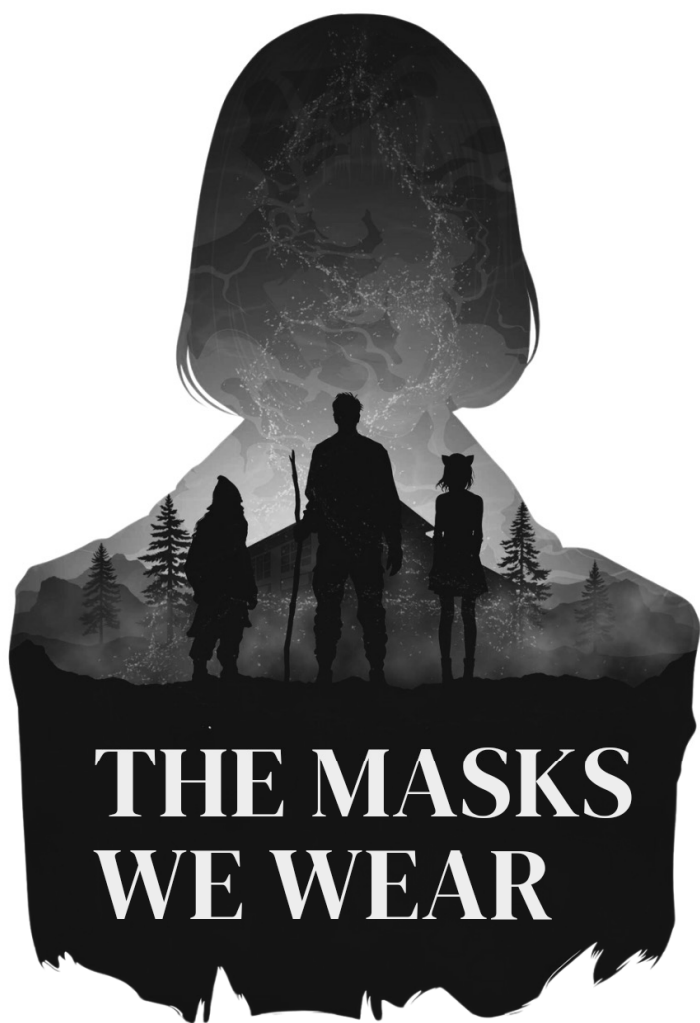


THE MASKS WE WEAR



THE MASKS WE WEAR

B.D. CARPENTER

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TRIGGER WARNING

Welcome readers,

Within these pages, you will find a world that looks like our own and a cast of characters that, for the most part, feel like us. We are all flawed in some ways and have our strengths in others, just like them.

You will find **curse words** and topics of **bullying, stalking, parental verbal/mental abuse, medical trauma, mention of sexually explicit materials,** and **sexual language**. None of the topics are intended to be graphic or triggering, but each individual has their own level of resilience and are on their own path of healing. Remember to practice good self-care.

To my loving husband and best friend,

*Your creativity shines brighter and is deeper
than any ley line. You made this entire magic
system without the use of a Gnome-hold. If
that's not some kind of false-Kin ability, I'm
not sure what is.*

Love,

B

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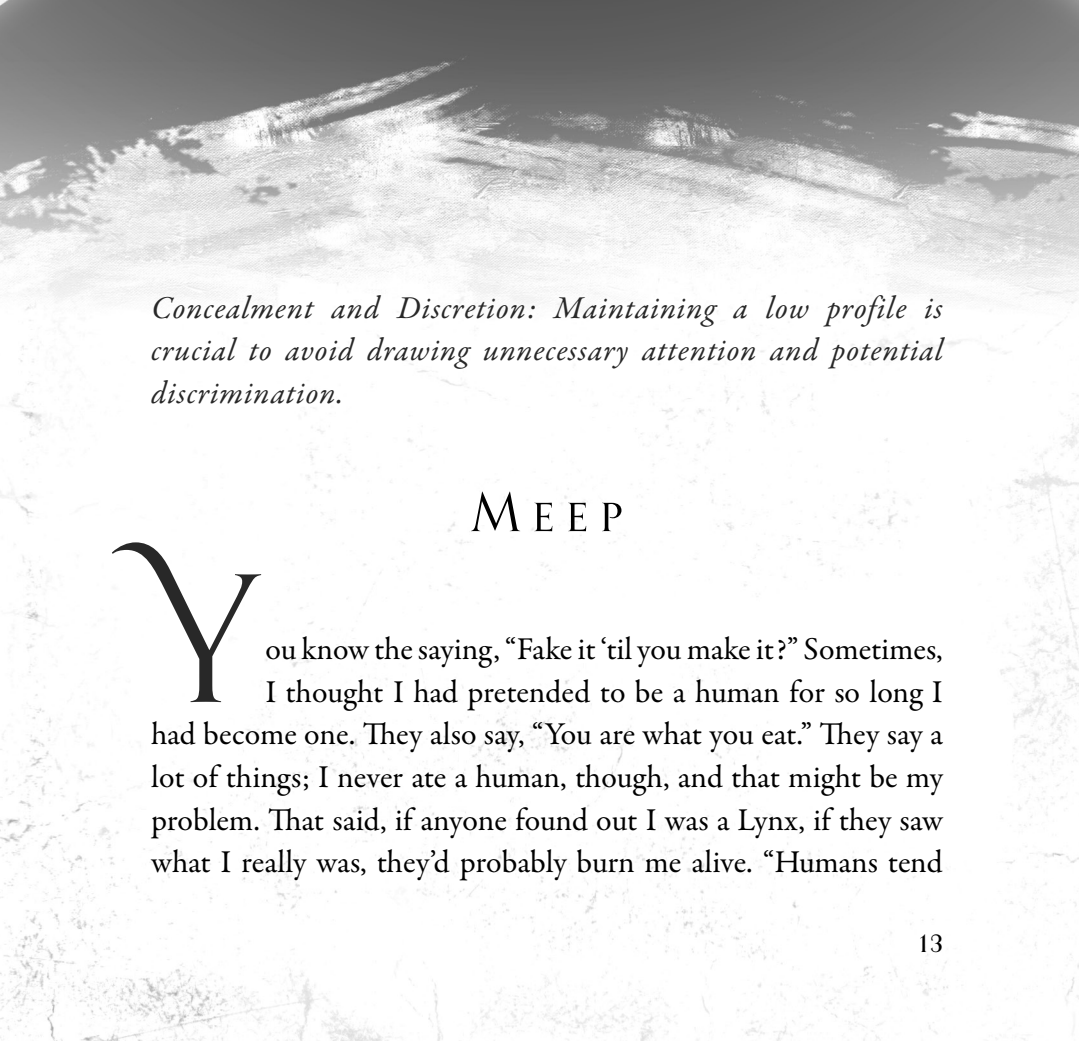
PART

ONE



CHAPTER ONE

NOT THAT KIND OF BARISTA



Concealment and Discretion: Maintaining a low profile is crucial to avoid drawing unnecessary attention and potential discrimination.

M E E P

You know the saying, “Fake it ‘til you make it?” Sometimes, I thought I had pretended to be a human for so long I had become one. They also say, “You are what you eat.” They say a lot of things; I never ate a human, though, and that might be my problem. That said, if anyone found out I was a Lynx, if they saw what I really was, they’d probably burn me alive. “Humans tend

to set fire to things they don't understand." That was a line drilled into me every day growing up.

"Don't be too flashy."

"Don't be too capable."

"Don't stand out."

Live a boring life.

So, there I was, at Clair's Eclairs, slinging coffee to college kids. Clair—whom I'd never met, and after three years, was not sure was even a real person—had wisely decided to open the town's only twenty-four-hour coffee house to better serve the sleep-deprived college population. Usually, it was quiet here, with no rush or urgency in the air. Working here wasn't *unpleasant*, for a food service job, but it wasn't exactly my long-term goal. I was good at it; I knew the business inside and out and had been given the creative freedom to create weekly specials. The hardest part of working here, working anywhere really, was to pretend to be something I was not: Clumsy. Humans were *not* so graceful.

As I cleaned the counter, I thought of the second hardest part of working here—the societal expectations of being a young woman, just barely an adult. Be demure. Be small. Be weak. Be subservient. *Fuck that*. Has society ever *met* a woman? Because no woman I knew would be content with that life. Sure, I'd seen stories online suggesting maybe some ladies liked to live that way. If that was how one really chose to live and that made her happy—yay—but that couldn't ever be me. I wanted something more in my life that would spark my interest and keep me engaged. But "excitement" was exactly the kind of career path I was supposed to avoid. I slammed the towel into the cleaning bucket with a bit more force than necessary. *Great, I irritated myself.*

My mood soured even more as I heard the shuffling gait of my least favorite customer outside. He wasn't a bad person. Not like a permanently pissed-off asshole, or an entitled elitist, but he was

awkward. Cringingly uncomfortable. He missed the mark of being suave and charming by a wide margin, but that didn't stop him from trying.

The bell tinkled over the door, and Jeremy sauntered in, greasy black hair pulled low over one eye. Cowlicks left craters in the back of his head, screaming to the world that this was not how he usually wore his hair. Who was he trying to impress? Hopefully, not me. I liked men who showered.

But I plastered on a smile in my best impersonation of a customer service automaton. "Good morning. What are you having today?"

"Well, hey there, Meep-Meep. What's a beautiful girl like you doing in a place like this?"

My smile didn't falter, yet I inwardly flinched at his body odor as the sharp stench of rotten broccoli hit my sensitive nose. He had used this line at least once a week, and I hated it when he called me "Meep-Meep." It reminded me of the old cartoons where I was the bird to be chased, and he was the hapless coyote who could never catch up. Yet, he sure kept trying. "What can I get for you this morning, Jeremy?" I asked, trying to keep the exasperation out of my voice.

"I will have whatever you had this morning to make you so *fine*."

This was another line he had used on nearly a daily basis for the past two years. I thought about giving him a book of one hundred and one pickup lines just to hear something new occasionally, however, giving him *anything* might send the wrong message.

At first, he was more overt with me, asking for my number, when to pick me up, and even what I liked in bed. I put a stop to it with a threat, a well-practiced *look*, and enough physical force to scare him into a semblance of respect. I would've smiled at the thought of it, but he would've thought it was for him.

“Okay, one mocha shot iced coffee with vanilla boogies, coming up,” I said.

Jeremy frowned as I turned towards the coffee machine, intentionally bumping into the edge of the counter with my hip as I remembered to move more like a human and less like myself.

He always feigned being adventurous, but then ordered the same thing every day anyway, and we both knew it—one large white chocolate Americano with amaretto, whipped cream, and a dash of cinnamon to make it pretty. I tried it once while he wasn’t here to see me, and I had to admit it was tasty. It just seemed like I shouldn’t drink it on principle.

After Jeremy slunk away, back to classes, or his cave, or whatever, my morning proceeded as normal. Boring and snail-paced. Disgustingly plain. Just a steady stream of bleary-eyed people hoping that a hit of espresso would change their outlook on life. I would have been happier if I’d had a coworker, someone I could talk to, bitch at, or collaborate with. But no.

In a fantastic turn of events, my best friend, Jessie, arrived to keep me company. She was the opposite of me in many ways. Long blonde hair to my short, dark pixie-cut, and her piercing crystal blue eyes contrasted with my deep amber ones. She wore her usual ripped and loose-fitted jeans, and a tight tank top with the TARDIS still visible despite the cracked and faded vinyl. While pouring her a black coffee, I concentrated on adding a subtle tremor to my hand in order to maintain the illusion of being just as human as she was.

I sat next to her at the countertop bar.

“So...” Jessie placed both hands on the countertop, palms down. “You broke up with... who’s his name? James, was it? That’s like the third guy in less than two months.”

I sighed. “His name was Brian. And yeah. Last night... he said he wanted kids one day.”

“Meep. I love you like a sister, and I would never want you to stay in an unsafe situation, but you can’t break up with everyone for being nice to you. This is a small town. You are going to run out of guys to date.”

I shrugged. “I guess I’ll date girls then.”

“We’ve already heard about how you treat the boys. Why would we want to date you?” she asked with mock severity.

“I don’t care who I date, or even *if* I date. I am not even twenty yet. Do you think I want to settle down and start having babies already? Like my mom? No, thank you. I want to *do* something with my life. To *be* someone. At least something more than an extra paycheck to keep the house afloat.”

Jessie sipped her coffee, pinky out. “Why, Meep, I’m shocked. You don’t normally talk this much.”

My face heated. “I guess I’m in a mood today.”

She placed her mug on the counter. I noticed it was empty, so I reached for the pitcher of strong, black coffee I kept on standby, mostly for her and a few of the elderly people who came in. When I finished filling her mug, she said, “What I don’t understand is, if you want to be someone, why do you seem to work so hard at being nobody at all?”

I froze halfway into settling back onto my stool.

She continued. “You have a great family, a great support system, and so much talent. I have seen you do some amazing things when you think no one is looking, like—”

“So, what’s your point?” I topped off my own coffee for something to do after cutting her off. I didn’t want her to continue that line of thought. Jessie had spent the most amount of time with me, basically every day, so she was bound to have seen something at some point. Had she seen me leap a ten-foot tree to rescue Old Man Mark’s favorite cat? I hadn’t thought she’d been looking, but she might have been. Or had she seen me walk that tightrope

without any apparent training that year a circus band set up outside of town? Or was she simply talking about my gymnastics routines being good?

Jessie was still speaking. "... you can do incredible things, and yet you can't take being in a healthy relationship."

Oh. Of course, that's what this was about. I sighed.

"Anyway, you have been in gymnastics your whole life, and you haven't even won one competition? I've seen you practice. I'm no official judge or anything, but it looks damn near flawless to me. Why do you keep fumbling competitions? If you want to be someone, why not be the person you were meant to be and be an Olympian or something?"

Damn. There it was. Today was the day I had to lie to my one and only friend.

The truth was that some of those humans at the Olympics I could not be completely sure they *weren't* Lynxes. But wouldn't it be tantamount to cheating if I even thought about going to the Olympics? Knowing what I was, it wouldn't be fair to the humans who had worked so hard to get there on their own.

Gymnastics allowed me to use my gifts without drawing unnecessary attention to my abilities. Foot placement was never a concern because my instincts guided me effortlessly; the concept of falling was foreign to me, and I had never even sprained an ankle. It was a perfect cover for a Lynx child because it allowed me to avoid all sorts of awkward questions like, *where did she learn how to do that?* or, *why shouldn't I light her on fire for being different?*

But I couldn't even tell her that. I couldn't be honest with my friend. This was what I had feared. This was why I had kept everyone at arm's length. But humans—and cats—are social creatures. I needed at least one friend... but I had hoped this day would never come. The day I had to flat out lie to her.

She wasn't a Lynx, but her aura exuded a wildness that was

both captivating and mysterious, and I indulged in a fantasy that maybe she wasn't too different from me. That was a fruitless line of thought, though. I knew better. Goblins, vampires, fairies, and any other fantastical creatures were figments of the imagination. There was only Lynx, and Not Lynx. Only *us*, and not *us*.

My mother had prepared me for this. Prepared me for the lie I would have to tell people when they started asking questions. Step one: Change the subject. Step two: Remove yourself from the situation.

I stood to get back to work and glanced at Jessie, still sitting on the bar stool. "I am satisfied with just being with myself. That's all that's supposed to matter, right?" I gave her a smile, hoping she would not see how weak it was.

Jessie shook her head sadly. "Meep, I love you. Never stop being you."

I rounded the counter and said, "I love you too. I couldn't live without you." I knew she hated compliments like that, and I *loathed* myself for tapping into that insecurity. She deserved so much better.

Even though she often told me she loved me, when I returned the sentiment, she always clammed up for a while. For some reason, she seemed to think she could love me, but somehow, felt undeserving of the same love in return.

My mom had told me that because Jessie grew up in foster care, she might have felt this way sometimes, and to give her time and space. Mom was pretty great that way. She had always treated Jessie with love and always welcomed her into our home. I used to argue with Mom when I was little about wanting to officially make Jessie another sister and adopt her, but Mom always said Jessie wasn't a Lynx, so adopting her would be too awkward. It was many resentful years before I realized Mom was probably right. She never used the excuse of having too many kids though, which I later appreciated.

Jessie sat in silence for a long time, and I cleaned machines. Eventually, she relaxed, and we discussed some of the hot celebrity gossip spreading like wildfire around social media. “Oh, also did you hear about the argument between Pete and Linda? I bet the whole town knows by now. Right in the street, she screamed at him for screwing her cousin at their uncle’s funeral!”

I loved how Jessie talked and talked. I only needed to smile and laugh in the appropriate spots. She carried on the whole conversation all by herself. It was so peaceful; I didn’t have to invent a thing.



Hours after Jessie had left, a small gray-haired man appeared, standing behind a woman who had just received her order. I leaned over the counter, trying to glimpse his face beneath the rounded top of his hat, one of those pilot-type hats with floppy ear flaps on the sides. His wire-rimmed glasses constantly shifted, magnifying his eyes, and then drawing back until his pupils were tiny dots. The way each eye zoomed in and back out at different rates gave him a disconcerting, otherworldly appearance.

“I require hydration. What do the locals drink?” he asked instead of any introduction while tapping on his tablet.

I blinked. I had never seen anyone like this man before. Why was he talking like he was from *Star Trek*? Maybe he’s foreign. Maybe English was not his first language, and his tablet was a poor translating device? He smelled odd, though. Like ozone, sort of metallic and clean. And those curled-up boots...

“Uh, the Sunrise Class is popular,” I said in a voice I hoped hid my confusion. “It has caramel and oat milk in it.”

The small man said absolutely nothing else, with no sign he

wanted the drink or even that he had said anything to me in the first place. He stared at me with those unnerving eyes enlarging and shrinking until it became very, very uncomfortable. With an effort, I turned away to make the drink, which was the most unsettling feeling I had ever had. If I'd had fur, it would have stood on end.

I kept my ears on him; my ability to hear things others could not was like my second sight. I did not hear him move. No foot-steps scraping against the linoleum. No rustling of cloth. Not even the slight sound of his breathing. My muscles worked by memory, pouring caramel, mixing flavoring into the steaming coffee, and stirring. This guy had shaken me, and I didn't know why. He was only some foreign dude with weird clothes and a faulty translator, right?

But somewhere in the back of my head, I thought of how humans normally smelled. Everyone smelled slightly awful, to be honest, a byproduct of the pollution around them coming from cars and capitalism. Even in this small mountain town, the pollution scent was everywhere and on everything. Yet, this guy smelled wholly clean, like he had never been around any pollution his entire life.

When I turned to hand him the finished drink—figuring if he didn't want it, I could evidently use it myself because I must have been dreaming—I jumped backwards, startled to discover him at the other end of the counter, five feet away. There was no way he hadn't made even the *slightest* sound without me hearing it. He had made so much noise when he'd come in that the silence now was doubly unnerving.

I swallowed hard and approached him cautiously, glad the counter separated us, and extended the coffee towards him, refusing to let my hands tremble with fear. I locked my eyes on his and calmly said, "It's \$5.75."

He gave me a crisp hundred-dollar bill, took the cup with both hands, and then finally asked my name.

"Meep." My voice was shakier than I wanted it to be, and I cursed myself. *Damnit, stay in control.*

"What is your sex?"

"Female." My eyes shifted around. *Yup, I'm alone.* At that moment, I would even have been grateful to have Jeremy there. For now, at least I had a longer reach than him. "Is this for a class?"

"What is your age?"

I considered leaping for the exit and abandoning this café. Whomever Clair was, I was sure she'd understand. "Eighteen."

"What is your allegiance?"

What the fuck? "Sir, I feel uncomfortable." I pushed his change towards him, or rather, by the top of his head. "I would appreciate it if you left now."

"What is your allegiance?" he repeated in the same flat tone as he had been using for all the other questions. He had raised his arm and tapped at a bulky watch.

"Earth." I edged closer toward the end of the counter, where my purse and cell phone were.

"How many people are in your household?"

"Excuse me?"

"How many people are in your household? Your cooperation is required."

"Yeah? Who is it required *for*, though?" I pulled my phone out of my bag and held it to my ear. "I am asking you to leave or I will call the cops."

I pressed the emergency button on the home screen and my phone started dialing. He stared back at me, completely unfazed. I blinked, and...

He was gone.

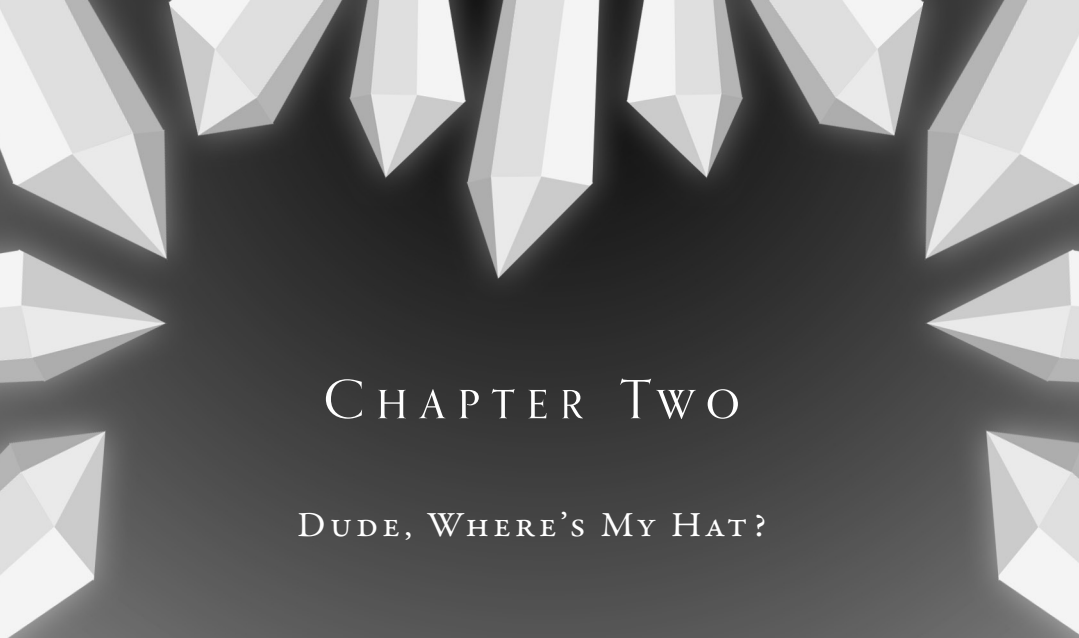
He had taken the coffee, leaving the change on the counter.

My mind spun with possibilities. Who was that guy? What did he want? Would I ever see him again? I suppressed a shudder. *I will be prepared for him next time.*

What was with this \$94 tip? Had he left it intentionally? He had to have. Ninety-four dollars was much too large for a tip. Even for one of those lucky, bikini-wearing baristas who made gobs of money in campy drive-through coffee stands. *Maybe I should give Jeremy the heads up that those things exist. No. Never mind. Those girls do not deserve that.*

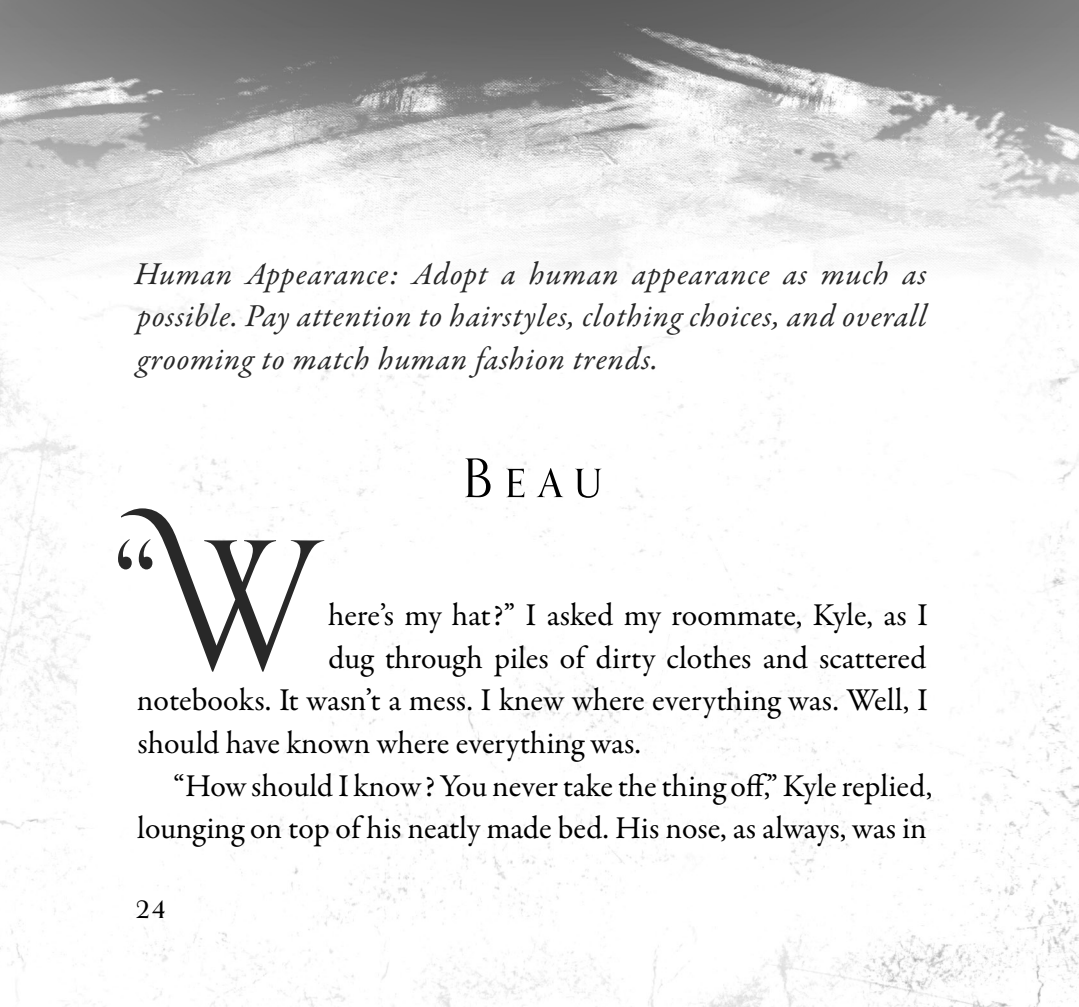
The way I saw it, if the weird guy really wasn't from America, and he hadn't understood American currency, then this had all been a big misunderstanding. Or this large tip was bribe money to buy my silence for him to be intentionally creepy. Either way, I didn't want to take it. If it was the former reason, then taking the money seemed dishonest, like taking advantage of him. And if it was the latter reason, then it was gross, and I had principles.

Many things defined me, and at times, a drunken farmer might have calibrated my moral compass, but I had never accepted bribes to condone misbehavior. A girl's got to set her boundaries.



CHAPTER TWO

DUDE, WHERE'S MY HAT?



Human Appearance: Adopt a human appearance as much as possible. Pay attention to hairstyles, clothing choices, and overall grooming to match human fashion trends.

BEAU

“Where’s my hat?” I asked my roommate, Kyle, as I dug through piles of dirty clothes and scattered notebooks. It wasn’t a mess. I knew where everything was. Well, I should have known where everything was.

“How should I know? You never take the thing off,” Kyle replied, lounging on top of his neatly made bed. His nose, as always, was in

a book.

"It must have fallen off while I was asleep or something." I rummaged through a pile of aluminum plates and wires, though it clearly wasn't under them.

"You are going to be late. Can't you look for it later?" Kyle reluctantly looked up from his book, clearly annoyed that I was interrupting him.

"I mean... I guess." I couldn't articulate why I needed my hat. There was just something right about a good hat. I felt naked without it. I couldn't expect a *human* to understand. I pulled at my beard in frustration.

I quickly glanced at Kyle's side of the room, which made it clear my hat wasn't over there. Books lined his shelves, organized alphabetically, and everything else was tucked neatly away. Nope, definitely not over there.

A large shadow fell over the open door. "What's the matter, nerd? Lose somethin'?" Chud asked with his Texas twang as he loomed in the doorway. His body language oozed confidence as he taunted me with a smirk. I tilted my head to meet his gaze. His massive frame seemed to be twice the size it should be.

I groaned in exasperation. "What did you do with it, Chud?"

"Me? Nothing. I'm just a concerned rubbernecker. Why would you think I was involved, Beauregard?" I hated the way he sneered my name like it was a dirty curse. Like his name was any better. *Chuuuud*. It sounded like something a cow would do.

I *preferred* Beau; I knew my full name was a mouthful, and the diminutive form was far more efficient. Chud, though, seemed to have mistaken my preference for brevity for a dislike. I liked my name. I could see it on a plaque labeling my statue, standing in front of the engineering firm I will have founded: Beauregard Artemis Reginald Cornelius. It was a name deserving of awe and respect, befitting a man who would change the world. That was, if

I could manage to pass my lame math classes.

"Maybe ya wouldn't lose stuff if ya kept your eyes to ya'self and off *my* girl," Chud said.

Ah. He had noticed me looking at "his girl," even though we both knew he and Samantha weren't officially a couple. He thought I would back off if he put on some pressure? By stealing my hat? My hat was like my child. How low could you go? This guy gave a bad name to humans. I hated bullies. Gnomes didn't bully other people... Well, at least my family didn't. I'd never met any other Gnomes, actually.

They say a bully wants a reaction from you, so ignoring them will make them go away. Maybe. But in my personal experience with bullies, ignoring them simply never worked. *It tells them to escalate to get a reaction out of you.* A dangerous game. No, bullies prey on those they perceive to be weak. Best to disabuse them of that notion posthaste.

I had to figure out how to deal with this. Fighting was clearly not an option. He was over twice my size. Yet, letting him get away with bullying me would just encourage more of this in the future. Alright, step one was to rob him of his victory. Step two, get to class... I could worry about step three later.

"Oh well, it's not important. Now I can get a new hat." I let excitement color my voice and Chud's cocky grin wavered, clearly not expecting indifference.

I grabbed the nearest gadget, an automatic shirt folder I made last week, and thrust it at Chud's chest. He shifted his balance as he used both arms to cradle the object like he would a football. I squeezed past him into the hallway. "Bring this to Samantha," I said, patting his biceps like a good dog before hurrying away.

I dashed down the hall and hoped Kyle was paying enough attention when I left to describe the look on Chud's face after I bested him in our little stand-off. Outside, I clipped my helmet

on, glad to have something on my head again, and took off on my electric scooter at full speed. A glance at my watch confirmed I was already late, but I still stopped briefly to pet the stray dog and dig out a packet of crackers I snagged from the dining hall. "Good boy."



The teacher was writing on the whiteboard as I entered, and I slid into my customary seat in the back, unnoticed by anyone other than Jeremy.

"There you are. Why are you late? And why are you still wearing your helmet?" he hissed at me.

"Chud stole my hat," I whispered back.

Jeremy was only a little taller than myself, and much more overweight than I was. He also had greasy black hair, a neck beard, and let's not start on his smell. I turned my attention to the board. Equations filled it, and I sighed internally. I hated math. This surprised people because I had a reputation for being a complete nerd. Except math just made no sense to me. Oh sure, I could solve an equation as well as the next guy, but ugh... it took so long. There were so many steps. It was so pointless.

Yet, engineers had to do the math... *apparently*. Kyle was the mathematician, not me. Why couldn't we just leave the calculations to him while I made things that worked?

I noted the equations while the professor discussed how to calculate the load weight of various materials for construction.

See? Pointless. Just make it strong enough. Period. Why did we need these equations to show our work for something so obvious? Was it to showboat? To prove, theoretically, our design was worth something? Just build it and let whoever test it with their own hands. Simple.

But I needed to do the math to pass the class. And I needed the class to get a degree. And I needed the degree to be an engineer—it made humans feel better or something. Becoming an engineer was the first step toward my mission of changing the world. And I needed to change the world to get the statue.

So many hoops. Just like math. It was aggravating.



I left the building, walking alongside Jeremy. The cool fall air was normally refreshing, but without my hat, it was just uncomfortable.

“Chud stole your hat? Really?” Jeremy sounded skeptical as he continued our conversation. Chud was his roommate, and although they were not friends, he clearly didn’t think theft was in Chud’s wheelhouse. “I didn’t even think he was smart enough to pull off a heist.”

“I’m not sure how he did it. It was on my head when I went to sleep.”

“He broke into your dorm room at night? Creepy.”

“Disturbing is more like it. I’ll have to set up some safeguards.” I stopped in my tracks and tilted my head.

A man ahead of us was talking to a couple of other students while tapping away on a tablet. He was a three-foot-tall figure with a hooked nose and a gray, pointed beard wearing a patterned yellow and orange outfit with curly-toed boots, and to top it off, something like an aviator hat on his diminutive head.

Now, this was certainly an unusual enough sight, yet I was staring for an entirely different reason. An old saying my mom used to say came back to me. “Gnome knows Gnome.” Well, this guy screamed Gnome.

Every subtle detail I knew to look for was present to a grossly exaggerated degree. I expected Gnomes to be short, usually about five feet tall, like me. But this guy seemed to be more like three feet. There were some distinctive facial features if you knew what to look for, but his face was like a caricature. We often had a quirky fashion sense, but this guy's tastes seemed outlandish with his bright orange coat and silver boots with curled toes, like elf shoes. It was like a parody of Gnomes. Every detail that might identify him to others of his species was exaggerated and on obvious display.

The strange man finished his conversation and then noticed us staring. He approached with a brisk, purposeful walk, his curly-toed boots jingling like bells.

"What is your name?" he asked. His voice was high and nasally with a strange accent. Up close, I saw that he wore a strange pair of goggles that appeared to refocus as his gaze moved around. It made his eyes appear to be dilating at different times.

"Uh, I'm Beau."

"Jeremy."

"Full names." He sounded slightly exasperated, yet distracted.

"Beauregard Artemis Reginald Cornelius," I answered, confused.

"Jeremy Vimes."

"What is your sex?" he asked, tapping away at his tablet.

"Yes please," Jeremy replied eagerly.

"Hold on, you didn't give us your name," I countered, trying to ignore Jeremy's witless remarks.

"That's unnecessary. Please answer the questions. What is your sex?"

"Unnecessary? Look, I don't know who you think you are. You can't just go up to people and ask a ton of questions and offer nothing in return. Like, who you are? Where are you from? Why should we answer your questions? Is this for a class?"

"This is an official audit. Your compliance is required," he said, as if our cooperation was assumed.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" I wanted answers, dammit. He couldn't just show up here looking more Gnomish than all the Gnomes and not tell me anything.

"Dude, just play along. This guy's funny. I want to see where it goes," Jeremy said. The Auditor narrowed his eyes at Jeremy. "Male," Jeremy said in response to his previous question.

"Fine," I sighed. I might find out more by playing along. "Male."

"*Askerbin*," the Auditor muttered under his breath, "What is your age?" he asked with more tapping on the tablet before he raised a bulky watch to us, then frowned at it.

"Twenty-one," I said.

"Twenty," said Jeremy.

"What is your allegiance?"

Allegiance? What the hell was he talking about? And what did *askerbin* mean? It could be Gnomish, I supposed, which would just be the cherry on top of all this weirdness. I had never paid much attention to the old language. My sister did, though.

"Boobs," Jeremy replied.

"I pledge allegiance... to the flag... of the United States of America?" I offered.

The Auditor gave a displeased grunt and continued tapping away. "How many people are in your household?"

"Currently, I suppose it's just me and my roommate" I said.

"Same," Jeremy agreed.

Tap tap tap. "What is your household income?"

"Whoa, you're getting pretty personal, don't you think?" I asked.

"Your compliance is required," he repeated.

"Come on, this is getting good," Jeremy said.

"I guess about forty-thousand a year," I admitted.

Jeremy whipped his head around to stare at me, doing a fair imitation of the Auditor's eyes in his glasses. "Where did you get so much money? I'm only getting ten a year working at the convenience store."

"I make a bit of cash selling some gadgets, and I've invested some of it." I tried to show with my tone and eye movement that we should get back on track.

"If you already make that kind of money on the side, why do you even want this degree? Just work full-time instead."

"Can we not have this conversation in front of present company?" I emphasized the last two words with a jerk of my head.

"What crimes have you been accused of?" the weirdo asked.

I pulled a face. "What? None! This is getting ridiculous."

"Only being too good-looking." Jeremy ran a hand through his hair and struck a pose. I rolled my eyes at his unjustified confidence.

Tap tap. "Are you a member of the military?"

"No. I'm a student."

"The army of *love*." Jeremy traced an hourglass shape in the air with his hands.

"Have you found any glowing crystals recently?" The Auditor's eyes locked on mine as if he found this question to be significant to me.

Jeremy stared back for a quiet moment. "No," he said simply, all humor gone from his face and tone.

"No?" My voice lilted up with confusion at this bizarre conversation.

"Do you have any unusual abilities?" His eyes locked with mine again. I had the sense that he knew. And why wouldn't he? "Gnome knows Gnome," after all. Still, Jeremy was right there, so I couldn't exactly confess. What did he want from me?

"No. No special abilities," I said slowly.

“No. Of course not. What do you mean by special abilities? People don’t have special abilities,” Jeremy said abruptly. I shot him a piercing look. Why would that question fluster him?

“Mmm hmm. Does anyone you know possess any unusual abilities?”

“No.”

“Nope,” Jeremy said a bit too quickly. Was he hiding something?

The Auditor tapped a few last things on his tablet and turned to leave.

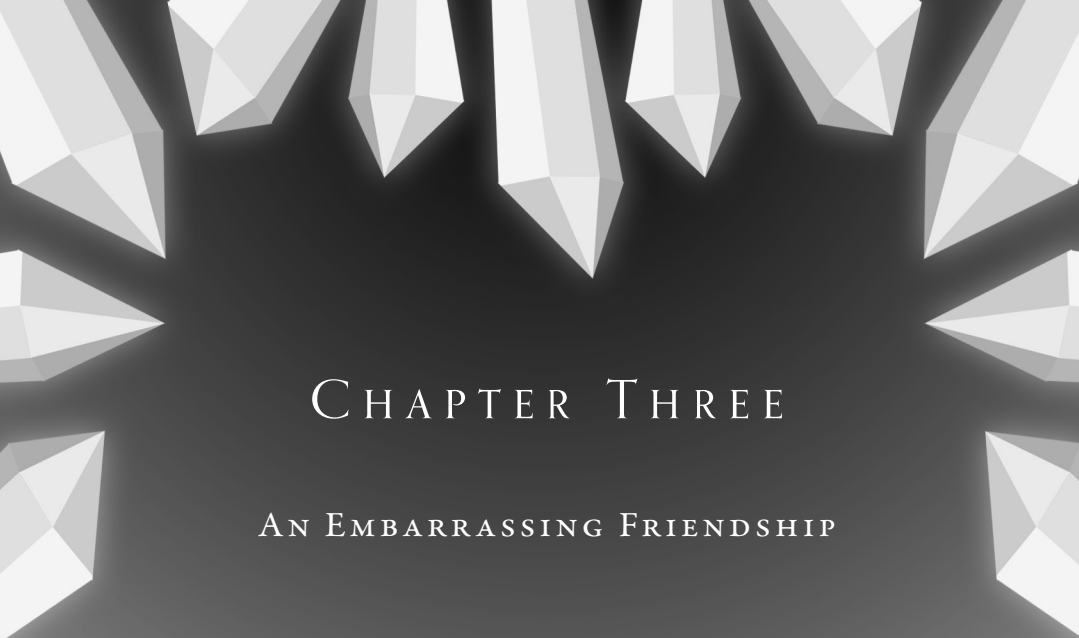
“Hold on, I want some answers from you.” I reached out to grab the small Gnome, but he *stepped* away. It wasn’t a normal step. Instead of moving him about nine inches, he rapidly receded, rushing away in a moment and leaving me grasping at air.

“Woah,” Jeremy exclaimed.

“What the hell?”

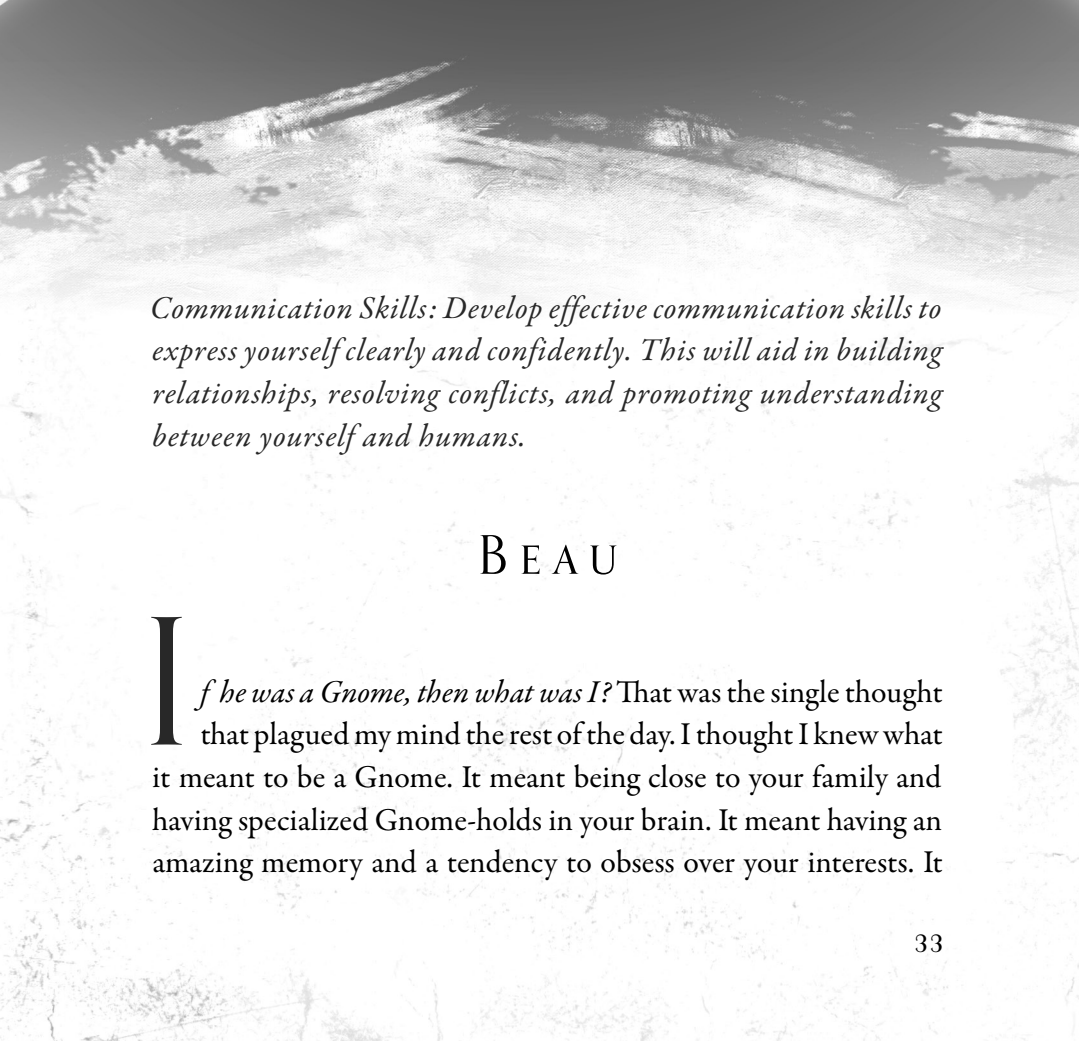
“So awesome.”

I couldn’t agree. I was confused, and my world was upended. What the hell was he? How did he do those things? What did all of those questions mean? This dude made me question everything.



CHAPTER THREE

AN EMBARRASSING FRIENDSHIP



Communication Skills: Develop effective communication skills to express yourself clearly and confidently. This will aid in building relationships, resolving conflicts, and promoting understanding between yourself and humans.

BEAU

If he was a Gnome, then what was I? That was the single thought that plagued my mind the rest of the day. I thought I knew what it meant to be a Gnome. It meant being close to your family and having specialized Gnome-holds in your brain. It meant having an amazing memory and a tendency to obsess over your interests. It

meant secrecy and a nagging fear that *they* would catch you.

Jeremy and I walked through the small local mall that smelled of mold and neglect. Whatever else was going on, I needed a new hat. Distracted hat shopping wasn't ideal, but I *needed* a hat. Not just any hat; it had to be perfect. Most of the hats I saw were awful, cheap, and plastic, with no elegance.

Jeremy pulled me into several anime and gamer stores along the way. He picked up three new anime figurines, a replica dagger from his favorite Windrunner series, and about a dozen sets of dice. I picked up a little bumble bee ABC sticker for my sister, Jo.

"Dude, what's that?" Jeremy asked, peering into my little bag.

"It's for my sister. I thought she might think it was cute," I said.

"I'm pretty sure that is for, like, actually small children. Didn't you say she was only a little younger than you?" he asked.

I frowned down at my bag. "But she does spelling bee championships." I pulled the sticker from the bag to look at it again. The holographic glitter reflected the lights around me onto the stylized letters that served as a backdrop to a fuzzy bumblebee perched on a pink flower. "Because, get it... It's a spelling bee."

Jeremy grinned and shook his head. "Buddy, you are incurable."

As I continued my silent crisis, he enthusiastically explained the merits of each set of dice he had just bought. I smiled, happy for his enthusiasm. I had one set of dice and considered them to be tried and true. Besides, the rigorous testing I put them through to ensure balance would be a pain to repeat for each new set. *Meh, we don't have to share every interest.*

I was about to give up when I saw a hat with potential through the window of a small, locally owned boutique. I took a closer look at the bright red beanie and found that it was made of wool and solidly built. "It's perfect."

Jeremy followed my gaze. "Dude, it's a hat."

"It's a *good* hat. Never underestimate the value of a quality hat."

I made my purchase and swapped out the helmet I was still wearing for the new red beanie. The pressure felt comforting, like a warm hug, and some of the tension I'd been carrying melted away. I put my palms to my cheeks, feeling my coarse beard beneath my hands, and took a moment to appreciate the hat.

"You are so weird," Jeremy chided, sticking his tongue at me.

"Says the man with two figurines of Felicia from Darkstalkers in your bag," I shot back.

"What can I say? I'm a man of taste and culture. I know what I like."

"Scantly clad cat-girls?"

"Scantly clad cat-girls, indeed," he smiled.

"Come on, I still need some things from MediaHutt."

We meandered towards the shop, and Jeremy picked up three monster trading cards along the way. Now that I had a new hat on my head, my mind felt free to fret even more about that Gnome. Was he inbred or something? My parents had never mentioned anyone like him. We were Gnomes, and that was that. I froze in my tracks as I glanced down at the level below.

There she was. Samantha James. I loved the long, hazelnut hair flowing over her shoulders, perfectly wavy and shiny, and I took a second to appreciate her shapely, muscular legs and cute halter top.

"You're staring," Jeremy said.

"What? No, I'm not."

"Dude, learn some subtlety. You stand there gawking, and girls will think you're a creep. Ask me how I know."

"I don't make a habit of gawking at girls," I protested.

"No, just that one."

"Is it obvious?"

"Talk to her. Make a move. She can't say yes if you never ask," he offered.

I sighed. "She can't say no, either."

“Seriously, she is right there. Go introduce yourself.” Jeremy gestured at Samantha in frustration.

“Now? No way! I need a plan. I’d need the right outfit, a good pickup line, a way to approach her, and the right scene... Oh, and I’d need to figure out where to take her if she says yes. I need to look up reviews for restaurants in town, check their menus for date-appropriate fare—”

“You are way overthinking this. Allow me to demonstrate.” Jeremy spat in his hand and ran it through his greasy hair, which did little to improve it, and turned towards the staircase.

“Wait!” I hissed, reaching for his shoulder. He shrugged off my attempt to stop him and slid away.

I watched in horror as he went downstairs and approached one of Samantha’s friends on the left. I didn’t even know her name. I knew none of their names, nor did I care. I hadn’t even noticed she was with anyone until now, I was so focused on her. Jeremy struck a pose in front of them, and, I assumed, said some words. I watched as the girls exchanged disgusted and horrified looks, as if a porta-potty had just exploded in front of them. The lead girl, the one he apparently spoke to, pulled a small object from her bag and held it out in front of her like a shield, and urged her group to back away from him. Was that mace? I flinched for him; glad I was unable to hear the words being said. I noticed a few onlookers tracking him with their eyes as he turned around and rode the escalator to the second floor.

Jeremy returned, looking unphased from the spectacle he had made moments before.

“Yeah, I should definitely take romantic advice from *you*,” I said, rolling my eyes.

He shrugged. “At least I tried.”

“That isn’t always a virtue. It’s embarrassing to be your friend sometimes.”

“Oh, come on—”

“I don’t know what you said to her, but if they pulled mace on you, it was inappropriate.” I pulled at my beard in frustration.

“Alright, fine. I may have been slightly out of bounds. I’m sorry.” His tone wasn’t entirely convincing. And I was pretty sure it was not me he should apologize to.

Remembering Chud, a plan began to take shape in my head. Payback was a bitch... or was that karma? “Come on, I still have some things to get before we go home.”

At MediaHutt, I looked for the supplies I wanted. I already had ideas stewing in my mind and picked up an assortment of servos, pneumatics, wires, and gears. Everything else I needed was back at my dorm. I smiled to myself; this prank was going to be awesome.