

## CHAPTER 20

Beautiful things lie behind smiling doors.

"It's a wonderful feeling," began the happy man. "To be greeted with a smiling face, in such an unlikely place."

Tapers, as a store, was long gone. Society had taken that away from us. While being an unpleasant truth, this did not cause any long term effects on our happiness, nor did it take away our ability to communicate and collaborate.

It couldn't have done either of those things. The moment I opened the door that day, this became clear.

"I'm a little shocked," I said. My camera was excited; he felt at home once again.

The happy man looked back at me and smiled. His face, as they would say, could turn the entire world upside-down. I never understood what that meant, exactly - until just that moment.

"Don't be," he said. "It's always been like this."

"But I don't understand," I said, looking around. The room was brimming with creative people, all of them chatting among themselves. It was paradise.

"It's easy," he said. "We were never exactly a store. Or a magazine. Or anything. We never wanted to be *in the way*."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He patted me on the back and began to stare into my eyes.

"These people are *beautiful*," he said. "I can count on a million hands how many dreams have come true in this building. To the best of our abilities, we try to keep all of these things afloat, or else face the consequences."

When I stepped in, everybody noticed. *Everybody knew*. Hundreds of eyeballs were drilling into my face. All I could do was stare at the floor, waving at them. I feared their reaction.

For all I knew, the floor could have been made of cameras. The *walls* could have been made of cameras. The people, with their aggressive expressions, were *most definitely made of cameras*.

"They don't seem very friendly," I said.

I was more nervous than anything. This, being my very first Tapers convention, felt also like the first - perhaps final - day of my life. The building wasn't even familiar.

What *was* familiar, was the happy man next to me. It was difficult to understand how, having lost everything, he could continue to

smile. Almost ten years earlier, he brought Tapers into existence. Now it was all gone, except for a small convention and annual competition.

"You must prove to them," he began. "How astounding you are. Do *you* believe that this can be done?"

"Oh, yes!" I said, getting my confidence back. "My taper, here, would agree."

The other cameras were equally enthused. At the end of the room was a gigantic screen with several hundred chairs planted in front of it. It would have, frankly, been amazing if any of them remained unoccupied by the time the audience sat themselves down - quite a thrilling prospect for a bunch of small unappreciated cameras.

"That's pleasant to hear," said the happy man, looking down at his wrist. His watch presented him with slightly surprising information. "Oh! Nice. It looks like we're ready to go."

"Where?"

"To a magical place," he replied, pointing to the screen. He turned around and made a gesture to the man at the end of the room. In reaction, this man picked up his little microphone and began to speak into it with his objectively beautiful voice.

"Tapers and gentleman," he began.

A few woman quietly complained, but they were ignored. The man continued:

"If you haven't taken your seats as of yet, do so now," he said. "We only have a few comfortable ones left and the rest are garbage."

The entire room suddenly filled with noise. The happy man, still standing next to me, looked quite amused.

"Oh gosh," I said, preparing to run. "I need one of those good chairs."

After the last chair was taken, the room began to quiet down. One rather large human being, having lost his chance of a seat, released a terrified moan. For a brief moment, the entire room was looking at him, but they soon redirected their attention to the man in front of the screen.

"Cool," he said. "We're good. I can hear my voice again."

The audience listened attentively.

"Fun stuff. Alrighty - anyway, hopefully you've all written your names on this little paper here!" he said, holding up a clipboard with a paper on it. Written on it was a list of participants. He squinted at it.

"And hopefully I can *read* your names!"

I raised my hand and called from one of the back seats. The man looked up.

"Yes?" he asked.

"Mine has a little camera drawing next to it," I responded. The people next to me sounded irritated.

He looked back down at the clipboard, squinted his eyes again, and smiled. Looking back up, he shrugged.

"Cute," he said. "You're on the bottom."

I frowned and lowered my hand. For a moment I could have sworn that the audience was cheering.

"It's a rather nice drawing, though!" he said. "Seems fair that I call these names in reverse this time."

"Yes!" I shouted. Everybody around me looked pissed.

Indeed, this seemed perfect for me. I was about to surprise all of them. *This was going to be my day.*

I didn't have enough time to change anything, or even *watch* all of it. My camera, in the past week, witnessed many events, some of them hideous and others wonderful. Great things lied ahead of us both.

Awesome. I took this moment to jump out of my chair and run to the front of the room; fiendly words left my mouth, but they were far too loud to be understood. I was alone with myself in this world, standing in front of a large intimidating screen with a tape in one hand and a happy, glowing camera in the other. All three of us were smiling.

The audience could have been fake, for all I knew. They didn't matter.

"Okay," I said. "What now?"

"This here, boy," he began, pointing to a large contraption next to the screen. "Will make all of your dreams come true. Place your magnificent tape in our very own *Tapers Videotape Machine* - the only one in existence, as only one has ever been manufactured."

"This is all very confusing, sir."

"Don't worry about it, everything is fine," he said. "I am, however, quite irritated that you are not doing what I have just instructed you to do."

The audience was getting unnecessarily loud. I walked over to the machine and popped my tape in, still wondering about the action I was carrying out.

"You guys made this crazy thing?" I asked. "If so, why the hell would you do that?"

The man looked at me sternly.

"This thing is wonderful," he said. "How dare you ask such a question."

The machine began making a surprising noise - almost like a thousand pennies dropping simultaneously every second. I covered my ears until it stopped.

"If you must know, however," he continued. "We didn't make it. We asked a brilliant man to do it for us."

"Yeah?" I asked, not listening entirely. The audience began to quiet down.

"He disappeared, unfortunately," the man said. "But the machine works like a charm, despite being rather broken. We didn't want to use anything *normal*, because, wellâ€¦ you can see for yourself the kind of magic we have on our hands now."

The lights turned off. Everybody directed their attention to the gigantic screen.

As this was happening, I suddenly realized something.

"Wait," I said.

"Quiet," the man replied. "We're watching your thing."

"No, seriously, Iâ€¦"

"Shut up, it's movie time."

The fear began to build up, but I could do nothing about it. Everybody was about to see. Everybody was going to know. While it seemed a nice idea before, to enter a video of my recent experiences, it suddenly came to me how unfortunate a decision that was. It all seemed rather predictable from here on out.

At the back of my mind was one question, however. What was so magical about this machine?

Shockingly, this didn't stay a mystery for too long. It was quite clear, as the video started, what this magic was. Everybody *did*, of course, witness the same events I remembered through my camera's eyes. They were, indeed, mostly accurate. Some of it was even new to *me* - a fact that can only be explained by my camera's natural sneakiness.

The audience's emotions weren't easy to figure out, but they wouldn't have been affected by this "magic" anyhow. The only surprising thing about this video was that Marvin had, somehow, been taken out of *all* of them. Completely. As odd as that may

seem, it could not be denied - no traces of that man remained - instead, he was replaced by none other than *me*.

Yes, *me*!

This was obviously the magic. The rest of the video was completely normal.

However, this led to yet another puzzling question: how did this man, standing next to me, *know anything about this*?

I could even see him staring at me, watching my reaction. He wore a horrifying smirk on his face.

Forget the color. Forget the happiness. This machine was Marvin's toy to get revenge and to hide himself from society. He knew this was going to happen! He knew that these hungry chair-hogging slobs would devour him - even take away his soul without realizing it. Marvin was a scared, old man. He hated attention. He hated everything.

All he wanted was a silly little girl. And all that girl wanted was to explode. These were *facts*!

Or, at least, I would present them so. This was *my* video, after all. These were *my* characters. How would I not know every last detail about their motivations?

The audience began to clap. Of course, yes. Overwhelming applause. This was definitely what I needed.

I didn't kill anybody. This was not my doing.

Still, I could not help but faint at that moment.