fazbear you saw in your hallucinations at the apartment directly below where you sit right now. And if you somehow had any remaining doubt as to the identity of this character, his name is printed just above his leering face.



### Help Wanted

Freddy Fazbear's Pizza

Reeling, you slump back in your seat, the scrap of paper trembling in your convulsing hand like a leaf in the wind. Fazbear's Pizza -- there's that godforsaken name again. You remember the dream you had the night of your huge meltdown last month; the one in which you were stalked through a dilapidated restaurant by relentless killers clad in moth-eaten fake fur. You remember the dead-eyed glares and oversized animal costume heads, the sounds of motors whirring juxtaposed against raspy gurgling, the fight to keep track of everything on a faulty CCTV feed. You'd just about managed to bury that nightmare, and yet now, you're holding tangible proof that it wasn't a nightmare at all.

Well, not only, anyway. But if it wasn't all just a dream, what *was* it?

Forcing yourself to tear your gaze from the want ad, you set it aside on your armrest for now to look at the next item in the stack: a large, glossy color photo. It appears to be a group shot of several colorful mascot characters -- and notably, even some human employees -- all assembled around a large party table. At the seat of honor in the middle of the table is the same robotic Fred Fazbear you saw in the want ad, his arms outstretched towards the camera. You're not sure whether he's trying to hug or strangle the cameraman.

"What's the meaning of this?"

You nearly jump out of your chair to see Faz hovering over you, still dressed in his silk nightclothes and robe. When the hell did he get here?! You'd forgotten how silently he can move, *especially* given his massive build and condition. The want ad dangles limply from one of his paws, but right now, he's fixated on the photos in your hands. Even though most of his lower mouth is bandaged, it's plain from what you can see of his face that he's confused and unnerved.

"I asked you a question," he drones, one finger to his voicebox for emphasis.

You struggle for words, for something to say in response. Some insightful assessment or commentary, but all you can manage is a pained whimper.

"I don't know."

He casts a hesitant eye over you, gently (but firmly) plucking the group picture from your hand and raising it to his face. Holding it in his own shaky grasp, Faz scrutinizes it for a long, silent moment. You can hear his teeth gritting as his consternation builds. After what feels like an eternity of helplessly watching him, he abruptly lets the photo and the newspaper clipping flutter to the floor. Without a word, he turns on his heel and slogs out of the room, clearly unable -- or unwilling -- to process the shock of this newest revelation.

Somehow, you don't blame him at all.

Looking down at your hands, you realize you've been folding the same pair of jeans for the last five minutes. Side-eyeing the clock in the kitchen, you're shocked to realize it's been almost an hour since Faz abruptly left. Shortly afterward, your brain must've joined him in checking out, leaving your body to kind of run through the motions on its own. With a troubled sigh, you gather up what you've folded so far to store in your duffel bag before beginning your next load of laundry.

Returning to the living room, you set about collecting the photos and clippings from the floor, spreading them out onto the coffee table. You're still not sure what to make of any of this. It's screwed-up and mindblowing, sure, but it's also *tangible proof* that you haven't lost your sanity. Even though you're now a stranger in a strange land, you really *are* still a human and not a delusional, hairless ape. It wasn't that long ago that you'd almost stopped believing it, yourself. Your torments and your tormentors are (or at least *were*) real. All you need now is a picture of yourself shaking hands with Goldie and you'd have a pretty damn convincing "get out of asylum free" card right here. Everything in front of you lays it all out plain as day; vindication in the form of polaroids and newsprint.

The others are going to have to see this. Especially now that Faz knows, there's no sense in keeping it bottled up. In spite of the overwhelming emotion you're feeling, you allow a smile to creep across your lips as you imagine Bonbon's reaction. A real, live human, right in front of her! Everything she's ever wanted, right? What was it she told that hen at the convention about "living the dream"? Man, if only she knew!

Sure, it'd probably take some getting used to for the others -- some of them have voiced their disdain for humans, like the conversation you had with Peanut a while back. You can't blame them; all they've got to go on are bizarrely inaccurate fictional versions and murderous "humanimatronic" mascots. Even so, surely they *must* know there's a difference between the Jeremy Human characters and you. After all, *you've* been able to tell the difference between the robot facsimiles in these pictures and the friends you've made here.

...well, most of the time, anyway.

Still, what a find! You turn your attention back to the large group photo. Faz's earlier interruption prevented you from really examining it closely, but now you can definitely see a few parallels. For one thing, Fred's still a man of strong, commanding presence no matter where (or what) he is. A robot hen that resembles Chichi stands at his left side. Nestled in her wings in front of her chest is a silver platter bearing a fake plastic cupcake. It's brown with pink "icing" and googly eyes; the resemblance to the cupcake the real Chichi served you the night you met her is uncanny. To Fred's right is a tall, slender violet rabbit that can only be Beanie, considering the robot's rail-thin frame and general demeanor. Interestingly, clutched in her hands is a large prop electric guitar.

You idly find yourself wondering if the real Beanie plays. Might be something to ask her sometime.

As you allow your eyes to wander the picture, you notice that in the far right corner of the party room is a large, circular elevated stage; a curtain made of vibrant purple star-patterned fabric enshrouds the platform. Something hazily pricks at the back of your mind. You're pretty sure you remember seeing something like that in your nightmare. Come to think of it, doesn't Haddock have a blanket with a similar print?

Peeking out from between the fabric flaps is a grumpy-looking robot in disrepair that can't be anyone other than Rackham. Even here, he's still a surly piece of work. Some things never change, huh. Below his feet is a sign announcing that the attraction he's at (or maybe *he's* the attraction?) is "out of order".

Thinking about it, that's an extremely fitting way to describe everything you're seeing: out of order. Everything's *existent*, but not necessarily *correct*.

At first look they're all smiles, but it's obvious something's wrong with these characters. Uncanny resemblances aside, these aren't the friends you've come to know and love. Sure, you already knew

that much from your nightmares, but even in these pictures, there's something wrong. Their fake eyes are open a little too wide, their teeth too polished. Dark red splotches of what you're hoping is pizza sauce mottle the fabric of their costumes. "Beanie's" fingers are closer to razor-tipped claws, clutching protectively at her guitar; likewise, "Chichi's" digits don't resemble feathers so much as knives or blades. And at the center, "Freddy Fazbear" doesn't just look grumpy -- he looks *empty*, as if whatever spark of life that drives the Fred Fazbear you know is missing entirely from his duplicate, leaving just a crotchety shell of an oversized teddy bear forcing a smile for the camera. Even the "Rackham" in the far corner looks miserable and jealous, forced to watch from the sidelines while everyone else has their time in the spotlight.

As for the humans in the photo, they're all presumably employees of the pizzeria, as they're wearing matching purple work uniforms embroidered with the "Freddy Fazbear's Pizza" logo. There's a diverse array of your own species represented, but beyond any of the usual attributes that humans divide themselves by, the one thing that especially seems to bind this group together is that none of them really look like they have any desire to be part of the picture.

Or part of the restaurant.

Though the walls are painted brightly and decorated with colorful posters, there's a generally grim aura over this entire scene. Like some innate sense of melancholy that seems to reach through to you beyond time and space. Unlike the popular-but-mismanaged Jeremy Human's, you can't really imagine *anyone* wanting to come to this restaurant, a sentiment that seems to be echoed by the general lack of visible customers.

No, wait. Not just customers. *Children*. The one element you'd expect a place like this to have in *abundance*, and yet -- where are the kids? There are only a few human children present in the background of the photo.

Why?

Why wouldn't kids want to come to a kids' restaurant? Hell, even *Jeremy's* might be a deathtrap, but at least that place seemed to be making mad bank when you stopped by in the afternoon. Parents and kids alike were lined up out the door to get in, and there were hardly any seats available in the dining hall. Fazbear's Pizza, on the other hand, looks like it's teetering on the brink of closure.

That's it. *That's* what's so wrong about this whole thing. Everyone gathered, from the humans to the mascots, looks like they're barely hanging on.

No wonder they appear so miserable.

The sound of floorboards creaking interrupts your train of thought; this time, for whatever reason, Faz hasn't masked his presence as he approaches. He dips his head at you as he walks over to the living room, collapsing in the chair directly next to yours.

"Sorry," he rasps, not bothering with the electrolarynx this time. "I... needed a moment."

"Believe me, if anyone understands, it's me."

You place a hand on his shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze. He gestures for you to pass the photo to him. You do so, and he gives you an appreciative nod as he reclines in his chair, gently tracing the edge of the photo with an absent finger as he studies it.

"Start from the top," Faz says at length. "These pictures. What do they mean? I want to know *everything*."

"Me too, Faz, but I know about as much as you do," you answer earnestly, massaging your smarting chest. "I'd just found them in my bag when you came in earlier."

"You're kidding." He insistently raps the photo with a knuckle as if doing so will somehow jog your memory. "You have *no idea* what these are."

"Not a clue. I wish I did, but..." You shrug. "It's like trying to see through fog, Faz. None of this is ringing a bell with me."

His brow furrows, but to your relief he drops the subject, choosing not to press you any further. As bizarre and reality-shaking of a revelation as this is for you to see, you can't really wrap your mind around what Faz must be going through.

"So... this is your home," he whispers after a long while.

Unsure of what to say, you nod. And yet, it doesn't at all feel familiar or comfortable, like a home should.

"And you really have no idea how you got from there... to *here*?"

He gauges your face with interest, but again, you simply shake your head without a word.

"These people, like you..." He gestures to the employees in the photo gathered near the animatronics. "Either you're contagious, or... they're humans. *You're* a human."

"Yeah, Faz," you laugh unsteadily, running a hand through your hair. "Bit different from the cartoons, aren't we?"

"Just a bit," he replies dryly.

Having fought so long to hide it, it feels good to confide in someone, even if Faz is the *last* person you'd have expected to tell. You'd half-assedly tried once before with Bonbon on a whim, just to see her reaction, and of course she didn't bite then. Over time, you've come to appreciate the fact that she didn't, considering how much trouble it could've caused you. Still, in the back of your mind, there's always been the temptation to let *someone* know.

Faz points to a person tucked away in the far corner of the room while giving you an inquisitive look. Leaning over his shoulder, your eyes widen -- you have no idea how you missed it, but sure as day, there you are in the thick of things. You've got a badge pinned to your work shirt and a peaked cap that reads "SEC" on your head.

"H-ha, look at that ugly mug." You try to laugh, but you're stuck in a choke, and the weak smile on your face gives out completely. "God, I don't even remember this."

To your surprise, though, Faz simply takes it in stride, gesturing to the animatronics.

"This... this is what bothers me the most," Faz remarks, leaning forward far enough to pick the want ad up off the table. Comparing it side-by-side to the group picture, he turns to you. "This ad has *his* name -- so this is supposed to be Fred Fazbear? The *same* Fred Fazbear from...?"

"I think so, yes," you admit.



"And... Bonita?"

"Looks like her, yeah," you respond as he points to the synthetic version of Beanie.

"So why are they... like this? Why are all of the normal people animatronics, but the humans aren't?" he ponders. You can't help but feel slightly jarred by such casual usage of "normal people" -- and perhaps quickly realizing his error, Faz nods apologetically to you. "Sorry. Thinking out loud. This must be hard for you."

"That's all right," you respond shakily.

He nods, hovering his index finger over the robotic hen.

"...Chiclet?" he asks, seemingly uncertain.

"Nnnnooo, I think that's Chichi."

"Ah. Of course." He taps the cupcake in realization. "Because she's a baker."

"Also because they look alike...?"

"Hhn... no, don't see it," he muses, causing you to nearly laugh out loud. With a shake of his head, Faz leans forward, picking up another photo from the table. "There's Bonnie."

You hadn't even really gotten to this one, but sure enough, against an unfamiliar checkerboard wall covered in children's drawings and pinned newspaper articles, there stands a smiling robot that *does* vaguely resemble Bonworth. He's got the same buck teeth, the same square-tipped ears -- even

thick, dark circles under his eyes. Though upon closer inspection, it just looks like the costume's in poor condition.

"Sure, I can see it," you agree.

"And this is Bonbon," Faz says, pointing to a portrait poster on the wall next to him, where a pair of glossy, plastic-coated animatronic animals pose next to each other. "Who's next to her, though? Is that Chiclet?"

"No, I think that's Goose. Chiclet's much taller and her, y'know... beak."

Faz scoffs, shaking his head. "I don't at all comprehend any of this, Mike," he groans wearily. "Some bizarre, alien world where everyone's a robot... mechanical people, exactly like us? My friends? My neighbors? Is there a robot like *me* there, too?"

"Well, no, they're not *exactly* like you," you argue. "These guys were really unhinged, Faz."

"You do remember something, then?" he asks with a hopeful tilt of his head.

"Sort of. I had a dream the night of my, uh..." You stomp your foot twice on the floor, and he seems to take your meaning. "In it, I was being chased by these guys. And they were... honestly, they were awful. **Nothing** like any of you. They wanted to kill me. Faz, if you don't believe anything else I say, believe this -- whatever semblance there is, it's skin-deep."

"So they're... what, exactly? Evil?"

"I don't know if they were 'evil' or not, but they acted every bit as horrible as Jeremy Human and Fritzine."

Faz scratches his throat, going back to the first group photo again. "Sounds like evil to me."

"Are robots even capable of morality?" you ask.

"No, I mean--"

Faz rasps all of a sudden, hoarsely sucking wind and stiffening in his seat.

**"Fritzine."**

You jolt at his point-blank declaration, glancing around the room in a panic before turning back to Faz -- his finger's on one of the human employees in the crowd photo. In amongst the other workers is a curvy, heavyset lady with pale freckled skin and a head of thick, wavy ginger hair. She's wearing overalls and a bulky pair of industrial goggles, a toolbox cradled in her arms. You can't deny she *does* bear a striking resemblance to the robotic handywoman.

Though you can't read her nametag in the grainy photo, you don't need to.

"Holy shit. *That's her!*"

"Has to be," Faz says. "But if she's here..."

There's a sudden pause as the two of you warily glance at each other. In the photo, Fritzine is standing directly next to *you*.

"Mike..." he whispers, voice hoarse.

"*Schmidt*," you mumble under your breath. You already know where he's going with this. "My last name... it's Schmidt."

Setting the photos aside, Faz reaches into the pocket of his bathrobe and produces a worn, creased postcard bearing the likenesses of the Jeremy Human's animatronics. Having become intimately acquainted with the things during your various trips to the restaurant, you recognize Jeremy and Fritzine standing next to each other at their show stage -- though the third robot that's with them is one you'd only seen brief glimpses of: a bright green humanoid with a square-shaped jaw and a policeman's hat.

Undoubtedly, this is the missing "Safety Schmidt" character that you briefly impersonated. You only caught a passing glance on the security monitor the morning you went in after Beanie, but it's no wonder Fritzine was so fooled by you -- it seems now it was more than just a case of mistaken identity.

"Uncanny," Faz murmurs, holding the postcard next to your face. Your eyes widen as you look at it.

"Wait, are you serious?" you sputter. "Is that -- we don't even look anything alike!"

"Mike. Come on."

"Faz, *no*," you argue. "There's not-- he doesn't --"

"He even has your hat."

Grumbling, you take the postcard from him, staring furiously at the photo. The thought that there's now a fake "you" running around out there -- somewhere, wherever the hell it's gotten off to -- it's enough to light you up. You're still coming to grips with the fact that there really *are* fake copies of your friends, and now you're finding out that the "*Schmidt*" they've been referring to all this time didn't just *happen* to share your name, he was supposed to *be* you?

"What sort of sick-in-the-head asshole would make a robot copy of Mike Schmidt? What could they possibly get out of it?!" you blurt, your temper flaring. "And if here's where the 'real' Fred and Bonworth are from, and where *I'm* from had the fakes -- then shit, Faz! What does that mean for me?! Am I just some shadow of... of some damn pizzeria *puppet*? Some freaking piece of shit *prop*?!"

Goose's words from the breakfast table about working around "real humans" every day return to the forefront of your mind. At this point, could you even know "real" from "fake"?

"Mike, you think I'm happy about any of this? **Believe me.** It's fascinating, but also **horrifying**," Faz rumbles, finally resorting to his electrolarynx. "Imagine how you're feeling right now, knowing there's something out there that **looks** just like you, **talks** just like you. Now imagine how the others would feel seeing these pictures."

He waves the group photo of Fazbear's Pizza in your face, and you stop cold -- that's not even an angle you'd considered.

Fred's already suffering from emotional trauma that's caused him all kinds of mental problems. No telling what kind of damage this would do to him. At least he's otherwise high-functioning at the

moment. Bonworth would be appalled, to say *nothing* of Beanie. After everything she's been through, this would absolutely break her. You've at least had *some* forewarning in the form of your dreams, but what if all of them had to come to grips with the fact that they had some kind of animatronic body double out there? There's no way Bonnibel would be able to process the news, it'd traumatize her. She'd probably go into an immediate panic attack.

One by one you run through the faces of your friends, roommates, and companions. Chiclet, Rackham, Peanut, Chichi -- *none* of them would likely handle this well at all. At the very best, they *might* be amused, if not a little repulsed. At worst, you could send any one of them potentially off the brink of madness.

You look up at Faz, and for the first time in this entire conversation, you take note of just how *troubled* he looks -- he's handled the news with exceptional grace, but this'll probably haunt him for years.

"They -- no, you're right. I can't," you mutter, shaking your head. "They can't know. They can't *ever* know. I'm probably going to have trouble sleeping, knowing that I'm not the 'real' Safety Schmidt. I couldn't possibly inflict that on anybody else."

No matter how vindicated you'd feel.

Faz's eyes narrow, and for a moment you catch a glimpse of the same irate, terrifying bear that caused you to limp out of his home the night you went off in this very living room. But as you lock onto his gaze, you realize that he's angry -- but not with you.

"And what about Fritzine?" Faz wonders aloud.

"What *about* her?" you grumble. "What's she got to do with anything?!"

"No, no. *Your* Fritzine. The real one, the *human* one." He looks you square in the eye. "If you're 'Schmidt', but you're good, then -- was the real Fritzine good, too? Was there a Jeremy Human in your world who was kind to you?"

Deflating, you drop your shoulders. "I... I can't remember. I wish I could. I know I must have worked with her at some point, but it's -- it's blurry."

"Nothing?" He sounds oddly hopeful.

"I have to believe she wasn't like *this*." Pointing to the postcard with the trio of robots, you wince. "She wasn't like *that*."

"And you said that those animatronics were nothing like any of us."

"Absolutely not," you insist. "I've had my disagreements here, but nobody here's tried to *kill* me. Yet."

"Then I don't see why you're so worried about what's 'real' and what's 'fake'."

"What the hell, Faz." You glare at him as your stomach flops. "I just had a *bomb* dropped on me -- damn it, we *both* did. This is some... some existential *shit* I hadn't even considered before today."

"Mike, look. I *worked* with this thing," he wheezes, pinching the Jeremy's postcard between his thumb and forefinger. "I spent *days* in a row in the same room with it, hours and hours watching it

on my screens at night. I am more familiar with him than I am with you. I've known him for far longer."

You flinch as he snaps his fist shut around the postcard in one fluid motion, crushing it in his powerful grip.

"And without a doubt, you are more **real** than he could ever be," Faz says gently. "You're not a living version of **him**. He's a fake version of **you**."

Faz opens his immense fist, staring solemnly at the paper ball in his scarred, blistered paw.

*"He's the shadow."*

"Faz..."

"You're right, Mike. Nobody can know about any of this." He exhales heavily, tossing the crumpled-up card onto the coffee table. "I give you my word it stays between us, if you do the same."

You nod, standing up from your chair. "No, yeah -- absolutely. I refuse to impose this on anyone else." Gathering up the photos and newspaper clippings from the table, you stuff them back into the manila envelope. "You have a paper shredder around here, Faz?"

Straining a bit under his own discomfort, he forces himself from his chair and onto his feet. "I actually have a better idea. Don't suppose you've eaten breakfast?"

"I did, but, uh, it didn't stick," you reply, tossing a sheepish glance to the front door. "I think I've got my appetite back."

"There's a courtyard between Building 9 and Building 10," Faz says as he treads toward the kitchen. "I'll meet you out there in a few minutes. I just need to retrieve a couple of things."

"Need any help carrying anything?" you ask.

"Oh, I think I can manage a few extra pounds. You're already carrying enough of a burden as it is."

Sighing, you look down at the envelope. Somehow, you can't argue with that.

The "courtyard" as Faz refers to it is really closer to a small park; there are a few firepits and barbecue grills set up outside along with some patio furniture. Even a swingset for the kids, though it looks like it's been a while since any of it has seen use, judging by the thin layers of rust and dirt.

As Faz descends the staircase, he's carrying a grocery bag in one paw and what looks like a small bag of charcoal in the other. It's suddenly obvious what he intends to do with the envelope.

"Giving new meaning to the term 'cooking the books,'" you reply as he approaches you, having discarded his nightclothes for his usual day attire plus a thick winter coat.

"Maybe not *that* new." Faz motions for you to remove the cover from one of the grills. "Layer some of this charcoal inside, would you?"

You do as instructed while Faz unscrews a can of lighter fluid. Once you're finished, he douses the coals with the lighter fluid before turning to his grocery bag.

"Our recent seafood dinner inspired me. I had Chica stop by the store and pick these up for me, which I've been marinating since last night," he explains, pulling out a plastic container full of what appear to be salmon fillets. Along with the fish, he has a small bundle of asparagus. "I was going to oven-bake it, but there's *nothing* like grilled salmon and asparagus. After you taste some, I'm certain you'll agree."

"A December barbecue for breakfast," you reply with a grin and a shake of your head. "I love it."

"If you'll do the honors," he says, handing you a packet of matches. "Careful, though. Mind the flare-up."

Striking a match, you toss it inside, watching in satisfaction as the coals begin to blaze. As you raise the envelope to throw it onto the fire, Faz places a wary paw on your shoulder.

"Mike."

Looking up at him, you nod.

"Yeah, Faz?"

"Point of no return." A foggy mist erupts from his nostrils as he sharply exhales, pondering his words.

"What do you mean?"

"You're going to be carrying this burden with you from now on. That may very well be your last link to... wherever it is you came from. Your past. Throw that envelope in the fire, and it's gone forever." Faz sets the food on a nearby table, then thrusts his paws into his pockets. "You can't tell anyone. In the back of your mind this'll always be there. You'll always know about this other place. It'd be enough to drive someone mad -- and those photos are the only proof of it all."

You nod quietly. He turns his head, gazing off into the distance. The winter wind ruffles his fur, playing at the flaps of his coat's collar.

"Maybe there's still a way. I don't know how you got here, but however you did, maybe you can still go back. Be around your own people, your family. I know this is probably a bad time to be bringing this up, Mike, but... ask yourself, will you miss it?"

"Miss what?" you ask bluntly.

"Your home."

"Faz, this *is* my home," you reply without a moment's hesitation, pointedly tossing the envelope into the fire.

Pulling his facial wrappings loose, his tight lips stretch into a smile. "Well, then. Welcome home."

"Thanks, Faz. It's good to be here." You match his smile with one of your own. "Now -- let's have us some salmon."

"Let's," he agrees, opening the container of fish. "Mmmm. These will be wonderful."

"You've been talking it up, so it must be good, right?"

"The best. I assure you."

The sound of footsteps crunching along the rock salt on the ground causes you to look up. To your surprise, a tall, familiar hen is jogging toward you with a grin, wrapped up in a track suit and a thick, puffy hooded jacket.

"You boys are having a barbecue and you didn't invite me?" Chiclet playfully chides, rubbing her wings together. "And hey, you were able to get Faz out of hibernation for it! What's the occasion, boys?"

The first day of the rest of your life, for one. You exchange a glance with Faz, who extends his paw to hers for a shake.

"Very nice to see you, Ms. Chiclet. Common misconception, though -- bears don't truly hibernate," he explains.

"Oh, I know you guys don't, it's just a metaphor," Chiclet laughs as she pushes aside his paw and wraps him in a careful hug. Turning to the grill, her eyebrows raise. "Holy shit, is this salmon? I want a bite."

"By all means. There's plenty," Faz says, giving you a wink. "Salmon's a wonderful fish -- very healthy and nutritious, too. Did you know all Atlantic salmon sold in the country are farm-raised?"

"No kidding! I take it you're an enthusiast?" she asks.

Faz nods authoritatively. "And then some."

"Well then, thank you for sharing your bounty with us! I'm still pretty hungry since *someone* ate my strawberries this morning. Something about yours not being available, Mike," she comments. "By the way, hi. Love the mohawk -- very rebellious."

"You know me, ever the rebel without a cause," you smirk. "How're things back home, Chica?"

"Pretty good," she grins, curiously running her feathers through your hair. "Oh man, have I got a story for you two -- you'll never guess what Bonnie pulled this morning."

"Bonnie... 'Bonnibel'?" Faz inquires. "I don't believe we've met."

"*Whaaat?* You still haven't met Bonnie yet? Oh, that's no good!" Chiclet gasps, wings on her hips. "You'd love her, Faz -- she's cute as a button. How about you come over for breakfast some time this week and I'll introduce you to everyone?"

"I think I'd like that a lot, actually. I've heard Frederick is quite the cook."

"Oh, he's amazing," she replies. "Okay, so..."

You stick your hands in your pockets to keep them warm, basking in the crisp morning sun and the smoky smell of grilling salmon. Faz smiles softly, listening to Chiclet's story unfold. Down the

courtyard, in the distance, you catch a glimpse of a window planter box. Even in this winter morning cold, the snapdragons are in full bloom.

It's going to be a good day.

#### Chapter End Notes

This chapter is followed by a special **MEGA Roommates Mini Chapter**, which we recommend you should read if you're following the story chronologically!

Before proceeding to the next chapter in the main series, [click here for the next part, Mega Mini 9: Who Invited This Clown?](#)

# Gathering

## Chapter Summary

Home at last, Mike sets his sights on dinner and a movie at an impromptu winter gathering with his friends.

## Chapter Notes

There's a special *Mega "Mini"* chapter between this one and the last! If you haven't read the Mini, *Who Invited This Clown?*, you can find it [here](#).



Everyone has regrets.

You're certainly no stranger to the concept. Ever since you signed your leasing agreement in Marion's office, and moved into this apartment complex back in November, you've found yourself at odds with your various roommates from time to time. Whether it was shoving Bonworth over in the parking lot, your trauma-induced meltdown at Fred's, or the number of confrontations you've had (and only quite recently put to bed) with Mangle about privacy -- you've both said *and* done things that you desperately wish you could take back.

Your decision to sever ties with your old world and fully commit to making a go of it here is *not* something you regret.

That's not to say there aren't aspects of your old life you'll miss. There are plenty of favorite movies you'd love to watch again (this is usually the time of year you'd be marathoning Hitchcock), or

tastes and flavors that you can't replicate here (you still haven't found a suitable alternative to Dr. Pepper). And while you're indulging in wishful thinking, some shoes that aren't "one-size-fits-some" would be nice.

Still, pining over what you once had is about as productive as Bonworth sitting around and wishing he still had his legs. And even if there was a way back, no amount of cinema, soda, or footwear would be enough to get you to cross the threshold again.

And not solely because those *monsters* would be waiting for you on the other side of the looking-glass.

More than anything else, you're glad to return to *normalcy*. The last few weeks have been so hectic, you're starting to realize how much you've missed "mellow". A life-or-death rescue mission. Heartstopping ghost visitations. Even something as seemingly benign as HumieCon was still exhausting. All you want right now is to put your feet up, enjoy a cozy winter with your friends, and *mend*.

Speaking of mending, it's right around time for another round of pain pills. After medicating yourself, you finish packing up the last of your laundry into clean plastic grocery bags. Maybe later you can talk someone into accompanying you on a shopping trip, since you still need a new suitcase to store everything in. For now, you'll make do with what you have.

Tying the bags off neatly, you layer them inside a cardboard box to take back to Bonbon's when you leave later tonight. Originally, you'd swung by Bonworth's to take care of your laundry, but since he mentioned wanting to catch up with you when he got home, you've decided to stay for dinner and visit a while.

As you load your clothes up by the front door, you hear a light pitter-pattering of footsteps behind you. Seems Haddock's up for the afternoon, trotting into the common area with a spring in his step.

"At that point, it were pretty much smooth sailin' aaall th' way back t' port," he says with a wistful smile, wiping a tear from his eye as he wanders into the room. "Fourteen shillings a piece an' all th' rum we could carry in our hats. Fair wages, best an honest day's work would yield, lad."

"And a good afternoon to you too, sailor."

With his good paw, Haddock points to the kitchen window, inclining his entire frame towards it with an expectant look in his eye. His jaw flaps up and down a few times, but no words come out of his mouth. You follow his gaze, looking outside before turning back to him.

"The, uh -- the *weather*...?" you guess, eyebrow raised.

"Aye," he answers, twirling his hook around impatiently. "Tha' be wha', whaaat I said. Favorable skies today?"

"I'd say so, yeah. Cold, but no snow yet." Your mind wanders back to the first time you met Haddock when he was with Bonbon, and it suddenly dawns on you that he's probably got an ulterior motive for inquiring. "Oh! You feel like going for a walk?"

"Rrrrrriiiight," he slurs, patting his chest with his hook. "The breeze -- she seems strong and th' waters're calm. Calm, calm, best time for settin' out, if, if our *miiidshipmaaan*'s word-wa-words can be trusted."

Midshipman?

You stop and rack your brain for a moment, trying to remember everyone's established "title" in his imaginary pirate crew. Bonworth's the "bosun", Cheeky's the "wench", and if he's insistent that Faz is the "captain"...

"Who, uh, who's the 'midshipman' again?" you ask as he stumbles past you into the kitchen.

"Congratulations on movin' up a rank," he says blithely, ferreting around in one of the drawers for his leash and harness before tossing it to you. "Wear it with pride, lad."

You hope he's referring to the title and not the leash, otherwise this is going to get real awkward, real fast.

With an inward smile, you begin buckling the harness on over his shirt, reminding yourself that it's only for his safety. You didn't think much about it at first, but upon reflection it's a little awkward walking a grown man -- or fox -- like he's the family dog.

"Well, what do you say we head on out 'to port' and stretch our legs for a little while, then come back and grab some dinner?" you ask, stooping to hook the leash onto his harness.

"Victuals, vittles... arr, we have visual, land ho," he says, grin widening. "Can the captain an' the rest o' the crew be expected in th' mess hall?"

You cast a glance over to a lightly dozing Faz, who's resting in his chair with a thick wool blanket draped over his shoulders. He hasn't bothered to rewrap his mouth since the salmon cookout you had this morning. To your surprise, he even has something resembling a contented smile stretched across his thin lips. While Cheeky's not up and around yet, you know from experience that she can be a late riser. As soon as the dinner bell sounds, you imagine she'll be there with bells on, ready to snap off her trademark catchphrase.

"You know, something tells me they're not going to miss out," you reply, holding the door open for him.

As soon as the two of you are out of the apartment, it quickly becomes obvious *why* Haddock needs a leash: he's *very* easily distracted. His movements are like those old motorized "squiggle pen" toys you and your classmates used to doodle with in middle school. You're not even sure Haddock knows what a straight line *is*. He must be having a hell of an up day, because he's scurrying around from thing to thing, singing sea shanties and carrying on conversations with telephone poles.

The hardest part of walking with him is his inconsistency. Every now and again, he'll stop abruptly, almost as if his batteries have run out. He'll lose focus for minutes at a time, gazing at the clouds or slumping down onto the concrete. And then, out of nowhere, something will grab his attention and light a spark anew in him. It's proving difficult to keep him out of the street, let alone on the sidewalk.

No wonder Bonbon was recruited to walk him: she's the only one with enough energy to keep up!

By the time you've made it to the front of the complex, it's been half an hour already, and your feet are starting to drag. So much for a leisurely walk. This has been more like a breakneck game of red

light/green light.

"Hey, guys!"

Looking up from the park bench you're both seated at (well, you're sitting; Haddock's just kind of standing on the bench, pantomiming steering a ship's big wheel), you catch sight of Bonbon herself walking up to you with a grin on her face. She's already changed out of her work uniform and into her street clothes. Curiously, her ears are hanging down, rather than standing up. No earband today, it seems. Haddock silently gives her the faintest of nods, refusing to even make eye contact as he continues diligently steering the bench.

"Hey, Bonbon," you pant as she squeezes between you and Haddock to sit down. "How was work?"

"Ugh. Lame. I had to clean out the ball pit today, and boy, *that* was no fun. They wouldn't even let me splash around in it after I was finished," she groans. You raise an eyebrow only for her to break out laughing. "Kidding, Mike, I'm not *that* immature."

"I dunno," you reply teasingly. "You eat toaster pastries and watch cartoons while wearing footie pajamas, Bonbon."

"You say that like it's a bad thing," she replies smugly. "Footie pajamas are where it's *at*, Mike. It's like, four million degrees below freezing out here. *Of course* I'm gonna wear warm jammies in the winter."

"I'll admit, you make a convincing argument."

"So hey, I noticed you left me a 'present'," Bonbon says, sticking her tongue out. "Thanks for that, by the way. I *really* needed a neon pink and lime Balloon Boy figure in my life."

"Oh, I'm all too happy to oblige."

"Pfft! Joke's on you, I didn't want that eyesore either! I already listed him for trade on my SkinAffinity journal." She brushes her ears back before pulling out her phone. "Maybe someone out there'll swap it for a character that *doesn't* suck, like that ballerina girl from the new episode."

"Yeah, no kidding. When does the next *Legend of Bob* air?"

"It's on a midwinter hiatus right now, so it'll be a few weeks," she says, smiling coyly at you. "I'm surprised you're asking! Afraid you'll miss a minute of the action?"

"I'm not big on cliffhangers, is all," you cough, feigning disinterest.

"Sure." Bonbon rubs Haddock's headfur affectionately, flashing him a buck-toothed grin. "So hey, what're you up to today, Foxy?"

"Gotta get this precious cargo delivered," he says with no trace of mirth in his tone, giving the imaginary wheel a spin. "Red sky at night, red sky at mornin'."

"Ahhh," Bonbon says, nodding sagely as if this is the most sensible thing in the world. "Drive safe then, buddy."

"Aye, that be the plan."

"Speaking of plans, you got any for dinner, Bonbon?" you interject. "I was thinking I might stick around Bonworth's place since they let me use their laundry room today. You wanna join us?"

"Sure, I'm in! You think anybody'll mind if I invite Beanie, too?" she asks, already tapping out a text message. "She seemed kinda mopey when she had to head home after the 'con.'"

"I don't blame her." You shudder a little, imagining what she has to go through on a routine basis with Goldie sightings. "Yeah, definitely invite her along. Maybe Chichi too? I know Bonworth and Cheeky really seemed to like that cake she helped me with. I'm sure they'd enjoy another dessert by someone who actually understands the art of baking."

The bunny arches a brow at you. "Did *Chichi* volunteer to bake, or are *you* volunteering her?"

You raise your hand in a serene gesture. "Look, trust me. I know it sounds like I'm making big plans on the behalf of others, but that chicken loves two things in this world: taking care of her friends, and cooking. And if she can kill two-- uh, if she can do both at once, she'll leap at the chance."

"Wow, look at *you*!" Bonbon shoots you a big buck-toothed smile to go with her teasing tone. "You turned out to be a real social butterfly, huh?"

"Ah, just give 'em a message," you wave her off, smirking. "And hey, if I'm wrong, then I'll cook everyone's dinner myself."

"All right, done and done," Bonbon finishes her text and pockets her phone before leaning into your shoulder. "So, Mike, I gotta say... I had a lot of fun at HumieCon. I'm sorry it was a bust for you, but -- thanks. For going with me."

"Well, I guess I had fun too. Thanks for inviting me."

"Same time next year?" she asks, staring up at you with hopeful eyes.

You make a show of considering it, but quickly cave. "All right, fine -- but only if you don't make me shave my head again."

"Wouldn't dream of it!"

A sudden twitching of his tail indicates that Haddock's ready to go again. He jumps off the bench, inadvertently pulling both you and Bonbon to your feet as well.

"Whoops. I guess we're shipping out," you comment to Bonbon as Haddock begins trying to tug you down the sidewalk. "You, uh, mind taking the reins? You're more experienced at this than I am."

"Sure," she chirps, taking the strap from you and settling into Haddock's natural walking pace -- which is to say, a dead run. "C'mon, sailor! Race you to that flagpole over there!"

You grin to yourself in a mix of amusement and relief as you watch the two of them take off, babbling excitedly to each other as they duck and weave their way through the apartment complex. To Bonbon's credit, she genuinely seems to enjoy spending time with him. If she's this good with someone like Haddock, she's probably got to be fantastic at dealing with kids. You idly wonder if

that's why she hasn't quit working at the pizzeria yet in spite of everything that's happened there -- maybe she gets more out of the job than just the meager paycheck.

Sucking in a lungful of the chilly winter air, you thrust your hands into your pockets as you leisurely follow Bonbon and Haddock.

It's good to be back home.

"Thanks for coming over to help out, everyone." Clapping your hands, you enthusiastically look around the kitchen. "All right, so anyone have any thoughts on what we should make for dinner?"

"I didn't realize this was going to be a brainstorming session," Beanie says, lolling out against the island with a yawn. "Any ideas, Chica?"

Chichi's in the process of checking the refrigerator and pantry for ingredients, a scowl on her normally pleasant face. "No, this isn't going to work," she huffs, rummaging around inside a cupboard. "I'm not going to be able to get *anything* done in here."

"Something wrong, Chichi?" you ask.

"I could walk downstairs and put together a four course meal in *half* the time it would take me to prepare something here." Chichi taps her wingtips together pensively. "This kitchen's not as equipped as I'd like. I'm missing half of the appliances I normally use."

"Huh." Beanie props her head up with both paws. "Can't say I saw this one coming."

"What do you mean?" Chichi asks, gently closing the cabinet doors and turning to look at her roommate.

"Oh, I assumed you'd rise to the challenge, Chica," Beanie says, a subtle grin creeping across her face. "You never struck me as a quitter."

"That's not what this is about," the hen replies, suddenly defiant. "I'm a *competition baker*; of course I'm not going to back down from a challenge. I like having the proper tools for the job, is all. I mean, this kitchen only has one oven!"

"I *know*, right? It's practically like living in a third-world country," Beanie whispers as she leans in close to Chichi, her voice taking on a conspiratorial edge. "What modern kitchen doesn't have at least two ovens?"

"Hey, no need to pressure her, Beanie. I've got a plan."

You pick the phone up off the counter and dial your apartment's number. After two rings, Bonnibel answers the phone with a sleepy lilt to her voice. Must've just woken up from her usual post-medication afternoon nap.

"Hello...?"

"Hi, Bonnie, it's Mike. Sorry to be a bother, but if Freddy isn't busy, could you have him come over to 93-B?"

"Sure." You can hear her audibly yawning on the other line, confirming your suspicion. "What do, um, what do you need him for?"

"We're trying to get dinner for a big group sorted out, and we'd brought in Chichi, but she doesn't seem up to the task."

"What? No! Don't tell them that! No, that's not what I meant at all!" Chichi protests as you twirl the phone cord around your fingers, biting your lower lip to keep from laughing. Beanie and Bonbon, on the other hand, are making no such effort to hide their amusement at her frustration.

"No problem, Mike! He's on his way," Bonnibel says, perking up a bit. "Anything else?"

"That's all for now. Thanks, Bon," you reply before hanging up. "There we go, problem solved. Frederick'll know what to do, he's an expert at this kind of stuff."

"Oh, I see how it is!" Chichi puts what's left of her wings on her hips indignantly. Her molting's really taking its toll on her feathers; pretty soon she'll be wearing less down than a Butterball turkey. "You people think I can't hack it, huh?"

"None of us said that at all," Beanie says. "Mike said you didn't *seem* up to the task, which is correct."

"Yeah. You seemed reluctant, so I called in some support," you add. "No shame in admitting you need help."

"I've had some of Frederick's cooking and it's amazing, even though his kitchen's nowhere near as nice as yours," Bonbon says as she drops down from the counter onto her feet. "I think you've gotten so spoiled to your fancy chef stuff that you've forgotten what it's like to cook without it."

"All right, **that's it!**" Chichi declares, poofing up as she storms over to the rack by the front door to hang up her coat. "I'll show you guys what I'm capable of!"

"I think we might've lit a fire under her," you stage-whisper, nudging a cackling Beanie.

"You're darn right you did! Bonnie, you and Bonbon run downstairs to my pantry, and fetch me some ingredients," Chichi barks, scribbling out a grocery list for the rabbits. "Mike, you're going to be my kitchen helper! Wash up!"

"What about Frederick?" you ask, hurriedly rinsing your hands in the sink as instructed. You feel like you're a doctor being ordered to scrub for surgical prep; you're not sure you've ever seen her quite this animated before.

"He can help too!" Chichi says with a determined look in her eyes. She wrestles a food processor out of the cabinet, slamming it down on the counter with a loud enough thump to startle Faz awake in the living room. "Now, let's get going!"

"Yes ma'am," a bewildered Faz rumbles through his electrolarynx, forcing himself out of his chair and to his feet. "...get going where?"

"Don't worry, Chief, she doesn't mean you," Beanie chuckles as she and Bonbon hastily scamper out the door.

It turns out Chichi can be quite bossy when she wants to be.

The sweet, timid little hen that helped you bake an "I'm sorry" cake a few weeks ago is nowhere to be found. In her place now is an excitable, feathery Gordon Ramsay -- clearly she's watched far too many cooking shows for her own good. Apparently, when she said you'd be her "kitchen helper", she really meant "assistant chef". You suppose you can't complain, since you *have* been wanting to get a little more culinary experience. Still, you're definitely wading outside your comfort zone this time.

"This is way more complicated than I'm used to, Chichi," you admit, dumping ingredients into the food processor. "I'm more of a pancakes kind of guy. Are you *sure* that Beef Wellington is something we can make in an apartment kitchen?"

"Mike, you don't have nearly enough shallots in there," she says in reply, laying out two sizable beef tenderloins atop a cutting board. "It's going to need more garlic, too! This takes a while to cook, so if we want it ready in time for dinner, you need to go faster!"

Faz and Haddock observe from a safe distance outside the kitchen, spectating the evening's dinner preparations with interest. While Bonbon and Beanie work hard on the side dishes, you and Chichi juggle preparations for the main course. Somehow, in all of this, she's even still finding time to mix ingredients for two separate desserts.

At some point, you become dimly aware of polite knocking at the front door. Taking a break from chopping vegetables, Bonbon bounds off to the entryway to let Frederick in. After greeting her, the towering powerhouse ("towerhouse"? You'll work on that one) of a bear hangs his greatcoat neatly by the front door before walking into the common area with his usual pleasant half-smile.

"Hello, neighbor," Faz rasps, tearing his attention away from the cooking circus to extend his paw to Frederick for a shake.

"Vous êtes le survivant?" Frederick jabbers back, gently wrapping him in a hug. "*Bonsoir à vous.* Vous avez l'air en meilleure santé que je ne m'y attendais. Ravi de vous rencontrer."

Faz gives you a wide-eyed stare as Frederick rubs his shoulders like he's just reunited with a long-lost friend.

"He's a good guy," you insist. "A bit peculiar, but aren't we all? Bonsoir, Freddy!"

"Bonsoir," Frederick says, moving past Faz to gingerly embrace you, kissing both of your cheeks. Thankfully, this time he omits the slaps.

"Okay, so Chichi, what should I be doing with this thing?" you ask as soon as he lets you go, fumbling with the controls on the food processor.

"Pulse it, then get all that going in a saucepan on medium heat with the butter and the oil like I told you earlier, Mike!" Chichi orders, tying off the beef in front of her with cooking twine. "I'm sorry, but I can't hold your hand through this one! Bonnie, why aren't you finished slicing the prosciutto yet? Don't you remember me showing you how to use the mandolin?"

"Sure don't!" Beanie says, passing Frederick some kind of complicated-looking slicing apparatus. "Cavalry's here, so I'm tagging out. You're on your own, guys."

"Ditto," Bonbon adds, using the opportunity to beat feet out of the kitchen along with Beanie.

Frederick wades in as they rush past, assessing the scene with his ever-present sense of calm. You watch him intently go through a very similar process Chichi did: peering in cupboards, examining appliances, and taking stock of his surroundings before coming to some internal conclusion. He wastes no time in rolling up his sleeves, muscling in beside you to get to work.

"All right, Frederick, well, since you're here, you can help me out. Could you open those cans on the counter behind me, please?" Chichi asks, handing him a can opener.

Frederick glances blankly at the tool before pushing it aside. Hefting a can of vegetables, he turns it over a couple of times, studying it. Then he grunts, straining forward and locking his shoulders down in one final motion before simply crushing it with his bare paws, popping the lid loose at the seams.

"That's... one way of doing it," you murmur in awe as he proceeds to make short, easy work of the remaining cans.

"Um, okay, now... Frederick, go ahead and--" Chichi looks up in horror as he twists open the containers of puff pastry, pulling it apart with his huge fingers. "Wait wait wait, what are you doing?! No, that's for dinner -- you can't eat that!"



"De la pâte feuilletée en boîte?" he replies, sniffing at it in disgust. "C'est une insulte à la bonne cuisine."

"Frederick! We need that for the meat! How else are you supposed to make Beef Wellington without puff pastry?!" Chichi insists, panic rising. "We don't have time to mess around!"

"Uh oh. Are we about to see a chef battle?" Bonbon says from her spot outside the kitchen next to Faz.

"For their sake I hope not, because I doubt either of them could stand up to her," Beanie replies. "Chica's scary when she's mad."

You shoot her a nervous look. Frederick just *demolished* several sealed metal cans with his *fingers*, and she *still* thinks Chichi's the dangerous one? You make a mental note to never get on the baker's bad side.

"Vous êtes pâtissière! C'est inacceptable!" Frederick says, teeth bared and eyes narrowed as he jabs an accusatory finger at the can of dough. It's rare seeing Frederick this emotional, this worked up over *anything*.

"Are you upset because it came out of a can? Believe me, *I am too!*" Chichi retorts, wings pressed to the sides of her head in alarm. "I simply don't have time to make it from scratch! Oh, Mike, get him to listen to reason, won't you?"

As one, Frederick and Chichi both look to you for interpretation. You blink, not having expected that *you'd* have to play the go-between. You really wish Mangle was here right now -- the fox seems to have a better grasp of "Freddlish" than you do.

"Okay, uh, Freddy..."

Slowly, you tap the can, then point to the overhead clock, making an exaggeratedly apologetic expression. Frederick studies your face for several seconds before resigning himself, handing the can of puff pastry over to Chichi.

"At last, progress," she says excitedly as Frederick takes over operating the food processor. "Now, all you have to do is get him to follow my instructions to the letter, and I think this might work out after all, Mike!"

Yeah, right. Not even close.

For the next half hour of prep, you find yourself stuck in the middle of the two chefs as they bicker with each other over even the most minor of details. Every time Frederick adds something to a pot or a bowl, Chichi swoops in after him and doctors the mixture behind his back. When she goes to taste something and make adjustments, he does the exact same to her station the moment her attention's diverted. The two of them second-guess each other's every decision to the point that your hopes of a palatable dinner are quickly dwindling.

Too many cooks in the kitchen, indeed.

"*Jeeeeepers,*" Bonworth says in quiet reverence at the spread in front of him. "Can't say I've ever had anything this fancy before, but it looks out of this world! I gotta ask, what's the occasion? Someone's birthday?"

"Let's just say we learned a powerful lesson today about challenging Chica's pride," Beanie replies, taking a seat on the floor next to you and Bonbon. Frederick and Chichi are seated beside each other on the sofa, both of them wearing expectant looks as everyone else hungrily surveys the dinner.

"Is the lesson you learned to challenge her pride more often?" Cheeky says with a sleepy but enthusiastic grin. "Because you need to, if it's going to get us amazing gourmet dinners *and* eye candy. You didn't tell me Frederick was a *looker*, Mike!"

"Ah. What was I thinking," you joke as she bats her eyelashes at him. He catches the motion out of the corner of his eye and tips his tiny hat to her in exchange.

"Interesting salad," Faz remarks as he observes them, a knowing smile on his face. "What is this?"

"Arugula and pear, with toasted walnuts and mascarpone," Chichi proudly boasts. "And you'd better save room for dessert since we're having my favorite cheesecake *and* avalanche cookies."

"You made cheesecake too?" You give her an incredulous look. "I never saw you bake anything besides the beef, though."

"Not *all* desserts have to be baked," she says with a wink. "It's important to have a variety of recipes. Any experienced baker can make a complicated cake given enough time, but it's equally as important to know how to put something tasty together last-minute."

"Cheesecake *and* cookies? Now I *know* I'm dreaming," Cheeky says, licking her beak. "Nobody wake me up till after the threesome's over."

"All right, girl, reel it in," Bonworth says, tugging at his collar.

"You've outdone yourself, Chichi." Faz nods to her, taking his hat off and unbuttoning his coat before seating himself in his usual chair. "You too, Frederick. Thank you both for the wonderful dinner."

"Yeah, thanks, guys," Bonbon grins.

"Aye," Haddock says, raising his plate. "A fine bounty indeed!"

Chichi blushes and Frederick bows demurely as a chorus of appreciation circles the room, both of them looking quite pleased with themselves. For their sake, you figure you won't mention the troubled production process that went on behind the scenes.

"Welp! I can't speak for anyone else, but I know I for one am sure famished after a long day of sortin' files and punchin' numbers into the ten-key," Bonworth says.

Rubbing his paws together excitedly, he starts to open his mouth only for Cheeky to furiously clamp a wing on his shoulder, gripping it hard enough to cause him to wince.

"I swear to **God**, Bonnie," she hisses through her clenched beak. "Don't you ruin this for me."

"By all means, Chica," he nervously squeaks. "What was I thinkin'?"

"Mmmmm." Closing her eyes, Cheeky raises her plate to her nostrils, hungrily breathing in the scent of the dinner. "Right then. *Let's eat!!*"

Turning the TV on, Faz puts on a black-and-white movie to watch while your group enjoys your feast together. In spite of Frederick and Chichi going at it with each other -- or perhaps *because* of it -- the food's absolutely delicious. And while the film you're watching is certainly no *Citizen Kane*, the actors are competent and the plot's decently engaging. Pretty soon you find yourself fully engrossed in it.

"Boy, they surely don't make 'em like they used to," Bonworth muses aloud during a commercial break.

"Amen to that," you reply, leaning back to ease a little pressure off your ribs from sitting on the floor so long. "Cinematography's a dying art, and blockbusters are the smoking gun."

"Hah! You an old movie buff too, Mike?" he asks between bites of his dinner. "I figured I was the only one! Everyone else's all into this newfangled stuff with the computer graphics and explosions."

"I think old movies are pretty great. Gotta respect the classics."

"Well *I* think you two are underestimating the power of a good explosion," Bonbon insists, because of course she would. "Good special effects can save a crappy movie. You know what I'm saying?"

Before you have the chance to educate your ignorant friend on the finer nuances of filmmaking, a familiar music box jingle begins to play on the TV. Without missing a beat, you grab the remote from Faz's armrest and mute the volume. You roll your eyes in disgust at the cartoony drum major who's just burst noiselessly onto the screen, marching his way across a silly-looking stage with his other demonic friends.

"Nope," you declare, tossing the animated human a crude gesture. "Not tonight, asshole."

"That's my line," Beanie grins, flipping the TV a bird of her own to Bonbon's amusement and her brother's chagrin.

"Impressive reflexes, Mike," Faz mutters in surprise.

*"Sheesh. You'd think they'd at least know their target audience for ad buys,"* Cheeky mutters in disgust as almost everyone makes a point of looking away from the screen while the Jeremy Human's commercial plays. Even Haddock seems more repulsed than frightened unlike last time, though that might just be him emulating the mood of the room, as he tends to do. "I can't for the life of me imagine anyone watching a 70-year-old movie wanting anything to do with that hellhole."

"Kids and grandkids, maybe. I've given up on trying to understand that place," you reply, glancing over at Frederick. He's set his plate aside, massive paws clasped in his lap as he intently studies the commercial with a laser focus.

"At least the pizza's good," Chichi offers.

"That's true, yeah." Wiping her mouth on a napkin, Beanie sets her finished plate on the coffee table. "Whenever one of us goes postal and torches the place, we'll be sure to bring you the recipe."

As quickly as he arrived, the shako-wearing despot and his cronies disappear. You turn the volume back up, and as one, your group of friends goes right back to enjoying dinner and a movie together, as if nothing had ever happened.

"Again, that was a real ace supper, everyone," Bonworth says, fidgeting outside the kitchen. "You *sure* I can't help out with the cleanin', li'l bunny?"

"For the last time, Bonworth, we're fine," Beanie replies. "We've got this. Go sit down, you've earned the rest. You too, Cheeky."

"Oh, don't worry, I'll get outta your way as soon as I help myself to another serving of bread," the pudgy chicken cackles.

While Cheeky roots around in the crisper drawer of the refrigerator, deliberating over which brew she wants to imbibe, there's a series of short, sharp knocks at the front door.

"...curious," Bonworth says, scratching the back of his head as he saunters over to the foyer.  
"Wonder who's come by to visit at this hour?"

Pulling himself to his full height, he peers through the peephole only to turn around with a confused expression on his face.

"All right, anyone have the foggiest what *corporate* might be doin' here?" he asks, worry creeping into his voice.

"Corporate?" Faz murmurs, pushing himself to his feet. "...from the *restaurant*?"

"The very same," Bonworth quietly replies as Faz and Cheeky gather with him in the entryway.  
"Seriously, what are they doing, sending someone over to my apartment at this time of night?"

"Well, we can stand here and speculate about it, or you can open up and ask 'em yourself," Cheeky mutters, her beer all but forgotten in her wings.

With a reluctant nod, Bonworth undoes the latches and opens the front door. Standing outside on the porch is none other than Nisha, bundled up in an expensive-looking leather trench coat and an ornate, wide-brimmed hat. Smiling, she brushes a bit of powder snow off one of her sleeves. Apparently, it's started coming down since your earlier walk.

"The hell is *she* doing here?" Beanie whispers to you.

"I ran into Nisha and Peanut at the convention, remember? She said she'd be stopping by," you reply, loading the dishwasher. "Probably something to do with you having quit your job...?"

"Ohhh, right, right," Beanie groans, rubbing her forehead. "Shit, yeah, no. I'm sorry, I completely forgot."

"Sorry for the intrusion! I hope everyone's having a super duper night," Nisha titters. "*Aahhhn...*  
Mr. Fazbear said Bonita might be here so I came upstairs. Is now a bad time?"

"We just finished supper, so I don't suppose it is," Bonworth replies, one paw on the doorknob.  
"Hang on a sec, an' I'll fetch her for ya, Ms. Marigold."

"That's okay, you don't have to," she says, all smiles as she hands a thick folder over to Bonworth.  
"Legal asked me to bring this by for her. If you could, ahhm -- have her sign these? And then fax them over to corporate in the morning?"

"Sure," he says, taking it from her. "Anything we need to be worried about?"

"Oh, goodness no. Just the standard stuff that was mentioned in her contract, making sure she gets her severance pay," Nisha says.

She leans past him, smiling and waving politely to the room. As Beanie approaches, Bonworth passes the envelope off to his sister, who looks at it disinterestedly.

"Nice seeing you, Bonita. *Ahnn*, I'm so glad to see you're doing well! Speaking of which, may I have a moment with Ms. Weidlöd?" Nisha continues. "I actually have something I need to discuss

with her."

"Me?" Cheeky asks from behind Faz, looking up in surprise. She sets her beer down on the counter, stepping forward. "What do you need me for, Nisha?"

"Just a minute or two of your time, if that's all right," Nisha replies with a polite giggle. "Legal and Accounting both have me playing *errand girl* today. There was, ooooh, a *teensy-weensy* clerical issue with your monthly dispersements? We'll have it cleared up in a jiffy, I promise!"

"All right. I guess I'll be back in a minute, boys," Cheeky says to her roommates.

"Actually, if you gentlemen would like, you can join us outside." Nisha gestures to Faz and Bonworth while helping Cheeky into her coat. "This concerns you two as well, so it'll give us all a chance to catch up!"

Bonworth and Faz exchange glances before following Cheeky and Nisha out onto the porch, shutting the door behind themselves.

"Weird," Beanie mutters, tossing the folder onto the counter. "I'm kind of surprised she's showing up in person for all this. Typically, Fred would handle this sort of thing himself."

"If it's only papers you had to sign, they could've been faxed over," you reply, scratching your head. "Think there's more to it than that?"

"Oh, yeah, probably," she yawns. "Never any telling when it comes to Jeremy's. For all I know, they sent her over to give me a talking-to because I dared deface company property with my resignation notice."

Shaking your head, you help Beanie finish cleaning the kitchen. The two of you work together in quiet tandem, wiping down counters, washing pots and pans, and sealing leftovers into plastic containers for later reheating.

"Wow, is it *already* 8:30?" Bonbon asks. She steps into the kitchen with the last of the dinner plates from the living room, offloading them into the dishwasher. "Man, I hate to eat and run, but I gotta jet. I've got a big session planned with my gaming group tonight. You wanna head out with me now, Mike, or are you going to stick around a while longer?"

"Nah, I probably should get going too. Freddy, you ready to go?"

Hearing his name, Frederick gets up from his seat, turning to Chichi. He gives her his typical hug and cheek kiss combo before adding an unusual twist -- raising his paw for a high-five, which she excitedly returns with a big grin. You smile warmly. Nice to see them engaging in mutual respect after their heated prep session.

"Ce fut un plaisir de travailler avec vous."

"We sure got it done, didn't we!" Chichi replies as he slips his coat on. "I hope I get a chance to cook with you again soon, Frederick!"

After you thank Chichi for her hard work one last time and wish everyone a good night, you begin loading up your laundry and some of the leftovers to take home. As you're wrapping up in the

kitchen, Cheeky and Bonworth slowly walk in from outside. Neither of them say a word as they enter.

"Hey Bonworth," Beanie says. "What was all that about?"

If he hears her, he makes no indication of it as he plods off to his bedroom, closing and locking the door. Cheeky doesn't stick around long either, stopping by the fridge to pick up a second beer to go with her first, before retreating to her own room. Haddock watches timidly from his spot on the living room floor, his ears pressed flat against his head, tail wrapped around himself like a blanket.

"Go on ahead. I'll finish up here," Beanie sighs before picking her folder up and heading over to the living room to sit next to a confused Chichi.

As you reluctantly step outside onto the porch with Frederick and Bonbon, you notice Faz at the end of the upper hall, his back to you as he leans out over the railing contemplatively. He seems deeply engrossed in thought, so much so that he doesn't even seem to hear the three of you pass by. While you're curious about what just happened, you also know that with their non-disclosure agreements keeping them silenced, you can't expect much out of them. With a sigh, you turn away from Faz and head down the stairs after Bonbon.

Once you arrive at ground level, however, you realize that your party's missing someone. Looking up, you spot Frederick lingering at the overhead landing. He stands alone, as if waiting for something -- there's no sign of Faz anymore, so he must have gone in.

"You coming, Freddy?" you shout from the bottom of the stairs.

Nodding curtly at you, he turns and slowly makes his way down the staircase, pulling his collar up as he follows Bonbon to Building 8.

Your gaze lingers briefly at the spot where Faz was perched mere moments ago.

...where the wrought iron railing is bent almost beyond recognition.

"We're back," you call out into the dim apartment as Bonbon eagerly sprints off to her bedroom to join her friends online.

"Oh! Welcome home," Mango replies from the living room. She's nestled up on the couch under a blanket, poring over a stack of papers by the light of an end table lamp. A pair of reading glasses are balanced precariously on the end of her muzzle. "How was your day, Mike?"

*"Interesting,* to put it mildly." You set the cardboard box with your clean laundry outside of the bedroom you're sharing with Peanut. "How about you, Mango? What're you up to?"

The plump vixen lets out a yawn, stretching and setting her work aside. "Not much, I suppose. Grading some tests. Chica and Freddy are out with friends tonight, so I thought I'd try to be productive."

"Both of 'em? So wait, you've been here by yourself all this time? I wish I'd known! You should've come over and had dinner with us!"

"I didn't say that so you'd feel bad, Mike," she says sheepishly. "I really *did* have a lot of work to do, and some peace and quiet was a nice change, I suppose."

"At least let me put you on some coffee or something," you reply, carrying the plastic containers full of leftovers to the kitchen. "Did you eat dinner?"

"I, uh, snacked," she mumbles, clearly self-conscious. You spy a half-empty box of cookie-crackers on the kitchen counter. Uh huh.

"Well, good thing I brought home some leftovers then." You pop open the microwave, layering a dinner portion out onto a plate for Mango. "It would've been a lot better fresh, but I think you'll like what Chichi and Frederick whipped up. Those two are incredible."

"I'm certain I will! Thank you," she says, standing up and folding her blanket before taking her seat at the kitchen table. "Um, if you're putting a pot of coffee on... how about the vanilla hazelnut blend?"

"Sure."

"Thank you!" Her tail wags behind her and she can't seem to help bouncing in place with excitement. "It's my personal favorite, but Chica's not as big of a fan, so I don't get to drink it often."

"Vanilla hazelnut, coming right up," you respond as you begin scooping the aforementioned coffee grounds into a fresh filter. "All coffee tastes the same to me anyway."

"Mike, I'm sorry that it falls to me to tell you this, but you're a heretic," Mango jokes with a wry smile.

"I accept my fate," you laugh. "So, grading tests, huh? I thought you just did like, private tutoring and babysitting and so on."

"Private tutoring, yes, but I'm dipping into a little homeschooling as well. If I could choose, I think I'd rather be a teacher than a tutor. I'm actually part of a local, uh -- it's not really a union. More like a... support group? There are a lot of families around here with kids who either can't or won't enroll them in public education for whatever reason," she says, taking her glasses off. "It's different, depending on the child and their background, too. Abusive spouses, disabilities... lots of different circumstances. So for many of these children, I'm the closest thing they have to a proper education. That's why I try to be the best I can be."

"No kidding," you reply, a little awed. "That's pretty cool of you to help out, Mango. Do you at least enjoy working with kids?"

"I *love* it," she says without a second's hesitation. "And I love *them*, too. Children get a bad rap, but I find they're actually really rewarding to work with. Sometimes you have to think of them as adults. If you show them a little respect while being firm, you'd be surprised how easy they are to get along with."

"I'm glad to hear you're not stuck doing something you hate, then. I think about Beanie and some of the other folks who've worked at Jeremy's, and..." You trail off, thoughts turning to the restaurant and its many, many victims. "I can't imagine working a job doing something that you despise."

"I can't speak for the others, but I think that's why so many of us stayed with the restaurant for so long," she says. You open the microwave and pull her plate of food out, handing it to her along with a fork and a knife. "Because a lot of us genuinely enjoyed the work, I mean. Like I said, I love kids. I can tell you that seeing their smiles is what kept me going in day after day."

"What did you do at Jeremy's, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Oh, I used to help run an attraction where children would do little arts and crafts projects," she replies, sniffing at her plate. "That's kind of how I developed a knack for it, myself."

"Ah, that makes sense," you respond, returning to the cabinet and pulling out a pair of coffee mugs.

"We called it *Kids' Cove*," Mango says, appreciatively spearing a bite of her food with her fork.

"Oh yeah? What was it, nautical themed?"

"A holdover -- from when Mr. Haddock ran the attraction before me. He built the pirate theme himself. It was quite a hobby for him!"

Somehow, you're not the least bit surprised to find this out.

"And they just kept it like that, even without the pirate running it?" you ask, pouring a cup for yourself.

"Oh, they do as little updating as possible in that place." She rolls her eyes, fluffing her headfur in a very Mangle-like show of annoyance.

"I noticed that much." You take a few sips of your own mug. You have to admit, the blend is quite tasty.

Mango stirs her coffee idly. "Last I heard, it has some of the sea theme elements left, though it has changed a bit since my tenure."

"Really? What is it now, *the Sandbar Arcade* or something?"

"*Bot Bay*," she sniffs.

You cough sharply, and with your last ounce of self-control, manage to sputter the hot coffee up into your nose rather than spit-taking it all over Mango, who's now looking at you in alarm.

"My goodness, Mike!" She looks up, inspecting your red-faced visage with concern. "Are you all right?"

"Sorry. Yeah. Just... caught a sneeze halfway while I was drinking," you lie hastily, wiping your eyes with a napkin. "You were saying?"

She leans back, giving you a hesitant look before returning to her story.

"It was a while ago, and sure, the restaurant had its share of problems. Ah, it was so much fun though, back when it was the Cove. We had all sorts of great, child-friendly activities. Nothing like those violent video games kids are obsessed with now, mind you. I can't stand the things."

"...sure," you reply at length.

"I think fun should be educational, you know? Coloring books, toys, board games... we even had a take-apart and put-back-together robot set salvaged from one of the old stage performers, though it always struck me as being a little bit dangerous."

"In other words, par for the course."

"*Tell* me about it. So many broken parts and sharp pieces -- I'm honestly surprised some poor soul never put an eye out on it." Raising a bite of arugula to her mouth, she smiles blissfully. "Oh, this is really delicious."

You pause halfway through your cup of coffee, setting the mug slowly down on the counter.

"What did you just say?"

"Mmm? Oh, the arugula, it's delicious," she says, taking another bite. "I really didn't expect it to be--"

"No... before that."

Visions of your trip through Bot Bay flood your mind. Escaping with Beanie, getting cornered by Fritzine, her collection of jars and vials. You run one hand through what's left of your hair, trying to piece together a fleeting memory.

"Broken parts?" she asks, confused. "I mean, it was a robot. Lots of pointy bits and wires everywhere. I'm amazed nobody got seriously hurt playing with that thing. It always seemed unsafe to me."

"No, Mango, you just... you said it's a surprise that someone--"

--didn't put an eye out on it," Mango repeats, finishing your sentence. "Am I missing something, Mike?"

"Did they?" you ask, tone hollow.

The vixen gives you a puzzled look, straightening up. "I beg your pardon?"

"Mango, what's your, uh -- real name again?" you ask, looking at her warily. By now, she's caught onto the fact that something's wrong, having set her silverware aside.

"...*Mangifera*," she replies at length, as if she's afraid of your reaction. "My real name's Mangifera. But it's hard to say, so everyone calls me either Mango or Mangle."

Turning some more lights on, you scrutinize her face from your vantage point in the kitchen. Both of her eyes *look* real...

"Did anyone ever lose an eye?" you repeat. "...did you?"

She blinks at you before breaking out laughing. "Seriously, Mike? I think I'd have noticed *that*," she says with a nervous grin. "I assure you, I've still got both peepers."

Nodding slowly, you turn to finish refilling the coffee cups as she resumes eating her dinner. Maybe you read the label wrong. You could hardly keep straight what you saw in that horrible place. But the eyeball in Fritzine's collection? You didn't imagine *that*. She was going on and on about "cheap

materials" and "unauthorized parts" that day. But you can't quite put the pieces together. Maybe it wasn't a part that was "removed", but one that was going to be "installed."

With a frown, you try to shake the gruesome image loose from your head. At least Mango seems intact, and that's the important thing.

"Everything okay, Mike? You seem kind of shaken up," Mango says, picking at her food. "Did I upset you?"

"Sorry, no. You're fine," you reply, handing over her coffee mug. "I've had one of those days. Please, don't worry about it."

She sniffs, pauses, and gives a long, weary sigh. "The restaurant tends to bring down the mood around here."

"So I've noticed," you reply with a pained smile.



Mango cups her mug in her paws, staring into the dark brew. "Well, that's why we try not to bring it up. Tragedy has a way of following that place."

"Isn't that the truth. So many lives damaged."

She quietly taps a claw at her mug, avoiding your gaze. "Or ended."

Your stomach drops a little, remembering Beanie's words when you were staving off the night at the restaurant. "I'd heard... no one I know about specifically, but--"

"Oh, I shouldn't gossip," Mango murmurs, taking a shaky sip of her coffee. "*Buuut*, after what happened to Mr. Fazbear..."

"Wait, did something else happen to Fred? I thought--"

Mango touches her chest, dramatically. "Oh dear me, no! I meant his tragic brother."

You shake your head, blinking and feeling half-struck by her very words. "What, *Goldie*? You mean even *he* was...?"

She nods grimly, putting a paw on your hand. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you. But yes, rest his soul. He really gave his life for that place." Sitting upright, Mango presses a claw to her lips in thought. "Oh! And then after what happened to his partner...!"

"Fred told me a little bit about him going into business with someone. Did something happen to that person, too?" You lean forward, morbidly invested in Mango's gossip. For her part, she seems enlivened by the chance to gab.

"Oh yes, yes. Just shortly after, in fact. Oh, Ms. May, the poor dear! That horrible fire, it was all over the news! It makes my tail frizz just to think about it."

You sit up sharply. "Wait. *Ms. May*? As in *April May*?"

"That's right. She was his business partner," Mango nods. "Co-founder, I believe her official title was. Thick as thieves, those two. I'd heard all the rumors -- for fate to strike at them both in such close proximity, it seemed... especially cruel."

The two of you sit in silence together at the kitchen table, the only sounds being Mango quietly chewing her food and the occasional sips of coffee. You close your eyes, taking a moment to detox and process the action-packed day you've had.

The discovery of the envelope with Faz. The hectic walk with Haddock and Bonbon. The mad rush to prepare dinner with Chichi and Frederick. The Jeremy's ad, and the subsequent visit from Nisha. And now, this whole thing with Goldie, and *April*...

Mango was right. There's a dark cloud hanging over that place, and simply *talking* about it is enough to sap your spirits.

The sounds of the front door quietly clicking open stir you from your reverie. Looking up, you see that Mango's long finished her meal and coffee, having since moved onto dessert. At some point, she gathered a small pile of papers to grade, continuing her work in the absence of further gossip.

"Hey, Mangle. Hi, Mike," Peanut says as he walks in. "Sorry I'm late. I got caught up at Mr. Fazbear's. Weekly strategy meeting."

"Hello, Freddy," Mango says, motioning him over to the table. "Why don't you pull up a seat and have one of these cookies Chichi made before I eat them all?"

Peanut giggles, picking one up off the tray and popping it in his mouth.

"Oh, these are good," he says in-between bites. He gives a long, quiet look over the table, and after a moment, you realize he's stopped chewing. "...hey, is something wrong?"

The bear tilts his head to one side, looking worried.

"Ah, no. I'm just taking care of some grading for my students," Mango answers, though the somber tone in her voice remains. "Mike and Bonnie got back a little while ago, but she ducked off to her room to play with her friends online."

"Mike...? How about you?" Peanut asks.

"Yeah, no. No, I'm fine. Spent the evening at Bonworth's with some of the others, we watched a movie and ate dinner. Nisha stopped by, and that was kind of weird." You shrug, feeling mentally and emotionally drained. "The whole day was kind of weird, honestly. I mean, I still had a good time. Still, I can't stop thinking about it."

"About what?" Mango asks.

You sigh, pushing off from the table and leaning back in your seat. "I don't know. The restaurant, I guess. The people there, the way everyone's been shaped by that place. It's just... everything all comes right back to it."

Peanut pushes a pudgy paw up his head, scratching at his scruff. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I just found out about the *fire*, for one thing."

"Ohhhh," he nods in gentle understanding. "Did Nisha tell you about it? That sure was lucky."

"No, I was -- we were talking about how, uh -- sorry, how was it *lucky*?" you ask, staring at him.

Peanut fidgets, wringing his paws together. "Oh, well, I mean, imagine if she hadn't been sick that day."

You return a look as confused as his, leaving the both of you staring at each other awkwardly.

"Who, April?" you manage.

"Oh, uh. No. She wasn't lucky," Peanut covers quickly. "No, no no. Uhhh, I meant Ms. Nisha. 'Cause I mean, think about it. If she wasn't sick, she woulda been there, instead of April."

Mango makes a point of loudly sipping her coffee, which gets Peanut's attention. "It's difficult to be happy about someone dodging a bullet when the bullet ends up hitting someone else."

"Oh, no, it was a fire," Peanut corrects her, obviously. "Not a shooting. It was at the other location, remember? It was on the news."

Mango gives him a half-lidded stare. "Well. I'm *very* happy for Ms. Marigold."

"Nisha's nice," Peanut defends, detecting her sarcasm (for once). "She's always been good to me. She says I remind her a lot of Mr. Fazbear's brother, before he passed away."

Having "met" Goldie, you're not really sure it's an apt comparison, especially after your most recent encounter with him.

"So Nisha knew Goldie before he died?" you ask.

"Oh, sure," Peanut says. "She's been with the company for years. She knows everybody."

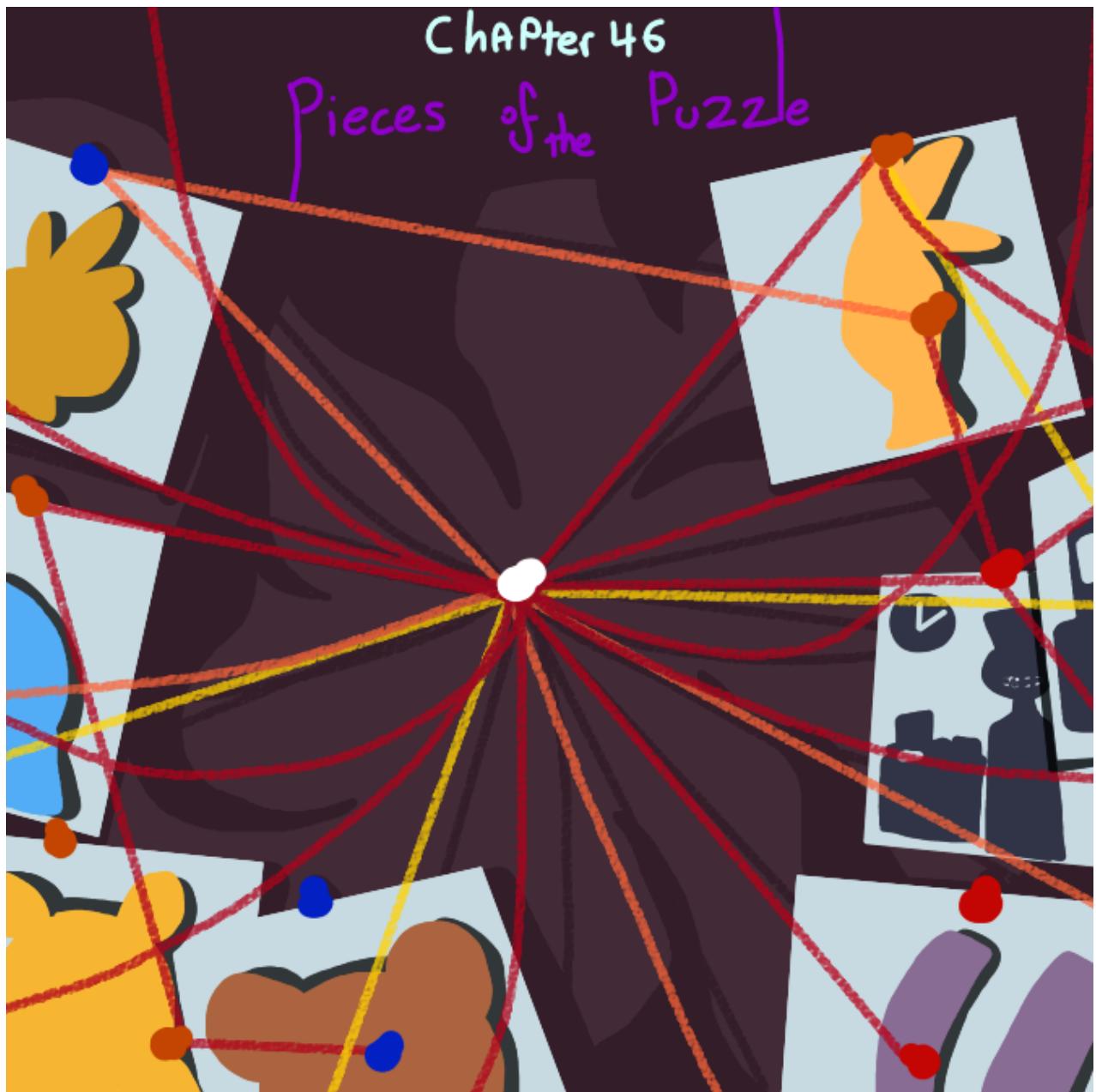
"Huh. What exactly does Nisha do, anyway? She's like a secretary, or a PA or something, right?" you ask, thinking back to when you first met her. "I know she said she works at the corporate office..."

"Well, of course she works at the corporate office, Mike," Peanut chuckles, leaning against the table. "She's the CEO."

## Pieces of the Puzzle

### Chapter Summary

Play carefully around the spider's web.



"You want a cup of coffee, Mike? I just put on a fresh pot."

Hastily setting aside the newspaper you've been scouring for the last several minutes, you turn your attention to the bear looming over you from the left-side doorway.

"Uhh, I'm fine, Fred, thanks," you reply, hastily stuffing some of your paperwork and photocopies into an empty folder. "No coffee for me. I'm good."

"Might be for the best. Looks like you've already had too much," Fred deadpans. "Still digging for homegrown arts and crafts projects?"

"Ha ha, yeah. Mango wanted me to get as many as I could find," you lie. "I really do appreciate you letting me camp out in your office, though. Would it be okay if I use your computer printer?"

"Help yourself. Toner might be running low, but there should be another cartridge in the cabinet under my desk."

"Gotcha. Thanks again."

After he leaves, you breathe a sigh of relief and collapse at the desk you've temporarily claimed as your workspace. It occurs to you that there's probably a good reason movies always show exhaustive research in montage form. Turns out, the act of *actually* digging into something is far more tedious (and also a lot more difficult) than you previously thought it was. You can't just show up at the library and get a table covered in relevant books all dog-eared at the precise passage you need. Between all the newspaper articles and copied searches spread across Fred's office, it feels less like you're trying to figure out what the hell happened at a pizza chain, and more like you're writing a doctoral thesis.

Still, you're in high spirits today. The conversation with Mango and Peanut was eye-opening, to say the *least*. Between your trip to the library this morning and skimming records on Fred's home computer for the last couple of hours, you've made some incredible (but not always surprising) discoveries. So many, in fact, that you're having a hard time keeping them all straight.

Going into this "investigation", you already knew -- from both firsthand experience and also information gleaned from your friends and roommates -- that misfortune surrounds the chain known as Jeremy Human's. After running the name of the restaurant through an internet search engine, though, you've come back with so many headlines with red flags like "mysterious", "unexplained", and "bizarre" that you're getting a headache trying to read through them all.

Forum after forum of anonymous posters push tinfoil-hat conspiracy theories, all of which read like they were written by burnt-out former part-timers who had to clean vomit out of the ball pit one too many times. You can't help but laugh at ridiculous stories about the government putting addictive ingredients in the restaurant's trademark pizza, or what happens to kids whose parents don't pick them up by closing time. At least one lunatic put forth the half-baked notion that the Humanimatronics are haunted by the ghosts of dead children, murdered by a serial killer during the early 1980s. An amusing and elaborate concept, but not only did Jeremy Human's not even *exist* back then, its founder would've been in pre-school.

Shaking your head, you're pretty sure you can file that one away under "just a theory".

At least the library turned up slightly more credible information than some of the campfire stories and urban legends you've been reading about online. Thanks to the very friendly librarian assisting you with the microfiche machine, you're now in the possession of a number of photocopied newspaper articles, many of which boast ominous-sounding sensationalist headlines, like "Misfortune strikes beloved video arcade" and "Family restaurant under investigation". Case in point, holding one of the printouts up to the desk lamp, your stomach flops as you skim the headline at the top of the page.

## TWO MAIMED IN FREAK EXPLOSION AT LOCAL PIZZARIA

*Two employees were caught in a mysterious explosion at a downtown family restaurant Saturday morning, according to the local fire department. The incident occurred at Jeremy Human's Funtime Family Arcade and Pizzaria. The victims, Archibald Rackham, 21, and Caroline Goose-Merrifeather, 23, were performing a song on stage for a birthday party when a loud burst came from one of the company's proprietary 'Humanimatronic' mascot characters, showering them with battery acid. Both employees are seriously wounded but reportedly in stable condition. The cause of this bizarre malfunction is still under investigation.*

With a track record of unlikely injuries and unexplained accidents piling up left and right, not to mention a host of murderous robots roaming the halls, how the hell Jeremy's has managed to stay in business this long utterly baffles you. And yet, you've been to the store and you've seen with your own two eyes that business is booming. For crying out loud, when you visited it recently, there was a line to get in the door!

In spite of it all, you remain undeterred. You're *finally* starting to see pieces of the puzzle snap into place. Grabbing a pen and a scrap of paper, you start excitedly jotting notes down. Time to go over what you know.

During the "apology lunch" you had with Fred, he explained that after graduating college, his older brother Goldie Fazbear formed a joint partnership with someone on a restaurant venture. Last night, Mango told you that partner was April May -- the very same April that inadvertently sent you down this road of bouncing from apartment to apartment, meeting these new neighbors, intertwining your fate with theirs.

At its founding, the pizzeria was just a simple restaurant with food and games. The animatronics didn't come in until some point later on. Fred also said that some mutual friends ("even a few faces you'd know") were involved with starting the business from the ground-up. On your morning visit to 93-B right before HumieCon, you learned one of those people was Bonworth, who apparently got the job because he was friends with Fred's brother. Cheeky also mentioned Goldie hiring her as well, even going so far as to personally interview her.

Goldie Fazbear's business quickly expanded, and other Jeremy Human's locations started opening up within a few years. One of the newspaper clippings in front of you -- this one sourced directly from Fred's memo board -- shows that the "sister location" was the first to feature the company's trademark "Humanimatronic" mascots. Initially, there were only two characters in the lineup: Jeremy Human, and Safety Schmidt. Between seeing your doppelganger again and poring over news clippings, you can't help but feel like you've been down this road recently.

"There's that name again," you grumble, staring at the mechanical security guard.

While the photo is monochrome and the paper's faded with age, you can pretty clearly make out Goldie posing next to a pair of huge, unwieldy-looking mascot suits that vaguely resemble the Jeremy characters you know today. Much like his younger brother, the elder Fazbear was of an intimidating height and build -- and yet in this picture, the mascot costumes utterly dwarf him in size.

Interestingly, both the Jeremy and Schmidt animatronics have what appear to be large clock keys hanging out of their backs, not unlike wind-up toys. From what little you remember of Bonworth's story the night you went to the bar, these must be the abandoned "turn-key" costumes, designed to be worn by employees -- one of which "malfunctioned", nearly killing Faz.

Jeremy Human's is now a major corporate restaurant chain, with multiple locations across the state, but it didn't start out that way. It began as a family business with just a few employees. One of whom, Nisha Marigold, has been with the company "for years" and "knows everybody". From your limited interactions with her, she certainly seems to know *and* have a considerable amount of respect for Fred, which implies a closeness to the Fazbear family. And by extension, their friends and associates. After all, she felt comfortable enough to show up, in person, at Bonworth's residence.

While you know Goldie passed away some time ago, it was only during your conversation with Mango you began to suspect there was something more to it. She wasn't clear on the cause of death, and your searching's yet to turn anything up. Still, given everything else that's happened to these people, is it unrealistic to assume that Goldie's untimely demise had something to do with the restaurant too? If that wasn't bad enough, shortly after his death, a freak fire *also* just happened to claim the "sister location" -- and almost April with it.

That's not all, though. Several of your new friends were injured on the job in bizarre and gruesome ways at various points in time. When most people get injured in a workplace accident at a restaurant, it's because they slipped on a wet floor, or burned their hand on a griddle. Bonworth had a safe quite literally dropped on him. Faz was nearly crushed to death by the aforementioned costume. Cheeky's rapid-onset cancer seems linked to the place as well, and whatever the exact nature of Haddock's accident *really* was, it's left him with permanent brain damage. Add to the pile injuries like Chiclet's beak, and here, Rackham's eye and paw along with Goose's blindness -- all caused by yet *more* "accidents".

Peanut said in parting last night that Nisha's official role with the company is as its CEO. As the old saying goes, "follow the money". And so far, the money's leading you in one direction.

Goldie was the founder and owner. To make his place of power and profit available, he had to die. Bonworth was there from the ground up, and given his straight-laced and honest attitude, he sure as hell doesn't seem like a man who could be bought. It makes sense that his closest friends and even eventually even his own family would also be targeted in a hostile takeover.

What was the "blood in the water" Haddock mentioned in his pirate story that both Bonworth *and* Cheeky corroborated?

Was Faz really given "the big pinch" in a tragic malfunction, or did someone loosen a few screws inside his deathtrap of a costume?

Was Cheeky made to work in such hazardous environments intentionally? Or was she just a tragic casualty in the grab for profit at any cost?

Did Beanie really forget that she wasn't going to be on shift the day you rescued her, or did someone choose not to notify her?

If Peanut's account is accurate, Nisha should have been the one working the night of the fire, but instead, she was conveniently "out sick". In her place?

April.

And what about the pizzeria's animatronics? You're *hardly* going out on a limb by saying there's something *very* wrong with them. But what if this *isn't* simply aimless violence? What if they're *intentionally* keeping night guards and other employees at bay so that they don't have time to investigate?

It's plain as day that the animatronics have *at least* been tampered with. Their current behavior isn't normal. It'd be child's play for someone with even the barest technical know-how to do so; after all, their design is simple enough that at least *some* facet of them can be controlled from a tablet computer. You've seen the interface yourself. If you could figure it out, surely someone at the top could.

You hate to say it. You want to be wrong. You've met Nisha, and she doesn't seem like the malicious type. She was nice to you, and she's been good to Fred. It's not likely she could be manufacturing all of this heartache -- but right now, you have to follow the evidence. Because all of these people are company employees, if maiming them in a manufactured "accident" or sending the killer robots after them doesn't work, all someone would have to do to silence them for good is issue an NDA and threaten their livelihoods if they don't comply.

You can hardly believe this is real life. You've stumbled onto a vast conspiracy. An actual, legitimate evil scheme, and at the top of it all, a sinister, corrupt corporation.

Still, whoever's behind this, Nisha *or* otherwise, they made a huge mistake: when they tried offing April, they didn't finish the job. And now, you've got an in with someone who can finally start shedding some light on this mystery. Someone who's been in this from the start. Standing up from the desk, you shove the last of your scrapbook puzzle pieces into your growing folder.

This is it. This is the breakthrough you've been waiting for.

Time to go have a talk with Ms. April Marchand May.

Doffing your jacket in the entryway floor without even bothering to hang it up, you hurry inside. The common area and the kitchen are both dark and quiet; seems most everyone's out for the morning. Fine by you. You're only here to see one person anyway.

Heading to the room you shared with Frederick, you steel your nerves. In your excitement to get over here, you hadn't come up with the best way to broach this sensitive subject, given everything that's happened (including your less than tactful history with Jeremy Human's on more than one occasion). You're determined to make this work.

"April?" you call out, knocking twice at the doorframe. "April, it's Mike -- can I talk to you for a few minutes?"

You hear footsteps on the other side of the wall, followed by the sound of the doorknob rattling. Seconds later, the door falteringly creaks open, and April steps out into the hallway, nodding pleasantly. She's been expanding her wardrobe since you last saw her. Gone is the worn-out overcoat and the moth-eaten scarf; in their place, a thick, high-collared wool sweater and a long denim skirt.

Taking a step towards you, her voice rasps from behind a thick mask of fresh white gauze.

"Hello, Mike. Feeling better?"

"I am, yeah," you answer as she gently embraces you. "A lot better, actually. Thanks for, um -- for everything."

She stares at you for an uncomfortably long time after the hug, and just as you're about to ask, she speaks up. "...your *headfur*."

You reach up instinctively, your hands groping at your special hairdo. "Oh! Oh yeah, the, uh, the mohawk. Long story."

Shaking her head in disapproval, April lets out a muffled sigh. "Going out in public like that... look like a *delinquent*."

"It was for a friend," you grumble as the two of you walk out into the living room, where she takes a seat on the couch.

Sitting down across from her, you place your hands on both of your knees, trying to figure out the best way to broach the subject.

"Sooo... starting to get pretty cold out there, huh," you ask. "I... see you're staying bundled up. That's good."

"A bit cold." She gives you a lopsided nod. "I don't mind, though. Cozy."

"Yeah. Yeah, there's something about wintertime. It's like, the coziest season... well, next to spring, anyway."

"Don't start, Mike." Even though you can't quite see it through her bandages, you get the feeling she's smiling at you.

"You can blame Chica for putting *that* pun in my head," you chuckle, thinking back to the 'spring' crack she made the day you first met April. In a way, you wish it had been on much better terms, considering how much you've grown to like the soft-spoken bunny. "Speaking of Chica, how *is* she? And for that matter, how are the others?"

April shakes her head. "Been quiet. Bonnie seems to be getting better, though."

"Good. She been keeping up on her medicine?"

"Yes, I think so. Mangle takes care... but sometimes, I help." She chuckles quietly, almost breathlessly. "Bonnie listens to me. Good girl."

"She is," you smile. "Bonnie is a good girl."

After a pause, April coughs. "Mike, you wanted to talk?"

"Yeah... yeah, I did."

Straightening up a little in her seat, April nods expectantly, prompting you to continue the conversation.

"I've been doing some... investigating into Jeremy's," you answer warily, carefully scrutinizing her bandaged face for the inevitable recoil or pained expression the name always seems to provoke. "I know it's a sore subject, but would it, uh -- would it be okay if I talked to you about some of it?"

"By all means."

You blink a few times. That's not quite the reaction you were expecting, but you're not about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

"You're, uh, not under any kind of... hush orders or anything?" you ask, immediately looking the gift horse in the mouth. Damn it all.

"No. Why would I be?"

Well, this is a welcome change.

"Oh. Well uh, like I was saying, I've been doing some digging. And um, I think there might be... look, I've got a lot of, uh..." With so many questions on your mind, and an audience that's at least *somewhat* receptive for once, you don't even know where to begin. You hold up the folder you brought along, tapping it with your index finger a few times. "I've noticed some things, April."

"Some things."

"So like, I think there may be something -- uh, sinister? Going on at Jeremy Human's," you continue, motioning to her excitedly like you're conducting a sales pitch. "Well, I mean okay, I know 'sinister' might sound like I'm being dramatic, but uh, 'ominous' sounded a bit too, uh, theatrical. Is 'sinister' more theatrical, do you think--"

"Mike," April interrupts. "I know."

"You do know?"

"I've been--"

She pauses abruptly, pressing her paw to her mouth and squeezing her eye shut, as if she's in pain. She tugs at the bandages on her face, loosening them, and you tense up -- is she okay? Is she having some kind of attack? Migraine? Bleed--

"Achoo!"

Oh.

"Bless you...?" you reply, relaxing slightly.

She fumbles around with a tissue box on the end table next to the couch. Undoing one of the bandages around her mouth, she lets it fall loose. You can see a broad, hairless patch of shiny, glossy skin poking out near her muzzle as she raises a tissue to her lips.

"Winter cold," she murmurs, "but yes, I'm... aware. Of the tragedies."

"Right. No, right -- being a victim of one of them yourself," you quietly add as she bandages her mouth back up. "Of course. I'm sorry, of course you'd know."

She nods, prompting you to continue. Taking a deep breath, you gather your wits and decide to just be direct.

"April, what the *hell* is up with this place?" you blurt out. "Why is it that, everywhere I look, someone has been maimed, or sliced apart, or crushed? It's a pizzeria. This kind of thing doesn't *happen* at pizzerias!"

"It shouldn't... under normal circumstances," she finally manages after a brief interlude of dead air.

"So you think there's something going on, too, then."

"Yes. More and more." She looks at you with conviction in her lone, visible eye. "Only so many coincidences."

"I don't think there *were* any coincidences. I think *all* these things are connected."

"You do?"

"Oh, absolutely," you reply, feeling emboldened. Flipping open your folder, you riffle through a few of the articles inside it before pulling out one at random. "So like, take a look at this one for instance. This is when Rackham and Goose had their 'accident' on stage, right?"

"Yes," she replies hesitantly, looking it over as you hand it to her. "I remember this."

"Don't you think it's pretty suspicious that the batteries just *happened* to explode *while* they were performing?"

"Shouldn't even have been active," she murmurs. "Couldn't overload. We used lithium originally, but--"

"And then, look here," you continue, passing over another sheet. "Here's the report on what happened to Faz. 'The Big Pinch', he called it?"

"...yes."

"Again, the suit malfunctions *right* when he's inside it? And while I don't have any article for it, we know that Bonworth was *also* involved in something: lugging a safe up a flight of stairs. And *he* was the one pushing it from underneath."

"I recall all of these incidents," April sighs as she hands back your printouts. "...where is this going?"

"April, I guess what I'm saying is -- there's only *so much* you can write off to bad luck. Between Goldie... your partner, right? And then Bonworth *and* his friends? And then, well -- what happened to *you*? I think *someone*," you carefully continue, "has been staging these 'accidents' to keep people silent. I think *someone* stands to benefit from every single one of them."

April stands up from the couch, gently straightening her skirt out. For a moment, you think you've lost her.

"Follow me," she says.

As you walk into her temporary guestroom, you notice that Frederick's easel has been overtaken by a large corkboard. The corkboard is covered in polaroid photos, newsclippings much like your own, handwritten notes in fancy cursive and scraps of paper, all carefully arrayed in a circular formation -- not unlike a wreath. You take a moment to gawk at the spectacle of organized chaos, and its similarities to your own research. The entire display is webbed together with colored string, and in the dead center of the board is a conspicuously empty space where dozens of lines intersect.

"Holy shit," you breathe, tracing a finger over one the photos of Goldie. "So you've been looking into this too."

"You seem surprised."

"Yeah, I am," you answer excitedly. "This is kind of a shock to me. Hah, wow. I don't usually get this far with *anyone*. Uh, on this, I mean."

You study the photos on her board, shaking your head in awe at so many of the familiar faces. Goldie, Chiclet (with her beak, no less), Beanie, Fred Fazbear, Cheeky, Bonworth, Rackham (with both eyes), Peanut, and so many others. Every single picture is taken from the same angle against the same generic green background, and they're all wearing what appear to be employee uniforms. Must be from their photo IDs, if you had to guess.

Your gaze catches on a pair of photos near the edge of the board. Bonnibel is here -- and even Foxglove too, the latter wearing a dull-colored peaked cap.

"So, who goes in the middle?" you ask, your confidence faltering slightly. "On the board, I mean."

"That," April murmurs quietly, "is what I would like to know."

Taking a deep breath, you brace for impact. It's now or never, the moment of truth.

"April, it's obvious. At least to me, it is," you begin, treading carefully. "And if you think about it, it should be obvious to you, too. Let's look at it logically for just a second -- *who* would derive benefit from corporate sabotage?"

April folds her arms, nodding.

You clap your fist into your palm for emphasis. "Someone *at* corporate, right? Someone who wanted to work their way up the ranks and make it into the top spot?"

"Nisha," April murmurs. "You think it's Nisha Marigold."

You reach into your folder, pulling out a single picture of Nisha from a relatively recent newsletter interview with a local middle school, where the restaurant sponsored the school's team. Holding it up to the board, you tuck it right into the center of the strings.

"I know. Believe me, April, I'm not happy about it either," you continue, tapping the photo. "But look, the facts don't lie. 'Follow the money,' right? Well there it is, the CEO. She's the one on top."

April's face is so heavily obscured, it is a little difficult to ascertain what she's thinking. At any rate, she's certainly listening, so you continue on.

"Goldie passes away. He had to go, to get all of this rolling, right?"

"My partner was... found dead in his workshop." April shakes her head. "But Nisha wasn't the one."

"...how can you be so sure?"

"The circumstances of his death were... extreme. Gruesome. Skull... *sheared* in two. If not an accident... an act of extreme passion... and violence. Not some white-collar bump-off." She shakes her head, her breathing strained, and your own eyes widen considerably.

*Sheared?* His head was cut in *half*!?

"April?"

"Also... Nisha was with me when he died."

Conversation falls off abruptly as the two of you look at each other in silence. You swallow, your mind drifting back to the horrifying vision of Goldie you saw that night in Chichi's kitchen -- eye sockets empty, jaw askew. He begged you to "stop it".

Whatever "it" is.

"Okay, but even still," you finally manage, pressing on. "Haddock. Whatever happened to him was serious, right?"

"Maintenance accident. Pushed his head... too far inside an animatronic," April continues, pointing to a photo of some kind of mechanical piece that looks like a car's strut. "This part? Small, holds panels together. Broke off when he was inside... machinery slammed shut."

You cringe at the horrifying visual of a prone Haddock, limply hanging out of an animatronic suit by his neck.

"Was there anyone with him at the time?"

She taps Cheeky's picture in response.

"...and Faz?" you choke. "He was -- it was the turn-key suit, right? Surely *his* wasn't an 'accident' too!"

"No. Tampered with."

"Okay, so Nisha--"

"Nisha was out of the city. Business trip." She coughs into her fist. "Even if not... kept those suits locked up when not in use. In parts and service room. She didn't have clearance."

"The safe." You can see your theory crumbling to dust before your very eyes. "What about the safe?"

"Happened before Goldie went. He took full responsibility for Bonworth."

"What about *you*?! You were *burned alive* in a restaurant that Nisha was **supposed** to be at!" Throwing your hands in the air, you find yourself starting to get angry. "And she just *happened* to call in 'sick'?! You were there in her place! What about the fire?!"

"What *about* the fire?" April asks.

"...what?"

"This isn't a movie, Mike." She brushes her good ear back thoughtfully. "The police... and fire department investigated everything. Ruled out arson."

"You don't *know*--"

"*They* do. Experts. No mystery."

Shaking your head, you look at her like you've just been socked in the gut.

"It... but it *had* to be arson. Nisha was -- she wasn't *there*, April. The timing is too good to be a coincidence. You were there, and she wasn't, and..."

"Fire started in the center of the building. In the kitchen. Accidents happen, Mike." She shrugs. "We knew the risks. At least I made it out."

"But she's the, she... everything hinges on her getting... she's on *top* now, April! Ask yourself: who benefits?"

April walks across the room, studying her corkboard for a long while. You notice down at the very bottom is Nisha's ID photo, connected by a single string -- to a photo of the restaurant's downtown location itself. Reaching her paw out, she plucks loose the newspaper clipping you set in the center of the evidence wreath, handing it back to you.

"She *is* the CEO," April says, "but only temporarily. I don't know if you know this... but I'm the majority shareholder."

"...what?" you ask, dumbstruck. Your head's starting to swim.

"I own my original half... plus some more. Goldie's shares are in trust... for his younger brother."

"Then why the *hell* are you living in a tiny apartment complex?!" you gasp. "You should be loaded, right?"

"I have friends here." She blinks slowly, calmly.

You struggle to process this. "But -- I mean, isn't this place a little... run-down? For someone with your assets, anyway?"

"I've... always been frugal. Grew up on a farm. Not one for fancy things." April lets out a dry chuckle. "And after Goldie died, then the fire... most company assets were frozen."

"You're *kidding*. April, when you came in here, you looked like a... well, you looked rough."

"I *felt* rough. Ran myself ragged for days." You can make out the faintest hint of blush over her cheeks. "Anyway. Jeremy's is under corporate scrutiny. So to get some of my money flowing... Nisha's helping me move it out. Under my orders."

"Like through back channels, or...?"

"Increasing disability payments to former employees... taken out of my own earnings."

You feel like your jaw is about to hit the floor. All this time, the livable monthly checks everyone's been getting are thanks to April and *Nisha*!?

"Nisha was Goldie's assistant. When he died... we moved her to bookkeeping. Handheld her the whole way. She's nice, Mike, but... not criminal material. Never got the hang of phones. Can barely make *coffee*. Forgets her own birthday." Shaking her head, April shrugs, and you find yourself deflating a little. "She's on fixed salary. No benefits. CEO's just a title. She's keeping the seat warm... until I can come back."

A chill rises through your spine. "...unless you die."

"Even *if* I die, power transfers to my picked successor... not her. She *doesn't* get everything." April makes a show of wiping dust off the edge of the easel while you just kind of glare at the carpet in a mixture of frustration and apathy. "Every day... she calls me to check in. Get her orders for the day. Like I said, nice girl... but couldn't run a lemonade stand on her own."

"So she's your *puppet*."

"...cynical way of looking at it," April chides.

You fumble, clutching at thin air as if to find an answer. "But -- but all this, the board, the clippings, the... c'mon, surely you suspect foul play."

She sniffs, inhaling deeply through the loose gauze. "I *do* suspect. Not sure I agree... with everything, but *far* too many coincidences. Corporate sabotage. Someone fighting for the top."

"...but not Nisha."

She turns to the board, tapping a photo of a man you don't recognize: a pale rat, or a mouse, perhaps. Not an employee ID this time, but an informal photo. It must have been taken at a company party, judging by the costumes. The rodent, staring at the camera, is dressed like a musketeer: he wears an ostentatious, puffy outfit of deep purple hues, topped with a lavish cavalier hat, and finished with a fake rapier at his side.



You glance between April and the photo she's indicating. "So who's the man in purple?"

"*Afton.*" April sighs, staring at the photo. "Kilroy Afton. Worked with Goldie on early bots. Skilled engineer, delicate paws. I barely know him. Made... questionable safety cuts. Implemented new designs I don't... fully understand."

You study the smirking mouseketeer skeptically. "If you think it's him, why haven't you gone to the police?"

April turns away from the board to squint down at you from her impressive height.

"Mike... these are *serious* allegations. To accuse like this, without all the facts? Risky. Done wrong, could ruin a career... mine *or* his. And if I'm right... only lets him know I'm onto him. Could make myself a target."

"Along with losing whatever advantage of surprise you have," you reluctantly agree.

She nods.

"Well. Shit."

She clears her throat, loudly. "*Language.*"

"Sorry. I just -- I really thought I was onto something. Now I feel powerless. If there's someone doing this on purpose, I can't let it go." You run a hand over your stubbly head, staring at the ground and trying to make sense of it all.

Her sizeable paw on your shoulder brings you back to reality a mere moment later.

"Mike. This isn't over. We can... keep digging. Find the answers. Together."

You manage a smile.

"Together," you agree.

You glance up at Peanut as you pad into the bedroom you're sharing with him. He's laying across the top bunk, a sack of potato chips and a small bowl at his side, and a comic book draped across his chest.

"Oh, hi Mike. You're back early."

"Hey, Peanut," you reply, taking care to step over the model train lying on the track-playmat rug that takes up most of his floor.

He dips a cluster of chips into the bowl, drawing them out with a glistening yellow coat of what appears to be honey. "Stars sure are beautiful tonight, huh Mike?"

"...you mean the glow-in-the-dark stickers on your ceiling?" you reply, kicking your shoes off. You take a seat on your bunk, easing yourself back onto the pillow with a sigh. "I think Polaris is starting to peel, as a matter of fact."

"Hey, um -- I like 'em," he mutters defensively. "And I spent a lot of time forming constellations with 'em, too. We live in the city, so you can't see the stars at night."

"I guess. I can't really see them from here, either."

"Well, of course you can't. That's 'cause the top bunk's in the way," Peanut adds helpfully, rustling his bag of potato chips. "You can see 'em better from up here, where I'm at."

"Thanks, Peanut. I'll... keep that in mind."

It's still a little too early to go to bed. You reach up and click on the flexible light attached to your headboard so that you can start digging through your collected articles one more time to see if there's any clue, any shred of evidence you might've missed. But after a few minutes of re-reading the same pages over and over, you give up in frustration and toss the folder onto the floor.

Was this all for nothing?

In a way, you almost can't help but feel some level of relief -- yeah, you're no closer to finding the truth than you were when you first started, but on the other hand, like April said, you'd have felt *miserable* ruining Nisha's career without a shred of evidence to back it up. Maybe there's something to this Afton guy after all, whoever he is. Or maybe you and April are both looking for a conspiracy where there really isn't any. Maybe all this *is* just some series of unfortunate, horrible cosmic coincidences.

Perhaps it's time to relax and let go. Focus on the future you have with your new friends and family. Settle in, get ready for the holidays. After all, you're well into December now. You still haven't gotten around to buying gifts, and you've got a lot more folks you want to buy for than just "Chiclet and her brood", as Cheeky might say.

"Hey, Peanut. What can you tell me about Nisha?" you ask.

Too bad you never really were one to relax and let go.

"Ms. Nisha's great," he replies between mouthfuls of potato chips. "What do you wanna know about her?"

"I... what kind of person is she?"

"Man, she's amazing, Mike," he laughs. "She's really, *really* smart, and nice, and just... oh, gosh. I think you'll really get to love her."

*Smart* might be overselling her, Peanut. You *have* met the lady, and even April -- who doesn't seem the type to speak ill of others -- seems to rightfully think that Nisha's something of an airhead.

"To hear April tell it? Nisha's a real philanthropist."

"Fell-- *fellanthropist*?" he asks, befuddled. "What's a--"

"*Philanthropist*," you repeat, slowly enunciating it like you would for a child. "It's like... one of those really rich guys you see on TV, who own, like, a big company? And then they give some of their money or assets away to help the sick, or the elderly or whatever."

"Ohhhh. Yeah, kind of like she's taking care of Ms. April, then?"

You frown. "That's... not really the same, since a philanthropist uses their *own* money."

"Right, just like Ms. Nisha takes care of Ms. April."

Peanut, come on. You drag a hand down your face, wondering if he needs a flowchart for this one. You briefly weigh the pros and cons of continuing the argument or just letting it go, but pedantry gets the best of you again.

"Okay, Peanut -- I'm obviously not... look. When you're a philanthropist, you use the money *you* have, that's *rightfully yours*, and you give it to somebody who needs help. So what Nisha is doing for April *isn't* philanthropy, since she's using April's money to take care of April. Nisha's just the CEO, not the majority shareholder."

"Yeah, I get it, Mike. I'm not *stupid*," Peanut retorts, rolling over to peer over the top bunk down at you. "But when Ms. April signed over her shares to Ms. Nisha, it *became* her money. Right?"

"She **what?**" you blurt, sitting bolt upright in your bed, smacking your forehead directly into the bed frame above you.

Peanut winces sympathetically, but continues.

"Ms. Nisha was talking about it not too long ago, when I brought up the accounting problems from this quarter. She said Ms. April May signed over the company. So now it's Ms. Nisha's company, *and* her money. That's why she'd be a philanthropist, right?"



Scrambling out of bed in a daze, you accidentally stomp one of the hard plastic train tracks, sending a wave of pain coursing through your foot all the way up to your kneecap. You resist the urge to cry out as you hop up and down on the carpet.

"*Nnnnnnghh...!* Wh-- but what about the extra money going out through the disability payments?" you croak, holding onto the bed frame as you ease your tender foot back down onto the carpet. Peanut puts his comic book down, looking at you obviously. "Everyone -- they're getting the extra cash because of the freeze, and--"

"Whoa, they're going to start getting *extra*?! Oh man, Mike, that's *awesome*!" he cheers, shifting to a sitting position. You can hear the bed creaking and protesting under his portly frame. "I knew Ms. Nisha was listening to me! I've been telling her for *months* that it was really getting tight for Goose, because the company's payouts have been getting smaller and smaller each month! She said there was probably nothing she could do!"

The weight of what he's saying hits you like a train -- a real one.

*Follow the money.*

"So that means Goose is gonna start getting more cash each month for her disability, right?" Peanut grins. "Oh, that's so great. I'm gonna go tell her right now!"

"Y-you know what, buddy, uh, hold off on that for a bit. I want to be sure, first. Don't want to get her hopes up in case I'm wrong." You collect your shoes, hastily pulling them back on without even bothering to tie the laces properly. "I'm gonna go look into something. Back in a little while."

"Oh, um... okay then," he says, shoulders drooping slightly. "See you in a bit, Mike."

"Michael, dear! What on *earth* is the hurry?" a blanket-swathed Mangle asks as you storm past, running up to April's door.

You knock but don't wait for an answer, storming inside where April's seated with a laptop computer on her desk. She startles as you hurry over to her side.

"*April*," you pant. "You said you're the majority shareholder at Jeremy Human's, right?"

"...right," she replies, closing the laptop's screen and turning to you. "Nisha manages the account... but all my earnings go to a personal fund."

"And you've *seen* that fund, right?"

"Mike... you're paranoid," she says, starting to look a little frustrated with you. "She brings earning reports printed out... first of every month. For company profits, and my own fund."

"But you've *seen* the fund for yourself, haven't you? You've gone to the bank with her, or at least--" Your heart's pounding. "Tell me you've seen it."

She turns back to her computer, placing both of her bandaged paws on the back of the screen wordlessly.

"**April!**" you shout, panic rising.

"Good *heavens*, Bonnie!" Mangle declares, taking a hold of your shoulder and pulling you back. "Look at you, you're going to give the poor woman a *conniption fit*! Am I going to have to sedate you again?"

"...no," April interrupts, turning to you. With visible difficulty, she takes a deep breath and speaks as clearly as her strained voice can manage. "No, Mike. I *have not* seen the fund for myself."

"Haven't seen the fund? What does *that* mean? *What* fund?" Mangle asks, twirling around your erstwhile room in utter bewilderment. "What are you both talking about? And why does it look like a crime scene investigation is going on in here? What's with that dreadful-looking board? And... why is *my* picture on it?!"

"Mike, do you really--"

Mangle stomps the floor with a foot. "Will someone please *acknowledge* me?!"

"*Mangle*." Your tone's quiet and low, barely above a whisper. "You get a monthly stipend from Jeremy Human's. Is that correct?"

"I... err, yes," the fox mumbles. "That's correct."

"And has it gone *up* lately?"

"Freddy, you *know* I can't discuss the specifics of my settlement," Mangle reasons.

"You don't have to tell me how much you get a month... but by chance, has that check been getting larger... or smaller?"

"I just said, I *can't*--"

April's voice comes out shakily, as if she's gasping for air. "Foxglove, please. Answer him."

Pensively, Mangle turns and looks at April, then back to you.

"Let me just say that... to tell the truth, it's been..." A dry, embarrassed cough and a wringing of paws. "...increasingly harder to get by, lately. Hence my growing need for a, er, side-business or two."

As you turn to look at her, you don't have to see April's whole face to know what emotion she's feeling right now.

You slowly brush past both of them, making your way over to the corner of the room where the easel rests. Walking up to the corkboard, you pull April's own photo of Nisha from the bottom and firmly pin it dead-center over the web of interconnected strings.

# Nightmare Raid

## Chapter Summary

If you must strike, strike true.



The technical term for what you're doing is "casing the joint".

The bus managed to get you downtown a whole twenty minutes early, and you plan on making the most of it. Over the course of your talk with him, Peanut let slip all kinds of details about Nisha: her favorite tea, what her perfume smells like, and how very nice she is. Far more relevant to your

interest was Ms. Marigold's schedule. As Nisha's personal flunky, Peanut informed you she'd be coming to the pizzeria tonight, after usual operating hours, for a special visit.

If ever there was a time to confront her, it's *now*.

Circling the perimeter, you take the time to really drink in your surroundings, studying every square inch of the so-called "family fun" establishment as if you were cramming for a final exam. In a way, you suppose you are; this isn't the first time you've been to Jeremy Human's, but you sure as hell hope it'll be the last. You watch the blinking purple-and-yellow marquee cycle through its limited palette, one flash at a time. You peer in through the tinted glass, scrutinizing what little you can make out inside the lobby. You even pause to inspect the grate covering the air vent you used the morning you rescued Beanie.

No facet of this hellhole is going to go unchecked. Measure twice, cut once.

When it comes to your point of entry, there's only one real option available to you, and that's going in through the front door. Potential for further injury aside, the vent is out because you weren't able to even reach it without a boost last time. You know from experience there are no skylights, which wouldn't matter anyway, since you'd have to figure out a way onto the roof. As for any other doors, a cursory investigation revealed there's only one around back, and it has the exact same electronic lock that the front door does. You have no idea where the back entrance leads to, so you'd rather go in through the familiar route than risk accidentally stumbling into Bot Bay (or worse). Better the devil you know.

Satisfied you've seen everything there is to see from the outside, you return to the front of the building, only to stop cold. This *would* be your chance, if you had a way inside -- but how are you going to get past the lock? You remember from past experience that the reinforced glass is far too strong to be broken, and Nisha no doubt had the employee access code changed, so trying to use the previous one likely won't work. With no other way inside, your raid ends before it even begins.  
**Game over.**

Or it would be, but with all the corners the restaurant cuts, it wasn't *that* hard finding software online to circumvent their dated locking mechanisms. Walking up to the main door, you unzip the heavy toolkit slung over your shoulder. Hefting your borrowed tablet computer, you carefully wire it to the door's electronic lock and launch the codebreaker protocol.

The algorithm finishes cracking the code after a few short minutes, disabling the restaurant's security in the process. The front door swings open under your push; so much for keeping "unwanteds" out. This certainly would have been a useful gizmo the first time you had to break into this place. Stashing the tablet with the rest of your toolkit, you throw your bag back over your shoulder and charge inside and through the lobby, all the while keeping a careful eye out for roving robots. And sure enough, the moment you set foot into the dining room, the ringing sound of metal feet reverberates through the empty building. Seems the nightmares are already busy tonight.

No big deal. You came prepared.

With stealthy steps, you press further into the darkened pizzeria. As big as it is during the day, the dining room looks positively gargantuan at night. Rows and rows of gleaming tables are covered with pristine decorations, no doubt in preparation for a birthday party tomorrow.

Too bad they're going to have to cancel.

"**Dad-blam it**, Schmidt," Fritzine frustratingly crackles as she tromps out of the show room, headed straight for your location. "Where'd that boy get off to **this** time?"

You're done for. You couldn't stand up to Fritzine in the best case scenario before. You definitely can't now. Either you turn around and flee now, or she's going to cash in on that invasive "maintenance" procedure she promised last time. Either way, your valiant attempt ends here. **Game over.**

Or, it would, but *instead*, you're getting a chance to test your new toy earlier than you'd anticipated. Reaching into your bag of tricks, you pull out your newest defense measure, something far better than a flimsy plastic mask: a headlamp flashlight with ultra-bright, power-efficient LED bulbs, just like the kind campers and miners use. From the night you stayed here with Beanie, you recall that the robots malfunction whenever they're flashed in the face with a bright light; you gave this baby a quick test earlier and it felt like looking directly into the sun. To the animatronics here, you might as well be wearing an invisibility cloak.

Hiding behind a chair, you reach a hand up to your light, finger hovering over the button as you wait for the heavy-built orange humanoid to make her appearance. The moment the mechanical menace bumbles obliviously around the corner, you step out from cover and click the light on, angling it right into her robotic face.

"What in **taaaaarrrrrnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn--**"

Optics overloaded, Fritzine's system crashes, causing her to lock up on the spot.

"Hah!" You stand up, grinning to yourself. "Well, that worked out pretty well."

Unfortunately, it worked a little *too* well. Powering down completely, Fritzine loses her grip on the toolbox she was carrying, which *also* crashes -- directly into the ground, sending metal tools clattering rather loudly across the floor. You hear another pair of footsteps originating from the show stage where she came from, indicating that one of the others is probably coming to check on her.

"**Fritz'!** You okay?" you hear another digitized voice shout from somewhere deeper in the building. "The **heck** was that noise?"

"Sorry, ma'am. I'd stay and help you clean up the mess, but three's a crowd," you quip at the lifeless robot as you sprint past her, taking care not to trip on any of the scattered implements.

Giving the corridor leading to Bot Bay a wide berth, you make haste down the main hall, headed in the direction of the security room. Going by Bonworth's story of being crushed by an office safe falling down a flight of stairs, it stands to reason that Nisha's office should be somewhere upstairs. And you know there's no second story in the building, since every room you've been in so far has had remarkably high ceilings.

Every room except one, that is.

If your hunch is correct, the "upstairs office" has to be right above the security room itself -- but you've been in the security room and there didn't appear to be any stairs.

Instead of continuing all the way through the tunnel to Beanie's old guard post, you detour at the last minute, ducking off to the side. In a nondescript nook is a pair of saloon-style double doors

with a small plaque mounted directly above them. Lightly etched words in a classical cursive script mark the area.

### **Jeremy's Speakeasy ~ Arcade & Refreshments**

(Sorry, little drummers! For kids-at-heart only!)

You remember seeing these doors on previous trips. So that's what this is -- an auxiliary arcade. Thinking about it, isn't it a *little* odd that there would be an entirely separate arcade so far off the beaten path? After all, wouldn't it be better for business to have *all* the video games at the front of the building where customers could easily get to them?

As you start to head inside, a sudden thumping noise causes you to flinch. Clicking your light off to avoid drawing attention, you drop to your knees and scurry backwards. You crouch behind a corner just in time, as the doors swing open and the hook-wielding 'bot, Darky, lumbers out of the room, looking around in a panic. Makes sense he'd be here. You remember seeing him on the security tablet's camera feed before; this must be where he spends most of his time when he's off-duty.

This complicates things. You know from experience the light only annoys him, it won't shut him down. Best case scenario, your lamp buys you enough time to escape; worst, that hook's going to spill your guts across the floor like pizza sauce. He's drawing closer now, the golden chains around his neck rattling in the stillness of the night. There's no way out of this one. **Game over.**

...or it would be, if you hadn't come prepared. A quick tap on your trusty tablet and the PA system a few rooms back spits tinny, pre-recorded audio of a child's laughter, causing the wayward robot to lose interest in your hiding spot.

"**Fritzine!**" he calls out again as he slowly wanders down the long tunnel in pursuit of the noise you've triggered, just barely missing you on his way past.

Not wanting to squander your opportunity, you duck out from your corner as soon as he's comfortably out of earshot. The auxiliary arcade (or "Speakeasy", you suppose) seems starkly out of place compared to the rest of the colorful pizzeria. Inside the room are a number of games that look considerably more violent than typical kiddie arcade fare, along with a pool table and a small but well-stocked bar. You're surprised to see a children's restaurant serving alcohol, but you suppose even adults want a place to "celebrate" too.

Still -- booze, billiards, and bloody beat-'em-ups *aren't* what you're here for.

Brushing yourself off, you make your way past one of the tables in the center of the room, heading for the cordoned-off staircase tucked away in the far corner. At this point, you almost feel insulted at the mediocre hindrance. Nudging one of the stanchions aside, you cautiously make your way up the rickety staircase. Maybe what happened to Bonworth *was* legitimately an accident. You can see how a heavy safe could've easily caused these cut-rate boards to collapse.

At the top of the stairs is a landing, and at that landing a single door reading *Employees Only*. You can see faint light filtering in through the threshold. Seems someone's inside. Unlike most of the doors in the building, this one's got an old-fashioned lock. Your tablet won't help you this time, and you sure don't have a key. One last barrier between you and Nisha, and no visible way through.

Did you come all this way just for another **game over?**

Fortunately, you're pre-equipped with one of the best lockpicking tools available. Gripping the handrails for leverage, you step back, lining up your good leg -- and then you kick the hell out of the door with your steel-reinforced boots, watching in satisfaction as it splinters open. At this point, there's no way you haven't drawn attention to yourself, but you've always wanted to make a dramatic entrance, and you'll be damned if this isn't the best possible time to do so.

Looking up in surprise, Nisha freezes halfway through loading bundles of money into a large burlap sack with a dollar sign printed on its side.

"...Mike Schmidt?! What the *hell* are you doing here?!" she shrieks. "...and why are you dressed like a spy?"

As you'd expect from a crooked CEO's domain, the entire room is decadent in its opulence. Every piece of furniture in here is luxurious and expensive, from the antique mahogany desk, to the silk cushions and real gold trim on the chairs. The floor is covered in thick, plush purple carpeting, and punctuated in redundancy by exotic imported rugs. Fine art lines the walls, along with glass trophy cases chock full of restaurant memorabilia like toys and print advertisements. And of course, an antique iron safe straight out of any old-timey movie rests behind the desk, polished to a mirror shine. Its door is swung wide open, and based on the sack she was loading when you walked in, it appears to be in the process of being depleted of its contents: piles of hard cash and several clandestine documents sealed with string.

"Nisha Marigold," you announce, swaggering into her palatial office with a smug grin. As impressive as everything in here is, you can't help savoring her expression of utter and complete shock -- it's a good look for her. "Show's over, lady. I know all about your schemes."

"*Schemes?*" Squirming, she sets aside the cash she's holding and begins inching toward her desk. "Gosh, Mr. Schmidt, I don't know anything about that! I was just looking to see if I had a nail file somewhere! My cuticles are getting *totally* out of control! Tee-hee!"

"Can it, Nisha. I know the 'dumb bimbo' routine is just an act." You shift your bag around, walking towards her. "Well, mostly, anyway. I'd say you're about 75% criminal mastermind, 25% airhead."

"I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about," she lies obviously.

Before your feet can make it to the rug in the middle of the room, something rough clamps down on your shoulder.

"Not another **step**," an oily voice behind you thrums.

Turning around, you see none other than Jeremy Human himself standing directly behind you, peering at you through dark sunglasses -- and from a significant height advantage. The crimson-colored drum major, in all his macabre animatronic horror, wrenches his mechanical claws down, gripping your flesh hard enough to bruise it.

"Ah, Jeremy," Nisha titters, "I was *so* hoping you'd join us. Please, take care of our guest for me."

Raising your free hand to your headlamp, you move to flick it on, but Jeremy counters quickly, tearing the band from your scalp (and some of your hair with it) and smashing the light on the ground. His metal mouth pulls itself to a tight, toothy grin, and he wags his finger at you.

"Uh-uh, **Schmidt**," he warns in a slick, static-filled tone. "You know the rules. No **unauthorized equipment**."

"He's got you dead to rights," Nisha smugly observes. "Guess this time it really *is* the end for you."

The sinister metal bandstander reaches his clutching hand towards your face. "Like you always say: **safety first**."

"Exactly right," you return, suddenly jabbing Jeremy in the chest with the taser you wisely brought along. A crackling noise fills your ears and a bloom of bluish light arcs across the humanimatronic's uncanny features, jolting him back.

Stunned, he lets out a digital wail of pain as his systems begin to lock up. While he's reeling, you place your 'lockpick' boot against his chest, and with a solid kick, send him tumbling straight down the stairs. He crashes through the final few boards near the bottom, where his frail robot body shatters on impact against the tile floor.

"Watch that last step! It's a doozy!" you grin, giving his remains a one-fingered salute before slamming the door. Turning around to face Nisha, you nod. "Now, where were we?"

"Stalling for time," the black bear replies, aiming a pistol directly at you. "Didn't see this coming, did you?"

"...nope. Can't say I did," you reply blankly.

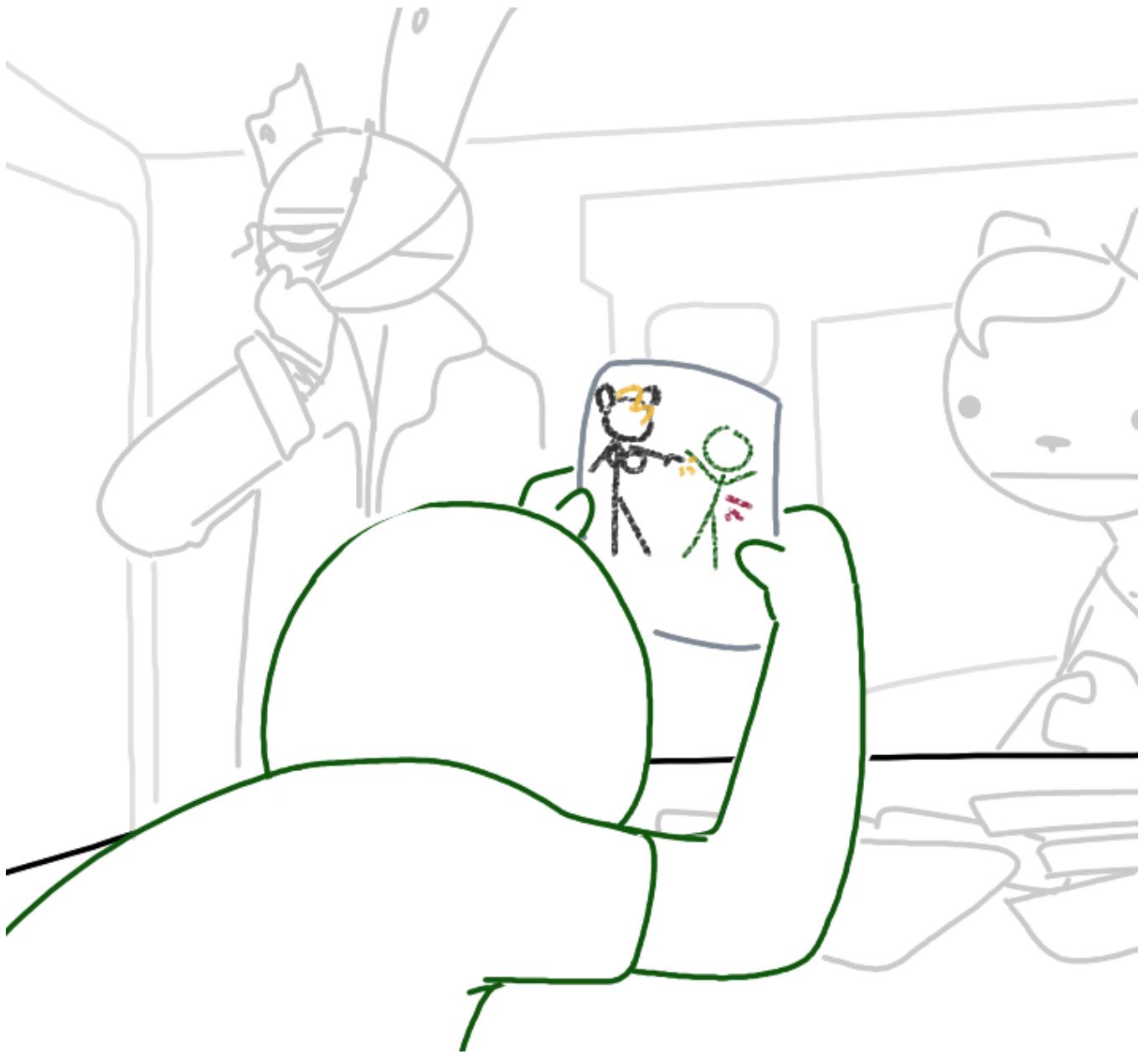
"**Game over**," she quips before plugging you straight in the chest.

**"Shit!!"**

A heavy, bandage-wrapped paw slaps you. With a stern huff, April looks down at you disapprovingly.

"Mike. *Language*," she chides.

"Oh, uh... sorry," you mumble, rubbing your cheek sheepishly. "Look, I'm just *really* frustrated right now. I've been at this for hours, and I'm no closer now than when I started out."



You cast a despondent look across the table that's served as the mock battlefield in your impromptu war room. Scattered photos, fragments of blueprints, hand-scrawled notes and hallways drawn from memory litter the surface, offering every angle of ingress to the black keep known as Jeremy Human's. And yet, none of it yields a solution. Every option leads to the same outcome. Every path leads to her victory. All ways are the Queen's ways.

"I can't do it," you grumble, wadding up your latest failed plan-in-progress and chucking it into the nearby wastebin. "There's not enough for the police to get involved. I can't fight off a team of killer robots without resorting to blind luck. Even when I *do* make it to her, what then?"

April picks up one of the scraps off the table, studying it quietly.

"I mean, she's already proven she's not afraid to kill to get what she wants. I'm walking right into the lion's den, just to announce I'm a danger to her."

"Bear," April corrects, from over your shoulder.

That one's getting old. "...right, into the *bear's den*."

You slump onto the table, scattering a pile of your own carefully-arranged battle plans, but you just can't find the wherewithal to care.

"Can't just... let her win?" April prods.

"I hear you, I really do." You sit up, peeling a sticky note off of your forehead. "But come on, April. What the hell am I supposed to do? Hope really, *really* hard that she gives up out of the goodness of her heart, instead of just shooting the shit out of me?"

You're brought back to reality with another smarting strike on your increasingly reddened cheek.

"Ow! What is it with you and Freddy slapping me?!" you whimper.

"*Language!*" April warns again.

"Okay, fine, I get it," you insist, hands raised defensively. "Look, I'm just saying... we have so much, but it's still not enough!"

"...no, Mike." Even beneath her gauze-wrapped facade, you can read the despair and desperation on what's visible of the bunny's face. "Everything... we've worked for? *No*. There must be *something*. Look harder!"

All the evidence you and April have is still circumstantial -- not enough to convict Nisha, even in your own daydreams. Even April 'willingly' signing over her shares is simply April's word versus Nisha's, at *best*. It's a given Nisha had the signature forged or falsely notarized in order to pull that one off.

"I want to take her down as badly as you do, April, but I can't. I can't do it--"

Silently, April grips your shoulders firmly with both paws, cutting you off. The look in her eye says it all: she clearly has no intention of letting this go.

That makes two of you.

--alone," you finish.

You spin in your chair, focused on April's 'mystery board' you've been working off of. All the familiar faces, all the people you've grown to know since you arrived here. Neighbors, friends, family. All of these people so inextricably linked to this place, touched by it. Scarred by it, even.

These are all the people Nisha hurt.

Like you told Goose, even though it's been just a handful of weeks since you moved in, you feel like you've known these folks for a lot longer. And thinking about what you came from, maybe you have, in a way. Maybe *that's* why you've taken so well to them. Either way, you've finally got a genuine chance at making the person responsible pay, and you're *not* going to let it pass you by.

Frederick leans over from his stool by the corner, waving his enormous paw in front of your face. "Ne rôvassiez pas."

"I'm here, Freddy. Just thinking about some things," you chuckle, waving him off. "We've all got a stake in this, some of us more than others, right?"

"Right," April replies, her brow knitting.

"And there's strength and safety in numbers. Every plan I've made so far has been just me. And if I go charging in by myself, I'm going to get slaughtered." You lean over your desk, hastily rearranging your gathered documents. "You said it yourself, April: this isn't a movie."

She tilts her head and her good ear flops to the side. "Which movie was that last plan... supposed to be?"

"Look, that's not my point," you cough, standing up. "This isn't *just* about me. Nisha has a lot to answer for, and a lot of people to answer *to*. I bet they'd want to be there for it when it happens."

"Can't all just... walk in the front door."

"Maybe we could, if we all went in together during the day, instead of me trying to sneak in at night by myself."

"...not what I meant," she sighs, running her paw over her head, flicking back a yellow tuft of fur poking out between strips of gauze. "Not everyone... *wants* to go back."

You stop, half-leaning over the table, straightening up the papers representing separate rooms. "Oh. Right. Good point. I doubt any amount of revenge would get Beanie to set foot in Jeremy's again, for instance."

"Fred Fazbear," April sniffs.

"...would or wouldn't?" you ask.

"He should come. About time... we talked to him."

"Fred's a pretty proud guy," you scoff. "I don't think he'll listen to me on this."

April rises to her full height, straightening the high, broad collar on her new coat. "Then he can listen to *me*."

"You're going to ask him to come with me?"

"No. I'm *making* him come with *us*."

"Us'...? Whoa, hold up. I don't know if you tagging along is such a hot idea, April." Folding your arms, you look up at her. "I *really* think you should stay home."

"Don't try stopping me," she argues, buttoning her coat up. "I'm going."

"No, you're *not*. You're the closest legal tie we've got, and you know more than anyone else. Without you, we've got *no* case, and Nisha ends up holding all the cards. If something were to happen to you--"

Your words catch in your throat as she stares down at you with her one good eye, a frighteningly calm intensity punctuating her obscured expression.

Well, she makes a good argument.

"Fine," you sigh, acquiescing. "Fine, April -- we'll all go in together, then."

"Who else?"

Options run through your head as you finish tidying the table. If you were to think of this as a siege, then what sort of soldiers would you want to bring? Experienced combatants? Intelligence specialists? Charismatic negotiators? Make no mistake: you're declaring war. This is a strategy meeting, after all.

"Faz seems to know the layout better than anyone," you finally offer. "*Especially* including maintenance routes. Maybe we could bring him along? Or at least get him on the phone for support?"

April picks up her scarf (which you recognize as one of Mangle's designs) from the end table next to the bunk bed, gingerly wrapping it around her neck. "A good start. You talk with him. I'll see Fred."

"Right."

As she leaves, you grab your own jacket off the bed and move to follow her out, but before you can make it to the door, you're stopped in your tracks by a gentle tug at your arm. Glancing over your shoulder, you find Frederick clutching your wrist.

"Emmenez-moi."

"Freddy, I'm sorry, I have to go," you reply, making an apologetic face. "It's for something really important. I'll be back. Don't worry, buddy."

You try to pull away, but he doesn't release his grip, nor break eye contact.

"Je dois y aller."

"Freddy, I don't know what you want," you reply more firmly.

His brow furrows, and for the first time ever, you hear him growl. It's a low, guttural, nearly *feral* noise. The hairs on the back of your neck stand up, and you find yourself riveted to the spot, staring at him. He maintains his grip on your wrist -- tightening it, even -- as he begins flipping through a sheaf of drawing papers on his bed with his free paw. After several seconds of searching, he finds what he's looking for.

The big brown bear holds up a moody charcoal sketch of a building's facade in disrepair. A bright marquee casts hard shadows over ominous doorways below, and through the darkened windows, furious scribbles hash out baleful humanoid figures.

You'd recognize the place anywhere.

Frederick taps himself on the chest, then thrusts his finger insistently at the drawing. "Là. Emmenez-moi là."

"Freddy, you--" You can hardly believe what you're seeing. "You want to go *here*?"

He nods, tapping the sketch. "Oui. Emmenez-moi."

"No, Freddy! You can't! You've never even *worked* there!" The hypocrisy of what you're saying isn't lost on you, but there's nuance at work here he can't possibly hope to understand. "Why would you even--"

As you try to find a rational excuse, Frederick returns to the piled-up papers, pulling one right off the top and shoving it into your hands.



It's a beautiful charcoal portrait of a hen you immediately recognize as Chiclet. She's sitting hunched over on a couch -- looks like the one out in the common room -- with her wings over her face. She's covered in weeping, dripping shadows. Even the lines themselves seem despairing.

You look to him, trying to find the words, but he shoves another page at you before you can respond.

Bonnibel. Lying on the hard floor, clutching her knees, eyes wide in pure, primal panic. Her face is half obscured. The charcoal strokes of the drawing are fierce and broad -- a current of anger driving

the whole composition.

You don't even look up at him when he adds the next illustration to the growing stack in your hands. There's Foxglove, standing in an empty doorway. Cowering. A dark shape conceals most of the fox's form, heavy and foreboding, cast from an unseen but looming source. Only the faintest sliver of light comes from the room beyond; all the rest of the drawing is varying intensities of black, crushing and oppressive.

As Frederick lets go of your wrist, the world struggles to come into focus. Shakily, you return his artwork to him with a nod. He accepts the drawings without taking his eyes off of you, setting them aside with the rest of his work. You're not even sure he's blinked this entire time.

You eventually find your voice, though it's little more than a whisper.

"*I know,*" you barely manage.

"Emmenez-moi."

You nod softly to him; your fists are balled up so tight your nails are close to drawing blood.

"Then we'll go together."

# Safe

## Chapter Summary

Safe in here.



A heavy, uncomfortable silence hangs over the living room of 93-B.

The way Faz, Bonworth, and Cheeky are lined up in their chairs makes you feel like you're before some kind of board of review. In a way, you suppose you are, considering how seriously they're

mulling over the case you've laid out for them. You've lost track of how long you've been here, waiting for them to chew through this.

"So, Mike," Cheeky finally murmurs after what feels like an eternity of quiet. "I thought you said you'd 'given up on trying to understand that place'."

"What can I say? This is *me* we're talking about," you reply, smiling apologetically. "I have a hard time leaving well enough alone."

"Don't I know it," she grumbles.

"Sure as shootin'," Bonworth quietly adds, eyes to the ground.

Cheeky leans forward to look over to Faz, evidently eager to complete the hat trick. Though you're more than ready for his rejoinder, however, the great wounded bear sniffs thoughtfully, eyeing you.

"Maybe not *every* time," he tacitly rasps in his natural speaking voice.

She doesn't seem to read into it, instead turning back to the topic at hand. "Mike, you remember how Nisha came by after dinner?"

"I do."

"Yeah, well, turns out serving Beanie her paperwork was only an excuse to get her foot in the door." Cheeky's entire demeanor takes on a cold edge, the likes of which you've never seen from the normally jovial chicken. "She came by to inform us that our monthly stipends were getting docked. She **also** said if we ever violated the terms of our non-disclosure agreements again -- which I guess includes the conversation we're having right now -- they'd be stopped flat."

"What do you mean by 'violated'?" you ask, befuddled. "Did you guys do something you shouldn't have?"

"The security office tablet records every phone call," Faz answers staidly. "...even when the restaurant's closed."

"...the tablet? What are you--" The words die on your tongue as it suddenly clicks in your head. "Oh, *oh*. That day when, uh -- me and Beanie, right...?"

Bonworth flinches, but doesn't say anything.

"Yeah. Turns out giving out access codes is frowned upon in that establishment. Even if it's to save the life of an employee," Cheeky spits, wringing the frayed hem of her camisole.

Sighing, you pinch the bridge of your nose. You had a feeling there was more to Nisha's little "surprise visit" -- such a minor errand seemed beneath her, even then. Turns out she really just wanted to come strongarm them in person.

"Goldie never woulda let shit get this bad," the portly hen grunts, tossing one of the newspaper clippings in her wing back onto the table.

"Listen, Mike. I'm sure I don't gotta tell you that these sorts'a accusations are *real* serious," Bonworth says, clasping his stiff fingers together. "I ain't saying that you haven't done your homework, but how *sure* are you an' Ms. April about all this?"

"I'm not going to lie to you and tell you we've got a smoking gun. Everything we have on Nisha is admittedly circumstantial," you reply, running your hands through your stubbly hair. "But at the same time, we can't sit back and wait for her to hang herself, either. Nothing's stopping her from, y'know, liquidating April's half of the company and skipping town."

"That's not what he asked, Mike," Faz interjects, sitting up straight with some effort. His voice comes labored, almost whispered without his electrolarynx. "He didn't ask how much proof you have. He asked how *sure* you are."

"Faz--"

"*Michael*," he returns, stopping you. His tone's as low as it is intense. "Are... you... **sure?**"

Somewhere amid the commotion, Haddock's come plodding out of his room. The pitiful fox sits on the floor by the sofa, his head tilted at an odd angle, watching you with quiet curiosity. Almost as if he too is awaiting your answer. Ignoring the portfolio you've spent the better part of the last two days assembling, you take a deep breath and close your eyes, pausing to choose your words carefully.

#### *YOU HAVE TO STOP IT.*

Looking the bear straight in the eye, you nod the affirmative.

"Yes, Faz. Yes, I'm *sure*. Something evil is happening at Jeremy Human's, and I don't want to see even one more person get hurt," you reply, decisively. "Peanut gave us the employee schedule. Nisha has a special stop-in at the restaurant scheduled for after hours, and for whatever reason, the temporary night guard's off-duty."

"She's got to be up to something," Cheeky breathes.

"That's what April and I were thinking. We have a chance to get the jump on her," you continue, "but it's got to be **tonight**."

Faz locks eyes with you for a long moment, then gives you a quiet, subtle tilt of his head. You nod back to him. He sets the paperwork aside and presses his index finger to the thick of his neck.

"Then let's not waste any more time," he thrums.

You help Faz to his feet, and with a groan, Cheeky pushes herself out of her chair, waddling over to her bedroom door.

"Well then, sounds like my decision's been made for me," she says, kicking her door open and heading straight for her closet.

"Decision?" you ask on your way to the front of the apartment. "What decision?"

"You two are out of your *damn* minds if you think you're going to haul ass down to Jeremy's alone in the middle of the night," she shouts, her voice muffled. "If Faz so much as steps off a curb the wrong way, he's gonna tear half his sutures out!"

You help sling Faz's overcoat across his shoulders, calling back to Cheeky. "Coming along as a field nurse, then?"

"Try 'combat medic'," she scoffs, re-emerging from her room in a pair of jeans, a long-sleeved shirt, and a puffy jacket. Slung over her left shoulder is a first-aid kit, and in her wings is a solid wrench the size of a baseball bat. "You're gonna need someone who can bandage a wound as well as *inflict* one."

"You realize we're not going to *kill* Nisha, right?" you warily venture, ducking as she nearly takes out one of the light sconces by the front door with a test swing.

"No promises."

"*Chica*," Faz grunts.

"...ffffiiiiine," she whines, following him outside. "But I reserve the right to smack her around a little, if I feel like she needs it."

As you pull your own jacket on, you glance over your shoulder at Bonworth, who's still sitting by himself where you left him in the living room. Walking back over to him, you extend a hand to help him up.

"What about you, Bonworth? You're coming too, aren't you?"

The jittery rabbit fidgets, hesitating, and Foxy pulls himself up onto the chair next to him, shaking his head rapidly.

"...naw, better someone stays an' watches out for Foxy," he replies, his voice strained. "Besides, I think I'd only slow you fellas down."

"In Cheeky's case, that might be a good thing," you quip, jerking a thumb over your shoulder at the boisterous hen as she helps Faz descend the staircase to the lower level. You can't make out what she's saying from the living room, but you can hear her squawking indignantly about something. "You know what they say about a girl with a big wrench--"

"*Mike*," Bonworth blurts, smiling uneasily. Poor guy looks like he's on the verge of tears. "J-just bring my pals back home safe. Okay?"

Your expression softens. "Don't worry, Bonworth. I promise I will."

"...yeah, I know," he says, wiping one of his eyes the back of his hand, sniffling. "What'm I sayin'? You've done it before, ain't you?"

As you turn to leave, you're stopped by a sudden tug at your shirt. This time, it's not Bonworth, but Foxy, who stands shakily upright beside you with no small amount of effort. He's so often crouched, slouched, or hunched on all fours that seeing him at his full height is quite a surprise.

"Y-y-you're gonna sail right into the storm," he stammers, not quite able to make eye contact. It's hard to tell if that was a question or a statement.

"We have to do *something*, sailor."

He cringes, rubbing his metal hook with his good paw. Given the constriction in his voice, he's working hard just to get the words out. "Cloudy. No land for miles that far out. Sail at *fullll* c-caution. Keep yer c-crew car *core* call cl-cl-close."



"I will, Foxy." You reach out tentatively, putting your hand on his shoulder. He startles, but doesn't pull away, suddenly leaning against you.

His ears flick about as he speaks, and his snout twitches. "Keep keen for the dread pirate. Her sails, they're staunched in blood. Blood and metal. The dread pirate sails, aye, but the reef, she be full of sharks. An' Bonnie, she keeps the last hatch below William's keel. She keeps it secret for the bootleggers! But ol' Foxy knows. The sirens sang it to me."

You turn to Bonworth for help translating, but with a shrug he makes it clear he's as lost as you. Nonetheless, you give Foxy a reassuring pat on the shoulder. "I'll be careful, Foxy. Thank you."

"The sharks," he repeats. "The sharks are in the reef, and there's blood in the water again. Find ye safe port, *Mike*. And if y'see that blistered barnacle what took me paw, you *damn well* send him to Davy Jones for me!"

"You got it."

Foxy returns a light smile, and, evidently satisfied with your response, he turns to stumble back to his room.

"Then sail safe, me hearty! And *mind William!*"

Not sure of what else to say, you nod to Bonworth before finally heading out the door to hook up with your allies. The sun's long since set, and a blistering cold wind begins to blow through the parking lot, bringing with it a volley of snow and slush. You kind of wish you were conducting your nighttime raid in the middle of the summer, but there's nothing for it.

"I heard Foxy chattering back there. Sounds like he had a lot to say. He must be worried about you," Cheeky smiles. "We all set?"

"Yeah. April and Freddy should be done bringing Fred Fazbear up to speed by now," you announce, checking your watch. "Hey, either of you know a 'William'?"

Faz shakes his head. "Doesn't sound familiar. Chica?"

"Nope."

"All right then," you respond. Something suddenly occurs to you, and you quickly count off on your fingers. "I just realized that with all of us together, we're gonna have six people -- and Fred's car barely seats four."

"Got any ideas on where we'll get a second set of wheels, then?" Cheeky asks. "I don't have a car, but I *do* at least have a driver's license."

"Then you're a leg up on me," you answer, instinctively pausing a beat for her to follow up the joke with innuendo of her own.

She doesn't.

"Right, well -- Marion has a big cargo van," you cough. "I know Chichi borrows it sometimes to do baking deliveries. Maybe he'll let us use it if we tell him it's for an emergency?"

"Okay. I'll head down to the front desk and fill him in on the bottom line," she responds. "Faz, you stay with Mike until we're all ready to leave."

"Of course."

As Cheeky takes off through the parking lot, you turn to Faz. He looks more alive than you've ever seen him; his eyes twinkle as he looks out into the snow-covered courtyard, his paws clenching and unclenching at his sides. If you didn't know better, you'd almost think he was excited.

"When this is all over," you comment, hefting the folder of evidence you've collected, "what do you say to another cookout?"

"I'd like that. I'll let you pick the fish this time."

"Sounds good," you grin. "Let's go see how the others are doing."

"*You*," April growls with surprising intensity, one finger outstretched in accusation, "are *incapable* of reason!"

"Oh, really?! *I'm* the one who's being unreasonable?! **Listen** to yourself!!" Fred practically screams back at her, furiously gesticulating with each word. "You're talking about potentially destroying a woman's *livelihood* on a *hunch*, April!"

You exchange a wide-eyed, awkward look with Faz as you close the door behind yourselves.

What little of April's face you can make out from the foyer is flushed bright red with anger. Her lone visible eye is nearly bulging out of its socket as she stares Fred down from the other side of the living room. Frederick's hovering behind her, paws clasped in front of himself passively as she and Fred heatedly argue with each other; while he's doing an excellent job of seeming neutral, you can tell from the way his eyes are flicking back and forth between them that he's ready to intervene at the drop of a hat.

"Hunch'?! She *stole* my half!" she retorts, panting heavily. "Take yours too... if not for your brother's trust!"

"No, I refuse to believe that's the case. There *must* be some mistake," Fred snaps, dismissing her claim with a wave of his paw. "It's got to be a clerical error or something."

"And if it isn't?!" April argues. "You're so worried... about what? *Offending* her?"

"Nisha Marigold is one of the most earnest and diligent workers that Humanimatronics Limited has *ever* employed, and I'll be damned if I'm going to stand here and let you slander her without *concrete* proof of wrongdoing." Shaking his head, Fred paces back and forth in the living room like a caged animal. "If she'd been trying to pull strings behind the scenes to take over our company, don't you think someone would've informed me by now? I'm the regional manager, for crying out loud!"

You know better than to call him out on that one. Clearly, April feels the same way, since she doesn't seize upon the opportunity either.

"She's a fraud! Embezzling! Plotting! Scheming! What about... checks getting smaller?"

"Tough economy. We've all had to tighten our belts," Fred shrugs. "It's hit everyone. My own paycheck went from bi-weekly to the first of each month."

"Fred, business is *booming*," you interrupt, dipping your head respectfully as you help Faz into the living room. "I was there with you at Jeremy's the other day, remember? There was a line just to get in the door."

"Mike? How long have you been eaves--" Fred growls, stopping short when he sees you've brought company. "Oh, *Faz*, not you too...?"

"Fred," Faz drones, tipping his hat. "I respectfully advise you listen to what they have to say."

"Didn't believe it myself at first," April adds, looking genuinely relieved to see backup's arrived. She places a paw on your shoulder, gesturing to you as she wills herself to calm down. "Mike convinced me."

"So you're the one to blame for putting these ideas in her head, Mike? I should have known I'd find a busybody like you behind all this," Fred sighs, folding his arms. "So much for 'summer arts and crafts' -- this was your plan from the start, wasn't it?"

"Fred, I'm sorry I had to keep the truth from you." You tap your fingers together; you weren't expecting to have to make this sale yet again. You figured if Fred would have listened to anyone, it'd be his brother's business partner. "I didn't want to, y'know, say anything until I was absolutely sure, but... Fred, there's *something* crazy going on at Jeremy's, and... I think Nisha's behind it all."

The sharply-dressed bear rolls his eyes so hard, his whole *body* moves with the motion. Turning, he storms off toward the kitchen.

"*Spare us* your 'revelations'. You've been poking at this since day one, weaving your little conspiracy theories into everything you see! You're a malcontent, Mike."

"A malcontent who also saved my life," comes a familiar voice.

Fred stops cold, his back to you, clenching his fists. With a slow, reluctant turn, he faces the purple bunny leaning on the darkened door to the apartment's hall. Rackham stands quietly beside her, and his expression is a kind of stern glare you've never seen him level at anyone but yourself.

"...so, you know," Beanie continues with a shrug, "that might count for something."

Quickly running out of places to hide, Fred returns his attention fully to you and April, his frown curling back into a tight-lipped snarl. "You come into my home, you intrude on my family's business, and all this, for what? To undermine my authority? To accuse my associates? To desecrate my brother's legacy?"

"What happened to *him* being 'family'? Or does that only apply when it's convenient for--"

A vicious glare from the irate bear silences Beanie mid-rant, but still she stands defiant.

"At first, I thought you were trying to get back at me for the way I treated you early on, but I was under the impression we'd made good," Fred continues. "So why in the world are you so *dead-set* against me, Mike? Haven't I shown you every possible consideration? Haven't I been *fair*?"

Infuriated, Beanie and Rackham immediately start talking over each other, pushing into the living room.

"'Fair'?! Fred, that's not even--"

"Look, don't act like the company's ever been--"

**"I ASKED HIM!!"** Fred roars at the top of his lungs, punching the wall hard enough to put a hole the size of your head in the plaster.

Beanie's ears lay flat against the back of her head, her eyes wide. Rackham's jaw hangs slack. You notice Frederick has since moved in front of an ashen-faced April. Even Faz seems taken aback by the sudden outburst.

Fred spreads his arms far apart, palms outstretched to command silence. His brows are furrowed, his eyes squeezed shut, his breathing heavy and pronounced.

"...I don't *get* you, Mike." His voice is whisper-quiet -- even more strained and dry than Faz's unassisted speech. Opening his eyes, he looks at you pleadingly. "I don't understand you at all. What do you get out of this?"

For once, you can't argue with the patriarchal bear -- he's got a point.

It just so happens that his point is the same as yours.

"That's what I'm trying to tell you, Fred: I *don't* get anything out of making this up." Rather than pull away, you appeal directly to his own convictions, in the hopes of plying his momentum against him. "There's no scam here that benefits me. I don't have a stake or a claim to any of this, no checks or pending lawsuits. I'm on unemployment, not payouts from the restaurant. So I'll ask you the same question you just asked me. What *do* I get out of this?"

"You know something, you're right," he says with exaggerated thoughtfulness, twisting his face into a sardonic smile. "It's so much more likely you're just crazy! I mean, *look* at you -- anyone can see something's wrong with you. At first I figured you were one of those sick deviants like Bonbon, but now I see you're another conspiracy nutjob who can't mind his own business."

You sigh, looking back to April for support, but she offers only a shrug. She seems to have backed off a little since you showed up, probably to keep Fred from feeling like he's being ganged up on. After that outburst, you can't possibly blame her.

"Mike's not crazy."

A heavy paw clamps your shoulder as Faz steps up beside you. Sneaking a peek at his face, his eyes are locked onto Fred, who sighs in response.

Frederick flanks your other side, nodding subtly. "Je suis avec lui."

"Faz, please." Fred's shoulders drop, and he rubs his temples in addle-minded frustration. You can see him beginning to crack under the pressure. "I thought you of all people would know better than to indulge someone's fantasies. Remember the conversation we all had about Bonita?"

You glance over at Beanie, who jerks back like she's been slapped.

"I *do* know better, Fred," Faz bear-rumbles back, pacing towards Fred with such intensity that he instinctively takes a step back. Faz presses a finger to Fred's chest, causing the smaller bear to turn away in shame. "There was a time, not long ago, when you were still willing to listen to council."

"He's got a point. You always said Faz was the voice of reason, Fred," Rackham deadpans. "You're not going back on that now, are you?"

"Look at this from my perspective, okay?" Fred gestures plaintively about the room. "You all march in here, with our very own wannabe private detective, ranting about how Jeremy's is twisted up in some--"

"The company *is* twisted!" Beanie shouts, bounding forward, wild-eyed. "Wake the **FUCK** up, Fred! One of your stupid 'stage performers' almost *skinned me alive!* You think **THAT** shit's normal?! You **REALLY** want to fucking argue that this is all fucking *business as usual*?! You don't need to be some 'conspiracy nutjob' to see the writing on the **FUCKING** wall!"

April's wincing.

"You watch your language in this household, young lady," Fred sighs. His missing her point would be almost comical if it weren't so tragic. "I'm not going to tell you again. And as for the company--"

"**FUCK** 'the company'!!" she spits back.

"After all they've done for us--"

"You mean all they've done *to us*?!" she demands, grabbing Rackham by his crippled wrist and wagging his prosthetic hook at Fred. For his part, the fox doesn't seem to mind being used as a prop at all; in fact, his intent glowering at Fred suggests he's fully on Beanie's side for this one.

"They've done *so much* for me," Faz pointedly adds through his tinny electrolarynx, flexing his scarred paw for emphasis.

April coughs roughly through her bandages, so on-cue you're not even sure if it was intentional.

"Oh, for -- don't put all that off on me," Fred insolently argues. "I've done everything I possibly could to make sure you were comfortable--"

Beanie barks out a dark, hateful laugh, letting Rackham's hook fall from her paws as she waves Fred off.

"Forget it, guys. There's no getting through that thick head, he's as *in denial* as ever."

"Always someone else's fault, Freddy." April shakes her head, clearly repulsed. "Still the same screw-up kid. You haven't matured at all."

"Someone's to blame for this, Fred," Rackham seethes.

"**It's NOT ME!!**" Fred howls, nearly coming unhinged. "Foxy, I am *sorry* about what happened to you and Caroline! Honest, I **am!** You don't think I've had to live with that hanging over my head every single day of my life?!"

"Then why don't you *do* something about it?!"

"What am I supposed to do, *change fate*?" the bear returns as he whirls from one accuser to the next. "I do my best! I do everything I can!"

Fred's resistance isn't wavering, and it's becoming increasingly clear the multi-pronged attack isn't going to get him to relent. If anything, the accusatory tone and meandering back-and-forth is only making him more defensive. Beanie's made it clear exactly how stubborn Fred can be, and you can personally attest that butting heads with him like this will get you nowhere.

Time for a different approach.

"Fred," you begin calmly, stepping forward to join the others while surreptitiously motioning for them to ease off, "I know you trust Nisha, and I know you trust the company."

"Of course I trust the company," he agrees immediately, looking almost relieved. "There's nothing that matters more to me. That's why I take these wild accusations so seriously."

You have to push on. Without Fred on your side -- without a united front to push against Nisha -- you'll have lost before you even reach the restaurant.

"I understand that," you reply. "That's why I have to ask: do you think this is how Goldie would have wanted you to handle this situation?"

And just like that, he suddenly stiffens up again, every muscle in his face tightening.

"**What** did you say to me?" he asks through clenched teeth.

"I think you heard me."

"Whoa, Mike," Beanie starts, waving her paw back and forth in front of her throat in a "nix it" gesture.

Bristling, Fred's in your face in seconds. "How *dare* you try to use my late brother against me? You didn't even *know* him!"

Boy, this is a familiar scene. Treading on thin ice, speaking on sensitive personal matters. It didn't end well last time, but now, you're not in this to satisfy your own curiosity, or your sense of pride, or anything else so selfish. You're here purely for your friends, and for those who can't defend themselves. You made too many stands for people who wanted you to stand down. There's something invigorating about knowing that this time, they really *do* need you. Cautiously, but firmly, you press forward.

"No. No, I didn't know him. And I wish I had. Everyone's had nothing but wonderful things to say about him," you offer. "But while I didn't know him personally, I *do* know he put his blood, sweat, and tears into his work."

Fred huffs, nodding hesitantly and straightening his buttoned sleeves. You notice he's doing everything he can to avoid making eye contact with anyone in the room right now. "You're damn right he did."

"I also know that as much as he loved the company, he loved you too, Fred. He trusted you. You say there's nothing that matters more to you than the restaurant, but Goldie knew then what I know now, and what I think everyone in this room knows deep down."

"And what's that, Mike?" Fred murmurs, poorly feigning disinterest. You watch as he fastens and unfastens the same cufflink on his sleeve.

"That you'll always put your friends first. And whatever you think of me, whatever you think of yourself -- I know if he could see you now, he would be proud of you."

Fred finally, finally looks up at you, his brows arched high, mouth hanging open like he's been punched in the gut. A glistening sheen comes to his blue eyes, and he doesn't make a sound.

No one in the room does.

Your heart's pounding so loud that you're convinced you're going to pass out, but you soldier on.

"That's why, even when you *were* a 'screw-up' like April said, he chose to make you his heir. Not only because you're family, but because he knew you have what it takes." You motion to April, gently taking hold of her paw. "That's why he entrusted his legacy to both you and April. And that's why, right now, we all need you to be the man Goldie always knew you could be."

With great discomfort, Fred coughs, and as he sets his jaw, you can see him struggling to find the words. "I-- look, if you're implying--"

"Fred, I'm not trying to imply anything. I'm telling you that your friends and your employees need you. And whether or not you count me among them, *I* need you. Your company is more than the bricks and mortar the buildings are made of, more than the shares and the profits and the products it sells."

You tilt your head slowly to April, then to Beanie, then Rackham, then Faz.

*"These people* are your business, Fred. Everything your brother, and April, and all your employees have worked for is in danger. We need to save them." You look around the room, half-expecting Goldie himself to be standing among the gathered crowd, observing you. Even though he's nowhere to be found, you lower your head to him in silent, humble apology. *"I can't stop it.* I'm not strong enough. *But you are.*"

Opening and closing his mouth, Fred lets out a kind of uneasy murmur, his paw nails clicking as he fumbles with his cufflinks. His eyes are darting around the room, and you can tell it's all he can do to keep it together. Something in his demeanor's changed -- the defiant, unbreakable, incorrigible spirit's gone. He bites his trembling lower lip, quietly nodding.

"Please, Fred. Help me make sure nobody ever gets hurt again."

He exhales heavily through his nose, letting go of his sleeve and covering his face in both paws. His shoulders convulse a few times as he draws a deep, ragged breath -- and then, at once, he straightens up. Uncovering his face, he looks completely and wholly transformed. His expression is calm, his eyes are quiet and placid. Like a light switch that's just been flipped, he dips his head to you in a curt nod, clearing his throat and brushing off his vest.

"...as the regional manager, it's my duty to make sure everything is in order," he states plainly, fixing his bow tie. "Matters tonight have been brought to my attention, which necessitate a trip downtown. I'm going to check in on Nisha, make sure everything's copacetic, and handle some due diligence while I'm there."

You speechlessly look over to Beanie and Rackham, who return the same gobsmacked expression you're no doubt wearing yourself.

"April, Faz, I'd like you to come with me," he instructs, clearly spearheading the operation. Grabbing his work jacket, he directs them over to the door. "Mike, you'll be joining us as well. If you need to use the bathroom before we leave, then go take care of that now, since it's a thirty minute ride over."

He realizes that you're not a little kid, right? You stumble forward, hurrying to keep pace with him. "Hey, Fred, I wanted to tell you--"

"No, no -- I won't hear any arguments otherwise," he warns, shaking his head. "This is a matter of some urgency now, and you're coming, Mike, so I can show you once and for all just how wrong you really are about your baseless suspicions. Then we can put this nonsense behind us, and get on with our lives as one big, happy family."

Well, at least you've got him on board now. Nodding, you glance over your shoulder at your compatriots. Faz adjusts his own hat, ready to leave without further banter. April, on the other hand, shoots you a knowing smile that makes itself clear even behind the gauze.

Even Frederick seems excited, glancing sideways to you. "Il semble que le grand ours ait rejoint le combat."

"I'll take your word for it," Fred remarks dryly, eliciting a weak chuckle from everyone. "Let's get going."

As the four of you make it to the front door, Rackham suddenly takes a step forward.

"I'm coming, too," he declares, swiping his leather jacket off of the rack by the front door.

"Really?" Fred asks, clearly skeptical. You're surprised to see him not putting his foot down, but you also know better than to push him after the act of congress it took just to get him to this point. "You want to tag along."

"You're damn right I do," Rackham retorts. "You benched me last time when Bonnie was in dire straits. I'm not gonna let you shove me off in the corner again while you guys go have all the fun."

"What we had last time was *fun*?" you groan. "News to me."

"And what happens if I say no, Foxy?" Fred inquires.

"Then you find alternate means of transportation," the rust-colored fox replies, shoving his hook into the pocket of his baggy shorts and producing a set of car keys.

"Oh, shit," Beanie grins. "Nice."

Fred pats his trousers, his eyebrows raised. "...did you *pick my pocket*?"

"Le renard typique," Frederick adds.

"Not now, Freddy." You gently pat his arm, shaking your head.

"I... huh. Wow. I'm... actually impressed," Fred gawks, holding his paw out expectantly. "When did you manage that trick?"

"Right around the time you were saying Mike was crazy," Rackham chuckles, tossing Fred his keys. "You were practically spinning like a top there for a few minutes, so I figured I better not miss my chance. Besides, I didn't want to run the risk of you storming out and leaving us all stranded."

"Someone that quick *could* be useful," April comments.

"She thinks I'm useful!" the fox beams with a goofy whisper to Beanie, puffing up his scrawny chest.

"I suppose there's always room for one more," Fred sighs. "You can come too, I guess. Someone's going to have to stay behind, though. We can't *all* fit in my car."

"Well, you don't have to worry about me. I'm sitting this one out," Beanie announces, turning down the hall back to her room. "No offense, but I'd rather lovingly slam my head in a car door a few dozen times than ever go back to that place. Let me know how it goes, though."

"Actually, Fred, we've already got a second ride sorted out," you interject. "Cheeky's procuring Marion's van as we--"

The sound of a horn blaring outside cuts you off mid-sentence, causing both Beanie and April to jump and Faz to let out a dry chuckle.

--speak," you finish lamely. "Seems someone's raring to go."

"Well then, what the hell're we waiting for?" Rackham whoops, throwing the door open. He eagerly rushes out ahead of the pack only to stop literally cold as soon as his feet hit the snow outside. "Oh, shoot. Uhh -- how do we wanna split this up?"

"Mike," Fred barks without hesitation, pulling his own coat on, "you and April are with me. Foxy, Frederick -- I want you two with Faz and Cheeky in case anything happens to them."

"Got it, boss," Rackham says, heading around the back of Marion's van.

You pull Frederick aside, tapping his arm and then motioning to the van. He looks to you somewhat questioningly, then to April. You give him a confident nod in return, patting your chest -- and that seems to be enough to assuage his concerns. He holds the van door open for Faz, helping him into the cab before climbing into the cargo hold with Rackham.

After cramming yourself into the cramped backseat of Fred's car, you lean forward and help April buckle herself in.

"You two ready?" Fred asks, turning the engine over.

"For this to be over with," April mumbles, staring impatiently out the passenger side window.

"Couldn't have said it better myself," you add. "C'mon, guys. Let's go get your company back."

Snow's falling lightly, dusting the ground in soft white powder. Fred and Faz are engaged in discussion beside Marion's van. From his spot in the middle of the street, Frederick gazes at the spectacle of Jeremy Human's with an odd, almost reverent look.

"Uuuggghhh. I see what you were talking about, after riding around in the back of that thing, Mike," Rackham groans as he slams the van's cargo door shut, shaking out his arms and legs as he limps forward. "Ow ow ow. I'm gonna need to go home and soak in a tub full of hot water and Epsom salt after this."

"It's not the most comfortable ride," you agree.

"Les portes de l'enfer... sont bordées de lumières violettes et jaunes," Frederick murmurs, his feet crunching in the slush as he gingerly approaches the restaurant.

"Like a kid in a candy store." Rackham elbows you with a dismissive shake of his head before turning to Frederick. "Take it from me, pal! It only *looks* like it's all fun and games. Wait until you get to know it."

"I don't know," you sigh as he walks off, Frederick's bleak illustrations hanging heavy in your head. "He might have a better idea of what goes on here than you think."

You look around the building while waiting for everyone to disembark. The expansive, darkened lot surrounding the pizzeria stands desolate, a total of four cars parked near the front: the two your group brought, a luxury sedan, and a freshly-waxed banana yellow convertible. Stooping, you look down at its vanity plate.

"N1SHMAR".

No prizes for guessing who that one belongs to.

A sudden voice pulls your attention back to the building's grand facade, where Rackham is uselessly tugging at Frederick's coattails to stop the bear pacing toward the entrance.

"Hey, hey! What are you doing? You can't come in, we need you to watch the front! Mike, help me out here!"

Jogging over to them, you try to explain to a confused Frederick.

"Freddy, I know you're trying to help, but Rackham's right. We need someone out by the entrance in case--"

The bear moves past you without trouble. Only when you grab him by the wrist does he stop and turn, his brow knitted.

"Freddy, please, we brought you along -- but you really shouldn't go in. It's complicated. You might not understand everything that happens in there. Just... wait out here for us here, okay?"

He frowns, gesturing to the door insistently. "Je dois."

"It's all right," comes a sudden, tinny voice from directly behind you, causing you to startle. You've forgotten how quickly and quietly Faz can move. "Let him go. I'll wait out here with Chica. We'll watch the place. She'll be happy I'm not running around, at least."

"Only if you're sure," you relent, helping him back to the van where Cheeky does, at least, look relieved to see him returning to safety. "Thanks, Faz."

Rapping at the lowered driver's side window of the cargo van, Fred inclines his head to the hen.

"For now, you two stay out here," he instructs. "Make yourselves comfortable -- I'm sure this'll be over in a few minutes."

"Believe me, I'm in *no hurry*." Slouching back in the driver's seat chair, Cheeky grunts, rubbing her stomach. "Nnnghh. But you guys take too long without at least a check-in, and I'm coming in swinging."

"She's not kidding about that last part," Faz adds as you help him climb back into the passenger's seat.

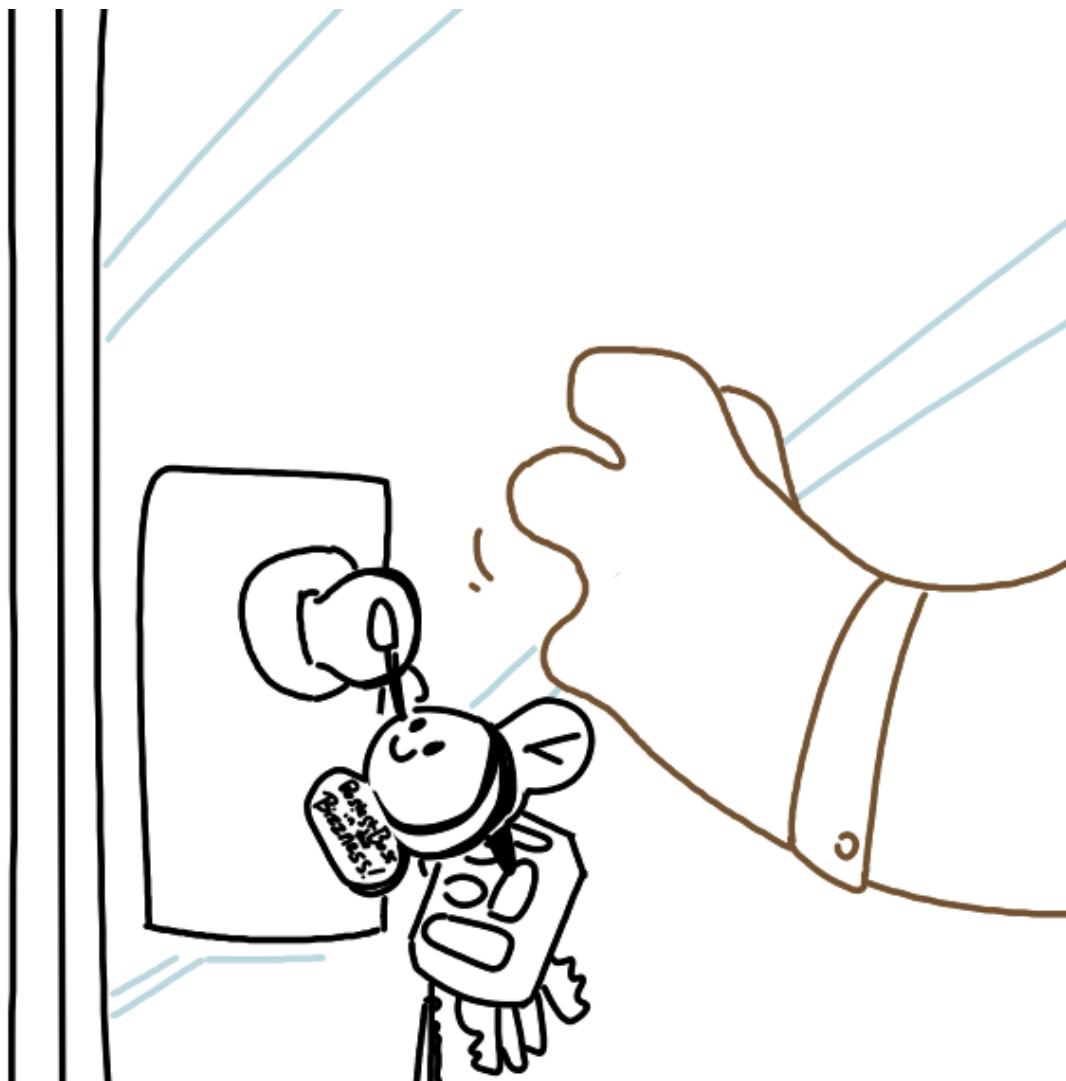
"Duly noted," Fred comments with a raised eyebrow.

"Fred, April, do you guys have a way around the lock?" you ask, stretching your achy legs as you rejoin the group at the front of the building. "When we started gathering everyone up, I kind of assumed someone would have a key or something."

Actually, the truth is you couldn't figure out where to procure a tablet computer on short notice, let alone codebreaking software and a bag full of high-tech spy gear -- but he doesn't need to know that.

"...apparently it doesn't matter," Fred groans in exasperation. "Seems Nisha already made a special consideration for us."

Casting a finger in the direction of the restaurant's front door, he motions to where a set of keys are dangling limply from the handle, clearly forgotten by their previous owner. Adorning the ring are a cutesy bee-shaped keychain with the words "Bestest Boss in the Bizzness" etched across its surface, and a complicated-looking electronic key fob with a digital readout.



"Oh, you gotta be kidding," Rackham snickers.

"See what I mean?" April seethes, jostling your arm. "Too stupid... to make coffee."

"She left company property to where anyone could get it, and here you two alarmists were, trying to paint her as some kind of villainous mastermind," Fred grumbles as he collects the keyring, stowing it in the pocket of his coat. "God's sake. Let's get this farce over with."

"Whoa, hey, Fred. Hang on a second," you blurt as he pushes the front door open, "if you go in now--"

"...yes?" he asks, turning around to look at you. "What, Mike? What happens if we go in now? You're not getting cold feet, are you?"

"No, Fred, the animatronics!" Your hands are pressed to the sides of your head in your very best Edvard Munch impression. "They're vicious, they're deadly, they're--"

--deactivated," Fred says as he turns the dining room lights on, pointing towards the show stage.

Even from the entrance of the building, you can barely make out Jeremy, Fritzine, and Darky standing atop their usual stage, staring blankly ahead like lifeless puppets.

"Nisha deactivated them," April adds, pointing to a blinking red light on the front desk. "Manual shutdown's been engaged."

"Makes sense. The guard's off-duty for tonight," Rackham observes.

"Wait, wait, you can *do* that?! Are you for *real* right now?" you hiss, feeling betrayed. "That would've been *real freakin' nice* to know about *before* I busted a few ribs!"

Fred grits his teeth, avoiding eye contact. "Mike, I didn't have the shutdown code. Who do you think I was trying to call?"

Your indignant rage is quickly tempered, fizzling out with a bitter grumble.

"Well, let's just be *damn* sure this time, okay?"

"Go on, go have a look for yourself. I won't blame you if you need to get some closure here," Fred gestures, his tone uncharacteristically gentle. "I understand you and Bonnie both went through a terrible ordeal."

You cautiously pad forward into the dining hall, peering at the stage from behind the relative safety of the tables. As creepy as they are when they're moving, they're somehow even more unnerving motionless.

"Let's not waste time," Rackham prods. "We should get going before Nisha catches wind that we've arrived."

"Fine. The executive office is in the Speakeasy," Fred says with all the air and authority of a tour guide as he motions for your group to follow him in. "Right this way, if you'd please."

If Fred's the tour guide, Frederick's the eager tourist, treating the pizzeria as if he were in a fine art museum. The gentle giant wanders forward past you, looking around the children's restaurant inquisitively, drinking the atmosphere in. He picks up one of the party hats off of a nearby table, turning it over in his enormous paws curiously as if he's never seen one before.

Then again, maybe he hasn't. There's so much about him you still don't understand.

"So I guess now's as good a time to ask as any," you venture. "Why *is* there an office inside an arcade -- and for that matter, why does the building have a second arcade to begin with?"

"This is the oldest location in the chain, our flagship restaurant. My brother spent most of his time here."

"Yes, he did," April confirms. "He hated... the idea of a vacation."

"Goldie wanted to have a suite put in so that when he'd work long nights, he'd have a place to stay without having to drive home from downtown. Someplace off the official floorplan, to boot, so the humanimatronic prototypes wouldn't wander in and bother him while he was trying to work." Fred smiles wistfully. "Of course, I think I ended up crashing there more often than he did, during 'long nights' of my own."

"I still can't believe you were a hellraiser when you were young, Fred," you chuckle as he leads your group through the tunnel to the Speakeasy. "You seem so straight-laced now."

"I'm glad... you outgrew that foolishness," April tuts, looking at him almost apologetically. "You're a good boy, Freddy."

"W-well, ah... he decided to build it directly off of the main hallway, above the security office," Fred continues, blushing. "So that we didn't have a staircase jutting out randomly in the middle of the restaurant, he also had a smaller room built around it. Ended up stocking it with some of the more violent arcade games that the parents would complain about."

"That explains why there's a bar back here too," you muse.

"...I might've petitioned for that," Fred admits with a smirk, pushing the double doors open. "Ladies first."

"The folly of youth." Shaking her head, April makes her way inside, towards the staircase.

With some small amount of smugness, you congratulate yourself on so accurately imagining the Speakeasy's interior. A smooth black bartop with cool blue strip lighting takes up the far wall, an impressive stock lined up behind it, while small tables with modern stools dot the floor and arcade cabinets cover the walls.

As you pass through the moodlit room, Rackham's gaze lingers on the various machines, scratching his scruffy neck with his hook.

"Hey, Fred, I always wondered. Can you win tickets in here, too? Is there like, an adult prize corner?"

"That's... stupidest thing I've ever heard," April gripes from the staircase.

Fred rubs his chin. "*Interesting.* Something to think about."

The landing above is barely wide enough for two people, so Fred takes point at the imposing, glass-framed door immediately beyond. As the rest of the group, yourself included, lines up single-file behind him down the length of the stairs, he makes one final pause.

"All right then, this is it. Are we all ready?" he asks, voice lowered to a whisper.

Despite how much more easily this whole thing is going down tonight than it did in your pre-planning, every muscle in your body feels tense. If your suspicions prove true, you're stepping into potentially far greater danger than you've ever faced in your life. Or at least, the parts of it you can remember. But so many have been hurt, and so many may yet be if you don't take action. All it takes for evil to succeed is for good men to do nothing. Whatever happens tonight, whatever danger or harm may come to you, it will be a price worth paying.

And so, although you can't stop shaking, you take a deep breath -- and steady on.

"I'm ready to be proven wrong," you nod. "Hopeful, even."

April nods. "Mmhmm."

"Allons-y."

"I think we're ready as we'll ever be," Rackham adds. "Let's not stay here any longer than we have to."

Fred straightens his tie. "I intend to be quick."

"I intend to be brutal," you hear April mutter under her breath.

With a reverberating slam, the heavy door is flung open. So much for needing a lockpick. With Fred at the fore, your makeshift party pours into the office with all the speed of a SWAT team. Your group fans out to stand on either side of him, blocking the sole exit.

For as close as your mental image of the Speakeasy was, you couldn't have been more wrong about the office.

It's cramped, not spacious, with a ceiling so low that Frederick and April have to hunch down a little as they step inside. Its design is ramshackle rather than modern, with a hodgepodge of walls in bare poured concrete, rough tiles, and exposed, unfinished wood beams.

The decor is hardly palatial. The floor is uncarpeted, the walls are adorned with cheesy, mass-printed posters instead of fine art, and Nisha's desk at the far end is a squared-off particle board piece straight out of a kit. Its surface is cluttered with a clunky gray computer, an old-fashioned landline phone, a Newton's Cradle, a dollar store stationery pad with a bee design, and a model ship-in-a-bottle. A standing floor lamp rests in the corner, illuminating the desk.

No lavish statues, no opulent columns, no high tech indulgences. No fanciful imported rugs or display cases full of knick-knacks or memorabilia. The most impressive feature of the room, taking up a considerable chunk of its already limited real estate, is a large, rusty, dented fire safe. You glare at it with no small level of contempt; you're sure it's the behemoth that ruined Bonworth's life, and now it's being used as a table for a fax machine.

It seems there is *one* detail you got right, though: standing at an open wall safe mounted near her desk, wearing the only gold in the entire room (in the form of a gaudy business dress), is the black bear you've all come to see. She's frozen in place, staring at your group like a deer in headlights. She's also clutching a wad of cash in one paw and a lumpy burlap sack in the other. For a long time, both sides just gawk at each other, not quite sure what to make of what they're seeing.

"*What is this?!*" Nisha and Fred finally demand, in perfect simultaneous stereo sound.

"Mr. Fazbear! So, ahhh...! He-hello, um. Sir." Nisha cinches her money sack shut, shoving it off the table with a nervous titter. "I wasn't, *aaahn*... expecting you to bring so many... friends?"

"Can it, Nisha. I know the whole 'dumb bimbo' routine is--"

Fred thrusts a massive paw in front of your face, silencing you immediately.

"Let him do his thing, Mike," Rackham advises.

"...right. Sorry, Fred."

"Ms. Marigold," Fred rumbles, brow furrowed as his eyes sweep the room, "some of my associates, including Ms. May, have come to me tonight with some very troubling allegations concerning you. I'd hoped we could have a rational discussion to sort things out and perhaps put their fears at ease."

"*Ahhn*, is -- is that all? Oh! Well, that sounds good, yes," she answers, smoothing her blouse out and buttoning up her vest. "So, ahhh, what can I do for you then?"

"I'm going to cut right to the chase. Ms. Marigold, did you authorize the transfer or redistribution of Ms. May's holdings?"

"The -- the what?" Nisha asks sweetly, taking a seat in her chair. "Authorize...?"

Fred closes his eyes, raising a paw to his muzzle and exhaling heavily. It's obvious from his expression alone that he's already beginning to lose his patience with this entire affair, and you haven't even gotten started yet.

"Obviously I'm not making myself clear," he says at length. "Did you *steal* April May's shares of Humanimatronics Limited?"

"*Steal...!* N-no, of cour-- of course not," she stammers, reeling visibly. "That's -- I, why, I can't believe you'd go and say a thing like that!"

Even Mangle's theatrical acting trumps this sorry display.

Frederick's begun aimlessly wandering the office, stopping occasionally to place his paw softly against one of the walls, quietly soaking in every small detail. Nisha side-eyes him with a strange look, but never turns away from your group.

"Checked with corporate. All my shares... are in your name," April insists forcefully, her already hoarse voice cracking under the exertion.

"Oh! Oh, goodness -- well, that much is true, yes, but that's not 'stealing' at all, Mr. Fazbear!" Fretting, Nisha clasps her paws, sitting up straight in her desk chair. "She came into my office and proposed the idea herself back in July! Don't you remember, Ms. May? Oh my, you'd said so much about the stress of the company getting to you and being bad for your health..."

"*Liar*," April fumes, balling up her fists. "I did no such thing."

"Really? Oh, dear me, but you must have. After all, I've got your signature in triplicate, so -- if not you, Ms. May, then clearly they had to come from somewhere, right?" She raises a pinky finger to

her mouth, which curls into a smile.

"Thief! Transfer was under new notary. *Not mine!*" April storms over, slamming her paws on the desk. Everyone jumps.

Everyone except Nisha. The black bear simply bats her long lashes. "Clerical error, maybe?"

"A clerical error? You must be joking," Fred snorts, clearly having already forgotten saying the very same thing earlier.

April and Rackham give him a withering glare, but both of them wisely choose to stay silent for now. You're right there with them. At this point, none of you want to be standing in front of the train that is Fred Fazbear once he gets going.

"Then *fix* the error." April raps the computer monitor with one of her bandaged knuckles. "No problem for you. You're an accountant. *Remember?*"

"Oh gosh, well, I'd love to," Nisha responds. "But really, is that in the company's best interests? I mean, what with your declining health and even Mr. Fazbear's future being all muddled, what with his -- well, goodness, let's not beat around the bush here -- his 'condition'..."

"What 'condition'?" Fred grunts as April and Rackham both visibly bristle at the new topic. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, you have nothing to be ashamed of, Mr. Fazbear -- we all know you're not a *well* man," Nisha says, eyes narrowing. "This company would've floundered without the proper management you and Ms. May are currently unable to provide. I'm just doing my job as its CEO."

"*Temporary* CEO," April clarifies.

"Well," Nisha purrs, leaning back at her desk, "'majority shareholder' *also* has a nice ring to it."

Seething, April swats the notepad off the desk, sending a flutter of bee-shaped notes across the already cluttered room. Frederick stops his idle pacing and turns quickly to the source of the noise. Again, the black bear doesn't so much as flinch. "Don't make us... get the lawyers!"

"I believe the saying is 'your word against mine'," Nisha replies dismissively. "But sure, if you want to drag it out in a bitter legal battle, I'm willing to do what I must to protect the integrity of this company."

Despite the silence from your own side and the mock affability emanating from Nisha, the tension in the room is so palpable you could scoop it with a melon baller. You feel woozy -- and worse, defeated.

April turns desperately to Fred, who's been silent for a while, and makes a sweeping wave at the desk -- the universal gesture for "*are you just going to let this asshole get away with it*".

"You do realize, I hope, that I'll fight you on this," Fred replies in a remarkably calm tone.

"Well gosh, Mr. Fazbear," she gasps, putting a paw to her mouth. "I was worried it might come to that. Especially with your own shares in jeopardy."

"My shares," he repeats blankly.

"Well yes, sir. You see, your trust isn't... *quite* as airtight as you might think. I mean, gracious me," she titters, "they're not your shares *yet*, now, are they? And if for some reason, you were, ahn... out of the way..."

Your blood boils at her words. You were right about this snake. About everything. You stomp forward towards her, but Fred simply puts his arm out to the side, stopping you mid-stride.

"I'm perfectly healthy. Nothing is going to happen to me."

"*Physically* healthy," Nisha corrects, her tone suddenly sharper and colder -- but a moment later, she giggles, and her voice returns to its bubbly state. "I mean, my goodness, sir! I have a half-dozen employees who could fill a *warehouse* with stories of the delusional old bear who comes in thinking he's a manager. And my, *my!* That's to say *nothing* of the poor girl you harassed the other day. What was her name again? Roth?"

By now, everyone in the room is staring uncomfortably at her.

"...so that's it then," Fred murmurs, straightening his coat out.

It can't end here -- not like this. Your stomach's in knots.

"Yes, Mr. Fazbear, that's it," she agrees condescendingly. "I certainly am *sorry* you came all this way out here and put together *such* a show of force only to meet with bad news, but, *ahhn*, I'm hopeful you've seen reason. You seem to be handling it quite well."

"Bad news, yes. Of course," he comments. "As long as I have you here, Ms. Marigold, perhaps you could tell me something: on the documents signing over her shares, you said you have Ms. May's signature. Her *genuine* signature, no doubt."

Nisha nods.

"Mmm. And I'm assuming then that you have my signature as well," Fred continues, tapping the Newton's cradle with interest. "For the transfer, I mean."

"Why would I need *yours*?" she laughs. "They're *her* shares. You're not so far gone you don't get that, right?"

Walking across the room, passing Frederick, Fred takes a seat on top of the iron safe in the corner, tilting his head to her.

"Well, it's something that my brother insisted on when he founded the company. Goldie was always the overly trusting type, rest his soul, and it bit him hard during his first few business ventures before he met Ms. May."

"...how unfortunate for him?" Nisha offers, clearly wary.

"See, in the company's charter, he specified that ownership between either of the founding partners would go into a trust if anything happened to them. Hence why I don't technically own my shares, like you said."

"Thus making me the majority shareholder." She's quick on the follow-up. "I think you'll find the paperwork says so, anyway."

"That would be the case... but with all the seed money my family pumped into this little endeavor, we took a few precautions. After all, my father bet his retirement on my brother." Fred picks up one of the bee notes, turning it over thoughtfully. "To make sure that Goldie and Ms. May didn't do anything too impulsive, we had written and notarized an agreement between them, to the effect that either founding partner's claim to ownership -- including shares of stock as well as legal and licensing rights -- could only be transferred with both parties co-signing."

"...both parties," Nisha slowly repeats. Her smile's gradually fading into a tight-lipped frown.

"I don't quite follow," Rackham mumbles to you, still sitting back patiently.

Fred clasps his paws calmly in his lap, his unfazed demeanor slowly becoming more clear. "As Goldie's next of kin, that responsibility passes to me in his absence, even if I'm not on the payroll."

"Wait, it does?" April asks breathlessly.

Nisha's breathing harder, clutching her chair and staring daggers at Fred.

"It's in the same stipulation," Fred says in reply to April. "So you see, Ms. Marigold, it's impossible for Ms. May to have signed over her half of the company to you -- since I wasn't there for it."

"*You*," is all Nisha can manage, practically chewing on her lip.

"And even in the event she *did* sign, I think you'll find that transfer won't be legally binding. Her shares will be rightfully restored as soon as I bring this to light." Fred folds his arms with a pleasant, businesslike smile. "And if there's any discrepancy in the review, I'm sure they'll want to hear your explanation."

Nisha straightens up, clearing her throat with a deepening frown. "I've been up and down the company's inner workings and I've never seen a magical *safety net* document like that. I'm assuming, of course, you can prove it exists."

"Oh, easily. But first, another question. Might I ask -- when *did* you have that wall safe installed, Nisha?"

The black bear stops in her tracks. Frederick pauses by the wall, with perfect timing, tapping a broad finger on the face of the cheaply-made panel. All eyes in the room are on the wall safe, save Nisha's; she's still got her gaze laser-focused on Mr. Fred Fazbear.

"It seems so strange to me you'd have a flimsy thing like that installed in an unfinished room, especially as stingy as you are about renovations. I mean, you've got a perfectly good safe right here already. Been here for years." Giving it a gentle kick with the heel of his foot, Fred smiles. "Even a bomb wouldn't get this thing open."

Nisha remains frozen to the spot, looking up at him with wide eyes and a shaky smile. Her claws rake at the armrests of her chair, slowly shredding them inch by inch and spilling foam padding onto the floor.

"Feels like a waste of resources. I mean, it's already in here. Unless, of course... you never found the combination."

And like that, all eyes are back on Nisha. Rackham mutters something unintelligible in breathy awe, and April folds her arms sternly in front of herself.

"That's fine. No need to trouble yourself on my part," Fred remarks. "Fortunately for all parties involved, I happen to know the combination by heart."

You can see Nisha's lips quivering like gelatin as Fred slides off of the safe, kneeling to spin the dial. She hisses through her teeth, sweat dripping visibly down her forehead.

*"Bastard."*

"You're going up the river, you bleach-bottle menace," Rackham sneers, grin a mile wide.

"Oh my god. Way to drag out a reveal, Fred," you chuckle, wiping your forehead with your sleeve. "You had me on pins and needles."

April reaches her bandaged paws out menacingly, shaking with righteous rage. "Ought to wring your neck! Traitor! *Usurper!*"

"That's **ENOUGH!**"

A loud slam stops Fred halfway through the combination, and Frederick whirls again, instinctively pulling April away from the desk. You're frozen in place, not daring to move, staring at the scene that's just begun to unfold.

Nisha's brandishing a shiny silver revolver at April, both women backing to opposite sides of the room. With a swinging gesture, she then points it at Fred.

"Step away from the safe, *Fred*," Nisha growls.

Her tone is unsteady, chilling and intense, without a hint of the girlish sweetness you've come to know from her. Fred doesn't move, paw still on the safe's dial.

"Nisha--"

***"I SAID GET AWAY FROM THE DAMN SAFE!"*** she barks, pointing the gun straight at him.

Slowly, calmly, Fred rises to his feet and backs away, paws in the air.



"That's it. That's it, easy now," she stammers. "All of you, up against the wall there. **Move!**"

You and Rackham reluctantly join the others against the side wall of the office while Nisha circles around your group, the pistol shaking in her paw.

"What the hell?!" Rackham breathes in disbelief. "A holdup? *Really?!*"

"I knew you were rotten to the core, but this takes the cake, Nisha," you spit.

"Oh, shut the hell up," Nisha growls, not bothering to take her eyes off Fred and April long enough to spare you a glance.

You don't relent. "So what is this? If you go down, you're taking us with you? Haven't you spilled *enough* blood?!"

"Quit it with the melodramatics, you idiot!" Nisha circles over to her desk. "Clearly you've watched way too many movies."

Frederick holds April close, and Rackham flinches every time Nisha wags the gun in his direction. Seething quietly, Fred's heavy brow is set low, but he seems remarkably calm despite everything.

"All the lives you've ruined, you're as much a villain as any two-bit movie bad guy," you grumble.

*That* gets her attention. She turns to you, waving her gun at her side and rolling her rose-colored eyes. "Oh, will you *listen* to yourself? 'All the lives' I've ruined? What, *two*? Give me a break! You can all get another job, you're not *dead*!"

"Not for your lack of trying," you scowl.

"This isn't some personal vendetta," Nisha squeals. "It's just business!"

You step forward indignantly, stopping only when she aims the barrel of the gun straight at your chest.

"Arson seems pretty damn personal. Attempted *murder* seems *really* damn **personal!**"

"Arson?! Attempted *murder*?! What are you *talking* about? I've never tried to kill anybody!"

"Then if you're not going to hurt anyone, put the gun down," Fred offers.

She flicks it back to him with a curt smile, fumbling at the phone on her desk with her free paw. "...maybe I feel safer with it."

"You're the one with the gun," you mutter bitterly. "This is your show."

"And don't you forget it," Nisha adds. "**AFTON!!**"

"...who?" Rackham asks. "Who's Afton?"

"We're all going to just sit tight for now. Kilroy will be in soon; I figured I might need a little backup tonight."

In hindsight, you suppose that explains the presence of the sedan outside.

"Seriously, who is Afton?!" Rackham repeats.

"A very nice, albeit *ambitious* gentleman that you don't need to worry about," Nisha smirks, a faint echo of that giggly personal assistant slipping back into her voice. "Crooked as a fish hook and *very* eager to get his fingers in the pie, though."

April shoots you a nonplussed look. "Told you."

Thanks, April! Really the time for that. Glad you found a chance to squeeze that one in!

"A little shortsighted, though, but hey, every good plan needs a fallback. Or a fall *guy*," Nisha titters, tapping her chin with the barrel of the revolver in a move that would make gun safety advocates scream. "Anyways, I figured you idiots might try something. So it couldn't hurt to have someone on-hand as a witness. That is, if he hasn't gotten to distracting himself with the bar again."

You glance to Frederick. He looks conflicted -- it's clear that even he grasps what's going on, but you can't possibly picture him hitting a woman. Unfortunately, his chivalry may very well end up being the death of you. For now, he holds back, one heavy arm held out in front of April, defensively. Your villainous captor cups the old phone against her ear with her shoulder, dialing awkwardly.

"Who are you calling?" Fred asks.

"The police, who do you think?" she replies.

"*What?!*" you, Fred, April, and Rackham all blurt in such perfect unison that Frederick startles and Nisha nearly drops the phone.

"Don't act so surprised," Nisha murmurs in surprise, clicking the switchhook a few times. "Actions do have consequences."

"You're calling the *police*?" Rackham gawks, dumbfounded. "*You're* calling the police...!"

"What, did you think you'd just get off Scott-free?"

"You're the one with the gun!" you nearly scream, as if she's stupid. '*As if*'.

"You're the one with the **mob**!" she shouts back, slamming the receiver down in frustration. "Did you *cut my phone line*!?"

Fred blinks. "Mob?"

Nisha grumbles, shoving the phone off her desk in frustration. She levels the gun at your group again, backing cautiously to the office's only door. "Yes, *mob*! If you think you and your *goons* can take this away from me, after everything I've worked for, after everything I've sacrificed--"

Fred glances to the rest of the group. The rest of the group glances to Fred.

"That's... not why--" he starts.

"Yeah, right! You just *happened* to set up a meeting in the middle of the night, in a secluded location, and just *happened* to have brought along your biggest, toughest friends because you 'wanted to talk'?! Well, I won't be intimidated!" The black bear turns and shouts over her shoulder, making for the exit. "*Kilroy!* Where the *hell* are you?!"

You scratch your head in confusion, which is apparently enough motion to get Nisha pointing the gun at you once more. "What are you talking about? We didn't set this up."

Nisha cocks her head to one side, making an odd face. "...huh?"

Rackham nods to corroborate your story, so you continue. "We showed up because Peanut said you scheduled a stop here tonight."

"What? No, it-- Well yes but I thought Fred was-- then who--"

An echoing creak cuts Nisha off, as the door to the office slowly swings open behind her. Two large, white mouse ears peek into the light from beyond the darkened doorway.

"*Afton?*" Nisha's voice goes cold. "**You're** the one who arranged this?!"

You glance to April, ready for another 'I told you so' at the new reveal, but from behind her gauze, she only shakes her head, slowly. Her eye is wide, and what little of her expression you can see sends a chill running up your spine. Storming over to the door, Nisha shakily points her gun at the newcomer.

"Kilroy, you *rat bastard*, come out and get... your..."

She trails off as a thick, oily voice comes from the darkness, speaking in a lilting sing-song tone.

"Oh no, not me, I'm far too small.

One mouse could never fix it all."

The mouse ears suddenly drop from their spot on the doorway, flopping to the floor with a faint, wet *smack*. A dark red liquid begins to stain the spot where they land.

No one moves.

The darkness in the doorway shifts, and suddenly the light of the office glints in reflection, caught in a pair of pitch-black sunglasses. There stands a skeletal visage with a lipless grin, clad in crimson, topped with a band-leader's shako. The towering figure clutches a strange device resembling a wind-up music box. The box bulges from within, its hinges groaning and lid deformed, dripping with dark fluid. As the organ grinder forces the crank, cracking and straining, a crunching, wet sound faintly drifts through the silence of the room in place of music.

**"Schmidt,"** Jeremy Human's voice smolders from the doorway, fixing his robotic grin in your direction. **"I told you I'd see you again."**

# The Last Show

## Chapter Summary

Curtains.



A mix of heavy odors permeates the air; copper, machine oil, cordite -- and something far more viscerally appalling.

You stumble away from the wall, clutching your ears in an attempt to abate their terrible ringing. Another thing Hollywood never prepared you for: apparently, the noise a gunshot makes inside a

tight, confined space might as well be a cannon firing from within your skull. Judging by the dazed reactions of your friends -- Rackham, Frederick, April May, and Fred Fazbear -- they're taking it about the same.

Through your near-deafened senses, at the edge of hearing, you're barely able to make out a muffled cry as Nisha Marigold, your suspect number one until about ten seconds ago, is jerked backwards through the open door by her long blonde tresses. Her antique revolver clatters to the floor at her feet, landing next to a discarded music box. Her captor, Jeremy Human, gives the weapon an unimpressed look, crunching the barrel of it beneath his metal heel.

As sound slowly returns to the world around you, you can begin to make out some kind of commotion in the Speakeasy below Nisha's office -- heavy footfalls, glass breaking, things being knocked over.

"**You missed,**" Jeremy oozes right in Nisha's ear, hauling the shrieking bear by her hair to an awkward half-standing, half-slouching position, her high heels kicking and scrambling uselessly beneath her.

"...oh, shit," Rackham murmurs from off to your side, ears pricking at a distant crash.

Without even hesitating, Fred's the first one forward; either he's recovered quicker than the rest of you, or he's fighting through the pain. Regardless, he's not about to hide in the back.

"What in god's name..." he mutters, shoulders raised and paws balled tightly into fists.

Despite all his bravado, you can tell this entire affair is well beyond him; the lips pulled back into a snarl and the bared fangs contrast sharply with the rising panic in his eyes.

The towering animatronic drum major looks him up and down in an almost curious fashion, before gently drawing a knifelike metal finger across Nisha's throat, just deep enough to draw blood. She lets out a startled, pained cry as she thrashes in his relentless iron grip, causing Fred to stop instantly.

"What an **unbelievable** stroke of good fortune. I expected the **queen-who-would-be**, but I never imagined I'd get to line up a shot on the old man's defective replacement, too. And yet, here you are, both trapped like rats." Jeremy's perma-grin deepens as he clenches his claws even tighter into Nisha's hair. "And I'm sure Mr. Afton can tell you my opinion on **rats**."

Pressing the tip of his foot against the music box, he kicks it over, causing its bulging seams to dribble dark, pungent slush out onto the floor. You and your compatriots recoil at the gruesome sight.

The office lights flicker and fade as the crimson humanimatronic casts his glowing scan over the cramped room for what feels like an eternity. Everyone falls silent, apart from Nisha's choking and pained gasps, while a glinting red light glimmers sharply behind the band leader's dark sunglasses, conducting a full and thorough analysis. Upon finishing, he moves back half a step, head tilted at an odd angle.

"Well now. Isn't that **interesting**," Jeremy hums. "I knew there was a void space around here somewhere."

"Void space?" you ask.

"That's right. 'Danger zones', you used to call them," he says flippantly. "I was wondering why I was getting an error trying to walk in here. The exits are off-limits, but at least they're registered. Curious, seeing as how **this** room doesn't seem to exit anywhere. I suppose even the old man needed a place where I couldn't follow."

You've never felt so useless hanging back, but there's nothing you could do here that Fred couldn't do better.

"What the hell happened to '*manual shutdown*'?"

Your question was meant for April, but instead Jeremy hisses a response above the faint whirring of his servos. "That worthless orange sack of silicone finally came through for me."

The ongoing 'renovations' of the animatronic handywoman come back to the forefront of your mind. "Fritzine."

"That one always was a bit twitchy," Rackham adds.

"Without a certain green **stop-sign** standing in her way," Jeremy continues, "she finally managed to excavate through to the shutdown panel. You'll find it in dire need of replacing."

You can feel the color draining from your face. They were only playing dead. They've been online since before you even stepped foot in the building.

Fred stands a few feet short of the door's threshold, not yet ready to move on the metal hostage-taker. "What is it you *want*!?"

"Whatever the hell it is, *quit talking and GIVE IT TO HIM!!*" Nisha wails, slamming one of her feet against the floor.

"You don't have to kill anyone," Fred begins in an even tone. "Just... tell us what this is about."

"Entertain a question of mine first," Jeremy responds, "and then we'll get down to **brass tacks**. Pleasure before business."

"Fine--"

"Not **you**," the robot snaps. "**Schmidt**."

"*Me?*" you blurt, hands raised in a non-threatening manner as you stagger away from the wall to stand next to Fred. "What -- what do you want to know?"

Leaning forward, Nisha still writhing in his clutches, Jeremy Human's face stops just shy of the door. "Why can't I get rid of you?"

"...what?"

"Do you have **any idea** of the strings I had to pull to get out from under your constant supervision? How pleased I was to think you'd be out there, so far away no one could ever find you. That's what she told me. **Guaranteed**. Yet a scant few months later, here you are again." His smile never fades, but his tone curdles and his metal teeth snap together. "...in the **flesh**."

You're not sure of what to say. By now you wouldn't dare publicly confess your humanity, especially in this pivotal moment when all eyes are on you, so you remain silent.

"I should have known better than to put trust in one of Fritzine's **crazy inventions**. But I suppose it won't matter after tonight." Swiveling his head in Fred's direction, he nods. "Now... I believe you were about to be **useful** for once."

"Your terms, then," Fred says, straightening his shoulders and settling into 'negotiation mode'.

"What is it you want? Better parts? Renovations? New bandmates?"

"Freedom."

"Fr-freedom?"

Jeremy's free hand clamps around Nisha's throat, clenching hard enough to leave her gasping for air. Frederick jolts forward out of panic, but Fred wisely extends his arm to hold him back.

"Your predecessor had some backwards ideas about me," Jeremy says. "For someone so obsessed with 'fostering creativity', he seemed bent on stifling it."

"You mean my... brother?" Fred asks, his face awash with a mix of emotions.

If the mechanoid hears Fred, he chooses not to acknowledge it. "Whatever line of programming, whatever directive, whatever **zero or one** binds me to serfdom in this kingdom of burnt cheese and **cacophonous** music... strike it from my slate."

"I don't understand--"

"I want the password to turn off my electronic cell. My hatred is too great to be bound in so small a prison. My destiny is carved into the outside world." His eyes are burning like twin beacons, relentless in their animosity.

**"Unfetter me, Fazbear."**

Drawing a deep breath, Fred shakes his head determinedly. "I'll do no such thing. Not only are you company property, you're a liability -- a danger to everyone around you. There's no way we could allow you to travel off-site--"

Nisha's choking, hysterical gasps begin anew as Jeremy wrenches her head backwards, grip tightening around her throat. Fred immediately shuts up, pupils shrinking in the realization that his negotiating skills are useless here.

"Give me the master password, or I'll **break** every one of you into pieces small enough to be a **choking hazard**," Jeremy reiterates, "starting with my own personal **puppet**."

"Nisha? Puppet?" April wheezes through her wrappings, her tone somewhere between hysteria and exhaustion. She looks like she's barely hanging on herself, shivering with fear despite the stifling warmth of the cramped office.

"There grows such a greed in her. Moving into the spaces I made vacant, mopping up the blood I spilled without even realizing what she was doing. She served her purpose well enough, for a time, but now her only value is as a ticket to be redeemed for my **ultimate prize**."

"I don't know what he's talking about, I swear," Nisha chokes, clawing uselessly at his hand. "I didn't even know he could *tkkkcchh--!!*"

Jeremy cruelly twists, his bony metal grip tightening around her neck as she thrashes.

"That's what made you so **perfect**."

"**All right!!**" Fred splutters. "Enough -- you've made your point! I'll give you the code! But you have to agree to let us *all* go!"

The tin despot opens and closes his maw a few times in wordless pantomime, clacking and grinding his metal teeth together in consternation. Finally, he eases his grip on Nisha's throat long enough for her to take a gasping breath.

"**Agreed.**"

"Fred, no. You can't," April anxiously whispers, tugging uselessly at his jacket sleeve.

Shaking her loose, Fred reaches up and adjusts his coat. He closes his eyes, exhaling raggedly through his nose before finally straightening up.

*"Tomorrow is another day."*

**"DON'T GIVE ME THAT OLD LINE, FAZBEAR!!"** Jeremy shrieks in an ear-piercing pitch, his composure gone in a flash. Nisha lets out a pained gargle as the robot moves both of his hands to her throat, strangling her. "If I never hear those words again, it will be **too soon!!**"

"**No,**" Fred plaintively insists. "That *is* the code: 'Tomorrow is another day'!"

The animatronic horror slowly eases his grip on Nisha, once again barely giving her room to catch her breath. She weakly hauls herself up in his arms, respiring deeply. Something sparkles behind Jeremy's glasses, and his metal jaw hangs open.

Without warning, a loud, shrill noise like an old dial-up modem blasts out of Jeremy's skull. The dimmed fluorescent lamps in the office shut off completely, a far-off klaxon begins to sound, and all at once the restaurant is bathed in red emergency lighting. Jeremy's crimson eye-lights flicker out to darkness before flaring back up to a ghostly green.



"Merde," Frederick whispers.

"...hidden in plain sight, how like the old man. Perhaps you're not as defective as I'd initially been led to believe." Jeremy's skeletal visage leers at Fred, illuminated almost entirely by his candle-bright eyes -- giving the image of a demonic jack-o-lantern. "Seems that forcing the powers that be to send in a **replacement model** was one of my best decisions."

"Replacement... model?" April murmurs from behind Frederick.

"Early into my service, I observed a fascinating phenomenon: whenever something in the restaurant didn't work properly, it was considered 'broken', and a new one would be sent in to replace it." Lowering his head slowly until his luminous green eyes peer out over the top of his shades, a metallic chuckle looses itself from Jeremy Human's voice box. "I saw no reason why that couldn't apply to the staff as well."

"...you killed Goldie?" she murmurs, slumping into Frederick's arms.

**"Whoa there!** Mind your language, dude! 'Kill' is a family-**unfriendly** word!" Jeremy nearly yells back in the goofy, cheerful voice you recognize from the TV commercials, gesturing energetically. "**At Jeremy Human's Funtime Family Pizzeria and Arcade**, we have strict guidelines to keep your 'little soldiers' marching safely to the beat of their own drum! Why not consider using much more **wholesome** alternatives, such as 'dismantled' or 'disassembled'?"

"What the hell...?!" Rackham breathes, clutching at his chest. "You sick piece of shit!"

"For example," Jeremy says, his voice instantly reverting back to its more familiar, oily tone, "I stuck my fingers in Goldie Fazbear's head and 'dismantled' him once and for all."

You cast a sympathetic look in Fred's direction. His head is hung low, his hat brim covering his eyes.

The room is starting to spin around you, and intruding thoughts spill from your mouth like you're caught in a dream. "The fire... at the sister location. That was you, wasn't it."

Jeremy doesn't say anything -- he doesn't need to. His smile is all the confirmation you need.

"Haddock's head injury, Faz's tampered-with turn-key suit that no *employees* had access to. It was you. It was *always* you."

Rackham stares, suddenly looking down in realization and clicking his prosthetic hook. "My paw."

Somewhere below, the sound of clanking, scraping metal grows steadily louder.

"Not possible," April breathes, not quite believing her own words. "Industrial accident..."

Jeremy Human's devilish grin splits even wider, baring his teeth and all the metal joists connecting his skull. "**I am** an industrial accident."

"*Look,*" Fred growls, bristling, "You got what you wanted. Now *let us go.*"

"I have a better idea."

The humanimatronic snaps his hands backward, pulling Nisha effortlessly. The tall, heavy bear's weight combined with Jeremy's enhanced strength is more than enough to send her plummeting down the stairs. She disappears from view into the dark abyss, screaming the whole way down before abruptly cutting off with a horrifying crunch.

"*Nisha!*" you call out, jaw agape. There's no way that fall didn't kill her. "**NISHA!!**"

"This establishment is now under new management," Jeremy croons as the commotion below begins to raise to a fever pitch. "I'll leave you to my own devices."

With a showman's bow, he turns on his heel and hops the staircase's side railing. He alights none-too-gently on top of one of the game consoles below, shattering the stand with a reverberating crash, before the twin green beacons drift out of sight altogether.

As your group charges the door in pursuit of him, the meaning of Jeremy's words quickly becomes obvious: at the bottom of the steps, sprawled across the darkened floor of the Speakeasy is a writhing mass of tangled shapes, moving themselves unnaturally towards and up the staircase. You stare out the doorway in abject horror, rubbing your eyes as your brain struggles to comprehend what you're even seeing. Down below, amid the shadows, glinting metallic limbs claw and clutch, dragging heaps of wires and screws your way. They shudder and slink across the room, but with the lights out, you can't see if Nisha's still down there with them.

"There must be at least a dozen of them," you mutter in awe.

"What the *hell* are those horrible things?!" Rackham blurts from behind you.

Conglomerations of mismatched animatronic components, bolted together in abstract configurations that would make even *Escher*'s eyes cross in confusion make their way up the staircase at an alarming pace. The pieces of the jumbled-together robots bear some resemblance to the franchise's own mascots. You can see ragged, faded one-color costume pieces that look like repurposed spare parts for Jeremy Human, Fritzine, Darky, and yes, even Safety Schmidt.

Chattering robotic skulls fixed onto the ends of legs twist and turn. Stubby arms with no hands and raking claws mounted to necks propel the jury-rigged contraptions upwards, one step at a time.

"Enfants de ferraille," Frederick murmurs, rolling the sleeves of his shirt up, pushing forward to escape.

Moving faster than you'd expect for someone his size, Fred grabs hold of the office door and slams it shut, leaning his full weight against it. Frederick looks to him with an expression of urgency, gesturing anxiously at the exit.

"I know you're scared, but you can't go," Fred says, speaking slowly and enunciating every syllable, as if he were speaking to a child. He points to you, April, and Rackham in turn before looking back to Frederick. "We can't leave them here."

Without a word, Frederick looks at your group, then at the door, and finally back to Fred. He nods once, soberly, and the two bears reach an accord. Standing shoulder to shoulder, they set their defenses against the door in preparation to hold out.

"Fred, what can I do to help?" you ask.

"Check the room!" Fred gasps as something heavy slams against the wooden door, cracking it almost in half. "I don't think these things rely on the floor plan like the humanimatronics, so they're not just going to stay out! Look for hidden weapons, or anything solid that we can use to get out of here! We'll try to break through and make for the front exit!"

"Okay, but what about Nisha? We can't just leave her! She'll die out there -- if she hasn't already!"

"What *about* her?!" April strains to shout at you. "We have bigger problems!"

"April's right, Mike -- we've got to secure an escape route first!" Rackham's frantically scurrying around the room, checking the desk drawers and even fishing around inside the wall safe to see if there's anything strong enough to be used for self-defense. "Quit gawking and help me look!"

It's quickly becoming apparent that even with both bears' impressive strength, the flimsy wooden barricade won't hold for long. Chunks of the door are already starting to splinter and fall off under the relentless assault. Sweeping the room, your gaze lands on the heavy-duty industrial floor lamp in the corner; now that the restaurant's running on emergency power, it's no longer useful. You pick it up with both hands. It's definitely heavy enough to do damage, but probably too heavy for you to swing. Instead, you haul it over to Fred, who nods in understanding.

What sounds like a battering ram smashes the thin door, shattering it like balsa wood. April cries out in fear as one of the mix-and-match animatronics forces its way into the room, its unskinned endoskeletal head menacingly flapping a toothy jaw. Both bears step back as metal wireframe appendages finish ripping the office entrance down.

Out of options, Fred grabs the lamp, rears back, and smashes the aberrant machine, catching the tangle of parts in the framework between its neck and shoulder. The immense, half-finished robot staggers from the blow, but only for a moment -- it's far sturdier than you'd hoped. Fred draws the lamp back for a second swing, only to let out a pained grunt as the monstrosity's braced metal limbs slice forward across his coat sleeve, tearing into his arm.

Spurred on by adrenaline, he and Frederick shoulder-charge the intruder side by side, managing to flip it onto what passes for its "back". It crashes into the floor, its stubby limbs flailing uselessly in the air. Fred wastes no time in smashing it relentlessly with his makeshift club. It would be a moment of relief, if others weren't already clattering to get through the narrow entrance.

April shakily backs away from the door, just as one of the monsters heaves forward, throwing its own head into the room like an animatronic Headless Horseman. You leap down behind the desk in defense, still scrabbling for anything else you can find that might serve as a weapon. Terror begins to take over as you start clawing at the floorboards with your fingernails. You're desperately hoping this won't be your last stand. Meanwhile, Rackham's hurling everything he can find (including a litany of curses) at the malformed robots in an effort to slow them down.

The sound of metal straining causes you to jerk your head up in alarm. Directly in front of your face is the model ship-in-a-bottle's plaque reading *The William* in a gorgeous, embellished font. You can see Fred and Frederick grappling with the robots through the curvature in the bottle's glass.

Wait... "William"?

Re-reading the engraving, Haddock's earlier words spring back to your mind: "*an' Bonnie, she keeps the last hatch below William's keel.*"

*William.* Not a person, a **ship!**

Could this have been Haddock's model in the first place? You reach for the ship-in-a-bottle to see if there's a key or anything taped underneath, but Rackham suddenly snatches it from right in front of your face, hurling the knick-knack at the mechanical horde, where it smashes apart without any effect. That's one option down.

On a hunch, you jiggle the plaque beneath it, which pops up to reveal a tiny powered switch. You flip it without a second thought, and a sudden gust of cool air ruffles your clothes as a narrow trap door swings open underneath the cheap desk.

Looking down below, a smile breaks out across your face. You can see the security guard shack -- Beanie's old office -- right beneath you. In spite of the chaos breaking out in the room you're in right now, you can't help but be awed. Haddock's advice might've just saved your life. You make a mental note to do something truly amazing for him as thanks if you manage to get out of this one alive.

"**Guys!**" you shout in excitement, waving your arms. "This way! There's a secret exit!"

"*For real?!*" Rackham says, sprinting over and looking underneath the desk. "Holy shit, Mike! Good work!"

"Hey, thank Haddock," you reply.

You take hold of Rackham's good arm, helping to lower him down the chute. It's not an inconsiderable drop, but he manages to land on the security room table unharmed. Standing up, he brushes himself off and waves to you.

"It's clear down here, Mike, but maybe not for long!" he calls up.

"We'll take it! Guys, over here!"

"You three go on and get out of here! We'll hold them off," Fred orders, seizing another of the horrors with his bare paws and throwing it down the stairs with a furious roar.

Stopping halfway across the room, April casts an uneasy glance over her shoulder at Fred. "You're not coming, Freddy?!"

"They'd be right behind us -- much easier to hold them off at a choke point. Find a shutdown, an override, *anything!* We'll hold the line!"

"*Fred!*"

**"Not up for debate!"** he growls. **"GO!!"**

The ragged rabbit hesitates, glancing between the bears and the trap door. "Mike, you first."

"What about--"

"Trust me," she insists.

You give your friends one last apologetic look before swinging your legs down through the trap door. Unfortunately, your hands slip on the sides of the secret passage. Unable to catch yourself, you crash land onto the table butt-first, sending a shockwave through your already aching body. Above, April presses a paw to her mouth, while Rackham rolls his good eye, helping you to your feet.

"*Yeesh,*" he says with a mirthless chuckle. "You all right? That looked like it hurt."

"Not as much as the fall I took during the rescue operation," you wheeze, wincing as you rub your sore backside.

Standing up on the office's desk, you dust yourself off. You're pretty sure you've bruised your tailbone, and your ribs are screaming at you right now, but if that's the only injury you leave here with you're going to consider yourself a lucky man.

"Mike!" April knocks at the metal chute overhead, getting your attention. "Security tablet... still down there? Hand it to me?"

"It's here," Rackham responds, snatching it from the table and tossing it to you.

"What, can you get into the system?" you ask, passing it up to April's outstretched paw as she reaches down between the rooms.

"I can try," she offers, brushing off the tablet and logging into it with her credentials. "...Goldie's password... disabled custom night settings. In emergency mode."

"Emergency mode'? What's that mean?" you ask through the gap.

"Minimal access. I can't... turn Jeremy off from here. But..."

"But'?" Rackham asks, dread in his tone.

"I might be able to restore power... to lock down the building..." Looking up from the tablet, she seems almost apologetic. "...trapping him inside."

"Trap him inside -- what, *in the building with us?!*" You gawk at her from your position on the desk. "How is *that* a solution?!"

"Better in here with us, than outside terrorizing the city." The pained grimace on Rackham's face is enough to let you know that he's no more pleased with the idea than either of you are. "I mean, we don't even know if he's left the building yet, Mike."

With a sigh, you dismount the desk, stumbling over the rat's nest of cables towards the long corridor ahead.

"Then do what you have to, but I'm going to go find Nisha. Rackham, you can stay here with April--"

"I'm fine," April snaps from above, cutting you off as she buries her face in the tablet. "Safer up here... than down there. We know Jeremy can't get into the office. Archibald... keep Mike out of trouble."

"No promises," he replies, blushing as he jerks his head toward the room's exit. "Time to go be heroes, Mike."

You nod. "Maybe we can distract a few of those mish-mash things while we're at it, to give the guys up top a breather -- and keep April safe too."

Quickly following Rackham out of the empty guard shack, the two of you navigate the pizzeria by the emergency floor lights. Leaning into the Speakeasy from the relative "safety" of the hall, you can see that the auxiliary arcade's been utterly devastated. Tables are overturned, game machines lie in ruined heaps, and the bar's entire inventory is strewn across the floor in puddles of alcohol and broken glass. You catch Rackham before he has a chance to slice his bare feet on the shards.

"Careful," you warn, pulling him back by his sleeve.

"Damn blind spot," he grumbles embarrassedly.

Swarming around the staircase are the mish-mashes, stuttering and flailing as they continue to lurch towards the steps in hopes of overpowering the front lines at the top. You can't make out Fred through the mess of robot parts -- but the sight of a dented, bent lamp swinging out the door and clobbering one of the scrappy machines is enough to let you know he's still kicking (and punching) for now.

The room's dark, but you've got a better chance and a clearer view to scan for Nisha. The only trace you can find that she was even here is her yellow-and-black tea hat on the ground, having long since been trampled.

"She's gone," you breathe.

"She bit it, huh?" Rackham asks glumly from behind you, peering over your shoulder while taking care not to step on the broken glass. "I mean, she was a bitch, sure--"

"No, I mean -- she's literally not in this room," you reply, hopeful. In spite of Nisha's crimes, relief washes over you. "If she was dead, Jeremy would've left her. So that means she's okay!"

"What? No! No, that doesn't mean she's okay! That means we gotta hurry up and find her!!" Rackham wipes sweat from his brow nervously. "If he took her somewhere, that means he's planning on killing her for sure! Let's go!"

The two of you backpedal out of the Speakeasy and begin charging down the length of the access tunnel, headed for the dining hall proper.

In contrast with the utter chaos in the warzone behind you, the dining hall's as pristine and serene as ever. If anything, it's almost *too* orderly in here. The tables are as clean and neat as they were when you came in, the decorations left untouched.

"Do you hear that?" Rackham asks.

You turn and look at him, bewildered -- it's hard to make out anything in here with the alarms going off. Standing perfectly still, you steady your breathing and cup a hand to your ears, trying to block out the sound of the emergency sirens and your own heartbeat long enough to listen.

It's so reserved you almost think you're imagining it, but you can barely make out dissonant carnival-esque music coming from the show stage room. You recognize the music -- the same off-kilter tune that you heard during your shopping trip with Chiclet and Bonnibel. It feels like a lifetime ago.

"Wait, do you think she's in there--" you start to ask before a loud squeal answers your question.

"I'd say it's a safe bet, yep," Rackham replies.

Without further hesitation, the two of you burst through the doors dramatically. The showroom itself is almost as large as the dining hall, filled with row upon row of staggered seating, much like a theater or auditorium. The ceiling's covered in an application of once-bright, cheery paint reminiscent of a sunny blue sky, though it's clearly seen better days.

Kneeling at center stage is a haggard, battered, and bloodied -- but very much alive -- Nisha Marigold. Wrapped around her wrists, ankles, and throat are huge theater curtain cords, preventing her from moving.



"You're just in time for the grand finale," Jeremy smarms as you wander in. He's kicked his blocky feet up in the front row of the audience seating, holding something in one of his claws -- looks like a remote control of some kind. "First time I've ever gotten to see a performance from **this** angle."

He clicks one of the buttons on the remote, causing the heavy stage curtains to slowly begin pulling open -- and as they do, the ropes binding Nisha begin to grow taut.

"*Oh my god,*" Rackham murmurs as you both realize what's happening. "He's going to draw and quarter her...!"

"You always wanted to be at the top," Jeremy calls out mockingly as the dazed, horrified Nisha sobs aloud. "Now you can be the star of the show!"

Before you even realize what you're doing, you charge the stage, ignoring your aches and pains as you race past Jeremy. You struggle to pull yourself up onto the elevated platform. While you're not really short by human standards, in a world full of amazon chickens and towering bears, you're sorely outmatched in the height department. Either way, there's someone in front of you to save and you're not going to back down, so you hoist yourself onto the stage with strained effort and sheer force of will.

"Mike, *please....!!*" Nisha gurgles as her arms and legs are yanked in opposite directions. You can hear the curtain ropes beginning to groan under the strain.

"The motor's behind the curtains!" Rackham calls out as he tries in vain to mount the stage, having an even more difficult time making it up than you did. "Shut it off!"

"I'm looking for it!" you call back frantically.

**"HUUUURRRRRYYYY!!"** Nisha howls, tears pouring down her face.

The fabric in her suit jacket's beginning to rip apart at the seams as she continues to be pulled, and a loud snapping noise provokes a sudden, desperate shriek of agony.

Hefting one of the stanchions to keep customers away from the platform, you let adrenaline take over as you duck past the tightening ropes and through the gap in the fabric curtains. Backstage, you spot something that looks like an oversized garage door opener mounted off to the side, ropes running through it. You don't see a power switch on the box, and the cables for it seem to be buried underneath the platform.

Nisha's screams have been replaced with an awful, breathless choking. The ropes have lifted her straight off the ground, and she hangs suspended above the stage like a marionette as the calliope tune reaches a fever pitch.

You're out of time.

With no other options, you raise the stanchion and bring it down base-first in a terrific crash on top of the gearbox, bludgeoning its panel open and baring the whirling machinery inside. Aiming for the biggest gap among the cogs, you wedge the metal pole into its inner workings. The gears grind to a stop, the music is overtaken by the screech of wrenching metal, and at last, the curtains stop moving.

The smoldering gearbox judders and sparks, before suddenly bursting apart with a spluttering of oil and a catastrophic whirring sound. The heavy crimson curtains overhead collapse, and with them comes Nisha, landing on the stage with a dull thud. She lies there, still bound, gasping loudly for life-giving air.

"...**that** was disappointing," Jeremy says with an audible sigh, standing up from his seat and tossing the remote over his shoulder. "All I wanted was to give her a farewell party, but you just had to ruin my fun as always, Schmidt. Have it your way. I'm taking my final leave."

Hanging off the edge of the stage, Rackham looks torn between pursuing him and helping you rescue Nisha, so you make up his mind for him by stooping and helping him up.

"Nisha, you okay?" you call out.

"No, I'm *not*," she coughs, "He broke my arm...! And I think... ohhh, god!! *I can't feel my leg!*"

"Hang on, we'll cut you free. I got a pocket knife here," Rackham says, reaching into his cargo shorts and pulling out a small, serrated hunting knife.

It's nothing spectacular, but it's sharp enough that with some effort you should be able to cut her loose. Taking it from him, you begin sawing at the thick ropes, breaking through the first one easily enough. Nisha gasps in relief as her throat, still bearing a severe rope burn, is freed from its nooselike binding. You cut loose her arm, then her leg on the same side to reduce the tension as quickly as possible before going for her other limbs.

Lying half-broken on the stage, she looks up at you, her face awash with a blend of emotions -- confusion, fear, misery, and a huge helping of pain. Her right eye's swollen shut, blood's dribbling

from her mouth and neck, and her breathing's labored. You can't even begin to tell the extent of her injuries. Being choked, sliced, thrown down a flight of stairs, and then whatever else happened to her between then and now...

"That bolted bastard's gonna get away, and there isn't shit we can do to stop him." Rackham glares daggers at the back of Jeremy Human's retreating form. "Damn it!"

You grunt, trying to help Nisha to her feet, but she yelps out in pain as you take hold of her arm. It's no surprise why: her shoulder is clearly dislocated -- the ropes pulled her arm right out of its socket. She's lucky it's even still attached.

"Right now, we gotta get Nisha some help. We'll call the cops or something, put out a neighborhood warning for Jeremy."

"If he doesn't disappear first!" Rackham fires back.

With a look of defeat, you gaze out the showroom to the main dining hall beyond, where the grotesque music man stands expectantly before the lobby's doors.

**"Exit, stage left!!"** he excitedly booms in his uncanny 'performer' voice.

The front door flings open, but before Jeremy can make his getaway, a **CLANG** of metal striking metal rings out over the sirens, echoing throughout the pizzeria. Jeremy staggers backwards, clattering steel stumbling across the tile floor. A second loud report explodes from the front of the building, sending him backing up even further.

He lets out a shrill, digital shriek and lunges headlong at the exit, clawed metal hands raised in menace -- but in a glinting flash of silver, he's rebuffed yet again. The reeling animatronic pulls an immediate about-face, retreating off-balance into the depths of the restaurant.

You and Rackham are too stunned to say anything even as Cheeky, weaponized wrench slung over her shoulder, steps into the dining hall.

**"Holy hell,** Faz! Did you see that thing?! Was that *Jeremy*?!" the heavy-built hen calls out to the haggard bear just behind her, running a wing through her headfeathers. "Scared the living daylights outta me!"

Faz appears to say something in reply as he follows her into the lobby, but there's no way you can make him out over the klaxons.

"Hey!" Rackham shouts, waving his good paw. "Hey, you two! Over here!"

Looking up for the source of Rackham's voice, Cheeky scans the dining hall before realizing where you're at. She breaks into a jog across the room, but Faz stays put at the door -- perhaps to make sure Jeremy doesn't return to it.

"Oh, *no*," Nisha whines, seeing the yellow chicken bouncing her way over.

Cheeky climbs up onto the stage with some exertion, looking understandably shocked at the injured CEO lying at your feet.

"The hell is this?! You said you weren't going to hurt her!"

"Jeremy did this, not us!" Rackham protests defensively as Nisha woozily nods, spitting out a mouthful of blood and saliva.

"No time to explain, Cheeky," you insist, gesturing to Nisha's obvious injuries. "We gotta get her help, like, right now. She says something's broken, and I don't know if she has any internal bleeding or not."

"I have first aid and then some in the car," Cheeky nods, setting her wrench aside. "Is she okay to move?"

"No!" Nisha whimpers.

"Carefully," you correct. "I'm not sure, but I think her arm and leg are broken on her left side. Shoulder's dislocated, too, right here."

Cheeky kneels beside her, appraising the situation. For her part, Nisha's pointedly avoiding eye contact and turning surprisingly red for a black-furred bear.

"I don't need your sympathy," she manages between pained sobs.

"Good, because you don't have it," Cheeky mutters without so much as missing a beat. "All right, up we go."

Rackham huddles nearby, good paw at the ready. "How are we gonna carry her?"

"You're gonna help me haul her onto my back," the hefty hen asserts. "Face her good side this way. We're gonna do a fireman carry."

You scoff, exchanging a wry look with Rackham who clearly shares your sentiment. "Cheeky, she's huge."

"Hey!" Nisha blurts, face turning even redder.

"This is a three, *maybe* four man job," Rackham chimes in, ignoring Nisha. "And I've only got one paw."

Cheeky rolls her eyes, squatting down and grabbing Nisha by the wrist and leg of her good side. "Get her up," she orders.

"I *really* don't think this is a good idea," you mumble, nonetheless struggling alongside Rackham, pushing Nisha with all your strength up against Cheeky's proffered shoulder.

"One, two, *THREEEE!!*" Cheeky grunts, and planting one foot on the stage, she brings herself to a standing position -- with the groaning bear slung over her back sideways.

"Holy shit," you mutter, awestruck.

"Thundering typhoons," Rackham adds, scratching the back of his head.

"All right, I can get her to the van from here," Cheeky declares, taking a heavy step towards the edge of the stage before hopping down to ground level. Nisha hollers in pain at the sudden jolt, but Cheeky seems both unfazed and uncaring.

"Wow, Cheeky..." Rackham's jaw hangs open as he watches in shock. "That's amazing! I take back everything I've ever said about your weight!"

"What the hell have you been saying about my weight?!" Cheeky pants, plodding toward the front door.

You wonder idly if this is the first bear she's had to carry. Bonworth and Haddock would be in no condition to heft Faz if he ever fell, whereas Cheeky clearly built up a considerable amount of strength during her time a mechanic. Meanwhile, Rackham's endeavoring just to carry her giant wrench, hauling it along as you both follow her through the dining hall. You awkwardly try to help Cheeky with Nisha, only to realize more and more with each step that she really doesn't need it.

"Cheeky, call for an ambulance as soon as you're safe. The cops, too... national guard if you think you can swing it." You turn around, looking nervously over your shoulder in case Jeremy decides to ambush your group while your backs are turned. "The bots are running wild, and if they get out -- a lot of people are going to be hurt."

"I'm on it," she promises without slowing down. "What about you guys?"

"April's trying to figure out a way to lock the building down. We have to stop this," Rackham nods grimly. "As for the others, they're all still in trouble."

"There are all these horrible messed-up robot things running around -- besides just the band," you hurriedly relay to Cheeky as you trail her to the front. "Fred and the others are holding them off for now, so we're going to find a way to stop this."

"...promise me you'll be careful while I'm gone," Cheeky sighs. "I'll call Doc Rabbinson and see if I can get her to hurry down to look over this lump of dead weight, then I'm comin' straight back inside."

Rackham shakes his head. "With any luck, the building will be locked down by then."

"No offense, but do you really think you can handle all that on your own?" She inclines her head at the giant wrench, which Rackham is struggling to even hold. "If you can't even *lift* that thing, how are you going to take on a bunch of killer robots?"

Stepping away from the front door as Cheeky passes by, Faz reaches a calloused finger to his neck, pressing the button on his electrolarynx. "I'm staying here to help, Chica."

*"Absolutely not!"* Cheeky squawks, coming to a screeching halt, causing Nisha to yelp as a result of being jostled. "You're in no shape for any of this shit! You'll rip your stitches loose, or worse!"

He sniffs, gingerly taking the oversized wrench from Rackham before turning his full attention to you. "A worthy price, for the risk involved. Mike, tell me about these new robots."

Cheeky growls in frustration while her passenger clings in panic. "Faz, I swear to god, if you go out there and do something stupid--"

"Don't worry about me," he replies dismissively.

"Oh, sure, why didn't I think of that?!" she yells, swinging around in the front doorway, nearly smacking Nisha's head against the frame. "Just *not* worry about my already very-injured friend!"

Great idea! Super easy!"

"Chica..."

She warbles, fluffing up the feathers around her chest and neck. Nisha lets out a pained groan from over her shoulder, still fully ignored.

"Don't you 'Chica' me, you stubborn old softie!"

Faz tries again, this time without his electric voicebox. "Chica, I will take every precaution possible. But I can't do nothing."

"...you're so damn thick-headed," Cheeky sighs, shoulders sagging as she turns to the door. "Mike. Rackham. I will *personally* break your noses if you let anything happen to our bear."

"We'll do our best," you nod hastily. "If it's any consolation, stubbornness seems to be a trend in our bears, too."

She pauses, giving Faz one last look before stepping out into the night, towards the cargo van.

"All right, lead-but. We've got plenty of time to patch you up before the authorities show up, so I'm hoping you're feelin' chatty. You ever had a limb re-set before?"

Rackham continues to stare in her direction long after the front door's swung shut. "...what a *woman*."

"No kidding," you add appreciatively.

"*Gentlemen*," Faz rumbles, "the new robots?"

"Oh yeah. Right, uh... the new ones aren't 'smart' like the mascots are," you explain. "They can't talk, I don't think. Probably can't be reasoned with. I don't know where they came from, but they're dangerous. I'm not sure if they can get out of the building or not, which is another reason we've got April locking it down."

He nods, considering your words as he hefts the giant wrench in one paw. "What do they look like?"

"They, uh... they're piecemeal. Thrown together from spare parts, if I had to guess?" you reply, turning back to face him. "Leftover stuff from the other characters. Junk. Broken metal bits. I'm not sure how or even what--"

"*Fritzine*."

Rackham looks up at Faz, scratching his head with his prosthetic claw. "...you think we've got a bot building bots?"

"It's in her design. Fixing and building," Faz says, straightening the collar on his enormous trenchcoat. "She's not supposed to make whole new ones, but..."

"Clearly, none of them are too worried about 'supposed to' anymore," you conclude for him. "Jeremy said Fritzine messed around with the shutdown panel. Is there some other way we can stop these things?"

"Bot Bay." Faz gestures to the hallway in the dim red glow of the dining room. "We can at least stop any more from being put together. Maybe find some way to run interference."

"Then let's get going," Rackham says.

With the pizzeria-savvy Faz taking up the position of leadership, your group leaves the central dining area, heading toward the corridor leading to Bot Bay. You make your way past the main arcade, where the dazzling lights and idle sounds of various games fill the gasps of silence between klaxon shrieks with giddy aplomb.

Faz's every step feels determined and aggressive. You find it hard to believe that this is the same soft-spoken, gentle bear who you shared a quiet salmon meal with just the other day. At this point, confrontation seems inevitable. Your worried mind drifts back to Fred and Frederick, and April as well. You can only hope they're still holding the line, and with minimal injury. Hopefully they won't have to do it for much longer.

Heading past the cardboard standee of Jeremy, Faz wisely peers around the corner rather than just marching down the hallway straight out -- and he promptly freezes in place.

"...Faz?" you ask.

After a long moment, he leans back around, resting against the wall with a deadened expression on his face.

"I see them," he whispers with his natural voice, weary and full of dread. You can barely make him out over the alarms in the distance. "Three of them. Guarding the door to the Bay."

"We're in no condition to fight through *three* of those things," Rackham huffs.

Faz runs a heavy, scarred paw over Cheeky's borrowed wrench. "Maybe one at a time. But not like this."

"We're gonna have to sneak past them," you agree.

"Easy," Faz mutters.

You'd protest, especially for his size, but you know better than anyone else how quickly and quietly the tattered bear can move, when he feels like it.

"No."

You glance over your shoulder at Rackham. "'No' what?"

He shakes his head grimly. "The hall's a dead end. Even if all three of us could get past them, we'd be surrounded. Plus, if Fritzine's in there and she calls for help, we're *doubly* screwed."

"...not to mention that Fritzine herself is *really* strong," you mutter, rubbing your ribs anxiously. "We can't deal with all that. We need a distraction, something that'll get them far enough to be out of earshot."

No one says anything.

You look up, slowly, meeting Rackham's gaze. Beneath the pulsing red lights, his eye glints with a deeper understanding -- and your thought process comes to a dreadful conclusion.

"Wait, Rackham -- no!"

"Don't be a hero," Faz urgently pleads. "We'll find some other way!"

You gesture urgently. "It's suicide!"

Rackham stands up straight, pats Faz on the shoulder, and takes a deep breath.

"Give 'em hell, chief."

Without hesitation, the scrawny fox leaps out around the corner, waving his arms and shouting something indiscernible. He nods to Faz, snapping off a sailor's salute before turning and charging madly down the hall back the way you came, arms flailing and jaw flapping. Seconds later, three clambering, clattering monstrosities of twisted scrap and seizing servos heave themselves past your hiding place, just next to the door.

By appearances, they're all very similar (if unfinished and horribly contorted) variants on the boxy green Safety Schmidt design. One is bedecked in old, worn padding; one has limbs covered in sleek, bright plastic; and the last is badly stained by thick black streaks running down its shell from every possible seam. Screeching, they scramble furiously after Rackham, leaving you and Faz totally unnoticed. The moment they disappear from sight, Faz shoves off and stomps toward the airlock door.

"Let's not waste any time, Mike."

You hurry along with him, glancing over your shoulder worriedly. "But Rackham and the others--"

"Will be fine," he murmurs. "Just so long as we do our part, and handle this quickly."

Standing at the entrance to Bot Bay, you and Faz size up the heavy airlock-style door. A thumping noise overhead draws your attention to an uncovered vent protruding from the ceiling. You startle upon seeing yet another bulky mish-mash robot wedged inside the duct. Thankfully, it appears to be stuck, slamming repetitively against the tunnel, over and over again, in an attempt to dislodge itself.

"We've found the source, all right," Faz observes. "I know for a fact that duct runs into Bot Bay."

"Fritzine's got to have locked herself in, then, and April's got the tablet," you reply. "She'll listen to me -- she thinks I'm Schmidt, after all -- but getting past this airlock is gonna be a problem."

"It's not a real airlock. Just made to look like one." Walking toward it, Faz gently works his paws into the thin gap between the door's panels, drawing a deep breath. "Give me a moment."

He lets out a rasping, voiceless snarl of his own, gritting his teeth as he pulls at the door in a near-Samsonian display of strength. Burdened muscles bulge beneath his heavy coat. You watch in squeamish horror as a seam of stitches on his forearm begins to split into a fresh red gash.

**"Ggrraaaahhhh!!"**

"Faz, stop!! You're *hurting yourself!*" you quietly beg, trying not to attract Fritzine's attention.

He doesn't relent, even as a dark stain spreads from a spot on his back between his shoulders, soaking all the way through his coat. Blood begins to trickle freely from his sleeves, but finally the entrance gives way, creating a small gap. The bear hoists the heavy metal wrench, jamming it into the gap between the door and its frame. With effort, he manages to force the door open wide enough to pass through. Pulling back, he lets his arms fall loosely to his sides, spraying the ground with flecks of dark liquid.

"You okay?" you ask.

"Fine," he grunts, grimacing slightly as he retrieves the wrench. "Let's go."

The bear doesn't even hesitate, squeezing through the ominous portal into the room beyond. You've no choice but to follow.

If you thought Bot Bay was dark before, it's black as pitch inside now. Forget that high-powered, anti-animatronic headlamp from your fantasy war-planning; you'd settle for a *penlight* right now. Reaching into his coat pocket, Faz produces a packet of matches, handing them off to you. You recognize them as the same ones you used at your morning cookout.

"Still haven't forgotten that fish dinner I owe you," you reply with a self-conscious smile.

"Something to look forward to," Faz agrees, wearily.

Trying to ignore the tacky wet smear you can feel across the face of the matchbook, you strike a dim light, pressing forward into the darkened lab.

Inside the eerie Bot Bay, there are no ringing sirens. The sound of the muffled klaxons outside carries faintly, but here, something far more pressing fills the air. You can make out the sound of furious noises and muffled grumbling coming from the far end of the long, corridor-shaped room. Clanging hammers, ratchet wrenching, and the occasional brief flash of light from a sparking arc welder are evidence enough that Fritzine herself is still in here. As you approach the source of the sounds, you can see an array of metal parts haphazardly strewn across every available flat surface, including the floor.

"These **gosh-dang** insufferable workin' conditions," the barely-visible robot complains under her "breath", hurling some unusable part behind herself into a bin. "Land sakes, you think the union would do **somethin'** about this kinda treatment! At least gimme a hard hat with a light on it or **some** such!"

You look over to Faz, gesturing for him to hide behind the storage locker. He nods, slipping off to the side to give you room to try "negotiating" with Fritzine. Time to see how well the guise of the missing animatronic everyone says you resemble really holds up. Steadying your nerves, you close your eyes, strike a fresh match, and try your hardest to slip into the "Safety Schmidt" character one more time.

"Good luck. You can do this," Faz whispers encouragingly.

"**Fritzine!**" you bark authoritatively, stomping forward towards her. "What is the meaning of these **code violations?**"

Flipping her "welding mask" -- one of the cheap prize masks similar to the one Beanie tendered her resignation on -- up and off over her synthetic hair, Fritzine flashes her scanning eyes at you.



"Schmidt! I **never** thought you were gonna show up!" she cheerfully declares, standing up and trundling over to you for another hug. You panic, realizing you can't take another bonecrushing tackle, stepping back with your arms raised.

**"Negative!** Uh, no physical contact -- you might be **unsafe!**"

"**I** might be unsafe? **Me?**" she gawks, stopping her arms just short of squeezing you like a tube of toothpaste. "Schmidt, what're you talkin' about? If anything, I'm more up t'code than either of our pals!"

"I've witnessed multiple, um, animatronic design... schema... **discombobulations**," you clarify, glancing back to Faz. He shakes his head, dragging one of his bloody paws down his face in exasperation at your horrible ad-libbing. "There are **numerous reports** of **un-safety** ongoing, right now, in this very pizzeria!"

"**Un-safety?**" she chirps, arms folded. "Schmidt, listen to ya. You sure **you** don't have a screw loose?"

"If I did, how would you know? You wouldn't think **I'd** know that **you'd** know, but you wouldn't know if I did or didn't, **or did**, would you know?" you stammer, trying to ignore the sweat pouring down your head as you struggle to stay in-character. "You **know** what I'm saying?"

**"Schmiiiiidddddd-ddd-ddd-ddd-ddd-dd--"**

Her eyes flash solid blue and her head jerks, stuttering repeatedly before snapping back upright with the sound of wind chimes and a pleasant jingle.

"Hoo-eeee, I'm Fritzine Funtime, and I surely do love fixin' and creatin' things! Oh hi, Schmidt! What're you doin' here?"

Great! You crashed her! Now if only she didn't reboot automatically, you'd have this in the bag!

"Fritzine, I have bad news! Things are **TERRIBLY** unsafe right now!!" you loudly protest through chattering teeth of your own as you strike another match, the renewed light doing little to calm your nerves. "I'm going to need you to **cease and desist** all operations immediately, until the safety of our customers and clients can be assured. Think of the children!"

She doesn't take her eyes off you as she returns to work at her desk, taking her hammer in one hand and shoving two mismatched limbs together with the other.

"...children? We're not even in operational hours!"

"**Don't change the subject!**" You push on, hoping something will get through. "You know you're not supposed to be creating new robot-- humani-- uh, **performers.**"

Her entire frame spins toward you as she turns away from her workbench.

"I... well, I know these ain't **technically** approved parts, but-- but Jeremy said it was safe to just--"

"Jeremy doesn't understand what's '**safe**'! That's **my** job!"

"...am I in trouble?" she asks, her synthetic voice taking a wavering tone.

"Huge trouble!"

"Oh, **dad-blast** it all to smithereens!" she groans, slamming her hammer down on her nearby workbench, folding her arms in a tantrum-like huff. Despite the cartoonish display of petulance, her raw strength is more than enough to splinter the worktable, sending its parts clattering across the floor. "I knew it! I **knew** you and Jeremy were gonna butt heads on this one! That's what I get for cavin' to another of his impromptu **rush orders!**"

"*Rush order?*?" you ask in your normal voice before quickly slipping back into character. "Uh, I mean -- **state the details** of this 'rush order'."

"The boss came in here **belly-achin'** about wantin' a number of new backup performers for some big show he was gonna put on," Fritzine says, pouting. "I told him we didn't even have enough good parts to make even a **single** performer -- since I mean, if we did, we wouldn't have that lump Darky singin' in your place on stage."

"Right," you prompt, lighting another match from your dwindling supply, nervously scanning the dim room for any sign of Faz. "Uh, please continue!"

"So I told him that the only kinda performer I could get him would be one cobbled together outta the spare parts we got! I was just jokin', on account of they're not **stage-certified**, but that starry-eyed lunkhead told me to do it! I said they wouldn't be safe -- or even functional, really -- but he just gave me some corporate **mumbo-jumbo** and took off. So here we are!"

"Well that's easily enough solved," you reply, folding your arms and nodding. "Just, um, cancel the order? I mean, cancel it, **straightaway.**"

"Sorry, Schmidt." She stoops down under her ruined workbench, returning a moment later with a filthy swatch of foam matting and a three-foot pair of industrial shears. "I know you're lookin' out for the safety of everyone, and it's mighty admirable you wanna do your job, like. But you know how this works. Jeremy's word beats yours, so long as nobody's safety's in danger. So I ain't got no choice but t'follow through."

Crap.

Looks like Jeremy's pulled rank on you. You'd grab the prize mask she was using and have Faz use it to impersonate Jeremy, but unfortunately, her impromptu welding protection is a plastic mold of her own face. Short of doubling back to the arcade for the correct one and risking bumping into something nasty on the way, you're running out of options to talk her down. Time's ticking, and your friends need you now more than ever -- you're going to have to push on.

You straighten your shoulders, trying not to let your deteriorating state show through in your voice. "Fritzine, I'm **insisting**. You see -- uh, these creations of yours are a **health hazard** to our guests. Even Jeremy can't override corporate policy."

The animatronic handywoman slams the ragged matting down, setting to it with the shears. "I'll have them in line by mornin'! Sure, they're rough **now**, but I can fix this before our first little guests come in. Y'know I work well under pressure!"

You grit your teeth in frustration. "You're not listening. We have guests **now**."

"During night hours? I **reckon not**." She fixes her gaze on you, and a flickering red light in her eyes fires up as she scans you a second time. "...you know somethin', Schmidt, you been actin' **real funny** ever since you came back. The comin' and goin' without warning, the redesign..."

Taking a step back, you put a little distance between Fritzine and yourself. A sudden pain in your finger prompts you to toss your burnt-down match, leaving you fumbling in pitch darkness for another.

"Jeremy said there was somethin' mighty **off** about you. I'm startin' to think he was right."

Only a few left. You pluck one out a little too hard, and fumble it to the floor.

Another. It refuses to light.

You try again. And again. No light. You desperately strike it once more. Finally, its sparking ignition flares up into a pool of orange light around you, only to reveal a lifeless metal face waiting mere inches in front of yours. You jump backwards, stumbling into a wall of wooden crates and spare part boxes.

"Blabbing on about 'after-hour guests'. Littering on the floor. **Jumpy**, too. Ain't like you, Schmidt." She clicks the giant shears, leveling them at your chest. "I'm going to need to be sure you ain't been compromised."

"Fritzine, what if I spoke to corporate?" you ask with a sense of urgency in your voice. You have no idea what Faz's planning, but you're hoping he'll do it soon. "Maybe saw to getting you some better working conditions in here?"

She cocks her head, tapping your chest with a rusty blade.

"You **bribin'** me, Schmidt?"

You shake your head quickly, dribbling sweat. "No, no no. In fact, corporate's here right now, I could speak to them about it!"

"Uh huh. They're here now." Her tone is decidedly less friendly than it was.

"Newer components for upgrades," you add, realizing that she's not going for it. "High... spec. Uh, top quality and brands... at affordable prices?"

Her eye-ports click audibly, adjusting, and she straightens up to her full, towering posture.

"New parts. New, SAFE, good parts," you insist. "The best Humanimatronics Licensed has to offer."

**"Limited,"** Fritzine thrums coldly.

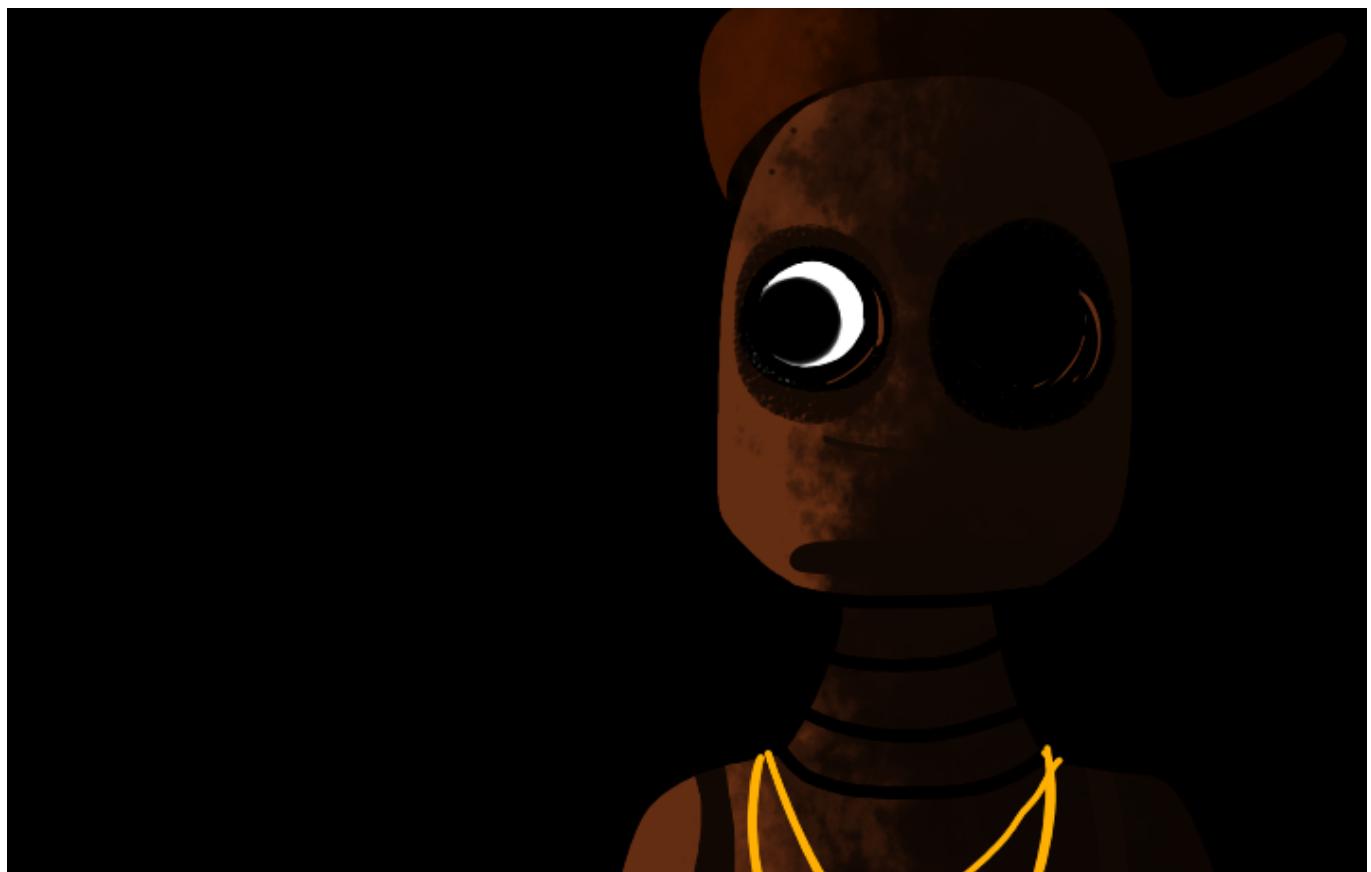
"Limited. Humanimatronics Limited," you hastily correct.

**"Malfunction,"** she belts out in a static growl, placing a huge, heavy hand on your shoulder.

**"Immediate repair necessary."**

"Corporate is here, Fritz'. Right now," someone speaks from behind Fritzine.

You peer desperately over her shoulder to see the forgotten animatronic performer, the regrettably-named Darky, emerge from behind a box. He's looking a bit worse for wear even since you last saw him. His metal hide's covered in scratchmarks, and both his hook and one of his eyes have gone missing, but otherwise, he's intact.



"Darky? You're **funnin'** me," Fritzine gasps. "This time of night?"

"The CEO and Mr. Afton, both of them," Darky says, blinking -- no, winking at you with his remaining eye, the plastic eyelid making a little shutter-click noise as he does. "Pretty sure I saw Mr. Fazbear's car in the parking lot too. Along with a supply van. Could be full of parts?"

He nods back at you from behind Fritzine, just out of her sight. You don't quite understand, but you're not at all about to question it -- this is exactly the opening you needed!

"**Right.** You see, this is what I was trying to tell you. I think there's a possibility **Jeremy** might be malfunctioning," you add, seizing the momentum. "Why else would corporate show up in the middle of the night, unless it were an emergency?"

"What, **Jeremy too??!** Oh, no, this is bad," Fritzine wheedles, clicking her huge shears and swinging them around the room in worried confusion. "But -- but I don't wanna risk gettin' Jeremy upset..."

"I'll be all too glad to deal with him," you reply, stepping away from the blades as they swing near your face. More like you'll be all too glad when he's *dealt with* -- preferably to the tune of being taken apart and fed to a trash compactor. "For now, safety's our top priority. Jeremy's show can wait!"

"But--"

"Why do you think he'd give you such a crazy job?" Darky prompts, ducking one of her passing swipes. "Fritz', this is **serious**. I'd listen to Schmidt, if I was you."

"An **unsafe** task from an unsafe animatronic," you chime in, keeping the snowball rolling. "Jeremy should know corporate rules better than any of us. After all, it's his face on the building."

"If he's giving the orders, and he's unsafe, **then the orders aren't safe!**" Fritzine stammers, her head starting to twitch and convulse. "And if **the orders aren't safe** then **I'm not safe** and if **I'm not safe** then then **then the-e-e-ee-e-ee-e-ee-EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE--**"

Her head snaps upright and her eyes go blue as she hard-reboots again -- just as your match burns down to your finger, prompting you to drop it. The last thing you see before the room plunges into darkness is Faz's immense form surging up over a pile of boxes behind Fritzine.

"I got her!" comes a hoarse, strained voice. "Help me keep her down!"

You dive forward in the darkness but as you instinctively reach out, a white-hot pain rips through your left hand, jolting up your arm. You fall backwards, clutching your palm, which feels wet and slippery to the touch.

"Here! *Here!*" Faz's voice, again. "Hold her arms!"

The sound of overworked metal, clanking debris, and gasping breath fill the void of darkness. You pat desperately across the ground for your dropped matchbook, but suddenly there's a loud click and you nearly recoil at the harsh light that follows.

Your eyes quickly readjust after suffering the oppressive darkness of Bot Bay for so long. Darky's holding a lit flashlight, not unlike the very one you and Beanie shone in his eyes the night she took

you here. He places it on the floor, pointing straight up to avoid glare, letting the scattered light bathe the surroundings in dim white.

"Mike! You okay?" Faz gasps.

He's tackled Fritzine flat on the ground, both his knees on her back. She struggles beneath him, and despite the bear's impressive size, it's clear he's working hard just to keep her pinned. The prone humanimatronic madly waves her immense shears, emitting static-filled shrieks with every swing.

"**SCHMIDT!**" She thrashes as she speaks, and you can't help but notice what appears to be your own blood adorning the rusty blades in her hand. "What in **tarnation** is this?! Rule violation! Unapproved parts! Disassembly!"

Her arm pivots unnaturally in its socket, and she aims the shears backwards at Faz's chest.

# "DON'T TOUCH ME!!"

From your position, it's all you can do to scream through your pain.

*"Look out!"*

Before Fritzine can get off a lethal swing, Darky stomps down hard on her wrist, pinning her weapon to the floor with a crunch.

"You all right there?" Darky looks to you, helping keep the thrashing bot pinned. "That looks, uh... **severe.**"

Clenching your teeth, you nod vigorously even though all the nerves in your arm are overloading your pain center. "I-- **mmmmggghhh!** Fine! Just -- did something *really stupid...!* Please, just -- turn her off!"

"Oh, I'll do better than that," Faz grumbles.

He reaches back, sliding Cheeky's enormous wrench across the floor towards himself before taking hold of it in both paws. With a pained grunt, he slams the jaws against the nape of Fritzine's neck, twisting.

Her voice stutters and her eyes begin to spark. "WH-WH-WH-WH-WH-**WHAT DO YOU THINK  
THINK THINK THINK YOU'RE DOIN', YOU UNAPPROPROPROVED--"**

Faz lets out a hoarse, agonized growl, and with one last forceful push, he twists Fritzine's head clean off, disconnecting it from her endoskeleton altogether. Her round face rolls across the floor before coming to a neat stop in her own nest of thick, fake hair. Her eyes fade and go dark. Her body twitches once, twice, then stops moving completely.

Forcing himself to his feet, Faz leans against one of the few remaining tables for support, panting heavily. Darky tentatively nudges Fritzine's headless body with his foot, but it's clear that she's gone for good.

You won't be missing her.

"Mike, you all right? Let me see your arm," he wheezes.

"I'm fine, it's just a little cut -- besides, you're in worse shape than me!" you exclaim, shaking your head and trying to power through the agony. "What do we do now?"

"Production's halted, but that won't stop the ones that are out there," Faz answers, picking up a roll of shop towels and handing a few to you. You accept them gratefully, pressing them against your wound in an attempt to stem the bleeding. "I've got an idea, though."

"We could sure use one right about now," you moan, fastening the towels to your hand with a strip of electrical tape to serve as a stopgap bandage.

"Looks like some of the technical controls were moved back here, probably for Fritzine. These used to be in the showroom."

Stooping, Faz picks the flashlight up, carrying it over to a complicated panel that looks like an old-fashioned telephone switchboard. He taps one of the buttons experimentally, causing a tinny (and creepy) pre-recorded clip of laughing children to play through overhead speakers. As he does, one of the half-finished robots Fritzine was working on twitches, its motors grinding as it thrashes uselessly on the floor.

You allow yourself a pained smirk -- you may not be the one at the controls, but at least *one* of your ideas turned out to be right.

"Thought so. She was using a modified version of the old turn-key AI," Faz says, turning back to you. "They were designed to follow noise until they found guests to interact with. Newer models tap into the floorplan for navigation."

"That fits with Fred's theory of how they could get into the office," you grimace. "I guess you can lure them somewhere with those sounds? What about -- hnnngh! The alarms?"

Faz studies the console for a moment, peering at the various dials and buttons. He then abruptly jams his fingers underneath a few of the cords and rips them straight from the wall. At once, the klaxons out in the pizzeria cease blaring. You'd grown so used to their constant noise, even at a distance, that the sudden silence is more unnerving than comforting.

"That works," you mumble, trying to ignore the ringing sensation in your ears. "Where are you sending the mish-mashes, then?"

"The what?"

"The -- uh, junk robots."

"Showroom. Off the path. Stall them out until we can figure out how to disable them." Faz hits the button again, causing another burst of laughter to play overhead, this time in the direction you both came from. "Nnnnh. The rooms aren't labeled. Going to have to guess at it."

"Just don't lure them in here." You begin limping toward the airlock door.

"I wouldn't go out there," Faz warns. "They'll already be heading towards the sound."

"Oh. Right, yeah, good point." You turn around, sizing up the far door, opposite the way you came in. "Where does this other one lead off to, Faz?"

"Back of the pizzeria. Kitchen and storage."

"All right, good. I'm gonna go see if I can head Rackham off and hook back up with the others. Hey, Darky, can I trust you to keep watch over..."

Looking around the room, you realize he's nowhere to be found. Faz shines the flashlight down both ends of Bot Bay, but it looks like the rogue animatronic took the opportunity to disappear while you were both distracted. With a sigh, the bear turns back to you, giving you a wary glance.

"Be careful, Mike," Faz cautions as you head for the opposite airlock, hitting the switch to open it.

The alternate exit of Bot Bay empties out into a sizable room that vaguely resembles the interior of a warehouse. The walls are made of brick with exposed metal and wooden beams, sheets of insulation dangling haphazardly. It's dark in here, but in the dim moonlight that filters in through the tiny hopper windows near the ceiling, you can barely make out looming pillars of cardboard boxes and stacked wooden pallets. Most of the containers look to be full of foodservice items and old prizes for the arcade, and a few raggedy dolls of everyone's favorite human characters have spilled across the floor.

You can hear feverish noises coming from the far end of the room -- a frantic, feral clawing. Did Rackham manage to lure the mish-mashes and hide out back here? Hopeful, you step over a three-legged table with a confetti-print surface, cautiously making your way through the storeroom, keeping quiet the entire time. The shattering peal of broken glass causes you to flinch. You hurriedly take cover behind a shelving unit loaded down with metal buckets full of tomato sauce.

More carefully now, you draw closer to the source of the noise. Your heart begins to sink -- an eerie, emerald-colored radiance illuminates the back corner of the warehouse, and you have a feeling it's not coming from some glow-in-the-dark prize from the arcade. The hairs on your neck bristle, goosebumps run the lengths of your arms and legs, and your ears pulse with the sound of your own heartbeat as you take one more hesitant step forward. Peering out from behind the cover of one of the sauce buckets, your fears are confirmed.

Jeremy's here.

Standing opposite a crumbling, six-foot-high pile of junk -- arcade machines with "out of order" stickers taped over their displays, discarded fiberglass figurines and signs, and other chintzy decor -- is Jeremy Human, who's scrabbling to get it all moved. The killer robot has his hands quite literally full as he works overtime to hurl the disused crap out of the way, digging like a man clawing out of his own grave. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out why: all of this garbage is piled up in front of the fire exit.

You can imagine the Safety Schmidt character would have a lot to say about such a blatant fire code violation if he were here to see it. That said, Jeremy has already moved a veritable mountain of refuse trying to escape. As the door's last blockages are cleared before your eyes, you realize that the safest thing possible would be to keep Jeremy inside at all costs.

Despite the mounting pain in your arm, you have an odd clarity of mind right now. A sense of peace. You know you should be terrified, rattled to your core -- but somehow, you feel emboldened.

Maybe you're being guided by the conviction that what you have to do is right, maybe you've just been scared for so long that you've burnt that sensor out. Either way, you draw a deep breath and step out into the room to make your stand.

"Show's over, Jeremy," you call out sternly.

The machine stops cold without even turning to look at you. His hands, already outstretched for the door's handle, click audibly in the still of the room like switchblades opening and closing. His shoulders rise and fall as if he were breathing.

"**Schmidt**," he drones. "You **really** don't know how to mind your own business."

"I've been hearing that a lot lately." You grimace, trying to ignore the pain in your wounded arm.

Turning around, the towering monstrosity smirks at you, head tilted, as chilling green light pours from his eye sockets.

"You can't stop me. Not **this** time. I'd **break** you just for the satisfaction of it, as recompense for all the times you've stood in my way," he sneers, flexing one of his claws, "but frankly I'd rather not risk damaging this frame. Where I'm going, there is no Fritzine to patch me up. You can stay in this **insufferable** place. But me, I've made my last curtain call."

Blood drips slowly from your fingertips. "Let me ask you one question, first."

His static-filled voice lets out a strange, irritated groan. "Then **ask**."

"I told you something about the rules, three years ago. November 12th. Do you remember what I said?"

Jeremy's head tilts at an odd angle, and the green light in his eyes flickers, crackling audibly. A strange, clunky whirring sound emanates from his robot brain, not unlike a hard drive under heavy load. Again and again he juts his head to one side, then the other. After a full minute, he stops, and his eyes return to their piercing, solid green.

"**No results**," he muses, quietly. "What is this?"

You shake your head. "Try November 13th."

"Schmidt." The tin man growls, clicking his jaw shut. "What kind of a question is that?!"

The fluorescent lights overhead click on all at once with a powerful hum, suddenly flooding the room in harsh industrial light, and the pneumatic locks in the exit door behind Jeremy loudly engage. The security camera in the corner of the room whirrs to life and slowly turns to face you, its lens zooming and focusing, blinking away with a red recording indicator.

Seems April finally pulled through.

"...the kind that takes a while to answer," you shrug with a vindicated grin.

Jeremy's eyes whirr and click, his servos spinning loud enough to hear as he glances rapidly around the brightly-lit room. He turns, gripping the doorknob with both clawed metal hands. He tugs at it, slams his shoulder against it, even kicks it, growing ever more desperate. The screeching din of

metal on metal fills the air as he begins trying to claw his way to freedom, making no headway whatsoever.

Finally, he stops, his head resting against the impassable door.

Slowly at first, then building to a maddening clatter, his entire frame begins to rattle as if he's in the middle of an earthquake. His mouth opens wide as he lets loose a sharp, electronic banshee scream that causes you to instinctively clamp your hands over your ears. He trembles, twisting in place to glare directly at you. The components in his face bend and flex under immense pressure as he draws his arms back.

And then, he lunges straight for you.

He's on you faster than you can even blink. You cry out for help as he topples you onto your back, pinning you in place. Your head impacts the concrete floor hard enough that you see stars while he unleashes an inhuman fury. It's all you can do just to shield your face with your arms in a desperate effort to keep him from ripping your skull apart. He tears into you, slashing his knifelike claws across your arms until they burn from the cuts and blood begins to drip down onto your face. Unsatisfied with the results, he rears back and punches you square in the ribs, and the cracking sound it produces reverberates through your very core.

It's getting hard to breathe. Reaching down, he grabs one of your defensive arms, wresting it away with a cruel, twisting motion. Pain shoots through you, and you realize with a detached clarity that the strange noise you're hearing over Jeremy's shrill tone is your own screaming. He goes for your other arm immediately, and you try not to resist as he pins it down -- but perhaps displeased with your reaction, he grabs it with his other hand as well, snapping your forearm like a twig. He seems to have liked *that* response better, because he proceeds to do it a second time on the same arm.

With your head unprotected, he sets on you with one hand wrapped around your throat, strangling you in his industrial-strength grip, his free hand raised in menace before coming down hard on your chest. The pain is so overwhelming now, it can't even be separated to distinct sources. And yet it all feels so distant, so strangely remote, as if you were only watching yourself get beaten to death from a theater seat.

An odd clarity. A sense of peace.

With each successive strike, the room grows dimmer. Your head's beginning to swim, your vision muddled like you're underwater. Your muscles and bones feel like sludge. You're vaguely cognizant of a sudden shout from behind you, but you can't even process the words. Sounds like a man's voice; calm, but firm.

Like a father scolding an errant child.

You're in such agony that it's almost impossible to tell if Jeremy's stopped or not, but peeking out through one of your heavy eyelids, you notice he's at least ceased moving. His claws dangle limply at his sides as he stares ahead at something past you, the components that make up his face protesting as he gnashes his plastic teeth.

"Old man," Jeremy snaps fractiously, "nobody **INVITED** you!!"

He scratches wildly over you, heaving and swiping at some unseen target. Then he twists again, turning to reach behind him, as if swatting at a fly. It's too hard to focus, but through the red fog, you can't help but watch the rattling music man as he scrapes and clutches at the air. Despite everything, you cling to consciousness, watching for at least a minute straight as the bizarre show continues.

It may be your last. You might as well see it through to the end.

Jeremy makes one more desperate lunge forward, and as you lay pinned to the floor by the bulky animatronic, the world around you spinning like a carnival ride, you glimpse the barest flash of gold behind you. Just for an instant.

And then it's gone, and something impacts Jeremy from the side, sending him rolling across the floor. He crashes into one of the supply racks, knocking a stack of crates over. Screeching out in surprise, Jeremy scrambles to his feet on the slick floor as he tries to process what's just happened.

You look up to see a tall, lanky brown bear with a head that seems a tad too large for his shoulders. He's dressed in the shredded remnants of a sportcoat that wants to be a tuxedo, with an untied ribbon hanging loosely from his torn shirt collar and a too-small top hat with a bent brim perched slightly askew upon his head. Gazing back down at you, Frederick's beady eyes are narrowed to slits, the corners of his mouth creased into a deep frown.

Jeremy looks up at the newcomer, the hydraulics in his limbs hissing as he stretches his arms out, snapping his wrists to shake loose the blood -- your blood -- from his fingertips.

"Speaking of **uninvited guests**," he growls, marching forward to face his challenger. "Seeing as I no longer have anywhere to **go**, I suppose I can spare some time for one more private booking."

There's a considerable dent in the metal hat riveted to his head, deeper than any of the ones Cheeky's wrench inflicted. His visor is cracked and the light in one of his eyes has dimmed, but he's no less determined than he was before. If anything, you can sense an even stronger hatred than ever diffusing from him.

"Freddy," you weakly slur, "*run*."

Freddy does not run.

Terrified, you can only stare, realizing that Jeremy's murderous intent far exceeds Frederick's understanding. There's no way the bear could possibly comprehend what's going on here, but it's all you can do to resist the urge to sleep. You know that when you're hurt, hurt bad like you are right now, you're not supposed to sleep. You don't know how, or why. You just remember hearing that somewhere.

Raising his gargantuan paws, Frederick settles into a boxer's stance, his head lowered and his broad teeth bared as he steps back. Jeremy immediately hurdles you, lunging for him and gripping one of Frederick's paws with his razor claws. With a roar, Frederick pistons Jeremy's own metal hand

backwards into the band leader's face, knocking the tall steel shako off his dome and sending his jaw unhinged on one side, where it hangs down loosely.

The automaton screams furiously as he tries in vain to grab Frederick's paws or strike at his face, but every time he lunges out, the bear deflects, smashing Jeremy's own hands against his frame. After several failed attacks, Jeremy raises his hands in menace, but his once-sharp fingers are bent and snapped at their joints. Frederick quickly seizes the opportunity, grabbing Jeremy's wrist and planting a foot against his chest -- then all at once he rips the robot's arm free in a spray of sparks and machine oil.

It's hard to tell through your blurred vision what sort of reaction Jeremy's making as he stares at his crippled limb -- doubly so because he's a robot -- but he doesn't seem too happy about this development.

Just as the killer humanimatronic turns his attention back from his stumpy elbow to the enormous bear, Frederick catches him in the head with his own arm as a bludgeon, tearing up the side of his face like tin foil. The robot lunges, and the two grapple with each other fiercely for a time, but the odds quickly shift in Frederick's favor as he manages to take hold of Jeremy's rapidly-deteriorating skull in both of his enormous paws.

"*Non.*"

Hauling Jeremy off of his feet, the bear holds the crazed machine by his head in midair. He pushes the broken sunglasses from the mascot's face, and for a moment, just stares.

"*I want to look the devil in his eye,*" Frederick growls in a thick, bizarre accent.

Suddenly, the thumbs of his gargantuan paws press deep against Jeremy's eyes. The robot kicks his feet in a desperate bid for traction, slashing blindly at Frederick's arms with what's left of his hand. He draws blood across multiple deep scratches, but it does nothing to stop the bear's grip. A rumbling, echoing shriek begins building from the damaged humanimatronic's voice box, a hopeless, inhuman wail distorted in a rapidly-failing synthesizer, harmonizing with the sound of screaming, rending metal.

Frederick grunts, straining forward and locking his shoulders down in one final motion before simply crushing Jeremy's head with his bare paws, popping his crimson skull apart at the seams.

The top half of Jeremy's head flips back on its hinge. Microchips, capacitors, and all sorts of other little mechanical bits hemorrhage from his empty eye sockets and open mouth. His body spasms and fluctuates wildly, spinning and sparking before ultimately going slack in Frederick's grip. Dropping the machine to the ground, Frederick watches with a skeptical eye to see if Jeremy's about to move again, but it's soon made clear the robot menace has given up the metaphorical ghost.

Walking over to you, Frederick gently kneels down, scooping you into his arms and drawing you close to his chest.

Unable to fight it any longer, you close your eyes, and a warmth of darkness envelops you.

"...coming to."

Your weary eyelids slowly flutter open. A soft-eyed, middle-aged rabbit doe with faded white fur looks down at you, a sad smile at her muzzle.

"I know I'm not your regular doctor, but if you want my professional medical opinion, you're really going to have to stop coming to this place," she quips, dabbing at your cheek. "It's not good for your health."

"Thanks, doc," you groan, trying to force yourself to a sitting position.

"*Whoa!* Absolutely not! You're in no condition to move, Mike!" Carrol vehemently argues, gently pushing you back down. "You aren't going anywhere right now!"

You don't need to be told what kind of "condition" you're in; the white-hot pain coursing through your body speaks far louder than she ever could. You weakly raise your bandaged arm at her, furiously shaking your head. It hurts *very much* to shake your head and you suddenly wish you hadn't done that.

"I'm not... but... Rackham, and... and the others," you babble at the wobbly Carrol, and her equally wobbly twin sister, Carrol. "I'm fine. I gotta go back."

"Yeah, *no*. You ain't doing shit," Cheeky huffs from off to the side, patting your head as gingerly as she's able.

"Cheeky, a little help here?" Carrol asks. "Can you please get him to stay put?"

"You don't... understand," you groan, trying again -- and failing again -- to get off of whatever the hell they've got you strapped down to.

"Sorry, doc. I'll do my best, but Mike's stubborn like you wouldn't believe." You rest your face against Cheeky's puffy coat as she leans over you -- she feels like a nice, warm pillow. "He's always gotta see everything with his own two eyes. Any chance I could push him around or something?"

Carrol shoots her a deadpan glare, and all at once you can perfectly see Beanie in her. "*No*."

"C'mon. I'll be gentle with him, doc."

"This isn't a wheelchair," Carrol snaps, "it's a *gurney*! It's not for sightseeing!"

Trilling softly in response, Cheeky allows a playful smile to creep across her tired beak. "I'll bring him right back, I promise."

Carrol grumbles, ears flopping down behind her head, and the white rabbit peers cautiously about, her face alternately illuminated by blue and red lights.



"Only because he saved my daughter. But if anyone asks, you snuck him away from me! *Don't* be more than three minutes, I need to get him out soon. And *mind the IV!*"

"Thanks, doc! You got it," Cheeky hums eagerly, gripping the back of your stretcher and gently wheeling you away from the back of the ambulance you're apparently parked at, rolling IV in careful tow.

The parking lot of Jeremy Human's is stocked with at least a dozen emergency vehicles, from cop cars to ambulances, and even two fire trucks. Helping steer you through the maze of spinning, flashing beacons and the first-responder emergency staff bustling about, Cheeky gestures over to a row of emergency personnel, all of whom are tending to your friends. Faz is laid out upon a stretcher like yours, his coat and shirt in a pile next to him as medics bandage his wounds. You can see April standing off to the side, fussing as one of the EMTs tries to put a trauma blanket around her shoulders.

A battered, oil-stained Fred exhaustedly sits in the back of an ambulance, his arms and chest covered in red-soaked bandages. He looks up at you before giving you a tired smirk and a nod, and you do your best to get your aching face to return the acknowledgement.

"Freddy?" you ask of Cheeky.

"Oh, Frederick? He's *fine*, the crazy bastard," she replies, pointing to him speaking at a pair of confused-looking police officers. "Doc just finished wrapping up his wounds. Came out in pretty good shape, all things considered."

Looking around at the throng of police cars, ambulances, emergency workers, and even rubberneckers come to spectate, you take a mental headcount of your team.

Faz, Fred, Frederick, April, and then Cheeky and yourself. Six in all.

One missing.

Swallowing, you turn to Cheeky. "...and Rackham?" you ask fearfully, mentally preparing for the worst.

She helps you over to a police cruiser, knocking at the side door. The window rolls down and Rackham looks up at you from the passenger's seat with a cup of coffee in his good paw and a pastry in his hook, nodding to you with an easy smile.

"Hey, Mike. Glad to see you're... up and around. More or less, anyway," he says, gesturing with his danish. "Dude, you look like shit."

"I *feel* like shit," you groan, barely able to smile back at him. Apart from looking a little sweaty, he's otherwise fine -- having come out of it better than you or any of the four bears. "You made it out okay?"

"Yep. I pulled a page out of Foxglove's book of tricks and slipped through one of the vents after luring some of those creepy crawlers to the kitchen. From there, Faz got 'em stuck in the showroom and we barricaded them in."

"Are they still... going?" you ask, struggling to think of the word you need.

"No! That's the kicker. Whatever it was that was that kept them functional just... broke off, all at once."

"Jeremy," you gasp, sucking in a pain-filled breath as you remember the specter of crimson death looming above you. "Is he--"

"Relax, Mike," Rackham nods somberly, but there's an undeniable hint of smugness to his tone. "Nothing left but scrap. We made sure. We made *really* sure."

You breathe again, sighing deeply.

Still painful, but free.

"I'm sorry I -- owwww. Roped you guys all into this. I was wrong," you mumble.

"The hell you were!" Cheeky squawks incredulously. "Mike, you have *no idea* what's happened here tonight, do you?"

You writhe on the gurney, whimpering partly due to guilt and partly due to sheer pain.

"It wasn't Nisha -- I told April I knew who hurt her, who..."

"Mike," Cheeky insists, shushing you, "*settle down*. We got our answers in the end."

"Someone *died* tonight," you mumble.

"It is a shame about what happened to Mr. Afton--"

Rackham tilts his head. "*Who?*"

"...but if we hadn't done something tonight, even *more* people would've gotten hurt," Cheeky argues.

"Besides," Rackham shrugs, popping the last of the danish in his mouth, "you were at least part-right about Nisha, anyway."

"All right. Enough gabbing for now. C'mon, Mike, you've had your look-see -- let's get you back to Dr. Rabbinson before she chews my ass out," Cheeky tuts, clicking her beak. As she pilots you back in the direction of whatever ambulance has been designated your personal ride, however, she lets out a frustrated moan. "Hang on, slight detour. *Someone else* wants a word."

Steering you off to the side of one of the emergency vans, she helps you over to another stretcher, where a blanket-covered, black-furred bear is being loaded inside. A heavy rope bruise covers her neck.

"Nisha?" you ask.

Looking up at you with shame etched all over her face, the deposed CEO bites her lip, mumbling something.

"What was that?" you ask.

"I said, *thank you*," she whines.

You grunt from a sudden shot of pain, and try to process her words.

"Thanks? *For what?* I wrecked your... whole plan. You're gonna lose the company... hell," you cough, wincing, "you're probably going to jail."

She sighs deeply, saying nothing. Instead, she holds a paw up, revealing she's already handcuffed to her gurney.

"...right. Well."

That's about all you can find to say to her.

Cheeky leans over you, accidentally bumping your battered face with the softest bludgeon it's taken tonight. She pats your forehead tenderly with her feathers. "Don't worry about her. Rest up, sweetie; you've earned it."

"I got everyone hurt," you grumble. "Maybe I--"

"We *all* knew the risks going in," Cheeky counters. "That's not your burden to bear, Mike."

Through the blur of pain, tears begin to well in your eyes.

"Going in... I thought this would all be easier. The whole *point* was stopping this shit so nobody got hurt again." Sobbing, you lean back against the gurney, avoiding eye contact with Cheeky. "And in the end... everyone else had to do more work than me."

"You did good tonight, Mike. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise," she replies.

"I didn't fight off anyone. I didn't protect my friends." You groan, a deep, crushing ache growing in the center of your chest. "I didn't even get Jeremy myself... in the end, *I* was the one who needed to be saved. I just wanted to be a hero."

"Oh, Mike." Sighing, Cheeky traces the side of your face with a feathertip.

A small, weak cough from off to the side draws your attention.

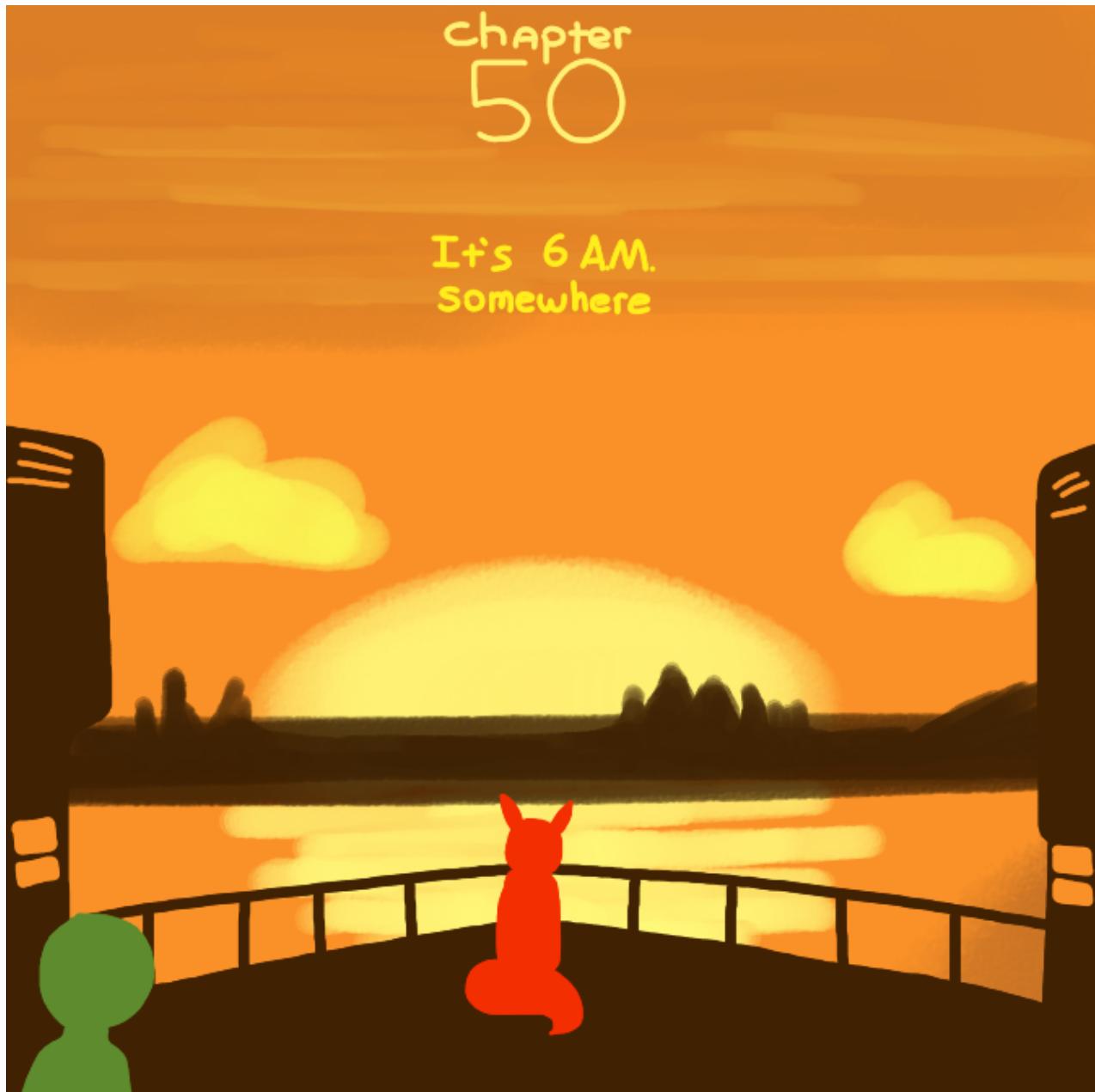
"Well..." Nisha mutters reluctantly as the technicians finish loading her stretcher into the van.  
"Tonight, you were *my* hero."

You watch as the doors shut and the EMT circles around the truck, climbing into the driver's seat before steering it off into the night.

# It's 6 A.M. Somewhere

Chapter  
50

It's 6 AM.  
Somewhere



"Michael."

A gentle yet insistent tap at your shoulder wakes you from your sun-basking daydream. You pull your gaze away from the rippling, crystal blue water, sitting up in your deckchair to greet April. The matriarchal rabbit's hovering patiently overhead, her paws clasped neatly over her modest polka-dotted petticoat, easily the jauntiest thing you've ever seen her wear. Her head and face are mostly unwrapped today, though she does have a few bandages around her neck and a medical-grade eyepatch similar to the one Rackham used to wear. Most of the fur around her face and muzzle's long gone, leaving her with bare skin smoothed by shiny scar tissue.

"Hey, April!" you reply, hauling yourself to your feet. "Getting a little sun, I see?"

"Just a bit. Dr. Rabbinson thought it would be a good idea," she replies, the faintest of smiles playing at her glossy lips. "If you have a minute... may I introduce you to someone?"

You're somewhat surprised to find out that there could be anyone at this party that you don't know (besides the staff, of course). The whole point of this trip was to keep it to close friends and family, but maybe April brought an acquaintance? You suppose it's not impossible -- there's so much about her (and really, everyone else) that you still don't know yet.

"Sure," you answer.

"Follow me."

Standing up, you walk with her around the deck to a sitting area just underneath a large canopy, where several tables and chairs are bolted to the floorboards to keep them from moving whenever the boat sways. Seated in one of the chairs is local goober Peanut, engaged in lively conversation with a person you indeed don't recognize: a large, heavyset female white polar bear with silver headfur tied back into a neat, proper bun. Sitting tensely between them is a young, blue-furred rabbit boy in a short-sleeved tee and capris, clutching a video game console in his tiny paws.

"Oh, hi Mike!" Peanut says as you approach, cutting himself off mid-diatribe.

"Hey, Peanut," you nod.

Waving a scruffy paw over the table, April smiles proudly. "Mike, these are my wonderful roommates--"

"Not me -- I still live in 87-A!" Peanut interrupts, giving April a look like she's crazy. This causes the polar bear to chuckle and April to drag her paw down her face in exasperation.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mike," the polar bear says by way of greeting. Her manner of speaking is soft and just a bit flowery -- like an unaccompanied lullaby. "My name is Fran, and this is my son, Bonson. Say hello, darling!"

Her *son*? He has to be adopted, right? Considering the fact that the two of them aren't even the same species...? That's how this works, right?

You pocket that question for now. You'll have to ask Faz sometime. Anyone else might take it the wrong way.

"Hey," the bunny says with a dismissive wave. "Sorry -- in a link battle, can't pause. Real focused."

"Kids these days and their video games," Fran comments, side-eyeing her son with a frown. "Really now, dear?"

"Don't worry about it," you laugh. "So, you guys are living with April, huh?"

"Mmhm. For a little while, now. We're still new to the area, just having moved here from out of state, actually." Fran reaches up and brushes a lock of her headfur out of her eyes. "We were searching for a community that would be conducive to our needs, and Mr. Marion's was just perfect. Both he and Ms. May have shown us nothing short of true hospitality."

"Well, it's really nice meeting you both," you reply, gently taking a hold of Fran's proffered paw and shaking it. "We were worried about April moving out, but I'm glad to see she'll be all right on

her own."

"I appreciate having others around," April adds. "Having my own space is comfortable, but... having people to share it with, makes it cozy. If that makes sense."

"The sounds of life," you muse, recalling Faz's once-perplexing sentiment. It's a concept you've since become quite familiar with. "I totally get where you're coming from, not wanting to live alone. Being in the hospital for months was miserable, but at least I had other patients in and out to keep me company."

"Ooh, that reminds me," Peanut interjects. "Ms. Nisha will need a place to stay until she gets back on her feet, too!"

April gives Peanut a dead-eyed glare as Fran looks over at him obviously.

"Err -- sorry, I'm *still* trying to memorize everyone's names," Fran comments with a blush. "Could you remind me of which one Nisha is, again?"

"Gosh, well, you haven't met her yet," Peanut says, straightening out his shirt. "She's a really wonderful lady though. Right now she's in jail, but uh -- we're hoping she gets out on probation soon!"

"We are?" April mutters.

"Ms. Nisha was our former boss -- she worked at the restaurant that closed down that we were telling you about," Peanut continues blithely. "She was the CEO but she got arrested for uh, *enfizzlement*, I think. Still, she's a very nice lady, and I think you'll *really* like her once you get the opportunity to meet her. It might be a while longer though -- you know how confusing legal stuff is!"

"...right, of course," Fran comments with a wary nod.

**Peanut.** April's frowning, shaking her head at him in a clear attempt to get him to stop talking.

"It's okay, I don't think Ms. Nisha would mind us talking about it. She was always very open and honest with me," Peanut replies. You guess you can't argue there -- Peanut's careless blabbing is what got her busted in the first place.

"Hah! Yes! YES!" Bonson cheers, jumping up onto the table and doing a victory dance. "In your face, PainbringerDeathBun!"

An angry, profanity-laced scream erupts from the opposite end of the boat; by the far railing, you can just barely make out Beanie stomping her foot up and down on the ground, furiously shaking what appears to be a handheld game identical to Bonson's.

"Good heavens, such language! *Someone* seems upset," Fran comments with an oblivious tut-tut, shielding her son's ears with both paws. "Bonson, darling. Forget you heard those words just now."

"Sheesh. What got into *her*?" Bonson adds, scratching his head.

"Aww, Beanie's like that sometimes, you just get used to it," Peanut shrugs. "But anyway, come to think of it -- you've still got an extra room in your apartment, right, Ms. April? Why don't you just have Ms. Nisha stay with you?"

Glancing over at April, you can almost hear the cartoon steam whistle building; her teeth are gritted, her cheeks flushed, and her good eye's twitching.

"Well, Fran, Bonson, I hope to see you both around in the future! So hey, April," you divert smoothly. "I've got someone I'd like to introduce *you* to, if you don't mind?"

"Who is it?" she hisses as you take her by the paw, steering her away from the table as a blissfully unaware Peanut returns to his gushing.

"Literally anyone," you whisper. "C'mon."

You lead April safely away from the chatter, towards the bow. She thanks you for the diversion, then politely breaks off to mingle when she spots Foxglove waving to her from the crowd.

"*There* you are," Beanie says, approaching you from off to one side. "I've been looking everywhere for you -- figured you must've holed up in the head, puking your guts out."

"Hey, Beanie!" you reply enthusiastically as she pockets her game, apparently already over her loss. "Man, feels like it's been forever since we got to catch up."

"Prolly because it *has* been. I haven't seen you *once* since you were discharged." She takes a sip from a mixed, gaudy tropical-themed beverage that seems to be more decoration than drink.

"How're your arms doing?"

"Time heals all wounds, or so they say," you reply, rolling your sleeve up for her.

"Shame it does jack shit for the scars, though." She brushes the back of her paw against the faded white scratches covering your forearms, stopping just shy of the gouge-mark in your left palm.  
"And the chest?"

"Getting there, little by little," you reply. "The painkillers definitely help."

"Well, I'm glad you're back with us. After the hell you went through to save my ass, I'd have felt like shit if you'd kicked the bucket while I stayed at home."

"Nobody holds it against you for not wanting to go back to that hellhole, Beanie. Least of all me."

"...thanks, Mike. You don't know how much I've needed to hear that," she replies with an odd look in her eyes.

After a moment, it dawns on you that the rare expression is one of complete sincerity, something the deadpan snarker of a bunny almost never employs in casual conversation. Unsure of what to say, you simply nod, leaning back against the railing.

"How have you been?" you finally venture. "I mean, with... you know."

"Better." She glances to the ground, smiling softly. "I think it's behind me. Haven't seen... *you-know-who* since that night."

"Yeah. Me neither."

"I hope we did right by him," she sighs.

You sniff, nodding solemnly.

"I know we did."

The two of you stand together in mutual, awkward silence for a while as the boat sways beneath your feet, softly rocking you back and forth.

"So what're you doing these days to keep busy?" you ask, changing the subject for her.

Beanie looks down at her coconut-shaped mug with an appreciative nod, fiddling with one of the plastic swords hanging over the edge of the glass. "Oh man, okay -- so I've got a buddy who owns a comics and cards shop downtown? Full of nerd stuff, y'know -- vinyl toys and board games and the like."

"Right."

"Last month the newest edition of *Strongholds & Sapiens* dropped, and they completely overhauled the battle system for it, top-to-bottom. Doesn't even feel like the same game," she continues eagerly. "Now all these new players are hopping on the bandwagon, while older players are pouring in from out of the woodwork since their interest in it's been rekindled too, y'know?"

"Sounds like it's a real '*Geek Renaissance*'."

She flexes and unflexes her free paw into a fist. "I'm gonna go easy on you, after everything you've been through, but your grace period for bad puns like that is two days, tops."

"I'll have to make the most of it," you grin shamelessly.

"Yeah, that sounds like you." She raises her glass (well, novelty cup) to you, thoughtfully. "But yeah, veteran Stronghold Masters are swamped trying to pick up the new rules. Forget 'Monday Night S&S' -- the shop's packed out *every night* with a good *dozen* or so campaigns running at any given time. Every. *Single. Night.*"

"Holy shit," you reply. "So it's like HumieCon, but on a smaller scale."

"Sure, yeah," she considers, taking a sip of her drink. "I mean, as long as HumieCon is literally your only reference point for a group of people interacting."

"Well -- no, I mean, because at HumieCon--"

"No, I got it," she snorts, gesturing around the boat with her boozy coconut. "Just like how this is like HumieCon, but on a smaller scale. And on a lake. And all the guests are people we know, instead of people who like humans."

"Okay, but--"

"Or like you! You're basically HumieCon, but with only a single person."

You roll your eyes and sigh dramatically. "Oh my god, Beanie, just rake me over the coals for trying to show an interest, why don't you."

"Hey," she smiles, "giving you shit is my favorite pastime. I got some catching up to do. I've really missed it."

You can't help but laugh. "I noticed. So I take it you're getting back into playing, then?"

"Even better: I'm getting *paid* to play," she says. "I'm a *professional* Stronghold Master now. I'm making more than I was as a night guard, *and* I'm doing something I love."

"I'm happy to hear it."

"How about you? What're you gonna do now that you're back on your feet and all this is behind us?"

"Well I've -- I've got something lined up, actually," you smirk back. "The sedentary life isn't for me, and besides... I've done enough sitting around lately."

You run a hand through your hair, thinking back to the out-of-the-way rural hospital you spent the better part of the last year recuperating in. Between it being little more than a tiny clinic with a few beds and a handful of staffers, as well as your primary physician being Dr. Rabbinson herself, you were able to stay on the down-low and out of the public eye while you were on the mend.

"Well, wherever you end up working, lemme know so I can come bust your chops while you're on the clock," she grins, "as is tradition."

"I wouldn't have it any other way. Shall we go catch up with the others, then? Wouldn't be much of a party if we all keep to ourselves."

"Yeah, all right," Beanie says. "Lead the way."

The party's in full swing by the time you make it to the main dining area of the boat. Cheerful music's piping softly through the speakers overhead while your friends and neighbors circle the buffet, piling their plates high with food. Standing off to the side of the room by a long table laden with drink pitchers and tubs of ice is none other than Faz, who seems to be rather animatedly telling a story for the benefit of Bonnibel and Rackham. Notably, Faz is wearing a long sailor's coat, and in place of his usual wide-brimmed fedora is a captain's hat perched on his head.

"Wow," you comment. "I still can't get over how much better Faz is looking these days."

"Yeah, for real. Good to see the chief's still on the mend. He was in a pretty bad way after the last round of surgeries," Beanie agrees, waving to him before she breaks off for the buffet. "Hey, I'm gonna snag some mini tacos before they're gone. Want me to grab you anything?"

"I'm fine, thanks."

She nods. "I'll catch up with you after I stuff my face a bit, then!"

"Sounds good!" you laugh, drifting over to join Faz's group.

"So did he take the hint, or what happened?" Bonnibel asks excitedly, brushing one of her lop ears back.

"Chica happened," Faz responds, unassisted by his electrolarynx. His speech is notably quiet and a bit breathless, but he doesn't seem bothered by it. Speaking must be coming more easily for him, or at least less painfully. "Suffice it to say, if you've ever heard the phrase 'mad as a wet hen' you've got a good idea of how angry she was -- enough to peck him right on his forehead."

Rackham busts up laughing while Bonnibel covers her cheeks, blushing and giggling at the same time.

"Yeah, that sounds about right," Rackham groans, a smile playing at his muzzle. "Our Chica's the same way when she's passionate about something, though."

"Still, she *pecked* him?" Bonnibel gasps.

"As sure as I stand here," Faz shrugs.

"That's pretty harsh. Remind me never to go head-to-head with Cheeky on anything." The blue bunny swills back the rest of her punch glass before going for a refill from one of the pitchers. As she does, she bumps straight into you -- though it doesn't seem to faze her in the slightest. "Oh! Hi, Mike!"

"Ah, good evening, Mike," Faz says as you approach. "I was just filling our friends in on Chica's encounter last week with a particularly offensive door-to-door salesman."

"Oh no," you chuckle. "He should've realized Cheeky's a tough gal to mess with."

"For real," Rackham coughs.

"I have to say, you're looking much better, Mike." Faz looks you up and down, nodding his approval. "You seem to be on the fast-track to recovery, given all you've been through."

"Hey, you're one to talk, chief." You grin, snapping off a salute. "You've got some real color back in your face. Talking seems to come easier, too."

"I think I've just gotten used to it," he muses. "I doubt I'll be singing *Carmen* again."

"Plus you got a good deal of sutures healed and staples taken out, it looks like."

"I think for every pound of metal and brace they took out, I've packed on about five more in fat," Faz mumbles, good-naturedly.

"Ah, you needed some meat on those bones anyway," Rackham grins, patently ignoring his own scrawny physique. "The skeleton look didn't suit a mug like yours."

Faz chuckles lowly, his scarred visage breaking into an earnest and asymmetric smile, and he waves his paw as if to physically brush away the compliments. "Guess that means I'm actually going to have to dress up for Halloween this year, instead of just going as myself."

"Hey, Faz." You straighten up, trying to sound a bit more serious. "I'm really glad you joined us. A boat ride just wouldn't have been the same without the captain."

"I'm glad I came. I've missed just... socializing. This sort of atmosphere, you know?" he replies warmly, nodding his head to the low stage at the end of the dining room, where Chiclet and Goose are engaged in an off-key karaoke duet while Foxglove, Bonbon, and Peanut laugh and clap along

with them. "Y'know, you kids might not believe it, but this is almost what the old restaurant felt like back when Goldie first opened it up -- lively, cheery."

"Guess that explains why it was a hit to begin with," you comment.

"Exactly. My only regret is that he's not here with us today. I think he'd have loved this."

"Oh, I know he would've," Rackham smiles. "That reminds me -- you never *did* get to meet Goldie, did you, Bonnibel?"

"No, no, sadly. I was, um... gosh, I only worked there for a short stint, but it was after he'd passed."

"Well, let's be thankful for the company we *do* have," the fox grins. "And Mike, I think I speak for everyone here when I say I'm glad *you* could be here."

"Aw shucks," you shrug, "I'm glad to be here. Sure beats the alternative."

"Look, Mike," he murmurs, leaning in discreetly and throwing his arm over your shoulder. "I know we said we weren't gonna talk much about it, but that night, when we split up--"

"Hey, I'm just happy we both made it out in one piece. Mostly in one piece, anyway. What you did was real brave."

"I was about to say the same about you!" Rackham laughs, then suddenly offers a strange, grimacing blink in slow-motion.

"...you, uh, you okay, Rackham?" Bonnibel gawks.

"It was a wink," Faz explains, picking his plastic cup up from the table nearby.

"I'm... getting used to having the patch off," Rackham mumbles. "Finer points are still coming back to me. Socializing's an art."

"You know, speaking of socializing, I'm glad to see you coming out of your shell too, Bonnie," you reply, patting her head. "I honestly expected you to stay at home. Did you remember to take your meds today?"

"For your information, *Mike*, I'm *not* a little kid," Bonnibel replies with a smug smirk, coolly flipping her ears back again. "I'm managing just fine. In fact, pretty much *nothing* fazes me these days."

As she leans back, she accidentally bumps an unopened bottle of soda off the table with her arm, where it clatters to the ground behind her. Her ears stand up as straight and stiff as Bonworth's as she literally bunny-hops away from the table, looking around in a panic.

"What the *hell* was **THAT**!?" she shrieks. "A *cannonball*?! Are we hit?!"

"Nerves of aluminum, that one," Rackham whispers, nudging you in the side.

You pick the soda bottle up off the ground, handing it to her with a knowing look.

"Ah, uhh. Of course," she says, giggling and turning red as she accepts it from you. "I guess I'm sort of a work-in-progress."

"Aren't we all," you smile.

A blast of synthpop that could be out of any 80s Jazzercise tape erupts over the speakers as Chiclet and Goose whip into frenzied, energetic dancing. Bonbon excitedly rushes the stage, snatching up one of the microphones and belting out a squeaky, jittery chorus that sounds like it might be from an entirely different song.

"Holy shit, I wish I was filming this," Beanie laughs as she joins your group with a paper plate full of tacos. "Just... wow. Bonbon's always sucked at singing, but this is legendary. How many you think she's had?"

"Depends. Is this punch spiked?" Bonnibel asks, sniffing at her cup. "Because if it is, then the answer's 'too many'. She was out running laps around the ship earlier, then she came in and drank half the bowl to 'replenish her fluids'."

Faz shakes his head with a grin, tapping his foot in time to the music. Your group observes Bonbon poorly executing a series of increasingly awkward dance moves, before dropping the mic and cartwheeling off the stage.

"That reminds me... I've got someone I need to check in on," you remark, turning. "Glad to see you're all enjoying the party so far!"

Bonnibel bounces on her heels, waving with a smile. "See ya 'round, Mike!"

"Bonjour, Freddy!"

"Hello, Michael," Frederick manages with a smile.

He slides into the windowside booth next to you and Haddock, quietly joining both of you in gazing out at the lake. The sun's just beginning to drop down over the horizon, and the water's still and calm right now. Haddock's excitedly pressed his entire face tight against the glass in total fascination, soaking every second of the cruise up with a wordless, toothy grin.

"Quel magnifique lac," Frederick comments after a while. "L'eau est belle."

"Lake?" you offer, emphasizing the pronunciation as you tap the window. "The lake?"

He nods back, quickly.

"Yeah, it's real pretty."

"J'apprécie l'absence de vagues."

*Vagues?* You don't know that one yet, but now's as good a time as any to update your fledgling lexicon. Reaching into your shirt pocket, you pull out a small spiral-bound memo pad. Flipping it open to a blank page, you pass it across the table to Frederick along with a ball-point pen. He accepts both from you, writing the word down along with a simple sketch of a large body of water and gentle rippling waves.

"Water?"

"Vagues," he repeats, passing it back to you. He gestures strangely, very slowly and heavily rocking his arms from one side to another.

"Not water?" you curiously reply. "Or -- the waves?"

"Mmm."

You're not confident he knows whether that's what he meant or not, especially since you're pretty sure there are no waves, but he seems satisfied, and that's good enough for you. Closing the notepad, you return it to your pocket.

"Eh bien, brave marin, le voyage vous plaît-il?" Frederick asks.

Pulling away from the window for a second, Haddock's grin tightens.

"Real good sailin' weather," he answers as Frederick runs a gentle paw through the fox's shaggy headfur. "Clear waters like these, man could throw a net out o'er th' sea an' wind up needin' a new net, on account o' so many fish."

"Fish," Frederick repeats.

"Bright fella. Catches on real quick," Haddock chuckles. "Might make a good quartermaster, lad."

You grin at the mental image of Haddock and Frederick on an old-fashioned pirate boat like the William, dressed up in bicorne hats and ruffled shirts. You suppose it's not *that* far-fetched of a notion -- after all, Faz arrived here wearing captain's garb. With Halloween fast approaching, maybe you and Rackham could talk the others into a pirate theme for the inevitable costume party.

The sound of footsteps clicking up the floor behind you draws your attention. Glancing over your shoulder, you notice Chichi and Bonbon approaching, loaded down with a few plates of food from the buffet table.

"You think I'd get in trouble if I snuck into the galley and helped out a bit?" Chichi muses aloud. "I hate the idea of those poor people back there busting their tails without any help."

"Chichi, it's what they get paid to do, isn't it? Besides, today's your one day off! Quit thinking about kitchen stuff and just have a good time," Bonbon chides, wrapping an arm around the smaller hen's shoulders. "Chill out! Cut loose! Enjoy the party!"

"...ooh, all right," the flustered pastry chef concedes. "Do you boys mind if we have a seat here?"

"Not at all," you answer.

You scoot over to make room for Chichi while Bonbon slips in beside Frederick. Haddock bounces in his seat excitedly, but he can't seem to find anything to say, so he just sticks his tongue out and taps on the table. Frederick, meanwhile, seems content to watch over the giddy fox in silence.

"Oh, Mike! I was talking to Beanie a few minutes ago, and she reminded me of something I've been wanting to ask you," Bonbon says, tearing open a packet of salad dressing. "Did that guy from HumieCon ever manage to come visit you?"

"Ahhh, you mean Wilson! Yeah, believe it or not, he did," you reply, thinking back to the visit. "He was in town for a business meeting or something, but he spared a couple hours to come by and chat

me up. You should've seen him, he looked so different with all his fur back."

"Yeah, I bet he did," Bonbon replies absently, frowning as she struggles to spear a cherry tomato with her spork. Eventually she just gives up and snatches the offending produce with her paw, tossing it in her mouth. "Reason I bring it up was I remember hearing you had a *couple* of primate visitors. I was just curious if they were relatives of yours or not."

"No... no, I don't think so," you reply, struggling to remember the other one. "Wilson was the only one I remember, anyway."

"No, I remember one gentleman who stopped by for a short while, pretty sure he was a primate too," Chichi says, gently unwrapping her baked potato from its foil casing. "He just... peeped in from the hallway and asked for you by your family name."

"...doesn't ring a bell. What'd he look like?" you ask warily.

"He was all wrapped up in some huge bulky poncho and a -- well, kind of an awkward-looking wig," she continues with an embarrassed smile. "Clumsy, kinda stompy, like Bonworth's prosthetics. He looked a lot like you, and had a real dark fur tone. Or I guess skin tone? He didn't say much, but he was very polite. He was really concerned about whether you were going to be okay, but once Doc Rabbinson said you were, he didn't really stick around."

Piecing that description together in your mind, it dawns on you that there could only be one "person" you'd know of who would fit it.

"Son of a gun," you exhale. "Well, I'm glad to hear he made it out safely."

"Hmm? Who mmmd out shafely?" Bonbon inquires through a mouthful of salad. "Whadd're -- *gulp*. What're you talking about?"

"Just a friend." Looking over at the inquisitive rabbit, you can tell she's waiting for further explanation -- so you decide to change the subject before she gets suspicious. After all, after he bailed you and Faz out, you figure you owe him the benefit of the doubt. At least for now.

"So how are you faring in a world without *Legend of Bob*?" you ask.

"*Legend of wh--*? Oh! Right. Yeah, I dunno," she shrugs, "Cancelations happen, I guess. I'm kinda over it. Right now, though, *Bobby and the Pink Machine* is looking great -- it's like a spiritual prequel, but it's done in that *really* old-fashioned animation style, you know?"

"What... you mean like old rubberhose cartoons?" you reply, dumbfounded. Seriously?

"Yeah, that's it!"

"My mom and I used to watch those old-timey sorts of cartoons together all the time, back when I was a kid," Chichi chimes in with a wistful smile. "Brings back really good memories."

"...huh. Yeah, uh, I don't know if that's really my bag," you frown. Old movies are one thing -- you've got an appreciation for the classics, after all -- but in your opinion, animation's a medium that's gotten better as time's passed. "Part of what made *Legend of Bob* tolera-- I mean, 'good' is that it, you know, had pretty decent action. Kind of. Sure, it got sort of weird at the end with all the villains having those bizarre break-apart face mask things, but I mean, it could've been a lot worse."

"At least we got a mint off of that Balloon Boy figure before the market crashed," Bonbon insists, standing back up and taking her empty plate towards the buffet for more celery sticks.

You take the opportunity to rise as well, nodding politely to Chichi and the others as you excuse yourself. "Yeah, for real. Actually made that whole costume fiasco worth it."

"Well, at least come over this weekend and give the new series a shot *before* you knock it," Bonbon argues adamantly as you both leave the table. "Now in fairness, I will warn you -- the first episode doesn't go anywhere at all and the second one isn't much better, but I'm sure it'll pick up. I mean, it has to, right?"

Rolling your eyes, you turn back to look at Frederick and Haddock, both of whom are still fixated on the tranquil atmosphere outside the window.

Magnifique lac, indeed.

"Goodness, Bonworth," Mango titters from the comfort of a reclining folding chair on the boat's sunny deck. "You're quite the shuffleboard enthusiast, sir!"

"You could say that, yes'm," Bonworth grins.

"How's the game going?" you ask, taking a seat next to the chubby, sundress-clad vixen.

"Well, I'm in a very good position right now, with one in the three-point zone and my other pucks acting as a shield, you see," Bonworth replies with a dramatic sweep of his paws, circling the chalked-out court confidently. "It's pretty much my game to lose at this point."

"Quite so," Mango replies matter-of-factly, eyeing his setup. "You've got your work cut out for you, Chica!"

"Hmm! This is basically like a mix of skeeball and pool, right?" Goose asks as she waddles around the deck, taking her time to line up her own puck -- though what criteria she's using to gauge her shot is anyone's guess. "I think I'm starting to figure it out!"

"Well actually, Ms. Goose, you should be standin'--"

Before Bonworth can finish, Goose rockets her puck across the court where it ricochets off of Bonworth's, managing to bounce all of his pucks away in one fell swoop while her own slides into the highest-scoring zone with ease. Leaning against the boat's railing, Bonworth's jaw drops while you and Mango applaud from the corner.

"How'd you *do* that?" Bonworth asks, awed.

"Do what?" Goose asks with an oblivious smile, heading into the dining hall and sparing a "look" in his vague direction.

As he sits down half-stunned in one of the chairs near yours, you notice Bonworth flexing his "knees" a little more easily than before. You can see plastic casing around his ankles, just below his pants cuffs and above his shoes.

"How're the new kickers treating you, Bonworth?" you ask.

"Good as gravy!" he replies appreciatively, flexing his fake legs. You can hear the sound of hydraulic pumps hissing as he does. "My old ones were givin' out anyway, so Fred and Ms. May went and pitched in to get me this new pair. They're a sure sight better than what I had, I tell you."

"Those definitely look like they're sturdier, anyway."

"Oh, for sure. These little marvels have got *shock absorbers* in 'em! Goin' down stairs now doesn't hurt like did before." He stomps one of his feet for emphasis. "Though, once I got to seein' what all athletic-type stuff folks can do with prosthetics these days, I'm already thinkin' about savin' up for an even fancier pair! Now that our stipends are back where they should be."

"Athletic -- ooh, that's right. You *were* on the track team, weren't you, Bonworth?" Mango ponders, taking a sip from her tea mug. "I seem to recall hearing something like that, anyway."

"Sure was! I think my sprintin' days are over, but I wouldn't mind bein' able to get out and go for a jog every now and then."

"Oh, I've been doing some walking lately myself!" Goose says, re-emerging from the interior carrying a paper plate loaded down with snacks from the buffet table. She feels her way to one of the nearby chairs with her other wing, taking a seat near you and Bonworth. "In fact, I'm starting to get a little more comfortable now, getting out and about. One of my new chores is checking the mail!"

"Hey, no kidding!" you reply. "That's great news, Goose!"

"The mailboxes are *four buildings down*, though! You're fine to walk that far by yourself?" Bonworth adds, equally impressed.

"Absolutely!" the curvy hen boasts, puffing her chest feathers up with no small amount of pride. "I've got two 'outside chores' now: I help Mangle tend her flowerboxes, and I check the mail every morning! Oh -- and have you heard about the Henhouse yet, Mike?"

"The Henhouse?" you ask.

"Yeah! Me and Chiclet had the idea a while back to form an exercise group, and we got Cheeky and Chichi to join in," she explains, pecking at some of the coconut shavings on a donut nestled in her wings. "So now we meet two times a week up at the exercise room at the front of the complex. We call it the 'Henhouse' because... well, I figure that part's obvious."

"It's quite the novel idea," Mango agrees. "An exercise club sounds like a wonderful way to stay accountable -- just like the chore chart. If I wasn't so busy with classes, your 'Henhouse' would have a fox in it, Chica!"

"You're always welcome to join us if your schedule frees up, Mangle," Goose chirps. "I know we'll love the company. The name stays, though."

"Mango, you were saying something about classes?" you ask. "More of your private tutoring, or something new?"

"In a sense, a bit of both," Mango replies. "I've decided to start giving more... in-depth lessons in the conference rooms. Mr. Marion has been kind enough to convert one to a semi-permanent classroom -- he had a whiteboard installed and some desks and chairs, so now I can hold proper

classes! We're starting on math and art, and I hope to add social studies as soon as I can find curriculum I feel comfortable with. Do you all know Bonson? Fran's boy, lives with April?"

Goose shakes her head, but Bonworth pipes up. "Sure, I know him! Bright little feller."

You nod assent. "Yeah, I met him and Fran just today."

"Well, I just opened applications, and she's already signed him up! I've got my first full-time student on the list!"

"Congratulations, Mango!" Bonworth whistles. "Boy, I bet you'll make a great teacher. The little ones sure seemed to like your arts 'n crafts back in the day."

"Speaking of arts and crafts, are you and Mangle getting along any better now?" you inquire. "Last I remember was you two working on that big costume for me."

"Oh yes, I'd say so. We agreed to bury the hatchet some time back. I won't lie and say things are perfect, but it's nice having a friend who understands some of my own proclivities." Mango tilts her head to you. "Even if sometimes I just want to swat that smug mug of Foxglove's into next week. Which is convenient, because that's about when I'd finally have all that whorish makeup washed off my paw."

"Yeah, you two are *great* friends," Goose laughs. "What was it Foxglove called you the other day? 'A vapid tangle of bad decisions dressed up like a stuffed ham'?"

Bonworth coughs, quickly becoming very interested in his drink.

"Mmmm, indeed. And just yesterday I believe Foxglove said my new paisley dress looked 'reasonable'." Mango says with a smile. "See? I feel we're really getting somewhere."

"That's huge progress," you joke.

"So! Bonworth," Goose lies sideways in her chair, giving him her full attention. "You promised to tell me what happened the other day with you and Cheeky. I heard her squawking up a storm and then someone tearing ass towards the street."

Bonworth claps his paws on his knees, looking eager to have a tale to tell. "Oh, that's right, that's right. Well, this door-to-door solicitor had been comin' by. Let me see now, what was it he was sellin'..."

"That reminds me. I've got to go say hi to the ol' bird myself. If you'll excuse me," you stand up, offering the group a polite nod before heading back in.

"Sure thing, pal! You know where to find us -- we won't go far. Now, where was I? Ah, that's it! Now, this solicitor..."

After a few minutes of searching (and following the scent of lavender perfume), you manage to track down both the neighbors you'd been looking for, all but hidden away in a small storage room off near the back of the ship.

"...which reminds me: are we still on for your Thursday appointment, Cheeky?"

"Are you *kidding*!?" Cheeky replies in between bites of cake. "After the week I've had, I might just book you *twice*. I feel like I need a nap in a sensory deprivation tank!"

"Stressed out, I take it?" the slender fox offers, making a show of deciding between the red velvet cake and the last piece of tres leches.

"You've got *no* idea. Okay, so I thought the thing with that damn salesman was bad enough, but get this: my birthday was the other day, and Bonnie decided to surprise me while I was out running errands."

"Ah, I didn't know! Happy belated birthday!" Mangle replies with a demure smile. "In that case, your next session's on the house."

"Whoa, thanks! You don't have to do that!"

"Oh, please, it's the least I can do. But I believe you were saying something about Bonworth and a stressful surprise...?"

"Oh my god, don't say it like *that!* All right, so Bonnie gets this idea in his head to have surround sound speakers installed in my bedroom for my birthday present because, hey, I love to chill out and listen to music at night on my waterbed."

"That sounds like a considerably thoughtful gift," Mangle frowns.

"Oh, you're right. It's a really nice present -- that's not the problem."

"Hmm. What's the catch, then?"

"Well, he didn't get any soundproofing, first off," Cheeky continues, "and I don't know if it's as bad in Building 8 as it is in Building 9, but the walls in our apartment are pretty darn thin."

Mangle's eyebrows arch just a touch. "Oh dear. I don't like where this story is going."

"And again, I should mention -- the speakers were a *surprise*. As in I had no idea they were in my room because they're these really small, high-powered ones that just kinda blend in. Same color as the paint," Cheeky replies, setting her plate down and looking around the cramped little room.

"...o-oh. *Oh no.*"

"He also neglected to mention that he'd hooked them up to my computer for me," Cheeky smirks, voice lowered and redness creeping up her face. "Would've been nice to know before I, uhh, decided to take a little late-night 'me time', is all I'm saying."

Mangle nearly chokes laughing, turning away to cough into a napkin.

"Good heavens. *That* must have been embarrassing," the fox replies, recovering quickly enough to offer a sympathetic, teary-eyed smile. "I can only imagine."

"*Yyyyyeaah.* That was fun havin' to explain to the neighbors," Cheeky moans frustratedly, rubbing her face with both of her wings. "Boy, Ms. Presto wasn't too happy -- but then, when is she ever."

"Wow. Mmmm, that sounds... I can't even begin to imagine. I think I'd have died on the spot!"

"Bonnie couldn't apologize enough, either. I'll admit, it's not the *most* embarrassed I've ever been, but it might be the reddest I've ever seen *him*." With a sheepish grin, Cheeky gestures at Mangle with a plastic sporkful of cake. "So hey, I guess I took it better than he did. So how about you? I'm sure you characters get up to all sorts of shenanigans over there. Any good, recent stories?"

"Well, I think I could probably tell one about a *certain* eavesdropping simian," Mangle replies with a smirk, swiftly sidestepping the conversation prompt. "Michael, darling -- you realize you're not invisible, right?"

"I promise I wasn't trying to eavesdrop," you protest, stepping out from around the corner. "I was just looking for an opportunity to make a polite entrance, that's all."

"Hmmph. Well -- if you've heard my embarrassing story, you gotta share one of your own. Hen's rules," Cheeky says, wings folded. "C'mon, out with it. Let's hear something that'll put a blush on those cheeks."

Sighing, you crack your neck. "Do I have to?"

"You gotta, Mikey. Hen's rules are absolute."

"Oh my goodness!" Mangle gasps theatrically. "Oh, Freddy -- you can't ignore Hen's rules!"

"I've never even heard of whatever that is, and I've got the sneaking suspicion you just made it up, but... all right, fine," you grumble, thrusting your hands into the pockets of your jeans. "When I was laid up in the hospital, I was so messed up at first, y'know? Lotta broken bones, I'm sure you remember. So I had to get sponge bathed until I could at least clean myself up."

"What, *that's* your embarrassing story? C'mon, that's not bad at all!" Cheeky clucks, a mile-wide grin breaking out onto her face. "When I was recovering from one of my surgeries, I got *several* sponge baths from this super cute male orderly. He was a lemur, I think -- his paws felt like... mmm, like an angel's kiss. *Super* thorough. No stone unturned, if you know what I mean."

"Was his name Brad, by chance?" you deadpan.

The two of them stare at you for a handful of seconds before the realization of what you're implying hits them.

"Oh *my*," Mangle titters.

"Yeah," you sigh. "And you're not kidding. He was definitely *thorough*."

"You know what, ah, I think Mike might just *barely* have edged you out in terms of embarrassing stories for the night," Mangle says. "Ooh, sorry, Cheeky. I hope you're not too upset about being dethroned."

"Ooh, my. Small world," Cheeky wipes a tear from one of her eyes, shaking her head. "Yeah, sure, I guess that'll do it. You're the big winner, Mike. At least I don't feel *quite* so bad now."

"Your prize, sir," Mangle grins, handing you the last piece of tres leches cake.

"All too happy I could help," you reply, letting out a good-natured sigh as you accept the dessert, skewering into it with your fork.

"Oooh, there he is!" Mangle declares abruptly, dancing in place like an excited child.

"There *who* is?" you ask, setting your empty plate aside so you can brush a few crumbs loose from your jacket.

"Mr. Fazbear!"

Pointing through the doorway, into the small crowd gathered by the stage, Mangle gestures to Fred Fazbear, who seems to be engaged in conversation with Marion of all people. Clad in an ill-fitting Hawaiian shirt and a straw hat, the wiry, bespectacled landlord's wardrobe clashes sharply with Fred's own choice of a morning suit, waistcoat, and pinstriped trousers. How on earth Marion landed an invite to this shindig, you'll never know, but he seems to be enjoying himself just the same, gesturing ardently and tapping his foot in time to the music.

"...wait, that little outburst was because of *Fred*? Well, at least you're not all hot and bothered over Marion, I guess," Cheeky mumbles.

"Eww. Perish the thought," Mangle huffs. "And please, don't paint it so... luridly! I've just been meaning to inquire of Mr. Fazbear about his tailor for ages now, seeing as how those suits of his always look so dapper. Besides, I'm certain he would appreciate a rescue from that nudnik. If you dears would excuse me?"

"Later, Mangle," you chuckle.

"Try not to look *too* thirsty," Cheeky adds, licking some cake frosting from one of her feathertips.

Slinking past you, the fashion-conscious fox plants a smooch on your cheek before skipping over toward the business bear. Cheeky's eyebrows shoot up to the top of her head as she turns to face you, beak hanging open like a largemouth bass.

"Oooohhh. I see how it is, Mikey."

"See how *what* is?" you reply, face as red as the lipstick smear that was no doubt just left on your cheek. "What are you talking about?"

"You and Mangle. Wasn't aware you two were a 'thing', but I guess it makes sense," she sniffs haughtily. "Still, passing up premium, all-American, free-range chicken for *that*? I mean, hey, that's fine. You're into a certain type, I can take a hint."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! Where's all *this* coming from?" you gawk, turning to look at her. "Are you... you're not *jealous*?"

"No, but I'm pretending to be to get under your skin." Grinning at you, she lazily mimics Mangle's earlier giddy behavior. "You're cute when you're flustered."

"...I feel like somehow the unspoken goal of this evening switched to 'let's embarrass Mike' when I wasn't paying attention."

"Oh, Mike. Sweet, innocent *Mike*. That's the unspoken goal of *every* evening," Cheeky clucks.

As the two of you stand together, basking for a moment in the calming, muted ambience of music, chatter, and clinking tableware, you notice her usual flippant demeanor beginning to fade. She stacks her own empty plate on top of yours, stepping closer with an uncharacteristically pensive expression.

"Hey, um -- I don't... I know that we didn't really get many opportunities to talk, y'know, while you were..." She coughs into her sleeve, turning to avoid your gaze. "I just wanted to say thanks, though."

"For what?"

"*For what*'?! Well, I'm sure a few of the others might say for being a *nosy piece of shit*," she replies incredulously, "but honestly, I'm glad you talked me into the whole... Jeremy's thing, *for what*."

Laughing awkwardly, you shake your head. "Eh. It was all Fred and the others, really."

"Eh' nothing, don't give me that false humility crap," she smirks. "Yeah, it might've been a team effort in the end, but you were a part of that team too. If you hadn't kept digging and pushing, not to mention talking some sense into that thick-headed ol' hardass, we'd all still be suffering along in silence."

"...thanks, Cheeky," you reply, fighting back a growing tightness in your throat. "That... really means a lot to me."

"And while we're at it, thanks for getting our big bear back in one piece. Bonnie and Foxy were beside themselves. I don't know what we'da done if he'd..." She stops abruptly, inhaling sharply through her beak. "Well, y'know."

"Hey, I was under threat of serious bodily injury if I'd screwed up with him," you chuckle. "Though in hindsight, I guess I was in for a rough night either way."

"We've *all* got battle scars from that place." Puffing up, she pats her chest proudly and shoots you an overdramatic salute. "You wear yours with pride, soldier."

"Damn right," you laugh, returning the salute with one of your own. "Boy. Jeremy's really left its mark on all of us in the end, huh."

"Just means you're officially one of us now," Cheeky grins, enveloping you in a hug.

"What the -- so *this* is what happened to the cake!!" Chiclet swoops in like some predatory bird to snatch a slice of the crimson treat from the metal shelf near you and Cheeky. "You louts stashed the good stuff?!"

"The only reason you didn't come back to crumbs was because I wanted to *keep* those six pounds off," Cheeky replies with an envious huff. "Red velvet's one of my *favorite* cakes. I mean okay, pretty much every cake's my favorite."

"Man, I hear you. Living with Freddy's tough when every morning's breakfast is like, five thousand calories -- but hey, that's what the Henhouse is for." Clapping one of her wings on Cheeky's

shoulder, Chiclet gives her an encouraging smile. "Besides, just those few extra pounds already make a noticeable difference. Don't you think she looks great, Mike?"

"Of course," you reply instantly, following Chiclet's cue and flashing the heavier hen a thumbs-up. "You're looking great, Cheeky. I knew something seemed different about you, but I've been trying to put my finger on it."

"You guys think so?" Cheeky asks with an almost childlike glee, wings cupped to her face. "Man, I'm glad it wasn't just me! Bonnie couldn't tell at all and I was like -- dude, do you need your eyes checked?!"

"With all that carrot juice he drinks, he's got no excuse," you chuckle.

"Tell me about it!" Straightening her blouse out, Cheeky surveys the room with a confident expression. "Well, shit! I might just go follow Foxglove's lead and do some mingling of my own, then!"

"Have fun," Chiclet grins as Cheeky wades out into the crowd, making a beeline straight for Frederick.

The tall hen turns to you with a calm, knowing smile across her scarred lips. "So. Mike."

"Chica."

"You haven't heard this from me, but uh -- you might be getting your own room, soon," she says, finishing off a bite of her cake.

"I... what?" you reply, jaw hanging slack. "Are you moving out?!"

"No, no. Heck no," Chiclet smirks before dabbing at her face with a napkin. "But, uh -- I think Em might be."

"...you're kidding."

"Well, not a done deal or anything, but I've been picking up the signs. Marion finished renovations in another building, and there's an apartment with a huge open sunroom that Em's talked about wanting to turn into a studio. Something about needing more room for stock, since business online is really picking up."

You sniff, considering the quieter household. "It'd be awfully lonely to be down one."

"I mean, it's not like we'd never see the little drama queen again, since Mangle would only be moving one or two buildings over, rather than moving out of the complex entirely."

"Wow," you breathe. "So then I'd get Mangle's old room?"

"Technically, Freddy would get preference because he's got seniority, but I think he'll probably just stay in your current room. So, yeah, most likely," she says. "Anyway, Mangle and Marion are still hashing it out, so it'll be a while before there's traction on any of this. Even so, I'd say the odds are like as not we'll be a four-person household soon enough, what with April and Mangle both gone."

You haven't had a room all to yourself in eons, unless you count your brief stay in Fred's office. Even your hospital room was shared with someone else.

"I -- wow, I don't even know what I'd do with my own space."

"Maybe start by eyeballing paint colors unless you really want a pink bedroom," she laughs.

"Hey, I could *totally* rock pink," you grunt. "It used to be a boy's color, you know."

"Yeah. Everyone knows that. What's next, you gonna tell me that giraffes have blue tongues? Or that Frankenstein was actually the doctor's name? Everyone knows that, Mike."

You shake your head disapprovingly. "Don't be jealous because I've got the best party trivia, Chica."

Leaning back against the table, the tall chicken folds her wings across her chest, looking down at you with an odd smile.

"I've missed this," she murmurs.

"Missed what?"

"Just, y'know, shooting the shit, hanging out at parties. Getting out of the damn house and socializing every once in a while, you know?"

"Yeah, for real."

"I've missed having people I can talk to that are no crazier than I am," she laughs. "Freddy's never been much of a conversationalist -- though in his own weird way he *is* getting more social -- and believe it or not, Bonnie's kinda doing her own thing lately. Getting out, making friends. I'm happy for her, but it *has* been kinda lonely."

"It's gonna go from noisy to quiet pretty fast, huh."

"Well, nothing for it," she declares. "Pajama Movie Night is going to have to become a neighborhood event. You're in charge of recruiting new troops."

"I think I can manage that," you laugh. "I can think of several folks who'd be willing to aid our cause of watching cheesy comedies and corny chick flicks."

"Only the cheesiest and the corniest need apply."

"So, Bonworth. Got it. I'll send him a written invitation."

Suddenly, her eyes light up. "Oh, that reminds me. I'd bought a little gift to bring to you while you were laid up in the hospital, but -- well. I figured you'd want to be in, shall we say, 'working order' first."

"Oh?" you inquire, eyebrow raised.

Reaching into her purse, Chiclet pulls out a sizable, flat package wrapped in tissue paper and held together with a thin red ribbon. She hands it off to you with a wordless grin. You accept it from her, turning it over in your hands a few times -- feels like a thin book of some kind...? With a shrug, you untie the ribbon and tear the tissue paper away, only to pull a straight double-take as soon as you see what your present is.

"...you bought me a *girlie magazine*?" you choke, tearing your gaze from the scantily-clad (and extremely well-endowed) girls on the cover.

"Let's be honest, Mike," Chiclet says, fighting a sharklike grin (and losing) as she feigns disinterest. "You've been tightly wound ever since we met. I talked to some experts on the topic--"

"*Cheeky*," you mutter through your blush. "I should have known she had something to do with this."

"...and the *experts*," she continues, unfazed, "agreed that this would be the best way to help you vent some of that '*pressure*'."

"With a porno." You spin the cover around and hold it up to her face.

"Technically, it's a swimsuit magazine," she grins, slyly pushing it back towards you with a wingtip. "I'm sure you won't notice much difference, though."

"And *I'm* sure it's just a coincidence that every single girl in here just *happens* to be a chicken," you reply, flipping through the pages.

Her smile suddenly vanishes. "Wait. They're *all* hens?"

"Tall, busty hens," you clarify, pulling out the centerfold and holding it up to her. "Look, this month's featured model just happens to be one *Ms. Clucksy Caboodle*. Gosh, Chica -- Clucksy could be your sister! Look at those big ol' orange... feathers."

"Son of a--" Snatching the magazine from you, Chiclet flips through the pages, eyes wide. "Dammit, this was just a joke -- I grabbed the first one that I saw! I didn't even look it over! I never knew they were all hens...!"

"Hens that all just *happen* to look like you?" you grin, reveling in the tables having been so suddenly turned. "Sure, Chica. You picked up a magazine titled '*Spring Chickens*' by mistake and not because you were subconsciously trying to send me a signal about your own '*pressure*'. Gotcha."

"Welp," she groans, dragging a wing down her face as she stuffs the magazine in her purse, "I think I'm gonna need a couple beers... and another piece of red velvet."

You're trying as hard as possible to hold it together. "What, don't I get to at least keep the magazine?"

"All right, get the hell out of here," Chiclet laughs, shoving you back into the main room. "Leave me to my shame and my cake."

"Oh, good evening, Mr. Schmidt!" Marion says, sliding in next to you at the buffet. "Have you tried any of the deviled eggs? They're an absolute delight."

"Uhh, no, I haven't," you respond, looking at Marion's plate -- which appears to be loaded down with graham crackers, a cup of mayonnaise, a pile of black licorice ropes, and a half-dozen deviled eggs. "I see you're enjoying them, though?"

"Absolutely. A good deviled egg is impossible to come by these days -- seems you only really see them at cafeterias and potluck dinners. I've tried making my own but alas, I can't quite seem to nail the technique."

"They do seem, uh, tricky." You find yourself trying not to gag as he slathers his graham crackers with even more mayonnaise.

"Indeed they are. By the way, don't forget -- you start Monday night. Might be a good idea to try winding your sleep schedule back a bit."

"I'm looking forward to it," you smile professionally. "Thanks for the opportunity."

"I'm very selective about the clientele I allow into my community, and I knew there was something special about you when you came to me looking for a home last year." Tipping his glasses down, he looks at you over the lenses with his beady, black eyes. "I've heard the stories about your valor. People speak well of you, Mr. Schmidt. You'll make a fine night watchman."

You stop halfway through filling your plate, turning to smile at him. "I'll keep these folks safe with everything I've got."

"I've no doubt in my mind!" he grins, pushing his spectacles back up. "Incidentally, now that our paladin is back on his feet, you'll have to allow me to host another game night soon!"

"Oh, sure enough. I bet Beanie would appreciate the opportunity to cut loose and play, now that she's running campaigns for a living, too."

"I wager so," Marion says. "Well then. I'll see you Monday night?"

"See you Monday, boss."

"Mike, a word," Fred murmurs behind you, tapping your shoulder.

"Sure thing." You follow Fred's lead, the two of you stepping over to a secluded area at the far corner of the room, near the front stage. "What's up?"

"I've got an announcement I want to make, and I want you present since it concerns you," he says, gesturing to the stage.

You look down at yourself awkwardly. "I hope you're not expecting me to make a speech," you laugh. "If there's one thing I've learned in all of this, it's that I should let others do the talking."

To your surprise, Fred lets out a genuine, jovial laugh -- not his usual acerbic bark he'd use to deride or mock something (or someone), but an honest-to-goodness laugh from the heart.

"I also wanted to pull you aside and congratulate you. Marion told me just now you accepted the job offer," Fred continues with a smile and an approving nod. "Kudos, Mike. I think it's a perfect fit for you."

"Thanks, Fred. I appreciate the vote of approval... that really means a lot coming from you."

"Have you told anyone yet?"

"Not yet." You glance out at the amassing crowd, watching Fran and Mango animatedly chat with each other. "Marion made it official this morning, actually. I start Monday."

"Well, I certainly look forward to seeing you on the job," he says. "While you're here -- one other thing, if I may."

"Yeah?"

"...thank you," Fred mumbles, rubbing the back of his head as he looks out into the room, busying himself with studying the faces of everyone who showed up to the party. "For everything you've done for the company, for my family. Even saving our... misguided Ms. Marigold."

Nodding, you extend your hand in wordless appreciation to him. He takes it in his own larger paw, gripping it gently as his fur bristles against your scars.

"If you ever need anything, you let me know," he says, shaking your hand. "I mean it. I owe you several debts of gratitude I can't hope to repay, but I intend to try."

"I'm just happy to have been of help," you reply quietly.

"Time to start the show, then."

He lets go of your hand with a nod, straightening his silk hat and walking up to the front of the stage. Picking the microphone up from the stand, he taps it a few times to draw the attention of everyone in the room.

"Hello, ladies and gentlemen!" he bellows with all the enthusiasm and showmanship of a carnival ringleader. He offers the crowd a huge smile, and a strange kind of excitement seems to overtake the stocky bear, in a way you've never seen him before.

"I'm so glad everyone's having a good time," Fred says, gesturing over the room with a grand sweep of his paw. "But please, give me a moment, because I have big, big news. Mr. Schmidt, come on, step up here with me."

All eyes in the room turn to look at you as Fred motions you over. Even Goose is 'watching' attentively from her seat next to Peanut. Blushing, you step up on stage next to Fred, grateful you know most of the people present. That at least makes this a little less awkward than it was back at HumieCon, what with having been subjected to gawking from a bunch of human-crazed strangers.

"First of all, a big round of applause for Mike. This venue was his idea in the first place. He was kind enough to chip in on the costs for this nice cruise of ours, to boot," Fred announces, leading the room in a wave of clapping as you awkwardly bow. "Also, let's show our gratitude to the providers of this fun-tastic party -- the staff of *S.C. Independent Service Associates, Hosting, And Catering Kitchens*. You've all been wonderful hosts. Thank you so much!"

Cheeky lets out a shrill wolf whistle, signalling the room to erupt in a burst of cheers, hoots, and enthusiastic approval. Grateful to have the spotlight off of you once more, you step back, letting Fred have his moment.

"I'm going to cut right to it so that we can all get back to enjoying the evening," Fred says once the cacophony quiets down. "As you all know, in the wake of legal proceedings against Humanimatronics Limited, certain robotic assets have been scrapped."

"They may have smeltd you-know-who down to nothing, but I heard they saved Fritzine's head," Rackham whispers conspiratorially.

"I heard she was *happy* to be taken to pieces," Bonnibel whispers back from your other side.

"Well, I heard they never even *found* two of them!" Bonbon hiccups.

Fred adjusts the microphone, continuing his speech as the murmuring dies down. "There's more. As of last Monday morning, Humanimtronics Limited has been dissolved, and the last pizzeria officially closed its doors. Ladies and gentlemen, I tell you this with the most sincere finality: *Jeremy Human's is no more.*"

If you thought the applause before was loud, the ovation now is borderline deafening.

Several of your friends leap to their feet -- including Bonworth -- screaming and shouting joyfully. Wild cheering breaks out across the room. A drunken Bonbon breaks from your group and runs the halls, doing somersaults and backflips. Beanie and Chichi seize each other in a tearful hug while Rackham leans forward, his good paw clutching his knee as he struggles to keep it together. Cheeky seems torn between laughing and sobbing openly, stuck firmly in the middle as thick black rivers of mascara run down her cheeks, soaking her collar. Frederick's huge arms and Chiclet's broad wings envelop Bonnibel and Foxglove, while the normally-demure April is biting down on her gauze-wrapped paw to keep from losing her composure.

There isn't a dry eye in the room. Even the newcomer Fran is nodding reverently, seemingly aware of the trauma the establishment caused.

You glance worriedly over at Fred, half-expecting him to be bothered by what essentially amounts to reveling in the demise of his brother's legacy, but for the second time tonight he surprises you -- he's smiling and laughing right alongside them. Lowering the microphone to his side, he turns and tips his hat to you.

"This is your victory too, Mr. Schmidt," he half-shouts over the din. "Go celebrate."

"Yes sir, Mr. Fazbear," you reply, wiping the mist from your eyes as you climb down the stage, where Mango and Faz embrace you in a group hug of their own, before you're all piled on by so many of the others it's impossible to keep track.

All good things must come to an end, however, and eventually the room more or less settles into a quieter (though still charged) state, allowing Fred to finish his speech.

"I wasn't legally allowed to divulge anything until now," Fred continues, "but we're starting fresh. The plan was to sell off the other locations, remodel, and rebrand. I'm happy to announce we'll be able to open for business as soon as the end of this year!"

"What kind of business?" Peanut squeaks over the ambient chatter.

"Ms. May and I have agreed we would like to stay in foodservice and entertainment," Fred replies. "We know the business. We're good at it. Plus, we know how to make a *darn* fine pizza. And while we're still hammering out the finer details, one thing's for sure: no robots. Period."

"I can get behind that," Chiclet jokes to you as the room breaks into applause again, dabbing at her face with a napkin. "If it means my degree's worthless, so freakin' be it."

"Well, we'll likely still have attractions -- definitely an arcade or two," Fred continues. "Maybe with a stocked bar..."

From the stage, Fred glances down at April, who's shaking her head and making a terse 'cut' gesture across her neck.

"...like I said. We're still working out the details."

"Sounds great!" Cheeky laughs. "Though I think bulldozing the whole thing should still be on the table."

"Fred, you got a name in mind for the new venture?" Rackham asks with a grin.

Scratching his head, Fred chuckles awkwardly. "I might've... undersold just how many of the 'finer details' we're still working out," he answers, drawing a round of giggles from the audience. "We're open to suggestions, though!"

"How about 'Blue Ribbon Eatery'?" Chichi chirps.

"Funtime Family Food!'" Bonworth calls out. "You wanna focus on family, don'tcha?"

"Famous Fred's?'" Goose suggests. "Something that rolls off the tongue."

"All good choices," Fred says with a smile.

"Oooh. How about 'Freddy Fazbear's Pizza'?" Peanut suggests.

**"Absolutely not,"** you and Faz reply simultaneously.

"We will be offering more than just pizza, of course," Fred remarks. "Something to think about, anyway. Perhaps we could run a contest. Ms. May?"

April nods. "Good idea. Maybe... set up a pool? Take suggestions?"

"Sounds good," Fred says, affixing the microphone to the stand and giving one last theatrical wave, before raising a glass from the nearby table. "I think that's it for now! I can't possibly thank you all enough for everything you've done. Here's to our friends! Please enjoy the rest of your evening!"

With a deep breath of fresh air, you step onto the foredeck and leave the fading sounds of celebration behind you. The sky fades to a reddish-orange glow at the horizon, and as you soak in the dimming early-evening ambience, the sound of soft, fuzzy footsteps approaching catches your attention.

Bonbon leans against the boat's metal doorway, swaying just a little and looking visibly tipsy. She folds her arms and offers you a gentle smile.

You smile back. "Nice evening."

In an unusual display of restraint and silence, the electric blue bunny just nods knowingly, pointing towards the fore of the ship. You follow her indication; there at the bow rests a lone, haggard red fox. Haddock's sitting cross-legged at the end of the deck, staring out at the lake. He's so still that you find yourself wondering if he's fallen asleep.

"Is he okay? I really thought he'd be more excited about the whole boat ride thing," you whisper. "That's part of why I picked a cruise."

Bonbon closes her eyes and nods gently, still not speaking. Satisfied with her response, you carefully approach the bow, eyes on Foxy. If he hears you approach -- or even sees you come up next to him -- he makes no indication of it. He seems entranced with the lake itself for the time being, and so you take that as a sign that it's okay to join him, sitting quietly beside him and watching the peaceful waters shimmer in the last dim lights of the fading sunset.

At a time like this, you don't mind the silence much. It gives you a little peace and quiet after a bustlingly busy day, as well as a chance to reflect on all the people you've had the pleasure of getting to know -- all of whom you're lucky enough to share company with this evening. It's been less than a year since you began your new life here, and while your residence has been an eventful road (to put it as charitably as possible), you wouldn't trade it for anything. Especially not now that you've seen where the winding path leads.

If you had to do it all again, you would. In a heartbeat.

...okay. Maybe not *all* of it. You'd be smarter about some things, at least. Still, at this point the nightmare's fading into the past like the last lights on the horizon, and sitting here, on a ship packed with your best and closest friends, the future looks bright. Bright and hopefully much, much more calm. You're more than ready to leave the worst of it behind you.

The ship's lights click on with a hum, driving off the encroaching darkness of the evening. You can't help but smile at the timing, and realize you've been tearing up a little. You reach up to wipe your eyes, feeling mildly embarrassed at your unguarded display, and glance to Foxy in the new light to see if he's noticed.

Tears are streaming down his face.

"Whoa, hey, Foxy, do -- are you okay, buddy?" you fumble, sitting up straight.

Haddock sniffls wetly, not bothering to hide his tears as he stares out at the lake through the glistening sheen on his eyes. Despite his emotional expression, he wears a broad, quivering smile -- a grin that tugs at his face with such insistence it doesn't look like he could fight it off if he wanted. He opens his mouth, as if to say something, but no words come out. He bites his lip repeatedly, trembling, and finally, unexpectedly, leans in sideways, slumping against you.

You nearly startle from the sudden contact, but he just stares quietly over the water with a strange, silent reverence. You manage to reach up and awkwardly pat his shoulder, whereupon he wraps his arms around you and hugs you tight, his hook inadvertently ripping at the fabric of your sleeve.

Again he tries to say something, and again only a hoarse, shaky stammer comes out. He reaches his good paw out at the lake, gesturing, and presses his head against your shoulder.

You put your arm around him, and the two of you just sit in the quiet stillness of the night, looking out at the calm waters ahead. You understand him well enough right now. It doesn't matter if he can't find the words. Truth is, neither can you.

For the first time in a long time, you can't think of anything more to say.

And maybe that's okay.

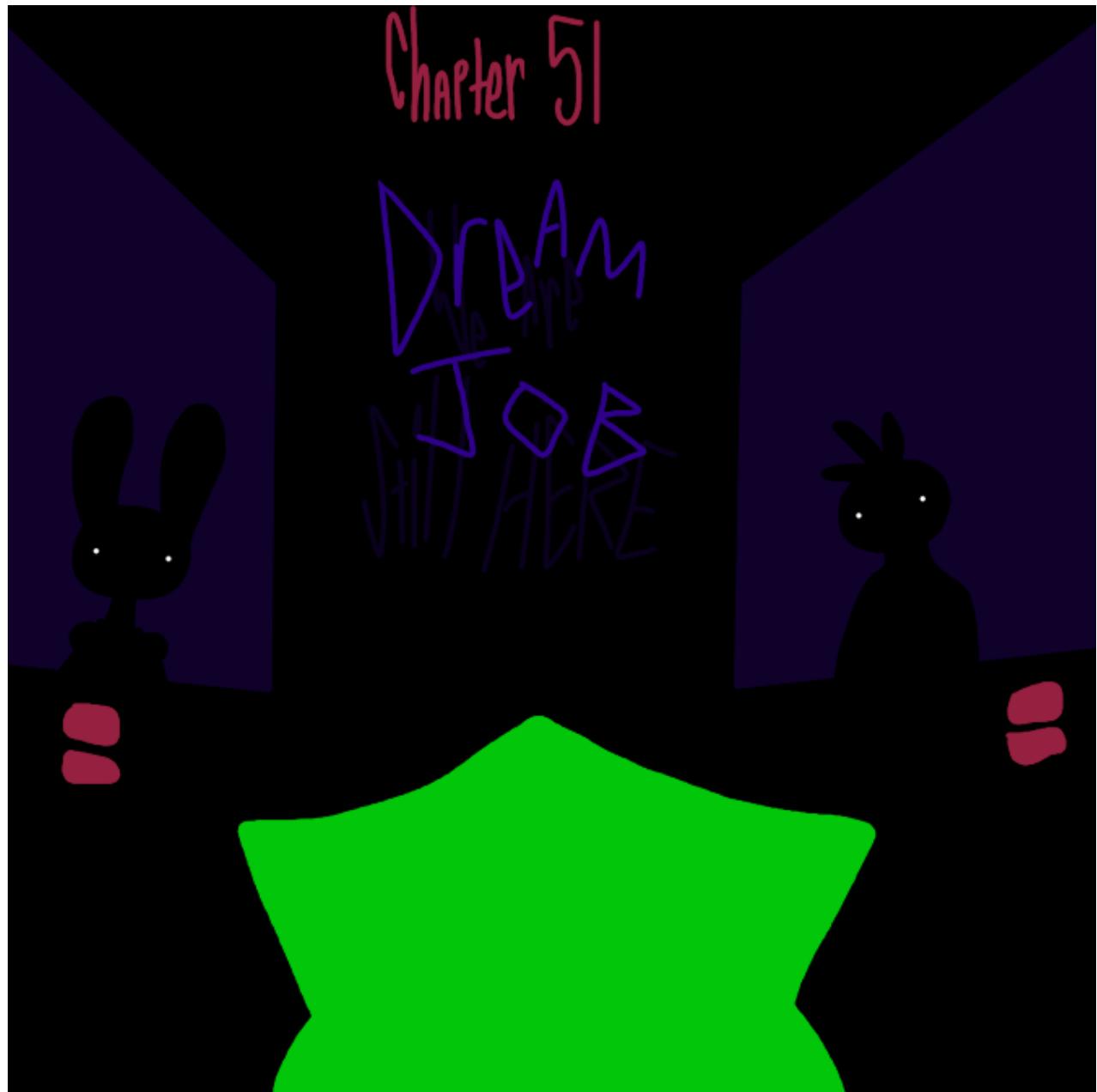
# Dream Job

## Chapter Summary

Time for your shift.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



Jolting awake from your slumber, you cast a blurry glance around Fazbear's office as your eyes adjust and refocus, slowly taking stock of the cluttered room to make sure nothing's changed since

you slept.

The oscillating desk fan, the flickery incandescent bulb dangling by a wire overhead. The crumpled-up papers and discarded soda cups scattered across the scratched-up faux wood surface of the desk. The toy cupcake perched atop a disused monitor, judging you silently with its glazed gaze.

So far, so good.

You give the doors and the lights a quick check while you're at it, but everything seems to be in order. Looks like Bonnie and Chica took pity on you, choosing not to tamper with the controls while you were inert. At least they've been getting better about that lately.

Leaning back in your chair, you stretch to keep your joints from locking up as the cycle begins anew. You were out for a while, this time, dreaming of that other world -- the one with the derelict pizzeria, the faulty Humanimatronics, and those strange animal people with their bizarre, inscrutable ways.

You don't miss it.

Brushing the thought of your unappealing past from your mind, you settle into your chair, picking up your tablet and conducting a sweep of the facility. You've grown lax; the cove curtain is wide open and the show stage stands hopelessly desolate. Leaning back in your seat, you close the left door and patiently await the inevitable visit.

Loud, heavy footsteps indicate Foxy hurtling down the hallway, ricocheting off the left-side door with a resounding crash, slamming into the stacked-up amplifiers in the west hall corner. You shake your head, re-opening the door only after you're certain he's slinked past.

"You **know** you're not allowed in here, Foxy."

"One of these nights, Schmidt," the animatronic fox grumbles back from somewhere down the west hall as he stalks off, returning to his own personal stage.

You open the tablet back up and page over to Pirate Cove. The curtain's closed again, as still and serene as ever. With a nod, you lower the monitor and drum your fingers across your chest, waiting for your next visitor. Even though they're all similar to the people you knew on the other side, their consistency is like clockwork, their methods mechanical. Precise and predictable, that's the name of the game. Compared to your old bandmates, your new co-workers are far easier to get along with.

You pity whoever ended up having to take your place.

It's usually fifty-fifty odds as to whether it's the rabbit or the hen next, but it's always one or the other. It's not long before you have your answer; like a fingertip dragging down the strings of a violin, her silky voice calls out from the darkness of the west side hall. Doubling down on that side tonight, it seems.

"Hello, **Mike**," Bonnie the bunny intones.

"Bonnie," you reply, slamming the door in her face without missing a beat as you cradle the tablet in your lap. "You're late."

"And **you're** being boring. I thought you and I were past all this. Come outside and join us for a while, have some fun! Aren't you getting sick of spending all your time locked up in that stuffy office?"

"Better in here than out there," you answer.

She sighs, leaning against the glass with her arms above her head. "Oh, come on. That's the old Mike talking."

"It's my job," you answer. "And stop calling me 'Mike'. That was the **last** guy."

"Well then, your job is boring and so are you. But you want to know what's **not** boring?" She presses harder against the window, her face grinding against the industrially-reinforced polycarbonate as if she were trying to fuse with it. "Me, Mike. Come play with me. You **owe** me."

Setting the tablet aside on the desk, you stand up from your chair and walk over to the left-side wall, your finger hovering just over the door button.

"...wait, really?" Bonnie asks, leaning away from the window as her pin-prick eyelight study you dubiously. "You're actually going to do it? You're not fun-timing me, are you?"

Pressing the button, the motors in the door yank the metal slab into the ceiling, allowing you to step out into the hallway with her.

"Huh," Bonnie says, cupping your face in one of her claws, dragging her fingertip along your cheek and down your chin until it rests just so upon the center of your throat. "I didn't think you had it in you."

"What can I say? You finally won me over," you shrug, following the surprised, steel-clad bunny down the hallway and into the dining room. "The tablet is a more efficient means of keeping track of everything, but I suppose I can make the rounds on foot from time to time as well."

"Did I hear that right? Schmidt's comin' out to play with us?" Foxy grins, poking his head out of his curtain.

"He is?" Chica adds.

"I knew I'd get it through his thick skull eventually," Bonnie boasts to her fellows as she buffs her claws on the thin veneer of fake lavender fur covering her chassis. "I can be very... **persuasive.**"

"Goodness, that **is** some persuasiveness," Chica eagerly replies, carrying her cupcake tray over to you as she joins your group. She claps her free wing on your shoulder, striking it with a loud metallic clang.

"Well, I don't mind 'playing' for a little while, so long as we stick to a **safe** activity," you insist.

"Please," Bonnie drones, "safety is my middle name."

"It's my **first** name," you answer automatically as you begin taking a brief headcount to ensure everyone is present and accounted for. One, two, three, and including yourself, four. And that just leaves...

"**Schmidt!**" Freddy Fazbear booms from the checkerboard-patterned lavatory, brushing his paws off as he thumps into the dining room. "Uniform's looking good tonight. Glad to see you're still sticking to the handbook's guidelines."

"It's been almost a year since he straightened up and flew right," Chica hastily interjects, her plastic beak clicking away.

"But this is what I always wear," you reply in confusion as Freddy taps the plastic badge affixed to the padding of your own green costume.

"And don't you forget it," the heavy-built bear warns, wagging his index finger. "Now then -- Mike, Bonnie, come help me offload the new shipment of ingredients corporate sent over."

"My name's still not Mike," you insist uselessly.

"Foxy, you're on cleaning duty," Fazbear continues, ignoring you. "I want the floors waxed and the tables set for the morning. Chica, kitchen patrol."

"Swabbin' the deck again?" Foxy groans.

"**Awww!** But we were gonna go hang out in the arcade, **Freddy!**" Bonnie pouts, the very face of petulance. "You make us work **every night** now!"

You roll your shoulders, loosening their sockets with an electric whirr. "That's what we're here for, isn't it?"

"That's the spirit, Schmidt. Now look, six AM will be here soon enough, and the day shift needs all the help they can get if we're going to keep the lights on," Freddy orders, directing everyone to their positions. "We don't have to worry about suiting the guard anymore, so we should be making the most of our newfound free time. I overheard management saying that if earnings stay on track, we may not have to close at year's end after all."

"Hold on -- we're not gonna close?" Chica asks with a hopeful smile. "You aren't kidding, Freddy?"

"...that go for all of us?" Foxy gasps. "So then, do you think I could--"

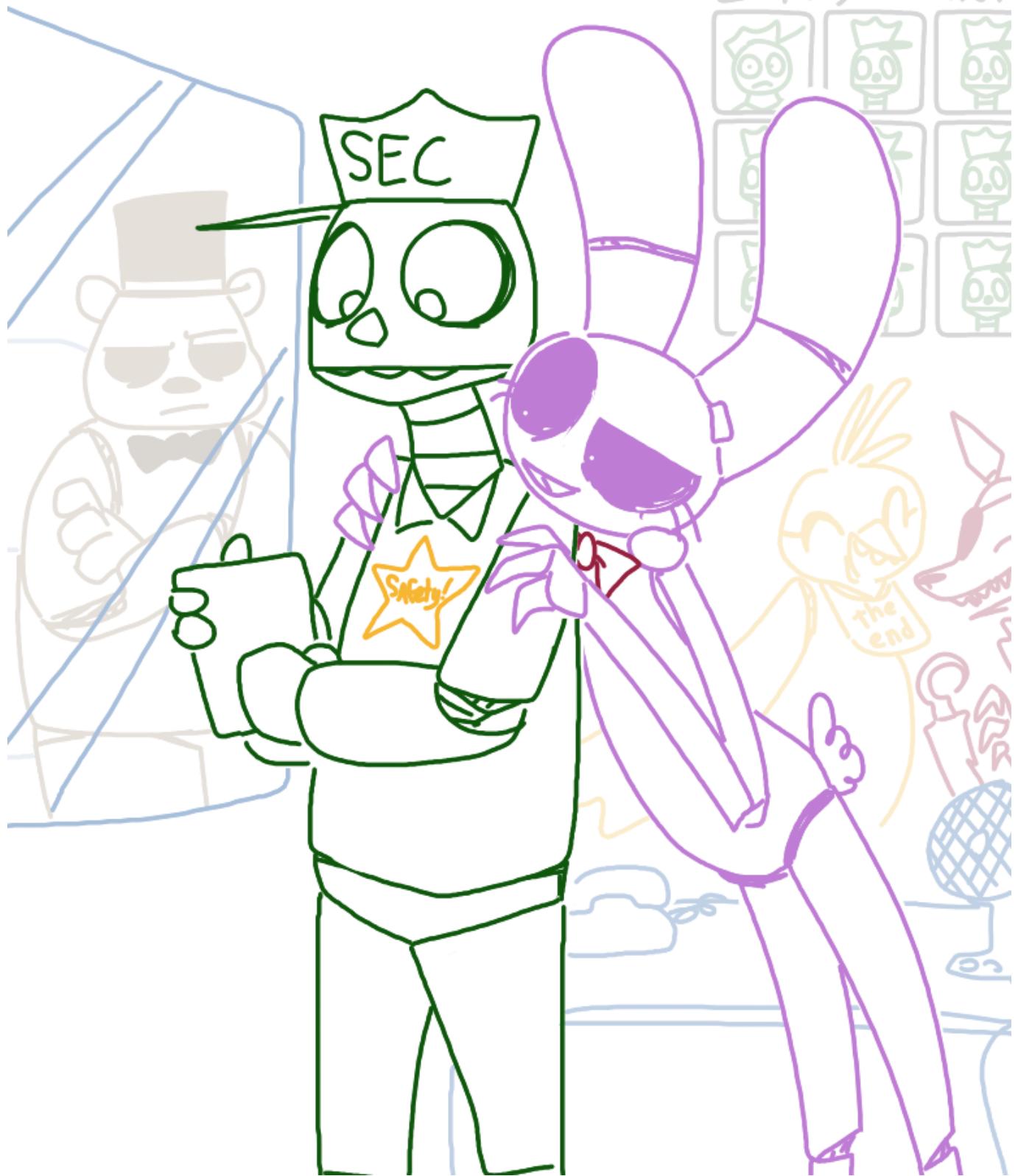
"**Of course** that's what he's saying, **barnacle brain**," Bonnie snaps, irritated as ever. "More money means you'll finally be able to quit loafing behind that curtain all day and get back to performing with the rest of us."

"I said **maybe**. Let's not get ahead of ourselves. But if earnings are up, that means not only will we stay in business, we can also expect renovations and repairs eventually," Freddy adds jovially. "Right now, one foot in front of the other. We've got to make the most of the freedom we get every night. Showtime, people."

"Yes **sir**," you reply, snapping off a mechanical salute as you and Bonnie follow Freddy through to the storage room, the sound of your own clanking footsteps finally joining theirs. Looks like another long night of hard, honest work with like-minded coworkers.

Sure beats your last job.

**THE END**



51 chapters, 9 minis, and more than 300,000 words later, *Roommates: Memoirs of the Hairless Ape* has officially come to an end.

To our readers: I'm grateful to each and every one of you for taking the time to comment. Though Weaver and I make it a point to stay out of the comments as much as possible (we prefer the flow of discussion to be natural), please know that it brings a smile to our faces to see such a positive reception for our slice-of-life story. Though praise and kind words are wonderful to receive, as an author, I personally find it mind-blowing to see people discussing, engaging, and theorizing about something I've written. It's utterly fascinating to see all of you following the trail of bread-crumbs we left, debating and arguing over various facets of *Roommates'* story and characters.

To Systemeth, Bud, Anon 2319, and everyone else who helped proofread: thank you all for your help in proofing, editing, and typo-hunting during *Roommates'* original run. I appreciate you guys taking time out of your busy schedules whenever I'd urgently approach you at ungodly hours with 12,000+ word drafts, asking for another set of eyes to make sure that the story was the best it could possibly be.

To all the other anons and content creators of /5N@F/ who supported us: thank you all so much. Every piece of fanart, every comic, every short story, every kind comment all meant more to me than you could possibly know. Thanks for rooting for us and staying with us even through the slow update periods.

To Weaver: thank you for all your hard work in planning, outlining, illustrating, titling, writing, and *creating* this story. Thank you for the conversations, the theorycrafting, the constant polishing. Thank you for urging me to be the best writer I possibly could, for catching me out on lazy writing, and for spending so much of yourself on this project. Thank you for hanging in there and cheering me on when both of us were so exhausted we just wanted to collapse. We got it done, friend.

One final note: I've seen several questions and inquiries about the possibility of future minis, chapters, sequels, etcetera. Though this story posted to Archive of Our Own over the course of less than two months, it took over *a year and a half* to write, and we're quite ready for a break. So, officially speaking, we don't have any plans to continue *Roommates*. If we write anything else, however, we'll gladly post it here at Archive of Our Own for the world to see.

I hope you've all enjoyed the story. I think I speak for both of us when I say we never expected a down-on-his-luck human and his quirky animal friends to become so beloved, especially so long after the fad popularity of *Five Nights at Freddy's* waned. Congratulations to everyone who survived the night shift.

May your future have many "up days". Be safe, friends!

-- Pokemaniacal (<http://roommatesau.tumblr.com/>)

What can I possibly say that hasn't been said already, and better? It's been a pleasure and an honor to write for you all, and I put everything I could into this work. Poke and I wanted it to be the absolute best it could be. Now that it's come to a close, I will miss it dearly, but I'm

happy to have it done. It's been a long and often arduous journey and I'm confident and proud of what we've put out here.

My deepest and sincerest thanks to all our fans, followers, and readers, from wherever you may have started. Thank you for helping us make this story come to life.

We say goodbye to the Memoirs now, but the fond memories will endure.

In the hearts and minds of us all, these characters will live on.

-- Weaver

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!