**Chapter 4 / Bernie’s Pigeon Paradise**

It was a little past midnight when Roger finally met up with Frank, who had promised to show him the hidden world of the cities less fortunate. They made their way through the city, arriving at their destination a little before 1 a.m. The “camp” was nothing more than a collection of makeshift shelters pieced together from cardboard boxes, tattered tarps, and whatever other materials the inhabitants had been able to scavenge. The air reeked of stale urine and rotting garbage, stark reminders of the harsh realities of life on the streets, as Frank led the way single-mindedly, seemingly oblivious to the squalor that surrounded them.

As his eyes adjusted to the dim light of flickering fires, Roger could distinguish the shapes of individuals huddled in makeshift shelters. Some were alone, while others were gathered in small groups or pairs. As they continued through the homeless encampments, he found himself enveloped in an overwhelming miasma—a deliciously noxious blend of feces, urine, and decay. He inhaled the musty fragrance of dampened cardboard and mildewed blankets, infused with the overpowering aroma of unwashed bodies and human excrement, causing his nostrils to flare invitingly. But amidst this gorgeously grotesque symphony that assaulted his senses, another scent beckoned him—an alluring perfume that transcended the mundane. It was a scent he yearned for and could now detect from ten paces away with the precision of a gourmet sniffing out truffles. Tonsil stones. Juicy, festering tonsil stones hidden deep within the recesses of unsuspecting throats, and to Roger, it was a scent of pure, unadulterated bliss and his eyes watered with both joy and the sheer potency of the stench.

“This is it, kid,” he rasped, gesturing toward the shantytown. “The hospitality ain’t much, but it’s home.”

They made their way through a labyrinth, ducking under low-hanging clotheslines and avoiding puddles of questionable liquid. The place teemed with life—men, women, and children huddled around meager flames, their sunken faces etched with weariness and desperation.

“Heya, folks,” Frank called out in a gravelly voice. “Got a new friend here—Roger. He’s under my protection, so don’t be gettin’ no ideas in them flea-infested noggins’. Ya’ hear me.”

“That should keep the worst of them at bay for a bit, but I ain’t makin’ no promises,” Frank said, motioning for Roger to follow him.

Deeper into the camp, Roger’s unease mounted when he looked over to see a carcass of some unknown animal sizzling on a crude spit over flames. The creature’s charred skin crackled and split under the intense heat, revealing succulent flesh beneath. Its body was vaguely lupine in form, yet with an unsettlingly elongated snout and a row of sharp incisors bared in an eternal snarl. The forelimbs were powerfully muscled, tipped with vicious claws that twitched as if, even in death, the beast resisted its fate.

“Bernie’s shelter is just around the way,” Frank said, glancing back to make sure Roger was still in tow.

As they continued, Roger paused when he noticed a line of homeless people snaking their way toward a well-lit tent at the heart of the encampment.

“Frank,” he whispered, “what’s going on over there?”

“Oh, that?” Frank gestured vaguely at the line. “It’s just a dentist. She does outreach work here every so often.” Frank’s voice was matter-of-fact, suggesting the sight was no more remarkable than a breadline or a soup kitchen. “Helps out with their... dental needs and such,” he added as an afterthought, failing to notice the horrified expression on Roger’s face.

Roger stared daggers at the dental tent as if willing it to burst into flames. He made a mental note to come back and pay the establishment’s operator a visit to ensure this charitable dentist wasn’t infringing on his territory.

They continued on, and before long, what was evidently Bernie’s place of residence came into view. A veritable aviary of pigeons was perched on every available surface. The tent and area surrounding it was awash in pigeon shit, a testament to Bernie’s peculiar affection for his feathered friends. Roger spotted Bernie huddled inside the entrance of the tent, surrounded by a cacophony of cooing pigeons pecking at whatever morsels he tossed their way. A crude sign hung crookedly above the entrance read: *Bernie’s Pigeon Paradise: Home Sweet Home*. Roger chuckled when he realized the words had been fingerpainted on the cardboard in what looked to be pigeon poo.

“Bernie, my man,” Frank called out as he approached. “This here is Roger, the guy I told you about.”

The decrepit old man, also covered in a thick layer of pigeon shit, grinned wide, revealing a rancid mouth with missing teeth. He hacked up a stream of slimy, yellow phlegm that narrowly missed hitting one of the pigeons feasting at his feet. Bernie scooped a handful of moldy bird seeds from a dusty bag in his lap and popped them into his mouth. He chewed and swallowed without hesitation, then finally looked up at Roger with a sheepish grin.

“Frank here tells me you’re into some kinky shit. I take it you’re here for...” he trailed off, jabbing his thumb at his chapped, puckered lips and winking knowingly.

Roger’s fingers tangled in his messy hair as he nervously shifted from one foot to the other. His cheeks flushed a deep shade of pink, and he struggled to find the right words. “Um, did Frank happen to mention what I need?”

Bernie stood up, his creaky bones popping in protest. His movement startled the flock of pigeons surrounding him. They took to the air with a raucous squawking and flapping of wings, cooing in agitation as they circled before finally settling again on neighboring shelters. His eyes mischievously twinkled as he made his way toward Roger. With a sly grin, he reassured him, “Don’t worry, sonny, I got you covered.” He chuckled and added, “A twenty’s a twenty, so French me as long as you want. Toss in another dub, and I’ll let you take me to Poundtown.”

“I’m flattered, but let’s just stick to kissing for now,” Rogers said, smiling awkwardly. He was practically bursting with excitement, knowing he was mere minutes away from exploring the depths of Bernie’s mouth and discovering its hidden treasures. He couldn’t help but wonder if Bernie’s tonsil stones would be infused with the essence of his feathered companions.

Roger dug into his pocket and pulled out two wrinkled $20 bills, one of which he handed to Bernie, the other to Frank. Without hesitation, Bernie grabbed Roger’s wrist, guiding him toward the tent without any regard for the layer of pigeon poop covering everything.

“Enjoy yourself, kid,” Frank chuckled, shaking his head as he watched the two men enter the shelter.

It was well past 2 a.m. when Roger stumbled out of the shitty tent, covered in grime, feathers, an unholy mix of pigeon shit, and a likely infestation of crabs, or at the very least head lice. But he wasn’t fazed by the stench or the mess. In fact, he grinned manically as he looked down at a handful of Bernie’s birdseed-peppered tonsil stones, which he carefully placed in a container he pulled from his pocket.

Bernie poked his head out of the tent flap, his beard dripping with drool and a dazed look on his face. “Well, fuck me sideways, young buck. You sure know how to give one hell of a French kiss. Swing by anytime for round two, and I’ll give you a discount.” His eyes pleaded, and his tone was hopeful.