

Working in anomaly containment was a lot easier than what people thought.

Really, though. It was. He thought so, at least. How many jobs gave you such clearly laid out instructions? Most jobs worth a damn, they paid you to sit down and pretend to work, or to work at an undefined 'something'. You chip at nothing, or you have to come to some definition of what that is along with your co-workers, and then you all use that energy making sure that at least one thing gets done. Not like it matters. The people up top are rarely, if ever, losing money when you cock up.

Not him, though. His days were simple. He woke up, rolled out of bed, ate, peed, found somewhere to shower, changed into his uniform, and then checked the todo pile. Camille, while kind of shy, did a bang-up job of keeping everyone focused on something, no matter what; for him, it was crunching numbers.

And crunch them he did! Every day he'd sit at his makeshift cubicle, papers in hand, and chop out stats for every single detail that might be important. Amount of limbs. Movement speed. Contact with other anomalies. Times turned east. The occasional cause of death. And there was nothing else he would rather be doing, really. There was something cathartic about trudging through all that raw data and coming out with only the essentials, like compressing coal into diamonds. Making things simple. Tidy. Put them in places where he could forget them, and then find them without even trying.

And, at night, while everyone slept, he got to wander.

He'd wandered the Westerville Mall many times before-- everyone in the team had done so at least once. He preferred to meander through its windowless walls and ceramic pathways; he'd count the shops with his fingers as he passed by, and note which ones moved out or in. The mall changed just enough to keep him entertained, but not so much as to throw him off guard. It was just right.

But then, the mall changed.

What was once a quaint building morphed overnight into a sprawling mass of corridors and ramps and elevators and endless endless *everything* all leading to nowhere. Whatever may have been considered tasteful by human logic and reason was blocked off from the public: the glass halls they prided themselves on were locked off but not destroyed; the previous parking lot was deserted, leaving miles of pure darkness only accessible if you knew where to look; a lot of shops became minotaur-themed, for some reason, selling labyrinth-print shirts and mino-burgers.

The mall had so many *things*. So many things that were *there* all the time. There were people and there were staff and they all had schedules and events and sales and they had so many variables to keep track of all the time. Walking at night, when no one else gave a damn, helped ease the monumental headache all that input gave him.

Case in point: this part of the building was not something he'd seen before.

Neville was sure he'd tracked this whole section on his last walk: the amount of blocked-off sections, how many of those still had merchandise in them, how many still had shops that just refused to close. Devona could tell you from the top of her mind, easy-- she was cool like that. But not him. For him, that certainty was more an ache underneath his ribs: a message from the part of him that remembered where he'd last been and where all the best hidey-holes were.

A grunt escaped him as he pushed over a maintenance door behind a large 'coming soon' advertisement plastered where a stall should be. The iconic TV-ready smile of some famous actor buckled in on itself, the gap between their teeth and jaw giving in to show... yet another pathway.

How had he missed this one? Perhaps it was made more obvious by the ad than as the dull wall it was before. He'd never know for sure; all there was left to do was to enter the man's maw.

First thing was the dust. There was so much dust. He pulled up the collar of his shirt to try and shield it from the barrage, the itch making him half-sneeze every third step or so. As the walk continued, the light pouring from the entrance became dimmer and dimmer, until he was basically standing in the dark. His eyes blinked, trying to make something out-- anything, really, that would make it worth it going further down this hole.

Just like that, fate sent a sign: a light from one of the stalls at the furthest end of the hallway, staying steady for a whole minute before rotating out of view. A flashlight? It had to be. Maybe there was someone still being sent to work in that hell-hole after all. Neville burst into a sprint, making sure to count the shops as he passed them-- abandoned food mart, home decor, home decor, bakery infested with rats-- until he made it to the source of that flash.

What he found was something he wasn't sure he expected. Racks and racks of clothes-- pretty fancy ones, too-- some high-end shop tucked in the middle of goddamn nowhere. Were they expecting to make big bucks in this city? Well, judging from the state of clear disrepair, they didn't exactly win the lottery.

And, in the middle of all that, was Witherby.

He appeared to be surveying the place, the flashlight held up only by the tilt of his head against his shoulder, leaning over a glass case not too far from the register. The light bounced off the case and back onto him, showing his silhouette against the darkness.

What a strange guy.

"So this is where you hide, huh, Wibs?" Neville heckled from his spot in the entryway, thumbs rocking back and forth inside his pockets as he stared off with a dumbfounded smile.

Witherby froze, hands clenching at the sudden noise. A moment passed, then two-- his eyes closed in recognition, shoulders slumping back to where they were, and he continued on, as if Neville had never called him out in the first place. "Impressive, is it not?" he wondered aloud, talking to no one in particular. His eyes betrayed his ruse as they flickered between Neville and the case. "Apparently they found it cheaper to leave all the merchandise here than to send a team to extract it."

Neville let out a 'hah', walking closer to where Witherby stood. He turned to stand behind him, resting his head over his unoccupied shoulder. "Didn't take you for a historian."

He shrugged him off. "Then you clearly do not know me."

Sheesh.

Neville sat in that silence for longer than he should have, counting the seconds as they passed, as if that would make either of them talk any faster. It was of no use. Wibs was one of those people who could pretend you didn't exist for as long as he wanted-- perhaps it was just a skill that he picked up from the job. Either way, he'd have to be the initiator. Just like at the water cooler, really! Like old times.

"So..." he said, resting his weight over the case like one would at a bar, "You come here often?"

"About as often as anyone else. Hadn't noticed this path even existed before they put up that poster. The printing made that door inside his mouth jut out-- it just... looked unnatural."

"Yeah, you'd know all about holes in men's mouths, wouldn't you?"

He let out an exhale, his hand pinching the bridge of his nose-- Neville cackled at his own joke all the while. Finally, Witherby opened his eyes again. "We just let you speak all the time, don't we?"

"Don't give me that, man! You're all out and about twenty-four seven!" Neville threw his hands in the air. "Who am I gonna tell all my material to, Ria?"

"Oh, I feel your 'material' may be too high-brow for her," he stated, flatly. "And you should give her more credit. She's trying."

"I'm just *saying* you can't give me that look just because you gave me a ball and I happened to swing it."

Witherby let out a wry smile. "So now we're talking about balls?"

Neville's cheeks caught the slightest tint of flustering red, eyes wide as plates. "Listen-- not fair!"

The other man returned to the glass case as Neville coughed away the embarrassment --and the dust--, amusement never leaving the glint in his eye. At long last, Neville cleared his throat, his signature cool-guy smile coming back as if nothing had ever happened. "All right! Okay. Listen. What's up with this? If you want help getting into that box, you know..."

"For you to smash it open?" Witherby spared him only a glance. "No need."

He reached into his sleeve, pulling out two bobby pins; he tore the 'head' off the first one with his teeth, then got down on one knee. Then, he bent the second bobby pin into the shape of a lever and rested the first one on top of it-- a makeshift lockpicking tool.

"Woah." Neville whistled, leaning forward. "New party trick?"

"Hardly."

The bobby pins pressed on the locks inside the case, pushing them up through trial and error; one by one they gave a soft click, until the case gave in with a 'pop'. Peeking in, Neville could get a better view of the case's contents: six sets of jewelry-- two pairs of earrings, two necklaces, two watches-- all neatly laid out for the best combination of storage and appeal. It was pretty to look at, for sure-- he could probably spend the rest of his natural life tracing out the inlays in some of them, but...

"You, uh... got a girlfriend, or something?"

Witherby turned to him with a raised brow. "Hm?"

"Or! Or a boyfriend! I don't actually know! I was just doing a bit!" Neville's shoulders tensed up, his hands going up to his chest as if fending a tiger off. "I've just never seen you around these kinds of places, man, and it's not like I knew a lot about you back when we worked, you know, *there*, and you spend all of your time working, and I don't know where you go when you aren't working? I'm just-- I'm doing what Devy does. I'm just asking. Are you just selling this off? Is that legal? I thought you were a tech guy, that's all."

The silence in the room was nearly deafening in itself. Neville could feel Witherby's gaze as he looked at him; his black eyes, focused and unreadable, remained locked onto his... but what were they looking for? Ah, fuck, he cocked this one up. It's fine. This is probably fine, right? He'd just wait for Witherby to dismiss him, and then he'd leave, and it would be as if none of that conversation ever happened. He counted the seconds. He kept track of each moment he was still staring. Just so he'd know.

Eleven seconds.

Witherby's eyes looked up, then left, as if recalling something-- and then he laughed. Not a chuckle, or a brief exhale. No, he *laughed*, putting his hand up to his mouth to stifle the noise. With his other hand he caught the flashlight before it could fall off from its nook around his neck, leaving it pointed to the ground as he shook whatever he thought was so funny off of him.

"Oh, no, nothing like that! I've never been good with computers. I'm not seeing anyone, either." He reached for a pair of earrings in the display case-- two silver studs in the shapes of crosses-- and nonchalantly pushed the edges of hair back as he put them on. "These are for me. Although perhaps I *could* trade these off. It's not like we get paid in fiat currency."

Neville couldn't help but stare at his coworker's ears. "Oh. I didn't know your ears were-- nevermind, that's, uh... stupid. What I was about to say! Not... not you." He cleared his throat. This was dumb. This was so, so dumb. How the hell did he manage to miss all that information? Did Devona ever catch it? He had so many questions. "So... you like this stuff?"

"It's one of the luxuries of this world. Food is very... temporary." Witherby's hands had moved onto the necklaces; he rolled them out over his palm, bringing them closer to the light as he examined each one. "I take it you don't change clothes very often."

"Yeah, no. Kinda busy trying not to get murdered, and all that." He said, banging at his chestplate for emphasis. "Especially with those weird ones that can walk through walls. Gotta stay safe, right?"

"I do not blame you, Neville. I was just making an observation."

Neville merely watched as Witherby's eye remained trained onto the jewelry-- he put them back in the box as he went through them, as if discarding players for a draft. He saw him pause at the last one-- a golden chain-- as he brought it up to the light, extending it in Neville's direction. Devona did that whenever she was trying to get a good shot-- what was he trying to do?

"Take off your tie."

"Wha-- huh? This?" He replied, grabbing its edge from where it was tucked into his shirt.

He nodded. "Just hand it over."

"Oh. Yeah, sure. Here you go, man."

Neville grabbed and pulled it out of place, the knot untying itself with the force, and leaving his hand holding it up like one would a fresh catch. As if on cue, Witherby stepped closer to him, necklace in hand; he put his hands around Neville's neck, wrapping the piece with a gentle touch, and letting it hang over his pristine white suit, while Witherby pocketed the tie.

"There," he said, patting his shoulders with the tips of his fingers.

Neville blinked, brow furrowed, tilting his head down to try and see the chain. "I don't get it."

Witherby let out a sigh. "I figured you wouldn't. Here."

With that same grip on his shoulders, Neville felt a push as he appeared to want to lead him somewhere. Well, why not? He let the shove walk him through the shop, the lone flashlight serving as the guide, until they turned towards an area labeled the 'changing room'. The light flashed back at them as it got reflected; he'd been led to a mirror. Neville stood still as he took in the change, pacing in place as if to help him see everything better.

Witherby leaned back against the wall, crossing his arms. "The red is striking, but... gold suits you much better. It brings out your eyes."

"Woah. Hey. I guess it does." Neville reflexively gave his reflection a double thumbs-up, wide grin spreading across his face. "It's like, shiny. Man, wish I'd brought my glasses--" he patted himself down-- "That would've been a good look."

"Maybe." Witherby stared off into the mirror, face as unreadable as ever. "...perhaps we could find you a whole outfit in this section. I'm sure if they kept jewelry, they must've kept some new sunglasses."

Neville's face practically beamed at the thought. "Really? Dude-- that's cool! You're the best!" He turned to face Witherby and tossed his arm over the man's shoulder, pulling him into a hug. "Wait. This is a friend thing, right? You're not trying to buy me out?"

"I don't work in my off-hours," he replied, matter-of-factly.

"Okay, cool. Second question. Won't people notice if we walk out with anything?"

"They don't have security here like we used to. I assure you they won't notice."

"Isn't that like... like a *crime*?"

"Oh, Neville." He smiled back to him, that aura of deliberately manufactured mystery hanging in the air ever so slightly. "You're about to learn a *lot* of things about me."

This was weird. You work with a guy for so long, and you don't really get to know him. Not like where they worked on was known for fostering good on-site relationships, you know, with people dropping dead every day. But their little group was something different, They'd all died, or close to died, back there, and yet here they were: alive and kicking, like it never happened. Maybe it'd be a good idea to start getting the gang together. Get to know each other. And, if this universe wasn't against it, maybe even live a little.

"Yeah, okay. I'm ditching if we get caught, though."

"Whatever you say," he answered, both of them walking back into the store.