

An Old Mike And Mouse

Fic

Crispin: Aged 16

Author's Note

I remember writing this in late January to early February of 2021. I did most of it at school when I was supposed to be working because our school was on lockdown but a few kids and I were allowed in because we were keyworker kids. Whoo! Anyway, I'm still tryna dig up Chapters 1-5. I thought they'd be on the school computers but they weren't. :(

-Crispin 15.11.21

Chapter 1

Running. It was something Mouse had known how to do since day one. No matter how many times his developers had limited his code, no matter how many times they stole his body parts temporarily, it was always a guaranteed escape. The air rushed in and out of his mechanical lungs, his sneakers pounded against the dried, dirt ground. He swiftly but carefully hit the ground with such grace, with every step, as to not trip over any of the sticks and branches on the uneven ground. That's just how it was. He had been running basically non-stop through the acres of forest for days. No food, no water, no breaks to stand still. Not that he needed those, he was fine without them. He wasn't soft and cushy like the humans were with needs to do such pointless tasks, once he was going, he was gone. His lungs never got tired and his legs never seemed to get sore, there was no physical need to stop or slow so why do it? Well, there was. His battery. It had been low for a few days but that didn't stop Mouse from wading it out for days until the last percent.

The trees around him began to thin out, they grew scarcer while still in abundance. Mouse's eyes widened, was that a light? A faint, orange glow laid in front of him. The closer he got to it the more it began to take shape. A cottage. A quaint little cottage in the middle of nowhere. Mouse weighed up his options as he ran: He HAD been running for a long time, he must be low on power by now, surely? Perhaps he could stop and charge for a bit? It couldn't hurt, right? A quick break? The cottage was now less than 100 metres away. He began to slow himself, now at a brisk jog. Balling his

hands into fists he punched the door a few times. 'Knocking' as the humans called it. His legs still wanted to run, he'd been doing it on repeat for so long that it was just an auto pilot at that point. The door began to creak open, Mouse was surprised anyone could possibly be awake at this hour. He ran inside, tripping over the man who opened the door and landing on top of him.

"Ow- Geez- What the Hell, Man?!" The man's voice sounded like he said each word with a capital letter. It was hard to describe, but it was a strong and confident voice.

Mouse looked down at him, slowly climbing off. Human skin, dark and fluffy human hair, worried, human expression. Everything about him screamed human. Observation complete: Human.

Mouse stood up and glanced around at his cottage. It was homely with a sofa up against the wall, a medium-sized TV opposite it and a rug in the middle of the carpet. Mouse glanced down at him, "sorry," he held out his hand for the man to grab.

Grabbing Mouse's hand, the man pulled himself up, "Who Are You And Why Are You In My House? And At This Hour Too? Seriously, It's Beddy-Boes Time!"

As he'd done it many times before, Mouse used the pre-programmed response to 'who are you:' "My name is Mouse Fields, I am the fusion of audio and visual, human and machine."

The man stared at Mouse. His expression was a vague mix of excitement and shock.

"Don't get your hopes up, my kind have been around a while. What, you never met a robot before?"

"Oh, No! I've Loads Of Robot Friends! I'm Actually One Myself."

Mouse raised an eyebrow and eyed the man up and down. He never made errors. The man was lying. "Proof?"

The man turned around and scampered up the stairs on all fours, "Hold On! I Have Something!"

Mouse waited in the living room, the thud of footsteps overhead. The man ran back down the stairs with a few papers clasped in his hands. He handed them to Mouse, "Check This Out!"

Mouse looked through the papers. There was a very ripped blueprint. Pretty much the entire top left had been ripped off, only showing some robotic blueprints from the neck down. Was it a coincidence the head was gone? Probably. It also cut off his first name, leaving only 'Jones' as visible. That was probably a last name. Mouse shuffled the papers in his hands and put that one towards the back. The next one was a confirmation letter that yes, the man he was talking to was infact an 'Hytex Machine.'

Whatever that was. He checked one last paper, a passport. 'Esviel Jones.' So that was his name. Esviel. What a strange name. Mouse looked up at Esviel, "so you weren't lying."

"Nope!" Esviel laughed, "I Always Thought It Was Obvious," He pointed to his neck. Unlike the rest of his skin which did admittedly look very organic, his neck and hands were a plastic-looking material. Like if you tapped it, it would sound like when you tap your finger nails upon another finger nail. "I'm Surprised I Passed To You."

"You pass well," Mouse handed the papers back to him, "you look very... Human."

"Ha, Thanks." Esviel placed the papers on the table, "My Name's Mike, By The Way. Not Esviel"

"Mike... Your passport says-"

"Yeah, I Know, I Need To Get It Changed. I Change Name Often. Security Reasons."

Mouse smiled, "Mike's a nice name. Very common, the most common American male name in fact."

"Thanks! I Picked It Myself! Anywho, Why Are You Here?"

"I've been trapped in that woods for a while and been running for three days straight with no break. Mind if I crash here for a night?"

Mike thought for a second, "There's Only One Bed. We Could Go To Walmart And Pick Up A Sleeping Bag If You Want?"

"That won't be necessary. I gain no energy from sleep."

"Wouldn't You Rather Sleep While You Charge Though? Much More Comfy I'd Say."

"Ah, c'mon, I'm staying for one night. I don't need a sleeping bag."

"For Future Travels?"

Mouse couldn't win here. Mike was going to drive all the way to Walmart in the middle of the night whether he liked it or not. "Fine, we'll go to Walmart."

"Alright, Let Me Get Dressed. You Want A Drink Or Anything?"

"Uhhhhh," Mouse pretended to think. Did Mike eat food too? Very human. Very human indeed. "Can I get a coffee maybe please?"

Mike began to walk into the kitchen, "Alright Then."

Mike's kitchen, while nothing extravagant, was still quite nice. There were a few shelves near the door with some expensive looking wines on them with some cheaper wines, half drunk, on the table. The fridge had some fridge magnet letters on it similar to what you'd find in a home with a child spelling out the words 'bi ngus.' Mouse had no idea what that meant, probably some human joke. He glanced over at Mike putting the mug of coffee in the microwave. Mike leaned against the counter, "So What Company Are You From?"

"I'm from an indie dev. His name's Bill."

"Ah, Bill. Is It Bill Time?"

"It's always Bill time." Mouse smiled and leaned against the kitchen's wall.

The two lingered on an awkward silence for the next 20 seconds or so until the microwave beeped. Mike opened the door and handed the mug of coffee to Mouse. "Okay, Be Right Back, Gonna Get Dressed."

Mike proceeded to then sprint full speed back into the living room and back up the stairs. It had only now occurred to Mouse that Mike was in fact wearing pyjamas. It was always something he found weird how humans had 'doing stuff clothes', 'relaxing clothes' and 'relaxing but I'm passed out' clothes. Just wear comfy clothes all the time? Weirdos.

Mike stepped back into the kitchen. He was wearing a comfortable looking, red sweater with some white jeans. He still looked tired despite this. He was swinging some keys around his index finger, "You Ready To Go?"

Mouse eyed his coffee, "I can drink this in the car, right?"

Mike shrugged, "I See No Harm In That." He turned around and began to walk. Mouse pushed himself off from the wall he was leaning against and began to follow.

It was still quite chilly outside. Mouse could see his breath whenever he exhaled. Mike climbed up and into the driving seat of his car. Mouse opened the door and side stepped into the passenger seat. He closed the door once he was in. "Can you even drive?"

"You Think I Can't?" Mike put the car into first gear and twisted the key. He began to drive.

Mouse took another sip of his coffee, "I've never met a robot who can drive."

"You've Apparently Not Met A 'Human-Looking' Robot Before Either."

"Toúche." Mouse's hands were wrapped around the mug. Compared to Mike's very squidgy looking, pretty much identical to a human's skin arms, his hands was very

grey. They were very metallic, pure iron. It was good as he wouldn't get scrapes and bruises, it was just a bit ugly.

"So... Why do you look so human?"

"I'm Just Built That Way. Most Hytex Bots Look Human, Some More Than Others Though."

"I see. Do you know any others?"

"My Cousin Simon Is A Bot And So Was My Ex. We Broke Up Because She Stabbed Me."

"She stabbed you?!"

"Eh, I Was Fine. My Left Shoulder's Still A Bit Screwed And Sometimes I Have Nightmares But Pff- I'm Fiiiine." Mike really droned out the 'I' sound in fine.

"Okay then?" Mouse took another sip of his coffee. The country road the two were driving along was incredibly dark, even with the headlights on. He could only really see where the lights shone, nothing more and nothing less. Mike must have drove down these roads so many times he just knew where all the curves and bends were.

Mike spoke up, "There's Usually A Game I Like To Play On My Way Down This Road On My way To The Store."

"Go on?"

"It's Kinda Useless Now Considering It's 3:27am But I Like To Count How Many Cars I Pass On This Road. I Make A Prediction At This Give-Way Sign We'll Pass Soon And Stick With That Number. Vans Are Worth 5 Cars And Trucks Either Add One Car Or Take Away A Car Depending If You've Over Or Undershot Your Answer. I Reckon We'll See No Cars."

"Yeah, same. Who would be out driving at 3am anyway?"

Mouse looked to his left, the headlights illuminating the give-way sign Mike mentioned. "Time starts now I presume?"

"Yup," Mike changed gear, "We've both gone for the same number so we can't bet or anything."

"True," Mouse took another sip of his coffee. It wasn't warm and inviting anymore, it had definitely been chilled by the night-time, mid-January air. It was kind of disgusting. The two remained in silence again, unsure of what to talk about.

Mike pulled up in the barren, Walmart car park. He got out of the car, "OoOooOOooOOOo, Bit Chilly Out Here! Mind Passing Me That Extra Jacket In The Back, Please?"

Before Mouse got out of the car, he grabbed the coat from the back and hoisted it to the front with him. He stepped out and handed the coat to Mike. Mike slid it over his sleeves, "thanks a bunch, bud!"

The two walked into Walmart. Mike walked to the left, he seemed to know where he was going. Mouse had to jog to keep up with his brisk walking pace. It wasn't long before they found the camping area where all the sleeping bags were.

"Alright, pick one. Pick any, I don't mind."

Mouse eyed at the sleeping bags. There was a disgusting, army-pattern one, a black one, a navy blue one and a hot pink one. He kinda wanted that last one but Mike would probably judge him. Would Mike judge him?

"You Can Get The Pink One If You Want, Gender Roles Are Fake. I Won't Judge."

Mouse picked up the pink sleeping bag box and held it to his chest, "okay, let's go."

Mike dipped his head and walked over to the self-checkout area. "Do you have credit? Cash?"

"Ah, no, sorry."

"Ah, No Worries! I'll Pay Then." Mike input his credit card into the machine.

"Thanks, I'll pay you back later I guess."

"You Don't Have To!"

"Oh, okay then."

Mike picked up the box and began to walk, "c'mon, let's get home."

The two walked back to the car. Mike put the box with the sleeping bag in the back and got into the driver's seat as Mouse was putting his seatbelt on. He shifted the car into gear and began to drive.

"You From Round These Parts?"

"Nope."

"Where Are You From Then?"

"The Fields."

"The Fields?"

"It's..." Mouse debated on if he wanted to explain. He wanted to but he couldn't think of a way to condense the story, "a really long story. I'll tell you in the morning."

"Okie Doki."

"Are you from round here?" Mouse didn't actually care about Mike's answer, he just wanted to fill the silence.

"No, Actually. Hytex is in England."

"Are you British then? You don't sound it."

"Yeah, I Guess I Am. I Don't Think Any Of My Voice Providers Were British Though."

"Oh. Wait, providers with an S?"

"I've Had A Couple Over The Years," Mike shrugged, "My Voice Used To Be Much Higher. Your Voice Is Quite Nice, Who Provided Yours?"

"Ah, I don't remember her name. I think it was like... Laura..? Lauren..? And some foreign surname beginning with a B. I don't know, sorry. It may come to me later."

"Oh, You're Voiced By A Lady?"

"Yeah. Couple of effects were added though. You can still hear the girliness if I go up a bit."

"Yeah, I Think It's A Common Practise For Girls To Voice Male Bots And Vice Versa. My Cousin Simon Is Quite Young So His Current Iteration Is Voiced By A Girl. It's Not As Weird As Humans Think It Is, Is It?"

"Yeah. Like... Little human boys sound high pitched like women, you expect a fully grown man's voice to come outta that mouth?"

"Exactly!" Mike laughed. He had a nice laugh.

"BuT jUsT gEt LiTtLe BoYs To VolcE tHeM." Mouse mocked, "No! Do you know how difficult it is to get emotion in your voice? Kids aren't good voice actors unless you actually force them to feel sad, angry or scared! Don't do that!"

"My God, Yes! That Boils My Blood, It Really Does."

"You have blood?"

"Ehhhhh," Mike paused to think, presumably focusing on the road at the same time, "Kinda. I Have Veins And Arteries And Stuff But I Run On Oil And Water, Not Blood."

"Weird. What would you do if you woke up one day and you were human?"

"I'd Love It! I Wish I Was Human To Be Honest."

"Yikes."

"Yikes?"

"I hate humans?"

"How Come?"

"Just Do," Mouse lied. He didn't feel like telling the story.

Mike pulled up into the driveway of his house. He passed Mouse the keys and clambered out the door of the car, "Open The Door For Me, Will Ya?"

Mouse nodded and stood up. He paced towards the door and slid the key into the hole. He pushed the door open and stepped inside.

Mike followed him inside and placed the box on the livingroom floor. He took off his coat and hung it on a peg in the porch. The sofa caught Mouse's eye. Couldn't he have just slept on that? Should he bring that up? Hm.

"Couldn't I have just slept on the sofa?"

Mike remained silent. He muttered something under his breath.

"You what?"

"We're Both SO Stupid. Hey-Ho I Guess." He shrugged, "My Room's Warmer, Wanna Sleep Up There?"

Mouse crouched down to rip open the box and pull the sleeping bag out. It was indeed very pink and looked quite warm. He layered it over his shoulders like a rich woman wearing a boa, "alright."

The two wandered upstairs and into Mike's room. Mike's room was rather plain with a normal looking bed, a wooden counter next to it and a wardrobe not too far away. There was a window looking out towards the front of the house. It was a small room but still very cosy. Mouse layered his sleeping bag next to Mike's bed. He pulled his charging port out of his pocket and plugged it in to an empty socket in the wall. Mike had seemed to have left his in the wall. Oh yeah, cos that's not a fire hazard.

Mouse took off his hoodie and led them at the end of his bed. Mike got back into his bed and plugged his own port into his palm. Mouse did the same. Turning off the light, Mike smiled at Mouse, "g'nite!"

"Goodnight, Mike.

Chapter 2

Mouse was rudely awakened by a cat sat on his face, purring. He sat up and the cat slid off and perkily sat on his chest. "Psst, Mike."

Mike was still asleep. It seemed to be still dark outside. Mouse reached over and poked Mike's arm. Mike sat bolt upright, fear in his dark eyes.

"Oh, sorry. Didn't mean to wake you."

Mike stared ahead of himself for a good few seconds, breathing. He blinked a couple of times and seemed to calm down. "Sorry, What Was That?" He was still dazed.

Mouse patted the cat on it's head, "is this your cat?" The cat put one of its front paws on Mike's bed and slowly padded up. As the cat was climbing up, Mouse noticed the cat was missing one of its hindlegs. It sat on Mike's legs and stared at him. Mike stroked its fur, Yeah, She's Mine."

"She got a name?"

"Strawberry."

"That's cute. I like cats."

Mike nodded and continued to stroke the cat, still solemn from whatever dream he just had.

"Are... Are you okay?"

"I'm Fine."

Mike was lying but Mouse didn't want to pry, "okay then. Can I fetch you a drink or something? Some water or something?"

"What's The Time?" Mike muttered to himself. Lazily, he picked up his phone from the counter and pressed the button to see the lock screen. 06:26am. "It's About Half Six, Might As Well Get Up."

Mike swung his legs out of the bed and stood up. He did a quick stretch and looked over at Mouse. "I'm Going Downstairs, You Wanna Join Or Do You Wanna Sleep In A Bit? It's Still Quite Early." He was still holding Strawberry.

"I'll join," Mouse forced himself out of bed and followed Mike down the stairs. The window to the outdoors laid on the wall. It was still quite dark.

"I guess I should get going then, shouldn't I?"

"Hey, I Have A Question. Before You Leave."

Mouse raised an eyebrow, "go on?"

"Where Are You Going?"

"Places."

"Which Places?"

"Yes."

"Mouse..."

"Look, it's a long story."

Mike flopped himself on the sofa and looked at Mouse with big puppy dog eyes, "I Have All Day."

Mouse sighed, "I'm on the run from my developer. They live somewhere in Canada so I only started like... three weeks ago."

"How Come?"

"He wanted me to take an update and upgrade that would 'improve me.' I didn't want to take it, it's my body and mind and my choice, why should I have to? He kept telling me I had to but really didn't want to so I ran away."

"Hmmm. That's Understandable. Sometimes You Just Have To Leave, Don't You?"
Mike took a second to take in the new information, "What Did The Update And Upgrade entail?"

"Update would have made my mind more human, upgrade would have gave me skin."

"You Seem To Really Hate The Idea Of Being Human, Don't You?"

"There's nothing I hate more. I hate humans and I'd hate to be seen as one. My stupid, ugly, gray skin is ugly as all Hell but at least it doesn't make me look human."

"True, True. You're Very Obviously A Bot."

"And I'd like to stay one, thank you very much!" Mouse sighed, "So yeah, I'm on the run."

"Going Anywhere In Particular?"

"No I'm just running."

"I Know A Place," Mike Grinned.

"You know a place?"

"I Know A Place You Can Go And Escape."

"Where?"

"The Hytex Warehouse In England. If You Apply And Switch Devs Legally They Can't Do Anything To You. Hytex Also Have Bot Interests In Mind A Lot More, They Never Force Bots to Take Upgrades Unless They're Like... Bug Fixes Or Something."

"That's cool, Mike."

"Unfortunately It's All The Way In England So We'd Have To Travel A Bit."

"Hmm..." Mouse thought. He can't stay on the run forever, having security was nice. Being on the run was dangerous and had no end in sight. It could end randomly. He could wake up one morning and expect a normal day only to be taken captive that afternoon with no warning. Or he could stay running forever. There was no way to tell. But with Hytex... It would take a while but the end goal was now in sight...

"I'll take it."

"Nice, I Was Actually Gonna Go There Myself A Week From Now to Receive An Upgrade Myself."

"Go there?"

"Their Shipping Is Temporarily Down Due To The Lockdown In England. I Have Special Pass To Go There As I'm A Bot And Can't Carry Covid. Do You Have An ID? Passport?"

"Mike I don't even have cash."

Mike thought for a second, "We'll Cross That Bridge When We Get There." He paced around a bit muttering nonsense to himself, it wasn't important and Mouse had found himself not really listening, "Anyway, Have You Ever Been On A Plane?"

"I don't think so."

"Oh. It's Not Fun. Well- Ehhhh... It's An 'It's An Adventure But We Hate It While It's Happening' Kind Of Fun."

"Like League Of Legends?"

"What's That? Sure, Whatever. Anyway, The Closest Airport From Here Is Like... A 5 Hour Drive. It's Very Early In The Morning And They Usually Let Me Stow Away Without Booking Because I'm Just Cool Like That. You Wanna Go Now Or?"

"Sure." Mouse tapped his foot on the ground to try and calm himself down. This was all quite new and nerve wracking. What was being on a plane like? Would he really have to be stuck with this guy for an entire flight to England?

"Okay! Let Me Pack a Few Things First. You Want Breakfast? You Must Be Starving."

"I'll uhh, make myself some breakfast. Thanks."

"Okay! Use What You Need! Just Give Me A Minute And We'll Be Good!" And with that, Mike ran upstairs on all fours and out of sight. Weird kid.

Mouse stepped onto the wooden floor of the kitchen. Did Mike have eggs in the fridge? The fridge door clicked as he opened it. Cabbage, lettuce, carrots, broccoli, apple slices, bread- Who keeps bread in the fridge..? Ah. Eggs. Mouse took them out and gently rested them in his palms. Would they be fine in his pocket? Probably. He stuffed a few of them in the front pocket of his hoodie. Okay, food for the road obtained, time for breakfast. Mike didn't seem to have a kettle and microwave-cooked coffee was definitely off the table this time. Think... Think... Ah, it would probably have to be a bag of apple slices. He opened the fridge drawer and took a bag out. It contained what looked like one apple worth of slices or so. He pulled at either end of the bag and opened it like a packet of crisps, the sweet smell of fresh apple suddenly wafting out of the bag. The apple slices were cold between his fingers from being in the fridge. They were quite delicious though. He sat on the sofa and looked around at the strange décor of Mike's house. There was a Christmas card on the window sill. Well. Barely a Christmas card. It was a shrek themed 'happy birthday' card for someone turning 3 but 'Happy Birthday' was crossed out in black permanent marker with the words 'Merry Christmas' written hastily next to it. The words 'Turning 3' were crossed out to say 'turning into a turkey.' Whatever that meant. Despite the weirdness, Mouse couldn't help but stare at it. Why not just buy a normal Christmas card? Who even gave this to you, Mike?

Just as that thought ended, Mike walked down the stairs with a suitcase trailing not too far behind, "You Ready?"

Chapter 3

Mike lifted the suitcase into the boot of his car.

"How much did you have to pack anyway? Jesus, you pack like a woman." Mouse rolled his eyes.

"It's All Necessary, I Promise- Ah. I Just Remembered Another Thing. Give Me A Moment, Will Ya?" Mike turned around and walked back into his cottage. Ah, hell. What had he forgotten now? He better have treats in here to make the journey at least a bit tasty.

Mike walked back out the house with a pet carrier in his left hand, his cat sat patiently inside it. He looked at the car looking puzzled. He opened the door by Mouse, "Mind Having My Cat In Your Lap For A Bit? I Just Need To Pop Over To My Friend's So He Can Look After Her While We're Away."

"Oh, sure." Mouse reached out towards the pet carrier and carefully placed the carrier in his lap. The cat was purring and vibrating his legs a bit. "Hello, Strawberry," he smiled. He was quite proud he remembered her name.

Mike walked back around and plopped himself down in the driver's seat, "You Ready?"

"Yeah."

Mike began to drive out and onto the main road.

"How far away does your friend live?"

"Not Too Far. Five Minute Drive."

"You really do live in the middle of nowhere, don't you?"

"Yup. And That's What I Love About It."

"No people?"

"No, I Quite Like People Actually."

"Ew."

"It's Not Ew."

"Whatever you say, Mikey Boy."

Mike pulled up in what was presumably his friend's driveway. He unclicked his seatbelt and took the cat from Mouse's lap, "I'll Be Right Back. Feel Free To Turn The Radio On Or Something."

Mike wandered up to the door, cat carrier in hand and knocked. It took a few seconds but a man opened the door. Mike seemed to stand up straighter, happy to see his friends. The two shook hands and seemed to be talking. The friend patted Mike on the back and Mike turned around and walked back to the car, cat carrier still in hand.

Mouse rolled down the window, "what is it?"

"I'm Just Gonna Come In and Have A Cup Of Tea. You Wanna Join?"

"Uhhhhh," Mouse pretended to think. Really Mike? Now is NOT the time for a cup of tea. "Sure."

Mouse rolled up the window again and followed Mike inside. The friend looked at Mouse, "so you must be Mouse! Mike told me about you," he held out his hand. Fleshy, human looking hand. Gross.

Mouse shook his hand with hesitance, maintaining eye contact. The friend had very human looking eyes, "nice to meet you too," he lied.

The friend walked into the kitchen, it sounded like he turned the kettle on. The sofa was pushed to the back of the wall, Mike was sitting comfortably on the left side. Was Mouse allowed to sit? Apparently, that was rude in some households.

"you're allowed to sit on the sofa, you know! Make yourself comfy!"

Mouse shrugged and sat next to Mike. Mike placed the cat carrier on the ground by his feet and undid the hatch, letting Strawberry free.

"Are you allowed to just give your cat to your friend without warning?"

"Yeah, He Said He Didn't Mind. When I Booked The Flight Last Week He Also Said 'Any Time In The Next Month Is Fine.' Besides, He Owes Me," Mike chuckled.

"Fair enough then."

Mike's friend came back into the room with 3 mugs of unmilked and unsugared tea. He placed it on the dark, wooden coffee table in the middle of his living room. "Hey Mouse, you like your tea with milk? How many sugars?"

"Uhhh, a lot of milk and 2 sugars please."

The friend began pouring in the milk, "ah, you're like Mike then. Is robots liking milk just a thing or are you two just weird?"

"My Cousin Hates Milk," Mike added.

"Oh, the one in Hawaii? Who is totally real?" the friend joked.

"I Wish Simon Wasn't Real, God," Mike laughed. He picked up one of the mugs, instinctively knowing which one was his, "Thanks!"

The friend sat in an arm chair not too far away from the sofa with one of the mugs. Mouse picked up the remaining one, it was hot in his palms so he held it by the handle. He always felt daring holding cups by the handle. The handle never looked strong enough to support not only the main container but also whatever was in it, they always looked ready to break off.

He blew on the tea a bit and took a sip. It was still quite hot. Strawberry went and walked round Mike's friend's legs. He did a happy gasp and picked her up and plopped her onto his lap, "hello Strawberry!" She flopped in his lap and started purring, "god, you're such a lumuck aren't you?"

"She's Always Been A Blimmin' Lumuck," Mike smiled.

"She seems fluffier than normal."

"Probably Her Winter Coat."

"Ah, I see."

The two continued to chat. Mouse took another sip of his tea; still hot. He bounced his leg a little in a minor attempt to entertain himself. C'mon, Mike, we didn't have time for this. At least the house was warm with a nice fireplace going. Mouse stared into the fire. He'd always liked the way fire moved. Sometimes it looked like it was dancing, sometimes it would look like hands desperately reaching out into the smoke and other times it would look like those inflatable wiggly things outside Barnes & Noble. This time it was the third option. He smiled, what were those things called anyway? He blinked and the memories came rushing back. No, let's not stare at the fire.

It wasn't long before he started getting bored again. Ah, what was a nice little internal game he could be playing? He decided to turn on an internal game of pong with a randomly generated difficulty. The ball bounced back and forth between the two sides. After a few minutes, the intensity soon began to stack up. Mouse almost let the ball go through a few times but just barely bounced it back by a few pixels.

"Helloooooooooo, Earth To Mouse? Earth To Mouse?" Mouse snapped back into reality to find Mike waving his hand in front of his face, "C'mon, We're Going Now."

"Oh!" Mouse put what was left of his tea back on the table. He'd managed to take a few sips but it was still only half drunk. Oh well, "Thanks for the tea," Mouse stood up.

"It's no problem! Have a good travel! Best wishes!"

Mouse followed Mike out the door, waving to Mike's friend as he did.

Mouse stuffed his hands into his pocket as he jogged a bit to match Mike's walking pace, "how long have you been friends?"

"Ah, Not Long. Probably Since I Moved Here In October So That's... Three Months?"

"Oh wow, that's not long."

"Yeah," Mike got back into the car, "Wanna Stop Off At Walmart Quick So We Can Grab Some Snacks? Fruitellas Maybe? Pastels?"

"It's fine, I stole some food from your fridge for the road."

"Ah, That Was A Good Idea!" Mike put his seatbelt on, "Not Letting Food Go To Waste, I Like Your Style. Erm, just Out Of Interest, What Did You Grab?"

Mouse looked Mike directly into the eye as Mike started the car. He pulled an egg out of his pocket and put it in his mouth, crunching down and letting the yolk splatter everywhere in his mouth. He crunched on the shell a bit before he swallowed it.

Mike was... unnerved. He remained quiet. "OooooKaaaaaaaay Then!" He pulled out of his friend's driveway and made it back onto the dirt roads of rural Oregon, "I'd Ask But I Don't Know If I Want To."

"You wouldn't understand," Mouse shrugged, "I like eggs, what can I say?"

Mike stared at Mouse, dumbfounded, for a few more seconds before turning his attention back to the road, "Yeah. Oh, Do You Want The Radio On?"

"Depends, what stations do you have?"

"No Clue, I Usually Have My Spotify Playlist On."

"Why not play that?"

"Ah, You'd Judge Me."

"My guy, I've heard bad music before. Unless my stuff is in there, I'm sure it'll be fine."

"Oh? You Make Music?" Mike was surprised.

"Yeah, you probably wouldn't like it though."

"Aw, Let's Give It A Listen!"

"I got kicked off of a music label that employs fourteen year old first-timers because my stuff sucked so bad."

"So? Fourteen Year Old Was Probably A Prodigy. Besides, Now You Know How I Feel When You Asked to Play My Garbage Spotify Playlist."

Not gonna lie, Mouse did kind of want to show Mike his music. Not because he thought it was good, hell, Mike seemed easily pleased, more so in a 'look person I look up to IE a parent or teacher! Look what I made! Please hang this up on a fridge and say you're proud and it's really good!' Decisions, decisions. Hell yeah.

"Okay, let's play a game," Mouse grinned, "you play one of your spotify songs and then I'll play one of the songs I made. How's that?"

"Hmm..." Mike focussed a bit more on the road, "Okay! Pick Up My Phone, Will Ya?" He passed Mouse his phone.

"Passcode?"

"Four, Two, Zero, Zero, Six, Nine."

"Oh wow, real mature," Mouse rolled his eyes, silently judging him on his phone background. Seemed like a bunch of pixel art. He eventually located Spotify to be greeted with a few playlists.

"What's the name of the playlist?"

"Gamer Boy And Then Some Emojis."

Oh yeah, Mouse found it. He tapped on a random song titled Terraria Music – Day. Ah, Terraria, he'd heard of this game. His old buddy Nitro Fun showed him it while he was at the HQ. Nitro was cool, massive gamer but still very cool.

"Oh, is this Terraria music?"

"Yeah You A Gamer?"

"A bit. My old pal got me into it not too long ago. We tried to get into a con for gaming but they wouldn't let me in because I was a robot."

"Aw, That's Pants!" Mike laughed, "Don't Let Him In! He'll Use His Robot, Wifi Powered Bluetooth Mind Powers And Make The Playstations And Xboxes Kill Us!" He laughed harder.

Mouse chuckled, "damn right. Humans are dumb."

"I Know Right? They Don't Get Us At All."

Mike shook his head, "You Thinking About Which Song Of Yours You're Gonna Show Me?"

"Haha, I'm dreading it," Mouse half joked, "Do you want regular bad or absolutely painstakingly bad?"

"Let's Start Off With Painstakingly Bad, Innit?"

"Innit? You BR'ISH?"

Mike laughed, "Partially! I Speak And Write With American English And My Voice Has An American Accent But I Still Talk Like An English Bloke. I Say Things The Way They Would."

"Odd but okay."

The Terraria song began to finish. Mouse got up his song on his phone, "are you ready?"

"Aye-Aye, Captain!"

"What?"

"Oh, You Never Seen Spongebob?"

"No?"

"Oh, Okay. Sorry. Watch It."

Mouse pressed play on his song. He got an ad for Grammarly, "ah, go away Grammarly, nobody cares." He skipped the ad after 5 seconds and the music began to play.

Mouse sunk into his hoodie a bit more. It was cosy and soft and incredibly warm. He was actually given it as a gift around the time one of his albums came out, it followed the same kind of aesthetic. Grey with black and white triangles spread evenly and randomly over the outside. He pulled the hood up over his eyes.

"Aww, You All Embarrassed?"

Mouse nodded, not wanting to talk.

"Bless Ya Little Cotton Socks, I Love This! It's Really Good! I Love How Passionate And Aggressive The Girl Sounds!"

Mouse lowered his hood, "really?"

"Yeah! Love A Bit Of Aggressive Music!"

"That's... actually why everyone hated it. They wanted something soft and normal and a 'song that sounds like something they already listen to' as one of my co-workers said once." Mouse shrugged, "a part of me wants to say 'they just don't get it,' and 'they don't know what they're talking about,' but the insecurity still lingers."

"You're Right... They Didn't Understand. This Is Really Good. You Have Great Potential Mouse, And God-? You Thought This Was The Worst One? It's Only Up From Here, Right?"

"You're so easily impressed, Mike."

"Actually, I'm Really Picky About Music. But It's True! Your Stuff Is Really Good!"

Mouse retreated back into the safety of his hoodie. His cheeks felt warm. Was he blushing from embarrassment? Impossible, he didn't have blood. Mike was being too nice to make him feel better. Mike hated it, really, he was just being polite. Good for him, politeness gets you far in life.

"Aww, Chin Up, Buddy! Wanna Switch Back To My Cringey Playlist?"

Mouse could only manage a small nod. He slowly unhid from his hoodie like a tortoise coming out from his shell. He double tapped Mike's home button on the phone and swiped up, getting rid of YouTube and stopping the noise. "Wait, wanna listen to my friend's music?"

"Oh! Sure!"

Mouse went back onto youtube and typed in 'Nitro Fun.' "One of his songs was in Sonic Mania, he's really cool in real life too."

"Oh Wait, Really? Sonic Mania? Wow! That's Really Cool! What's His Name?"

"Nitro Fun. He's the one who got me into games."

"I Could Have Sworn I've Heard That Name Before. I Dunno."

Mouse pressed play on another song, "he's been making brilliant music that people have loved since he was FOURTEEN. No hard feelings though, we're friends. He's

one of the only humans I'll actually tolerate," Mouse chuckled, "he made this when he was fifteen."

"Fifteen?! Nah, You're Messing."

Silence.

"You're Not Messing?"

"Nope."

"Wow..." Mike was taken aback, "He Really Is A Prodigy, Isn't He?"

"Yeah... He Really Is..." Mouse could tell Mike preferred Nitro's stuff to his. Rationally he shouldn't feel bad, Nitro was the better choice when compared to him and always has been. That didn't stop the realisation from stinging.

Mike was tapping his fingers on the steering wheel to the electro beat, "Wait, This Kid's Song Was In Sonic Mania, Right?"

"Mhm."

"How Old Is He Now?"

"Hmm... I Think He's In His Early Twenties Now? This Was Released In 2014 And Age Fifteen, Yeah He'd Be Twenty One I Think."

"Jesus, He's Older Than Me Then... What's he working on now?"

"An album I think."

"I Hope Things Go Well For Him."

"Yeah," Mouse wasn't sure if Mike was actually listening, "me too."

Chapter 4

Mouse yawned, the dirt roads looked exactly the same as half an hour ago. He pushed himself up from his car seat, sitting up straighter, "we there yet?"

"Mouse, We've Been Driving For Forty Five Minutes."

"Feels like longer," he grumbled. He folded his arms and sunk further into his chair like an annoyed toddler.

"Hmmm, Can You Drive?"

"What? Yes..? Of course I can drive?"

"Oh, You Wanna Drive For A Bit?"

"No thanks, I'm lazy. Why, you getting tired?"

"No, I Guess I'm Just Bored," Mike shrugged and changed gear, "Wait, You Don't Have A License Or ID Anywhere On You, You Probably Won't Be Allowed Then. Like... What If You Got Pulled Over?"

"Thank Java, I hated driving." Mouse rolled his eyes.

Mike chuckled, "You Seem To Hate Everything."

"Oh, I do."

"How About A Game: I Say Something And You Say Why You Hate It?"

"Alright, go on then."

Mike hummed in thought, keeping his main attention to the road, "Oranges."

"Ah, I bloody hate oranges. You gotta peel them first which is a right hassle, and then you gotta find the nearest compost bin to actually put the peel in OR just keep it in your pocket and smell disgusting for the rest of the day. When you finally get to the orange you it's all split up into itty-bitty pieces, like holy Java, if you aren't near a table or something good friggin' luck! And then! That's right, we aren't done yet, there are pips! Pips! At least with apples you can kinda eat the seeds and not realise but oranges, oh BOY are you gonna notice. Oranges don't even taste good! Fruit Guy, you are a weird dude."

Mike laughed, "The Passion! Do You Actually Hate Oranges That Much?"

"Maybe. There are a bunch of orange kinnies who joined roughly around the time this one dude who loved fruit maybe a bit too much left. Probably for their own safety, he'd probably eat them. On the music label I used to be on, I mean."

"As You Do. Hmm, Okay... How About... Bananas?"

"My God, I hate bananas so much. Like oranges, first you gotta peel the dang thing which can be a right chore in itself. Some people will say 'hur-dur just peel from the bottom' but even that can be hard! Sometimes the only way to open a banana is with your nails by piercing a hole in the skin- and then you try and open it and disgusting,

bananary discharge comes out! That is disgusting! And then you open the banana and most of it is covered in bruises and you can't eat it because- well shoot! Sometimes those bruises aren't bruises, they're actually South American spiders hibernating in there! You don't wanna eat a brown recluse or boner death spider, do you? And EVEN THEN, bananas are only perfectly ripe at the 3am the day after you buy them, after that they're either too soft or too brown. Genuinely hate 'em, bananas are actually worse than oranges."

"You Didn't Even Stop To Breathe That Time!" Mike laughed, "Jesus, I've Been Eating The Bruises For Years! They're Not Actually Spiders, Are They?"

"It's very rare but yes, sometimes it can happen. The spider is usually dead and okay to eat though but hey- sometimes they aren't. Sleep well, kiddies."

"Oh No!" Mike tried to laugh it off but Mouse could see it in his eyes, he was acting like he wasn't scared but he was, "How About... One Of Your Old Co-Workers?"

"Okay, I'm gonna pick one I don't genuinely hate because one I wanna keep this light hearted and two we'd be here for hours otherwise. Anyway, Fruit Guy is a right git. Like... How dare he never release his album. It's been seven years, dude! SEVEN years! No album should take seven years, especially with the quality yours is at. And stop being weird around fruits! Those things have feelings, you know! 'hur-dur but the fruits love me back,' no they don't, they prefer your friend and they just stay around you to cheer you up. His friend is far superior and pulls off your brand better than you ever could. Better musician in your old style? Yup. Mysterious persona? Check. Mysterious project that's been in the works for years? I can tell you easily who's I'm more excited about." Mouse paused, "I'm struggling to think, Fruit Guy was actually pretty cool. Definitely one of the better humans in the group even if a bit... Odd."

"Haha, Dude Likes His Fruits I'm Assuming?"

"You have no idea, Mike. You haven't seen the stuff I've seen, that everyone's seen."

Mike remained quiet, "How About I Just... Don't Ask?"

"Probably for the best. Let me just say though, 'that one event' is the least weird thing, think about what he does out of the public eye."

"Yeah, I Just Don't Even Wanna Know. Are Any Of The Others Weird?"

"Define 'weird.'"

"I Dunno, Just Something They Do That's Out of The Ordinary."

"Let's see... These two guys may have just been really humanoid aliens but I never figured that out, we have a pair of giant, walking and talking mushrooms I hear now,

there's another guy who pretends to be Japanese for clout, there's a British person who will just sit and watch a cuppa tea for HOURS! No exaggeration, he'll give it his full attention. It's creepy. Uhhh, I've heard there's a basement? I've never been there but apparently a lot of wackiness goes on in there."

"Kinky?"

"Not kinky, not in that way," Mouse shook his head, "if you break any of the rules you're sent down there. Apparently, that's where they put all the files with old or abandoned projects. Apparently when an artist leaves it's customary to say 'they went to the dungeon.' Apparently, I'm in there in a metaphorical way?"

"You Ever Been To The Actual Dungeon?"

"Nah, quite frankly, I don't want to. Who knows who or what is down there."

"Ah, True, True."

"You live rural, right? Got any spooky stories?"

"Oh Boy, Do I."

Mouse sat up straight again, "go on?"

"So One Time My Cat Went Missing. I Love My Cat, She's My Best Friend And I Was Getting A Bit Worried, Right? So I Went Into The Woods To Look For Her. Anyway, I Eventually Found Her. She Was Wounded, Hurt And Missing A Leg."

"Ah, is that why your cat only has three legs?"

"Yeah. Anyway, I Wanted Revenge SO I Went Back Into The Woods When I Next Had The Time. Anyway, I Nearly Got Eaten By... Something. No Clue What The Thing Was, It Was Unlike Any Animal I'd Ever Seen Before." Mike shrugged, "It Was... An Odd..? Experience...?"

"That's weird, dude. At least you're still alive to tell the story."

"Heh. True," Mike slowed the gear to go around a rather sharp bend, "So You've Got Like... Talking Mushrooms And Stuff Right? How Come That Is?"

"He... Didn't like to talk about it."

"Ah, I See." Mike changed gear again, "is everyone else human besides him, the mushrooms, the oranges and you or? Have you ever found that humans are more popular or vice versa?"

"Hmmm," Mouse had to think about this one a bit, "so here's a thing I've noticed. The absolute most populars... They're all human. I think. Fruit Man is, I know that. These

two blue people are also up there but they're... Debatably human. And then you have the non-humans like Ephixa, Televisor, me. They're all memorable because they're not human. And then you have the rest but are still popular. People still remember and know them but they aren't like... Skrillex levels of popular. And then you have the 'people still care but not as much' like... Obsidia."

"So Basically, You Get Popular By Either Being Weird Looking Or Fruit Man's Friend?"

Mouse sat in silence, "I hate that you've pointed that out because now you've made me realise because I WAS a friend of Fruit Man's and I was also weird looking and I STILL failed! And had everything going for me, all the odds in my favour but people hated me!"

"Aww, Mouse. Stop Putting Yourself Down."

"No! Don't tell me that! I screwed up and I need to suffer for it! I wasn't good enough, I never will be!"

"They Didn't Understand Your Music, They Weren't Ready. You Were... Just So Ahead of Your Time. They Liked It Years Later, Didn't They?"

Mouse did a deep breath, 'deep breaths, just do that to calm down!' as an old friend always said, "Yeah... True... It just... annoys me so much. They love whatever Fruit Man does no matter the quality, one time he LITERALLY made the same song twice and people *adored* it. But oh no, when Fruit Man and I collab I'm 'ruining his funky flow' and I'm 'difficult to work with.'" Mouse folded his arms like a sulking child, "I like him, I really do. The culture around the label I used to be on wasn't like high school. Fruit Man knows he's popular but he's super modest about it and he seems kinda embarrassed and self-conscious about it. Same with his mate, he also seems to really dislike his fame actually, he's very reserved and shy," Mouse chuckled, knowing he was just pointlessly rambling at this point, "This own guy, British guy, owns it. He loves the attention and honestly I can't blame him. He's always been an entertainer and he loves making people smile. He can be a bit obnoxious though."

"They Sounded Cool."

"I got into a fight with British Guy once."

"And-" Mike was shocked, "And How Did That Pan Out?"

"Okay, lemme give you the run down. British Guy is six foot, well-muscled and known for being an excellent swordsman. For reference, Fruit Guy was considered top-dog in terms of combat ability for a while due to his fire powers, but apparently when British Guy showed up he took Fruit Guy down effortlessly. According to Stephen it was 'spectacular and very satisfying to watch.' Little known fact about Fruit Guy, you

have to actually fight him and either be able to hold your own for a bit and or beat him to have any chance of collabing. I... Don't know why, he's just weird like that. Probably something to do with 'gaining his respect' or something. So anyway, Stephen is pretty tough too, he gave Fruit Guy a pretty bad wound with his axe once and Fruit Guy was like "woah dude let's collab eh?" He's Canadian like that. Anyway- I'm rambling aren't I?"

"Continue Your Ramble, This Is Interesting."

Mike sounded unimpressed but Mouse continued, "So yeah, British Guy kicked Fruit Guy's butt and because of that they made a whole mini-album together. Anyway, British Guy was then top dog and I'm pretty sure he still is? I could be wrong. Anyway, this leads onto how I joined Monstercat. They have a Radio Show called... Something... And I wanted to make my entrance... Big. I'd been wanting to join the label for a while but I wanted to make a big impression. So I hacked their show!" Mouse laughed.

"You Hacked Them?!"

"I hacked them- I hacked their show and it was during one of British Guy's songs. So anyway, he wasn't very happy about that. The CEO invites me onto the label and I show up to the HQ. I'm about to walk in and some British kid calls to me. I turn around who is it: British Guy and his merry little band of merry men."

Mike laughs, "he's British isn't he?"

"Yeah, anyway, so he stood there and he monologued for a bit and then he was like 'I'm gonna fight you!' Anyway, I had no idea of his reputation so it's not like I was soiling myself. He pulls his sword out and charges up to me like an anime protagonist and I, being a robot, have way faster reflexes than him. So I keep dodging his hits and eventually more and more people start watching. I keep dodging and he's getting more and more annoyed every time. I thought it would be funny to trip him over so I made him lose his balance and I tripped him over. I kept my foot on his back to stop him from getting up and continuing to attack me."

"Oh My Days."

"So I decided to have some fun with this. I can imitate lots of sound effects because I have a library for that- So-" Mouse tried to stop himself from laughing, "I played the megaman X blaster sound effect and he just started screaming!" Mouse laughed.

Mike laughed too, "Oh No!"

"I took my foot off of him and held out my hand to help him up. He just kinda looked at me and got up on his own and stormed off."

"Sore Loser. Baby Rage, Innit?"

"How could he not be, he'd won every fight up until that point."

"Eh, Shouldn't Mean He Should Baby Rage."

"ANYWAY, Because I beat British Guy and British Guy beat Fruit Guy, Fruit Guy then let me do one whole collab with him and I got to sit at the cool kids' table for a bit. British Guy was also at the cool kids' table and he didn't like that initially. Eventually we became buds though," Mouse shrugged.

"Wait... Fruit Guy Only Collabs With People Who Can Hold Their Own In A Fight Against Him... You've Spoken About That Other Guy Like He's A Quiet And Shy Little Dude, How'd That Happen?"

Mouse deadpanned, "Aside from British Guy, Fruit Man's Shy Friend (trade marked) is the one to come consistently close to kicking Fruit Guy's butt. It's always a big deal whenever those too fight, Shy Kid is small but uses his size to his advantage. Fruit Guy has height on him but Shy Kid knows how to imbalance him and get him down." Mouse relaxed, "Shy Kid also very agile and not only can he dodge easily but he can also do this thing where he just... Summons stars? And they're fire proof? It's weird and alien and I don't know how he does it but it basically means he never gets hit. He's the guy I was talking about earlier too, thought he was an alien. Anyway, he can do this and slowly chip away at Fruit Guy and basically float around effortlessly. You ever seen Orange Cassidy the wrestler? It's like that but more anime/comic esque. It's really fun to watch! Or, from a safe distance anyway. I hate fire."

"Oh, How Come?"

"It's... A long story."

"We Have Time. Unless You Don't Wanna Talk About It?"

"It's fine, I'll say."

Chapter 5

"So..." Mouse took a deep breath, "my home was kinda... Destroyed."

"I'm Sorry To Hear That," Mike avoided eye contact, again focussing on the road, "How'd That Happen?"

"So my home, The Fields, was a simulation like The Matrix. Some people lived there too but... They kinda went a bit insane while living there? Anyway, they went loopy and destroyed the place. They burnt everything to the ground..."

"Oof."

"I took Fruit Guy there once to see the rubble," Mouse's finger drummed in rhythm on the window, agitated, "he wanted to use it as 'inspiration' he got his inspiration alright," Mouse clenched his fists, "we only stayed there for a night, camping. It was nice but neither of us knew it at the time- I don't know if he knows now... His style completely changed and his personality changed, HE changed... His style was already kind of changing but this is where it did a complete 180, after this one song, I mean. Many people say 'they hate Fruit Guy's new style' and he should 'go back to his roots.' I feel... Partially responsible. He's made many stupid decisions after his trip to The Fields. I shouldn't have taken him there, he's going down the root the other humans did and-"

"Mouse."

Mouse hid further into his hoodie, pulling his legs up to his seat and curling into a ball, "I killed his success! I killed it and it's all my fault, I shouldn't have taken him there!"

Mike drove over to a bypass and stopped the car. He put his hand on Mouse's back, "Mouse... It wasn't your fault."

"Yes it was! What if he gets worse?! What if he goes crazy just like everybody else and hurts someone and it's all because I took him to The Fields?!"

"I'm Sure That Won't Happen... And If It Does, It's Not your Fault. It's Whatever Is Doing That In The Fields Fault."

"I should have warned him! You wouldn't get it, Mike..." Mouse rolled to face away from Mike.

"Mouse... Are you Crying?"

"No! Shut up!" Mouse's nose ran onto his hand, that's disgusting, "It's physically impossible for me to cry, go be stupid somewhere else."

Mike sighed behind him and placed a pack of tissues on his head. They fell in front of Mouse and down the side of the car.

"Mouse... Look At Me."

"No."

"So You Are Crying."

Mouse paused, trying to keep composure in his voice and not let it wobble, "No." It sounded weak and frail anyway.

"Mouse." Whatever softness was in Mike's voice now was gone, he was being much firmer now.

Mouse begrudgingly sat up and turned to face Mike. Mike sighed, "I Think We Should Take A Break. I've Packed Food in The Back, Wanna Have A Picnic?"

Mouse nodded, not wanting to talk. Mike ruffled his hair, "Chin Up, Chicken." He opened the car door and got out.

Chicken. What an odd nickname. Wait, humans called other humans who were softies 'chicken' didn't they? Was Mike calling him a wuss? Oh dear.

Mike opened the door on Mouse's side of the car too, "how do you like your sandwiches?"

Mouse didn't want to talk. He handed Mike another one of the eggs from his pocket, wordless.

"I Don't Have Anything To Do Eggs, Sorry. Your Choices Are Jelly, Cheese, Peanut Butter Or A Combination."

"Uhhh," Mouse's voice was breaking and weak already, "Pee-butter and jelly please..."

"Alright," Mike gave him a warm and sympathetic smile before going back around to the back of the car to grab food."

Mouse continued to sit in the passenger seat. He was lucky nobody had managed to track him down yet. Had they given up looking? His running speed was nowhere near that of a car so surely if people were following they weren't close behind, right? That probably just jinxed it. Thinking about it probably just jinxed it. Oh well.

Mike came back around to his seat and passed him a peanut butter and jelly sandwich wrapped in a bit of kitchen-roll. "Here Ya Go, A Nice Peanut Butter And Jelly Sandwich."

"Thanks," Mouse took the sandwich from him, being careful not to make his movements too shaky.

Mike stood outside the car and had a good look around at the scenery. It was still quite cold out, Mouse could see the moisture from his breaths in the air. Mike rubbed his arms, "Brr! Bit Chilly, Isn't It?"

"Mhmmm," Mouse took another bite of his sandwich.

"You Gonna Sit Inside The Whole Time?"

Mouse nodded, "Mmm hmm!" He didn't want to talk while eating, that was rude.

Mike was unfazed, "Okay, There's A Nice View Out Here Though."

Mouse weighed up his options for a few seconds. He began to climb out of the car, Mike stepped back to let him out. Mouse took another bite of his sandwich, a few crumbs falling like snow to his feet.

Mike was right, the view was incredibly vast. Patchworks of countryside separated by hedgerows seemed to run on for miles, a few hills were to the right. They looked huge but were so far in the distance Mouse wondered how big they were up close. Could they be considered mountains maybe? There were a few lone trees spread out on the left within the patchworks. A tiny speck, a bird, flew out from the leaves of one and flapped until it got to another. The wind was quite strong too, it whistled against Mouse's face. The tear stains on Mouse's face made him a bit cold.

"It's Quite Nice, Isn't It?" Mike continued to stare.

"Yeah, I guess it's pretty." Mouse took another bite of his sandwich, there was about half left now. He'd already planned his next bite, a bit with a large chunk of jelly on the left near some crust.

Mike was silent for a moment, leaving only the wind to echo between the two for a bit. "Wanna Know Who Else Is Quite Nice Looking?"

Mouse felt his face heat up, please don't say him. He swallowed, "who?"

"Me. Self Confidence Is Key, Sis." Mike laughed, "I'm Kidding AND Lying To Myself!"

"Who were you talking about then?"

"Nobody In Particular, I Just Wanted An Excuse To Uhh... Make A Joke. You Got Someone In Mind, Homeboy?"

"Nah, I hate everyone and everything."

"Even yourself?"

Mouse gave Mike a look.

"Oh, Right... Sorry, Poor Timing. My Bad."

"Anywho," Mouse took another bite of his sandwich, savouring the sweetness of the jelly. He covered his mouth with his hand, "... Yeah I got nothing."

"Yeah..."

"Hey Mike?"

"Hmm?"

"Why DO you sound like that?"

"Sound Like What?" Mike blinked, unsure.

"You sound like you start every word with a capital letter."

"Emphasis. Everything I Say Is Actually Very Important," Mike did a hair flick thinking he was fabulous. He just ended up looking a bit stupid.

Mouse snorted, "okay Michael."

"Wanna Hop Back In The Car And Continue On?"

"Alright then." Mouse put the rest of the sandwich in his mouth and stepped back in the car, "want me to drive the rest?"

"Uhhh, Sure. Yes Please. It's Unlikely We'll Get Pulled Over," Mike plopped himself down into the driver's seat and put on his seatbelt, "Uhh, Yeah, I Could Use A Break."

The two switched sides of the car outdoors and got inside.

"Wait A Second," Mouse looked towards Mike, beginning to drive, "Didn't You Say Something Earlier... 'I've Never Met A Robot Who Can Drive?'"

"Okay, you see, here's the thing," Mouse turned his attention back to the road, "I'm programmed with a learning algorithm. If I watch someone do something for long enough I'll eventually pick up on how to do it myself. It's how I learned to make music, play video games... Drive."

"I... Taught You To Drive?"

"Yes you did! Well done!"

"Wow! I've Never Taught Someone To Drive Before!"

"Well now you can say you can!"

"Yeah! I'm Chuft To Bits!" Mouse had no clue what 'chuft' meant but it was probably good, "Do You Know Everything Yet?"

"Not everything, I only know what I've seen you do," the road seemed to get a bit narrower so Mouse changed from 30 to 25, "So far I know what changing gear is, how to steer, what a give way sign is, a bypass is used to let another car go past OR stop and have a picnic."

Mike laughed, "Always A Picnic! You Ate That Sandwich Quick!"

"I was hungry."

"Didn't You Eat Like... A Whole Egg Earlier?"

Mouse remained silent, "yes."

"How Come?"

"Because I can and others can't, their reactions are funny," Mouse snickered, "you should have seen my Dad's reaction to it!"

"Bill?"

"Yeah, Bill!"

"Do You Like Your Dad?"

"Ehhhh," Mouse had to think about this, "we have a normal bond I guess. He's supportive of my interests, gives me advice, helps handle my career BUT his plan to give me skin like you was kinda cringe."

"Is That Why You Ran Away?"

"Yeah, he wanted to redesign me completely. Like... I hate how I look but I'd rather look like this than human."

"How Can You Hate How You Look? You Look Really Awesome!"

"Would you wanna look like me?"

"No Because-"

"See?"

"Let Me Finish."

"Sorry."

"No Because I Prefer Looking Human. That's Like A Tomboy Telling A Girly Girl, 'WouLd YoU WaNnA LoOk LiKe Me???' And The Girly Girl Saying 'No I'd Rather Wear Make Up And Dresses Because They Make Me Feel Pretty.' The Tomboy Isn't Ugly, It's Just Not the Girly Girl's Style."

Mouse remained quiet.

"You're Just Not Your Own Type, That's All."

"Hmm... I've never thought it like that before. But I'm still ugly. I'm not being 'oh woe is me,' it's a fact I accepted long ago. Humans look at me weirdly, kids are scared of me. You know what? I'm fine with that. I hate humans anyway so the more I scare off the better."

"That's Really Depressing..."

"Not really. If you didn't wanna get rid of mountain lions and stop them from eating you and you just so happened to smell like mountain lion repellent would you be complaining?"

"Well No- But People Aren't Mountain Lions..?"

"They are to me."

"No, Mouse. People Are People And Mountain Lions Are Mountain Lions- These Things Are Not...? Comparable...? At All...?"

"Look, I'm not good at metaphors and comparisons, alright? Those are human things humans do to confuse us specifically."

"Oh Mouse..."

"It's true! Have you ever heard a metaphor you actually understood?"

"Well- I- Err- No..."

"Exactly. They do so many things with the way they interact just to exclude us, all these little intricate rules that they're all just born knowing. It makes no sense."

"True, True." Mike returned to silence.

He was quiet for a while. Was he thinking? Was Mike even capable of thought?

"Oi, Listen. I Need You To Know Something."

"Hm?"

"I Don't Cope Well With The Cold. If I'm Left Out In It For Too Long, I Shut Down And I Don't Boot Back Up Until My Body Is Warm Enough Again."

"That's... Oddly specific? And poor design? What the hell, Mike?"

"I'm Not Done. Anyway, If I FREEZE To Death! I Need You To Not Abandon Me Outside? Or, At Least Come Back For Me If You Do."

"Huh?"

"Just Pick Up My Corpse And Take Me With You or Something. Or Get Me To A Warm Place? I Dunno."

"Okay..? What? Weird. Mike are you okay?"

"Yeah. I Just Die Very Easily. Anyway, I Thought I Should Tell You As It's Been Snowing In England And I Could Unironically Die."

"Oh, Okay. So just take you to a warm place and we're good, right?"

"Oh Yeah, There's Also A Time Limit. I Think If I'm Frozen And Out For More Than Six Hours All My Data Is Deleted Or Something." Mike shrugged, "Longest I Was Out Once Was Four Hours So..."

"Is dying a regular occurrence for you?"

"Nah. Just Something I Thought I Should Mention, I Don't Wanna You To Be Scared If I Kick The Metaphorical Bucket."

Chapter 6 Or Smth

Mouse parked the car in the airport's carpark, "well that was... Fast."

"I Know, Right! It's Like Nothing Happened For Like... Half The Journey!" Mike opened the boot of the car and pulled out his suitcase. He wobbled slightly from the weight, setting it down and pulling the handle up so he could drag it along.

"When is the plane?"

"I Dunno. We Should Go Inside And Check."

Mouse followed Mike inside. The airport was surprisingly quiet with only a few people busying themselves around.

Mike's eyes were filled with wonder at the vastness, "I Am So Incredibly Lost!"

Mouse sighed and pointed at what looked like front desk, "I think we're meant to go there?"

Mike nodded, "Interesting Observation, Mr Fields." Mouse rolled his eyes and followed him.

Mike gently put his hands on the desk. The reception lady was on the phone doing an important looking call. Mike stared at her, hoping she'd notice him.

"We don't have time for this. OI!" Mouse caught her attention.

The woman took notice, "hold please," she set the phone down, "yes?"

"I- Uh- Um, Yes-"

Mouse nudged Mike. Mike continued struggling.

"When is the next flight to England?" Mouse finally asked.

"Oh, it's like... An hour."

"Totally Tubular, Dude!" Mike finally blurted out.

Mouse turned to him, deadpan. "No Michael."

"Do I Look Like I Know how To Talk To Women?"

"No, you don't," Mouse turned back to the lady, "thanks for your help! Sorry about..." Mouse glanced at Mike, "him."

Mouse clutched Mike's hand and walked back over to a bench near an indoor flowerbed.

"What was that?!"

"I Don't Know How To Talk To Pretty Women!"

"I can tell!" Mouse stopped holding Mike's hand as there was no need to anymore, "don't tell me you have a crush on her now or something, Jesus."

Mike remained quiet. He turned his gaze to the floor.

“Michael!”

“She Was Cute, Okay! Her Hair Was Nice And Her Eyes Were Pretty!”

“Stop falling in love with humans! That’s disgusting!”

“No It’s Not! Humans Are Cute And Stupid And I Love Them!”

Leaning back against the wall and folding his arms, Mouse grunted, “fine, you can fall in love with your disgusting pests.”

The two hung on an awkward silence again. Mouse decided to go into screensaver mode. Pong? Nah, he already internally played that today. Tetris? That could be-

“You Excited To Go To Bri’ain And See All The Bri’ish People In Their Natural Habitat?”

“Nah.”

“Well You’re A Sour Puss, Aren’tcha?”

“The Hell is a ‘sour puss’?”

“Someone Who Hates Everything And Can’t Seem To Have Fun.”

“I am not!”

“Yeah You Are.”

“Am not!”

Mike snickered, “Are To!”

“Whatever.”

The two returned to their awkward silence. Finally, Mike had decided to shut up. Tetris time.

Mouse leaned against the wall in a more comfortable position and closed his eyes. He internally booted up Tetris and had a good crack at that. Mike was shuffling beside him. C’mon Mike, entertain yourself.

“What Are you Doing?”

“Playing Tetris.”

“Are You Asleep?”

“No, I’m playing Tetris.”

There was peace once again. Until Mike poked Mouse in the side. Mouse wasn’t expecting Mike’s cold finger to suddenly jab him in the side. Mouse jerked away, he wasn’t ticklish but it still caught him off guard. “What do you want now?!”

“Are You Playing Tetris?”

“Yes! Now go and entertain yourself! Stop being a prick!”

“Okay, Sorry. Do You Have Like... Internal Games?”

“Yes.”

“Pong, Tetris, Atari Breakout, Snap and a few others.”

“I Wish I Was A Gaming Console.”

Mouse spoke through gritted teeth, “I’m NOT a gaming console.”

“Sorry. What’s gotten into you?”

“I need a moment of quiet, Mike! I’m very stressed!”

“Oh! Sorry! You Could Have Just Said So, You Know. I’ll Uh... I’ll Leave You Alone.”
Mike slid away from him on a bench a bit.

Finally. Tetris. Admittedly, Mouse did feel a bit... Off. Was that guilt? He pitied Mike. Mike deserved what he had coming, he should know better than to continue to annoy him after obvious signs to not annoy people. Wait. Mouse never said, did he? Oh God, he was becoming human. He was mimicking their behaviours and their silly little intricacies. Come on, hold it together, don’t cry in front of Mike again and in an airport no less. System fail, he was crying again.

On the outside he was led against the wall with his eyes closed. On the inside he was very much crying. It was still oddly quiet. “I need comfort.” That came out sounding a lot louder than Mouse would have hoped.

Mike slid back in his direction and patted him on the back in a soft and soothing rhythm. “I’m Not Good At Comforting People.”

Mouse curled up into a ball again, wanting to get as small as possible to maybe hide from the pressure, “that’s fine. You’re doing fine.”

Mouse looked up at Mike, there was worry in his face. Did Mike genuinely care? Did Mike even feel sympathy? Empathy even? Was he programmed to do that or did it come naturally?

Mouse sat up, feeling a lot more okay than before.

“Better?”

“Better.”

Mike pulled a twix out of his pocket. “Choccy?”

Mouse took the twix from Mike’s hand, it was surprisingly unmelted, “choccy. Thankyou.”

“You’re Not You When You’re Hungry,” Mike winked.

Mouse cracked a smile and opened the packet, taking a bite. The twix was sweet in his mouth. You may think he only ate last chapter but that was actually a few hours ago.

“There’s The Smile!”

Mouse couldn’t help but smile a little more, “oh, stop it!” he held back a laugh.

“Oh, Okay Then!” Mike stopped and backed off from Mouse.

“You’re... You’re a good friend, Mike. I’m glad I have you here looking out for me.”

“Thanks! These Trips Are Usually Pretty Boring Alone So I Guess I Can Say The Same For You.”

The two returned to their quiet, unsure of what to talk about. Did they even need to talk? There was a solace in their silence almost. A question sprung into Mouse’s CPU. Should he ask it? He almost didn’t want to break the silence. Decisions, decisions. Hell yes. “Hey Mike?”

“Hm?”

“Why DO you wanna look human?”

“It’s... It’s comforting. I wanna fit in. I don’t like sticking out like a sore thumb.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Why, You Got A Problem With That?”

“No, I was just curious really. It’s amazing how we can have such... Differing opinions on the same topic despite being very similar.”

“Yeah, Well, My Home Was Never Destroyed By Humans, Was It?”

“True, plus you were... Stabbed... By a robot...” Mouse trailed off. It wasn’t his trauma, why did he hate thinking about it?

“Are You Okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just a bit overwhelmed, sorry.”

“Understandable. Is It The Bright Lights?”

“No.”

“The Noise?”

“No.”

“Socialising?”

“Hell No!”

“Your... Situation?”

Mouse had to think, it probably was, “yes.”

“Hmmm...”

“Like... What if they’re still looking for me? I’ve not seen them for a few days- which is a good thing! Don’t get me wrong! I just feel so... Tense. Like they’re gonna pop up out of nowhere and take me back.”

“Once We Get To England They’ll Never Find You. Hell, They’re Probably All Stuck In Canada!” Mike gave a warm, reassuring smile, “Chin Up, Chicken! You’ll Be Fine!”

Mouse smiled, whatever you say, chicken man, “true, true. I mean, what are they gonna do? It’s not like the British government will rat us out or anything. We’re just tourists!”

“Innit! They’ll Be All Like...” Mike attempted a British accent, “Cor Bloimey! That’s A Bit Stchewpid, Innit! Them Me’ol Fellas! Ahright, Let’s Go An’ ‘Ave A Cream Tea, Innit?”

“I have no clue what you just said.”

“I Said ‘Wow, Those Robots Are Dumb. Okay, Let’s Go Have A Cup of Tea And A Scone.’”

“What the hell is a scone?”

“It’s A Pastry With Jelly- ‘Jam’ As The Bri’ish People Call It- And Cream. Apparently It’s Playful-Controversial Over There From If You Put Cream Or Jelly First And Even The Name!”

“You know a lot about Britain.”

“I Used To Live There,” Mike deadpanned and then laughed.

“Aha, do you know the national anthem?”

“You Think I Don’t?”

Mouse shrugged.

Mike cleared his throat, he thought for a second and began to sing, “Go Compaaaaare! Go CompAaaare!”

Mouse snorted, “No! Is that the real national anthem?!”

“Yes,” Mike grinned.

“Your voice is nice, you’d be great as a vocalist.”

“You Think? I Hate My Voice.”

“You’re better than most of ‘em. Not as good as this one girl I work with but nobody’s better than her so don’t feel too bad.”

“Haha, She Good?”

“Her voice is lovely. Like an angelic penguin...”

“A What?”

“You heard me, Michael.”

“My name isn’t Michael.”

“It’s not?”

“Nope.”

“What is it then?”

“You Really Think I’d Tell You?”

“Is it just ‘Mike’ alone?”

“Nope,” Mike winked.

“Aw, c’mon! Tell me!”

Mike set his arms behind his head and relaxed, “Nah.”

“Is it... Esviel?”

“I Stopped Being Called That Years Ago, Keep Guessing.”

“Uhhhh. Is it a foreign variant of Michael like ‘Mikkel’?”

“Nope.”

“I dunno then.”

“Sad.”

The two resumed their silence. Mouse decided to look into the indoor plantbed behind him. It was mostly full of dirt and a few leafy plants that looked like the same kind you’d find in a grandmother’s home.

“Those Are Arrowhead Vines And Philodendron. Lovely And Easy To Care For Houseplants.”

“You identified those quick!”

“I Love Plants. Have you Got A Favourite?”

“Uhhhh,” admittedly Mouse had never thought about his favourite plant. It’s such a human thing to have a group of plants, or animals or colours and then go ‘you know what, I’m gonna pick a favourite.’ “I don’t know,” he shrugged and sat back down forwards, “you?”

“I Quite Like Strawberry Bushes, Orange Trees And Most Jungle Plants. God, I Love Jungle Plants. I Wish I Could Live In A Warmer Place To Grow Some Of Those But Eh, I Guess Rubbish And Cold Oregon Will Do.”

“Ha, got a favourite flower?”

“Ah, Probably Um... Ah... Roses? Roses Are Cute.”

“Oh yeah, those are nice. Sometimes we’d call Matey Boy that to wind him up.”

“Matey Boy Sounds Like On Hell Of A Guy.”

“He was. He reminds me of you.”

It was at that moment a voice echoed over the airport speakers, “if you are booked for Flight B325 to Bristol airport, please start boarding the plane!”

Chapter 7

Mouse walked down the aisle with Mike following close behind, trying to locate their seats. There were always 3 seats on each end, leaving them a window or aisle seat. They eventually found their seats at the very back of the plane tucked away in the corner. It looked cozy albeit cramped and uninviting.

“You Want Window Or Aisle, Mouse?”

“Uhhh... I'll take window, please. Sorry if you wanted window.”

“Oh Thank God, I Always Prefer Aisle. Stretch The Old Legs A Bit More. Or, The One In The Aisle Anyway.”

Mouse walked among the plane's chairs and sat by the window, Mike sitting in the same row but one seat away leaving only the middle seat between them. Mike was right, there really wasn't that much space to stretch your legs in these things.

“You Ever Been On A Plane Before?”

“No,” Mouse looked around for a seatbelt.

“Oh, It's Not As Fun As You Think. Sometimes Your Ears Pop And It Sounds Like You're Underwater For A Few Days...” Mike trailed off looking right by Mouse's face.

“What is it?”

“Do You Even Have Ears?”

“Oh, right,” Mouse took off the coating from around his ears revealing two, dark and fluffy cat like ears on the side of his head. His voice dropped to a murmur, “my hearing is super sensitive so I have to keep these on other wise I get overwhelmed by all the noise.”

Mike nodded, still a bit surprised by Mouse's hidden body part.

Mouse put the discs back on.

“I Like Your Discs, They're Cool Looking.” Mike stared at them intently, “What's The Purpose Of The Sticky Out Bit?”

“Okay, surprisingly I don't know.”

A voice echoed over the speakers, Mouse looked at the speaker rudely. His face read, ‘excuse me, I'm talking too.’ The plane shook and began to take off.

“Weeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.” Mike was unenthused, “Anyway, If You Don't Know, What Do You Think They're For?”

“Hmmm... Probably a wi-fi or Bluetooth thing. Or maybe an electricity thing? They are shaped like lightning bolts after all..”

“Possible,” Mike nodded, “They’re Pretty Cool Looking Though. Very Fascinating To Look At.”

“Thanks?” Mouse wasn’t sure if he should feel complimented or not.

Mike yawned, “Mind If I Take A Nap? I’m A Bit Tired” He sunk further into his seat, getting comfy.

“Why are you asking me?”

“I Don’t Want You To Get Lonely.”

“I’ll be fine, Mike.”

“Okay, Okay- Just Wake Me Up If You Want To, I Won’t Be Annoyed.” Mike seemed to fall asleep almost instantly. Was that a thing he could just do? And in an uncomfortable airplane chair nonetheless?

Being left to his own devices, Mouse decided to play some more internal games. Flappy bird? That sounds fun. He booted it up and closed his eyes and- Ah. He’d forgotten he’d modded and reskinned it to be a funny picture he took of Laszlo’s face that changed every time you pressed up. Caught off guard, he nearly made a noise. He pressed play and attempted to beat his high score. So far it was 10 but only because he got very lucky that day and was extremely bored. But... Being stuck on a plane for the entire trip to, where was it? Bristol? Perhaps the highscore could change?

Score of 3.

Then of 2.

Then of 5.

Then of none.

Then of 4.

Then of 5.

Mouse was bored. He quickly stopped disassociating and popped back into reality to check on Mike. Still asleep. He looked kinda cute actually, all snuggled up in his

chair. Mike had evidently dreamed last time they slept in the same room- what was that about anyway? He acted off put and surprised. It was none of Mouse's business.

Wait a minute. Why WAS Mike tired? He yawned earlier too. Mouse looked up and down near Mike, he wasn't plugged in or anything. He was plugged in back at the house, right? Maybe he was just using it to fast travel through time? Likely, but then why was he tired? Something was off. Nothing about this added up. ... It was probably nothing. Oh geez, what if Mike was human? It seemed impossible, right? The dude could plug himself in, His hands and neck were definitely plastic, he had undetailed robot eyes. There was no way he would be part human, it wouldn't make scientific sense. It was probably just all in his head. Mike wasn't human, that's stupid. Mike's too good for that.

Mouse resumed looking forward and decided to boot up Atari Breakout. But Mike... Mike was definitely a robot just like him. There was nothing to worry about, Mike's just weird. It all had a rational explanation- He was from a different company. Maybe he gains a BIT of energy from sleeping? No- Stop thinking about it. He's not human. You're fine.

Hours ticked by on the flight. One, then two, then four. It eventually got dark- and quick too. Aren't timezones fun? A few small lights came on inside the plane. It was surprisingly cozy. It wasn't sauna temperature by any means but it was warm. A gentle warm that you'd get when snuggled up in a blanket or by a fire place where it's cold all around you and you're safe and snuggled. It wasn't overly bright anymore which was nice too. Not dark, just dim. Dark places always seemed more cosy than bright places, didn't they? Mouse put his arm on against the window and stared out it. They were just above all of the fluffy, albiet dark clouds. There were stars in the distance too, some brighter than others. They freckled the night sky into a beautiful piece of paper covered in glitter.

Mike groaned behind Mouse, waking up, "WeThereYet?"

"Pardon?"

"Are We There Yet?"

"No, but I think we must be close. It's dark out now. It was afternoon in America so it must be like... 4am-7am here, right?"

"Yeah, I Think It's Like... 5am Here."

"Apparently it's snowing in Britain right now."

"Wait." Mike paused, "What..?"

"It snowed apparently."

"I Hate Snow. It's Gonna Be Cold, Ugh."

"Ah, sorry."

"It's Fine, We'll Be Fine," Mike still sounded annoyed.

Mouse stared at his feet, moving them back and fourth in an attempt to comfort himself. "What if they're still looking."

"They Won't Be."

"They are."

"I doubt it."

Mouse put his hands in his lap, agitated, "they are. They SO are. I'm SO dead."

"Do You Want A Cuddle?"

"Yeah..." Mouse unbuckled his seat belt, shuffled into the middle seat and did his seatbelt again.

Mike wrapped his arms around him protectively, occasionally moving his cold hand up and down his back. "You'll Be Fine, They Won't Come Looking. And If They Do, I Won't Let Them Get You."

Mouse buried his face in Mike's warmth and began to cry again. Dammit Mouse, stop crying. This is the third time today you've done this. Stop being overwhelmed, it's nothing. Stop being such a baby.

Mike ran his fingers through Mouse's hair, "It's Okay, It's Okay. You're Doing Great. You're Doing SO Well." Mike's words were comforting but they just made Mouse cry more. No one had ever been this nice to him. Why? Why be so kind Mike?

Mouse wanted to ask Mike every question in the world but could only manage a defeated sob.

"It's Okay... It's Okay. Just Let it Out, It's Fine, I'm Here For You. I Won't Let Anyone Mistreat You Again, You Deserve Kindness And Warmth And The World. You Deserve The World."

Mouse continued to sob, burying himself into Mike's sweater. The sweater was warm but Mike was not. Odd but he was too emotional to question it.

"Once We Get There And Get You Signed To Hytex, You Can Stay Just As You Are And Not Have To Worry About Being Changed Or Harmed Ever Again. You Can Finally Live As You. No More Worrying about Who Others Want You To Be, Only Who You Want. You'll Finally Be Your Truest Mouse."

Wondering if what Mike was saying was true, Mouse's mind filled with doubt. What if they couldn't join Hytex? What if they alerted his original devs to his location? What if they snitched? What if it took days, weeks or even months for him to legally join? What if after what if filled his thoughts. His breathing staggered, Mike seemed to pick up on that.

"You're Going To Be Fine. Once This Is All Over, you're Going To Be Fine," Mike continued to comfortingly rub Mouse.

Mouse tried to talk again but it just came out as sobs. He steadied his voice, "Mike- Mike I need to ask you something."

"Ask Away."

"Are- Are you" Mouse sobbed, struggling to get his words out, "are you human?"

"No."

"Are you lying?"

"No Again, I'm Like You." Mike continued to pet Mouse.

Something didn't sit right with that answer. "Then why sleep?"

"To Skip Time."

"You said you were tired."

Mike remained quiet, "I Was. I Still Am."

"If you were tired," Mouse paused to breathe, making sure he worded everything correctly, "then why sleep instead of charging?"

"To Save Energy. If I'm Low On Power And Can't Charge, I Sleep When I Can to Save Energy."

"Are you still tired?"

"Yes."

"Your charger is in your pocket. There is an outlet right by your foot."

The petting stopped. Mouse heard Mike murmur a curse under his breath. "Okay. Listen."

Mouse's face was still buried in Mike's chest, "I'm listening." He listened for excuses, insecurity in Mike's voice where he could be lying.

“Firstly, I Didn’t Even SEE The Outlet. Secondly, I Forgot My Charger Was In My Pocket.” Mike was lying.

“Lies.”

“Err- No?”

Got him, “Keeping your charger in your pocket honestly seems like a habit. It’s a very important ‘I can’t lose this’ item you’d always have on you- like your car keys or phone.” There was still wobble in Mouse’s voice, “you don’t just forget that it’s there.”

Mike’s voice deepened, he was annoyed, “Okay, Fine, you Caught Me. I Actually DO Gain A little Bit Of Energy From Sleeping But It’s Really Not Much. I Get more From Being Plugged In.”

“Then why not plug yourself in?”

“I’d Have To Open Myself Up To Do That And I Am NOT Doing That On A Public Plane.”

Mouse thought for an excuse in that, he repeated the audio back to himself in his head, “okay, fine, I’ll give you that.”

The two remained silent, still embraced. Mouse sat back up, leaving Mike’s arms. “Sorry for thinking you were human... I was stressed and a lot of stuff about you wasn’t making sense.”

“That’s Okay. I’m Very Different From You.”

“Do...” Mouse’s voice dropped to a whisper, his body being pushed back into the chair by the landing G-forces “do you want to be human?”

Mike sighed, “I long for the day I can forget I was ever a bot.”

Chapter 8

Mike grabbed his luggage from the shelf above him on top of the plane. Mouse followed him off the plane.

They made their way through Bristol airport and out the front doors into the car park.

“Where to now?”

Mike thought, “call a taxi or uber or something and drive the one mile to the Hytex warehouse. We may need to join a hotel temporarily as we’re gonna be here for a few days.”

Mouse pulled out his cellphone. It was on 34% charge, that should be fine. He opened the uber app and began scrolling. “Okay, uber is called.”

“Cool. And now we wait.”

The two waited for a while and didn’t really talk. After a few minutes, an uber pulled up beside ‘em.

“Where to?” The uber man said.

Mike opened the back door of the car and shuffled in. Mouse followed beside him. The car smelt incredibly clean, the seats were a sleek black.

“Uhhhh,” Mike thought, “Take the M4 all the way up to Gloucester please, we can walk the rest.”

“Ight,” the uber man began to drive.

Mouse sat in silence. He wanted to talk to Mike but it would feel awkward being in this area with a random stranger.

Mike pulled out some headphones and plugged them into his phone. He slotted them into his ears and leaned against the window.

Mouse looked out his own window. Nobody was out due to the current pandemic, about one to two-inch snow littered the ground almost untouched aside from a single line of footprints along the pavement. It was a serene silence. The sun was starting to come up, the sky a beautiful shade of orangey red where there wasn’t dark clouds. Snow continued to fall onto the pavement.

Eventually the uber man dropped the two off, “okay, that’ll be ten-fifty.”

“I have dollars? That’s 14.50\$”

“That was quick, go on then. I can probably just exchange it.”

Mike handed him a small role of change, “cheers man!”

“Cheers mate, have a nice day!” The uber man drove off.

The two men began to walk across the snow covered sidewalk, the ice and frost crunching beneath their feet. Mouse took the lead, somehow managing to walk a bit faster than Mike. Mike was rubbing his arms with his hands, trying to keep up.

“Mouse, I’m Cold.”

Mouse turned around to face Mike. Admittedly he did look quite cold, his skin was pale and he was shivering.

“C’mon, let’s walk a bit faster.”

Mouse walked faster hoping Mike’s walking would speed up. He didn’t. Mouse turned around and waited for Mike to catch up. There was a pang in Mouse’s chest- wait, wasn’t Mike super sensitive to the cold? He could shut down, couldn’t he? And Mouse would have to carry him. That would slow both of them down. It’s best to keep Mike moving on his own.

Mouse unzipped his jacket and took it off, he held it like a rag in his hands and held it in front of Mike, “c’mon, you need to stay warm.”

Mike hesitated but took the hoodie, putting it on over his sweater. He zipped it up and dug his hands into the pockets, “Th- Thankyou, Mouse!” Even his voice sounded cold.

Mouse, left in just a black shirt with his logo on it and some fishnet arm sleeves, was still actually quite cold. Admittedly, the shirt and fishnet sleeves were also a gift. He never really got to keep most of the money from the music he made, usually only a small cut. Luckily unlike Mike he wouldn’t die if he got cold, he wasn’t delicate like that, but it was still uncomfy.

The two continued to walk, unspeaking.

“I Like Your- I Like Your Shirt.” Mike stuttered.

“Thanks Mike.”

“I’m Tired.”

“I know, Mike.”

“I’m Cold.”

“I know, Mike.” Mouse glanced behind him at Mike, he still looked incredibly cold. Mouse had to stop and wait for him again. Once Mike caught up, the two walked side by side again.

This cycle repeated itself a couple more times until Mouse realised Mike was walking slower and slower.

“I’m Tired.”

“I know... I’m sorry...” Mouse grabbed Mike by the hand and walked, hoping him practically dragging Mike along would help speed things up.

“I- I Like Your Sleeves...”

“Thanks, I found them in the trash,” Mouse wasn’t lying. He did find them from the trash. He had to fix them a little bit but aside from that it was free clothes that weren’t that bad. God, saying it out loud made him realise how messed up his life could get sometimes.

Mouse continued his pace. The snow continued to fall around them. It was hard to see but above him was a tiny speck of black. Mouse squinted, using an opti-fine feature built into him essentially allowing him to zoom into where he’s directly looking in real time. It was a helicopter. Mouse continued to squint at it, moving his hand up to his brow to block some of the light. Bill was indeed up there.

“They’ve found us.”

“Huh?”

“The people hunting me. They’ve found us.”

Mouse dragged Mike round into an alleyway in an attempt to hide. The walls blocked the wind a bit.

“How Do You Know It’s Them?” Every time Mouse looked at Mike he looked colder.

“I can zoom in on stuff in real time. It’s them. I know it’s them.”

Mike remained quiet.

“Can you run, Mike? We’re gonna have to run.”

Mike nodded. His hands were shaking, Mouse couldn’t tell if it was from the cold or from fear.

Mouse gave him a reassuring nod and looked back out into the road. The two darted out and began to run. The two were roughly the same speed naturally, Mike probably being held back by the cold, but Mouse was still slightly faster.

“C’mon!” Mouse urged Mike to try and keep up, Mike was failing, obviously fatigued.

The two continued running, their feet pounding against the frozen pavement.

Thud.

Mouse turned around, Mike was lying helplessly in the snow. Mouse skidded and turned around, stepping back over to him.

“Mike..?”

Mike wasn't out yet, he looked up at Mouse like a helpless child, “I'm Too Tired...”

“Oh come on! We don't have time for this!”

Mike rested his head in the snow, giving up. “I'll Catch Up Later,” he was trying to catch his breath, “I'll Catch Up Later. Go.”

Mouse sighed, “why the hell would I just leave you here?! C'mon man, please...”

Mouse glanced up at the helicopter. It looked lower than before. Think. Think. Mouse grabbed Mike by the arm and began to drag him through the snow. “If you think I'm leaving you behind you're very stupid.”

“Mouse, No-“

“I don't care if I get caught! I don't want you to die!” Mouse's bottom lip trembled, don't start crying now.

Mike smiled warmly at him one last time, “Just Leave. You Can Come Back for My Corpse Later. Get To Safety, We Have Six Hours Before My Memories Go.”

“But-“

Mike limply shook Mouse off of his arm, “Go...” his voice was weak.

Mouse glanced up again, the people in the helicopter were readying a rope ladder down. Mike led in the snow, unmoving and unbreathing. He was dead.

Mouse dropped steadied himself, took one last look at Mike and ran. There was one thing on his mind, get to safety and get back to Mike.

Chapter 9 Or Smth

Once again, Mouse was running alone. That pang in his chest was back. Losing Mike was... Not good. No. Stop it. Stop having feelings. That's very human of you. If you have emotions you're just like them. You're weak, you're stupid and you're not thinking rationally. That's right. Stop. Thankfully Mouse's legs didn't get tired, they never did. He had missed running a bit though. Being with Mike was better though, he had travelled across half the world with his help. How did they find him? How did they know he was going to Britain? Mike wouldn't have ratted him out, it's in his best interest not to. No, stop. That's irrational. Mike, although very human, is your friend. Mike is your friend. He wouldn't do that.

Mouse ran into a push door of a nearby hotel. He breathed in, putting a hand on the wall. Why was he out of breath? He didn't get out of breath from running. Oh no, he must have been panicking again. Stop it. They won't find you.

The receptionist glanced over at him, "can I help you?"

"Can you give me a room please? I'm hiding but I plan to stay a while."

The receptionist walked round her desk and picked up a key from the bulletin board behind her. The hotel lobby was eerily quiet with a rustic feel, bars of wood holding the ceiling up.

"C'mon," the receptionist began walking up the stairs, "let me show you to your room."

Cautiously, Mouse followed, "if they ask can you tell them I'm not here?"

"Of course." She opened the door and handed him the key, "we sell breakfast downstairs as an all you can eat buffet, we pop in once a day while you're out for room service, uhh- yeah! That's about it!" she gave him a reassuring smile. "Got any questions?"

Mouse glanced at the one, singular, king sized bed, "nope, I may have a friend coming later, is that okay?"

"Yup, that's fine."

"What do I owe you?"

"How long are you staying?"

"Ah, a few days. We may not come back for a few days but let's say... 5 days total?"

Mouse glanced apprehensively out the window. He shuffled back against the wall and closed the curtains.

"5 days total... And that's 2 people, right? That's roughly about... 65 quid?"

"Yup! That's fine!" Mouse actually had no idea if that was fine. Mike could be dead or dragged away by now for all he knew.

"Okay, have a nice stay!"

"Thankyou so much!" Mouse flopped on the bed as the receptionist stepped out and closed and locked the door. She heard her flip a piece of paper presumably on the handle on the other side. The popcorn ceiling hung tauntingly above him, the little uneven spikes hanging down in typical, ceiling fashion. The room was very small, especially by British standards. He knew British rooms and houses were tiny by American and Canadian standards but he never expected this small. The walls were

a soft, muted green. The main brunt of the room was square which was where the bed was. He was lying in the exact middle, stretching his arms and legs out to get comfy. There wasn't much walk space on either side of the bed. To his left there was another square for an on-suite bathroom. Yeah, best not go in there. That's human business. It was probably clean but there was no reason to go in there besides maybe showering if he felt like it. That looked about 3 by 2 metres in total. On his right there was a wall and a little bit of an over hang for a window. The room looked about 10 by 3 metres in total plus about a metre squared in over hang. Room is small? Affirmative.

He took off the discs on his ears to maybe hear some chitter chatter downstairs. There was some. He flattened his furry ears against the bed, rolling onto his stomach. He could just barely make out what they were saying. He heard his name and 'runaway.' That was Timothy's voice, his Dad's voice, his Dad who he was running away from and never wanted to see again. Was he selfish for that? Timothy treated him well aside from that. He kept a roof over his head, gave him advice, made sure he wasn't having to big of a mental breakdown after each release. But he also stole Mouse's limbs on more than one occasion, rewired him, made him forget certain things by editing his code, forced him to continue making music when he was tired- Okay yeah, screw that guy. The receptionist was speaking now. Mouse moved to the floor next to the bed, lying on his side and pushing his left ear as far into the carpet as he could. The sound was muffled by the carpet still but he could make out what they were saying a lot better.

"Sorry, no one with that description came in."

"Ah, no worries! Thanks for your help."

And with that, Bill sounded like he left. Thank god, it was no longer Bill Time.

Mouse stood up and slid the coverings back over his ears, muting the sound of his own breathing and internal whirring. He glanced over to the far side of the wall. There was a small desk with a bible and a kettle and a few cups on it. Besides them were some tea bags, a small wad of sugar and a small jug of milk. Good God, how long had that milk been out? More importantly, he should have expected free tea in a British hotel. It was worth a try, right? Maybe a drink would calm his nerves. He pushed the outstick of the kettle down and it began to make loud, kettle noises. He spooned a few bits of sugar into his tea and plopped a teabag in there. They were very different from American tea bags, much bigger and circle shaped with no string to pull them out afterwards. What, would he just have to keep the tea in there? Was that the 'real and British way to make tea?' The outstick popped back up and he poured the water into the tea and then added a rather generous amount of milk. There was a spoon a little to the side so he proceeded to stir it with that. Right, what to do with the teabag? He thought. Better keep it in to be safe. He held the mug with both hands and set in on a coaster on the left bedside table. It was hot in his hands, better let it cool down a bit before drinking it.

Think, think. What was he going to do about Mike? Was it safe to go out and find him? He had six hours, right? Six hours before Mike's memory is auto deleted. He

couldn't go fetch him tomorrow, hell his body would have probably been moved by then. He'd have to go out and search.

Mouse peeped out the window slightly. Nobody seemed to be around here. Was it worth it? He needed to get Mike back. Screw it, it was worth it. He could probably get there, grab Mike, bring him back all before his tea went cold, right?

He opened the door and safely tucked his key in his back pocket. He shut the door and walked back down the stairs. He waved to the receptionist as he walked by, she smiled at him, "they're not here anymore," she said.

"Thanks!" Mouse nodded and stepped out. He took a left and began to run. It's better to be fast when he can, it's not like he'd get tired. Ah, which way did he come from? It was straight on and then left, right? He tried that. Lo and behold, Mike was still lying faced down in the snow. Apart of him was disappointed none of the humans had tried to help him, typical behaviour. But at the same time, relief washed over him. Mike was there! All he had to do was pick him up and get to the hotel, right? He knelt down besides Mike and picked him up, one arm under his knees and another supporting his head. Mike was surprisingly heavy, must have been about 60-70 kilos. That was about average weight for a guy his size though, Mouse reckoned. He began to walk. God, that probably looked really suspicious. Robot carrying a dead looking human. He sped his walking pace to a slight jog, hoping no one would take notice. No one was out so he was probably fine. Ah, he'd have to get past the receptionist though. What would she think? That would be a chore.

It wasn't long before Mouse managed to get back into the hotel. He pushed the door open with his foot and stepped inside. The receptionist looked over, "is he okay?" "He's fine, just a bit cold." Mouse looked down at Mike's face. He was pale, his lips blue. Yup. He definitely looked dead.

"Ah, okay. Just making sure you didn't kill him," the receptionist laughed nervously.

"I'd never!" Mouse wasn't sure whether to be offended by that. He saw it coming though. He chuckled, "anyway- uh, this place has warm water, right?"

"Yeah, in your room in the bathroom."

"Okay, thanks," Mouse began walking up the stairs. It was a bit difficult considering Mike being quite heavy but he eventually made it up there. At the top of the stairs, he led Mike down to unlock the door. He picked him back up again and placed Mike on the right side of the bed, the side closest to the bathroom. Guilt. Shame. Inadequacy. It all washed over him so fast. His arms hurt from carrying Mike's weight. He stepped into the bathroom and grabbed a flannel. He ran some water from the tap and waited for it to run warm. Wetting the flannel with boiling water, he ringed it out so it wasn't damp, just warm. He stepped back in and placed it on Mike's forehead. Hopefully that should warm him up a bit.

Mouse figured getting some of the snow off of Mike would also be a good idea. He picked the clumps of snow from Mike's coarse and rather fluffy hair. Hmmm. What else? Turn the heating up? Sure, why not. Mouse glanced around. There was no radiator so that idea was a bust. Damn it Mike, why did you have to die like this? Was it worth charging him too? Nah. Mike's charger was in his back, trouser pocket. If he woke up while Mouse was trying to get that, that would be very hard to explain.

Not to mention Mike would apparently have to open himself up for that and, presumably, take his shirt off. No thanks. Best to keep the shirt on and stay warm. Mouse took off his shoes and sat on the upper left side of the bed and pulled out his old cell phone. There was no wifi, dang. He could probably get wifi if he asked downstairs but he was too tired for that. He pulled out his own charger and unplugged a lamp on the nightstand. Screw you lamp, Mouse Fields takes priority. He plugged himself in and laid solemnly on the bed. What if it was too late? What if Mike never woke up? What if Mike was really dead forever? If so, was it okay to steal his wallet and pay for the hotel? He was dead right so the money would just stay there forever right? Mouse, you're disgusting. Whatever. Mouse closed his eyes. Maybe he could time skip through all of this.

Chapter 10 Or Smth

Mouse woke up and checked the time. 12:24pm. Noon. He checked over at Mike, still out. Damn it. Oh hey, the tea! He forgot about the tea! Oh well. He rested his legs on the bed, leaving them straight. He picked up the tea and drank it. It was cold and horrible, just like his miserable life. Mike was dead. Mike was dead and he was going to remain dead. Mike had been out for... How many hours now? He went to bed at roughly 8 to 9ish, Mike had been out for about half an hour before he went and found him again... That's about three and a half or four and a half hours by now. Tragic.

Mouse took another sip of his tea. It was sweet and yet bitter, miserable and yet humbling. Yeah, nah. This is disgusting. He got up and poured the rest of the tea down the bathroom sink. Mouse you failure, you can't even drink a cup of tea. The teabag plopped out and fell into the sink. You wasted a whole teabag you miserable failure. Think of the cow who was milked for that milk, the people who work under terrible conditions for that teabag and sugar. Disgusting. You're horrible. You're just as bad as the humans. Tears dripped down from his eyes and face and into the sink. It was just all so much. Mike was dead, Bill nearly found him, Mike was dead, he'd just wasted a whole cup of tea, Mike was dead- Stop it. Stop it. Just stop thinking about it. Purge your memory if you have to, play Tetris. You're a bot, bots don't cry. If you cry you're human. Tears ran down his cheeks and culminated at the bottom of his chin before dripping pointlessly into the sink. You're human, you're a stupid and over emotional human. You can't do anything to stop it. You've never seen your own code, how do you know you're you? You couldn't even save Mike. Mike's dead and it's all your fault. He's gone, even if he wakes up he won't remember you. What are the chances he even wakes up anyway? You killed him. Mike's dead and it's all your fault. He'll never see his cat again or move to a nice warm place to grow cool plants and it's all your fault. He died to help you and what are you doing? Throwing away your chances in a shoddy British hotel. He threw away his own life to make sure you were safe and happy and now look at you! You nearly got caught and now you're oh

so selfishly sad! You're selfish, you take what others give you and you grind it into the dirt. Mouse slumped to the floor and buried his face in his knees. Stop it. Just stop. You're human. You're human and you're weak and everyone hates you. Nobody liked you at Monstercat and nobody likes you now. Mike was just being polite, he didn't know he'd die. If he knew he'd die he wouldn't have dared even suggested coming to England. He died because you killed him. His blood is on your hands and now you have to live with that forever. And even if he was genuine, even if he DID like you, he's dead now. The one person who ever tolerated you- who ever liked you even- he's gone now. You're on your own, you have no protector.

Okay, that was fine. Mouse stood back up and wiped his face with a towel. He was much more at ease now. He glanced over at Mike. The flannel must be cold now. He reached over and grabbed it, running warm water to warm it up again. He lightly touched the water with his hand, making sure it was warm enough. He wetted the flannel and wrung it out again. He folded it back up and rested it on Mike's forehead. He looked much warmer now, colour had returned to his face. Wait. Why had colour returned to his face? Surely that would only happen if he had... Blood... Hang on, what? Mouse paced up and down the walk way, why DID Mike seem to lose colour when he died? Why did his skin seem to change colour depending on the temperature like a human's? Human skin did it because of blood flow, but Mike... Mike didn't have blood, right? That didn't make sense. If Mike had blood it would have dried up inside him a long time ago. Whatever. It made no sense. Nothing about Mike made sense. It was probably an Hytex quirk he chose to have to 'be more human' or whatever.

Mouse sat back down on the bed. Just give it one or two more hours. You have all the time in the world. Mike will wake up soon and everything will go back to normal. Everything will continue and pick up where it left off, Mouse and him would go to Hytex together and Mouse would finally be free. Heh, maybe he could ask Mike for vocal samples. His voice was nice and- Oh god what if he never heard it again. Stop thinking about that. Mike will wake up. He has to. Dear God, let him wake up. Mouse slid down the bed and rested his head on the pillow again. Part of him was tempted to go back to sleep but at the same time- What if Mike woke up now? He had to stay awake. Do it for Mike.

An hour ticked by.

And then another.

Six hours, it had definitely been six hours. In that six hours, Mouse had realised there was a TV in the room that hung from the ceiling. It only had a few channels, BBC1, BBC2 and Cbeebies which was mostly full of programmes for pre-school aged children. You can took a wild guess as to which one Mouse mostly watched for two hours straight. Anyway, what was important was he now knew that $2+4=6$ and that the Spanish word for 'I'm' was 'soy.' He glanced back at Mike, bored. He was still out. Damn it.

Okay, time to take issues into his own hands. He got up and walked round to Mike's side of the bed. He poked Mike's cheek, "Mike. Michael. Mick. Mickey. Mike." Nothing.

He poked harder, "Michael... Mike..."

Still nothing.

"Mike please."

Eerie silence.

"Mike, please. I don't know CPR. I don't even know if CPR would work on you."

Nothing.

Wait, was he alive. Not wanting to get closer to what was probably a corpse, Mouse took off the disks over his ears. His left ear twitched at the sudden noise. Everything sounded cleaner, crisper. His own oil roared in his ears, he could hear internal mechanical whirring but he had no way of telling if it was Mike or Mouse. Mouse held his own breath and listened for breaths.

Mike was breathing, at least. It sounded normal, relaxed, peaceful, regular, everything healthy breathing should sound like. Mouse gently put the disks back over his ears. Mike was breathing- He was working. Relief. So much relief. Mike was just asleep, it'll be fine. Come to think of it, Mike was looking even less dead than a few hours ago. Any 'deadness' was replaced with a look of 'peaceful sleeping.' Mike sure did sleep a lot.

But then the realisation hit Mouse. It hit him hard like a fifty mile per hour truck.

Would Mike even remember him? It had been six hours, right? Surely? Mike forgot things after six hours. Mike was alive, better wake him up before that happens.

Mouse poked Mike again, "Michael."

Mike's expression changed.

"Dammit Mike!" Mouse shook him.

"Okay- Okay- Geez," Mike sat up. He was alive. Mike was alive and okay and fine.

"Michael!!"

"Mouse!!"

"You remember!"

"Yeah I Remember! I Remember Dying!"

"So I don't need to do a recap?"

"Uhhh," Mike sat up, still puzzled. "Okay, So We Came From America, We Did A Plane Journey, We Got An Uber, Bill Found Us, I Keeled Over And Died And Now I'm Here?"

"Oh thank god, you still remember everything." Mouse rubbed his temples, "I was... I was so scared you wasn't going to wake up- I-" ah, here comes the crying again. Mike gave him a look of guilt, "Oh, Mouse... C'mere. It's Fine, You're Fine, We're Both Fine, Right?"

Mouse stepped closer and allowed himself to be embraced by Mike.

"Shh," Mike rubbed Mouse's back in a soothing manner, "We're Both Okay... We're Both Okay..."

Mouse was still trying not to cry, "Do- Do you want a cup of tea..?" He pulled away.

"Yes Please Actually. Or, If It's Not Too Much Trouble." The flannel finally fell off of Mike's forehead and into his lap. He seemed surprised but didn't bring it up. Mouse smiled at the moment and got the kettle going.

"God, you must be knackered."

"I Am Actually, I'm Still Low On Charge."

"Yeah... I was tempted to put you on charge but your charger was in your back pocket and I didn't wanna touch you or that location in case you woke up. That would be wrong."

Mike paused, "Pfff- You Gentleman! Thanks, But You Shouldn't Have To Worry About That- Or With me Anyway. (You're Right, Other People Would Maybe Get Mad So I Guess It's Good To Ask First.) It's Good You Think About That Kind Of Stuff Though, That's Very Polite."

"Heh... Thanks..." ah, how did Mike like his tea? It was it to or three sugars? Mouse put in two and a half. He liked milk too. He added milk to both teas and stirred them with the pre-given spoon. He handed the mug to Mike.

"Thanks A Bunch!"

Mouse sat on the bed with his back against the wall like Mike, "so how was dying?"

Mike blew on his tea to cool it down, "can I be completely honest with you, Mouse?"

"Go on?"

"There's Nothing After Death. Or, For Me Anyway. Could Be Different For Humans," he shrugged, "Robots Don't Go To Heaven or Hell, We Aren't Reincarnated. We Just... Cease To Exist. Code, Unlike The Human Conscious, Is A Physical Thing. If You Turn It Off, It's Turned Off And You Stop Thinking And Feeling. You Don't Feel Scared Or At Ease Or Any Of That, You're Just... Gone."

"Wow, good thing we'll both live forever then. Right, Mike?"

Mike bit his lip in thought, not wanting to look at Mouse. "...Yeah."

Mouse avoided eye contact. He got the message. Mike wanted to be human, he'd pick a human life span of about seventy years if he could. Mike would be human and die one day and Mouse would remain a robot, unchanging in youth and living forever in an unchanged state.

Mike shuffled and pulled his charger out of his back pocket. He shuffled one end up his shirt and plugged himself into an outlet in the wall. He took another sip of his tea, "What's The Time?"

Mouse checked, "3:34."

"Dang. Do You Wanna Go Now Or Tomorrow?"

"Might as well wait until tomorrow," Mouse shrugged.

"Yeah, We'll Be There For Less Total Time If We Go Tomorrow. Yanno, Cos They Can Start Earlier And Make The Most Of Their Work Day."

"True, true. Uhh, so about the bed problem?"

"There's Only One But It's Spacious."

"Yeah..."

"We Can Put A Pillow Between Us If You Want?"

"I don't mind."

"You Sure?"

"You only think it's weird because humans told you it's weird."

Mike shrugged, "I Guess You're Right." He averted his gaze slightly his right. Weird. There's literally just a wall there. Was Mike nervous? Had he ever slept in the same bed as someone else before?

“Besides,” Mouse continued, “if you really wanna put a pillow between us you can, you’re the one acting weird about it.”

“Nah, Nah. I Don’t Mind. You’re Right, It’s Weird, Human Learnt Behaviour. There’s Nothing Wrong With Sleeping In The Same Bed As Another Man.”

“Damn right” Mouse put the now empty mug on the night stand next to him. He didn’t need to charge. Mike did so he may as well sleep to timeskip, “now stop being homophobic.”

“Me? Homophobic..?” Mike seemed a little surprised, “I’d Never. Physically Impossible.”

“How come?”

“I Respect The Gays.”

“You are gay.”

“Bi, Actually. Get It Right!” Mike playfully hit Mouse with a pillow.

Mouse giggled, “okay, okay!”

Mike lead back down, more serious, “Yeah, Sorry.”

“What are you sorry for?”

“I Guess I Was Just Worried- I Guess.”

“Why?”

Mike thought for a second, quiet. “I Wasn’t Sure If I Should Tell You I Like Other Men Considering We Were Gonna Sleep In The Same Bed Together, And If I Did Whether You’d Think That Was Weird...”

“It’s not weird.” Mouse figured adding on ‘but it is weird that you like HUMAN men’ was probably inappropriate, “I’m cool with it.”

“Thanks.” Mike smiled, content with Mouse’s reaction.

Mike shuffled out of Mouse’s hoodie and chucked it over to the end of Mouse’s side of the bed. Reaching over, he turned off the lampshade on his side that was illuminating the room. “Goodnight Mouse.”

“Goodnight, Mike.”

Chapter 11

Mouse yawned and stretched under the sheets. Mike was already up and dressed by the counter less than a foot away tidying up.

“Morning, Sunshine!”

“Morning,” Mouse slid out of bed, the cold hitting his skin. Mouse picked his hoodie up off the end of the bed. Mike must have taken it off at some point while he was asleep. He slid it over himself.

“Sleep Well?”

Mouse checked his pockets for the eggs. They seemed intact and untouched despite the fact that Mike had most definitely put his hands in there, “Yeah, I’d say so.

Yesterday tired me out, aha.”

“True, True. You Ready To Go Or You Wanna Wake Up A Bit First?”

“Yeah, I can go now.” Mouse got up and put his shoes back on, “we leaving the suitcase here?”

“Obviously. We Can Come Back For It. How Many Days Did You Book?”

“Five days, 65 ‘quid’.” Mouse had no clue what ‘quid’ meant.

“Oh, That’s Pretty Decent Actually.” Mike picked up a scarf from the suitcase. He felt his hand to his plastic looking neck and put the scarf on. It must be hard to hate the thing that makes you superior. Mouse almost felt guilty for hating Mike’s need to look human. On one hand, he seemed to really struggle with it. But on the other hand, why not just ask to edit your code to get rid of that desire to look human? It was easier and probably cheaper too. Whatever.

“You Ready To Go?”

“Yeah.”

Mike unlocked the door and stepped out. Mouse followed and closed the door behind him, locking it. The two went downstairs.

The receptionist looked up at them, “alive today, are we?”

“Yeah, he’s alive today,” Mouse smiled.

“Yeah...” Mike rubbed the back of his neck, sheepish.

“Good to know, good to know,” the receptionist resumed reading the book in her hand.

The two men stepped outside. The snow was somewhat melted by now but still possibly hazard. The two walked at a brisk pace.

“Will you be okay?”

“I’ll Be Fine, If I Get Cold We Can Stop In A Café To Warm Up.”

Mike’s confidence put Mouse at ease. Mike would know his limits more than Mouse did, there was nothing to be scared of anymore.

The two hung on a silence. It wasn’t an awkward silence though. It felt right. Like they’d shared everything they possibly could have with each other. Every intimate detail about each other was shared yesterday, nothing was too weird or taboo anymore. Being around Mike just felt... right now. Would they remain friends after this was all over? Would they still keep in touch?

“Hey Mike?”

“Hm?”

“Are we... We’re gonna remain friends after all this, right?”

“Of Course, I’d Love To Keep In Touch!”

Mouse was at ease. He’d be able to keep one of the only people to care about him. Or, until mortality- No. Don’t think about that.

It wasn’t long until the two were at the gates of the Hytex warehouse. Everything in their journey had led up to this moment. They were finally here. Through all the hardship, tears, death even- They were finally here. It was almost dream like.

Mike pushed a button at the gate, “Mike Jone; I’m a bot. I’m early, sorry.”

After a few seconds passed until the gate opened. Mike walked in, Mouse following.

“Are you sure we’re allowed to come basically a whole week early?”

“Yeah, I Was The One Who Asked Them To Post Pone It A Week Actually.” Mike held the door open to the reception, “After You.”

“Thanks,” Mouse stepped in and waited for Mike to follow.

Mike stepped up to the receptionist desk, “Hi, I’m A Bot Here, I’m Here Early.”

“Ah, you must be Mike, right?”

“That’s Right.”

“Can I get your ID please?”

“Put ID Here.”

The woman behind the counter typed on a computer behind the desk. “OoooooKay! Just pop over to the waiting room to your right please and we’ll be with you in a second, alright?”

“Oh! One More Thing! My Friend Here Would Like To Switch Devs And Be A Bot Legally Owned By This Company.”

“Okay, I’ll send someone along. Both of you head to the waiting room, please.”

Mike nodded and walked to the left. He beckoned Mouse, “C’mon!”

Mouse followed, taking in his surroundings. Despite just being a warehouse, the hallways were rather cozy. Warm beige walls with white skirting boards, dot-lights every foot or so in the ceilings, doors parallel to each other every so often either side of the corridors. Eventually and seemingly through instinct, Mike opened one of them.

Inside, the walls were a remarkable dark green. There were a few odd bits of furniture, a coffee table, another help desk looking counter, a few bookshelves with some magazines and children’s books and those bead things you can slide along different plastic tubes you find screwed the to wall in doctors’ and dentists’ waiting-rooms. Aside from that, the room was barren. No windows, all light artificial. It smelled surgical like the inside of a hospital.

Mike sat down in one of the chairs, he seemed so relaxed about all of this, “Are You Nervous?”

“A bit,” Mouse sat down beside him, hands in lap.

“You’ll Be Fine. A Person Will Just Come In, Take You To A Room And Ask You A Few Questions.”

“Will they tell Bill?”

“I Don’t Know, Sorry Mouse.”

Mouse swallowed his fear down. Hopefully they wouldn’t, “Sooo... You excited to look human?”

“Oh, Very! I’ve Been Waiting To Get This Done For A While Now!”

Disappointment. Why would Mike purposefully throw away what made him superior? Guilt. Why can’t you just be glad for your friend, Mouse? Despair, you don’t deserve friends.

“That’s cool, Mike. I’m happy for you,” Mouse feared Mike knew he wasn’t being genuine. Could he tell? Would he be sad? Did that make him a bad friend? How can you be happy for someone when what they want is exactly what you’ve been fighting against?

“Thanks,” Mike picked up one of the magazines on the coffee table. It was held upside down. Ah, Mike just wanted to escape conversation, didn’t he? He wasn’t actually reading it. He probably didn’t even know how to read. Should he say something? Nah. Nah, best not disturb Mike. Mouse wouldn’t wanna talk to him either. God, all he ever did was put Mike down for wanting to look human, he was horrible. He was wicked to him. Horrible, absolutely horrible. Humans are bad. But... Mike wasn’t bad. Mouse had met nice humans before, Shy Kid, British Guy... Fruit Guy... Why did he care so much that Mike wanted to be human? That’s HIS choice, right? Stop being selfish, Mouse, you have literally no say in this. You don’t deserve a say in this. If Mike wants to look human, all power to him, right? Why do you feel so horrible? Say sorry. Say your sorry. Stop being scared, you need to. No, Mike’s probably forgotten you ever said that. No he wouldn’t, he probably remembered and took it to heart. Just... Stop. Stop thinking. Tetris time.

Mouse booted up Tetris, trying to forget. We don’t have time to cry and apologise. Maybe later. God, what would you even say? Mouse watched the Tetris blocks fall into each other perfectly, clearing line by line. He associated back into reality to check up on Mike: Yup, still pretending he can read.

A man walked into the room, “Hello?”

Mouse and Mike both poked their heads up to notice him.

“Ah, Mike’s friend. Can I see you for a second?”