

Chapter 1

Toal's fingers tap against the windowsill as rain pours around him and on the car, creating a pleasant sound that Toal rather enjoys. He closes his eyes and leans back further into the car seat, reaching for his last cigarette only to find that it is drenched and absolutely useless now. *"Well, this had been a horrible year,"* Toal thinks, sighing to himself. He had dropped out of university, and everyone knows a physics degree is useless unless it's a PhD, which was bad luck if you just want some money, something Toal desperately needed right now. Toal could probably score a minimum-wage job as some random McDonald's cashier but his criminal history did wonders on his chances to get a job just anywhere. Guess it's back to Chuck-e-Cheese.

The broken-down car engine rumbles, as Toal drives up to the Chuck E. Cheese next to the local university campus, passing by several cafes, people, and cars. Although he was broke and a dropout, he had a few connections, meaning he knew the manager of the building, Dani. Dani was likely the only staff member still in the building, as the Chuck-e-Cheese here is severely understaffed and only old people who wanted to relive their memories as a kid, pedos, or the occasional straggler would go here at this time and weather.

"Dani! It's nice to see you again," Toal says, approaching the greasy, black-haired rat who somehow became the manager of this crummy place (Toal wouldn't put it above Dani to lie and manipulate his way into becoming the top of the food chain here, as he would've done the same thing). The man was standing in front of the door as if expecting Toal to be here.

Dani turns around with a smirk on his face. “Ah, Toal, come back running here again? Let me guess, you blew it all on cheap whiskey and didn’t take my advice,” Dani says, twiddling the lining of his uniform as if he wanted to appear disinterested.

“Dani, you know me so well!” Toal grins as the two fall into strained, forced laughter. “I heard you got a boyfriend lately,” Toal smirks looking down at the slightly shorter man with glee in his eyes. Dani’s romantic escapades were always... dramatic, for lack of a better word, and it was fascinating to see the horrible outcomes of such relations, usually always horrible for the person facing Dani’s wrath.

Dani lets out a low chuckle, “I want you to guess who I got with this time.”

Toal had been waiting for his moment, and a large smile crossed his face as Dani looked at him like that. “Was it that strange guy you met at the bar?” Toal asks.

Dani nods but his grin grows wider. “Toal, did you know that the man is an A-list actor? Looks like you lost this time.”

For the first time in a while, Toal’s eyes widen and he looks at Dani surprised. “You mean you actually got someone famous to go out with you!?” Toal looks Dani up and down, taking in how greasy the other man was, how the other man’s hair was frazzled and dry, and how his nails were bitten to a stub. “What the hell? I mean sure I knew you had some of it inside of you, but just look at yourself. I wouldn’t believe you got with that hot guy even if he wasn’t an A-lister.”

“You’re not much to look at either,” Dani remarks dryly, scrunching his nose. “When have you last showered?” Toal grimaces when Dani brings out his haggard appearance. Toal was

still sure he could catch at least a couple of ladies, though, even if he didn't shower. After all, if Dani, a sewer-rat-like scum, somehow managed to get with someone famous, Toal could do so much better.

"You know that's why I'm here, so let's cut the bullcrap and just hire me already," Toal says, crossing his arms and dropping the silly expression on his face.

Dani ponders for a moment. "No. You still haven't paid me back after I won the last chess session. It doesn't matter if you're broke or not. I. Want. My. Money. Besides, you're obviously failing in the mental department now, since I've been on a 3-win streak against you."

Toal grits his teeth, biting back a rebuttal. Dani hated being argued with, and although Toal absolutely detested acting like this, it was better to be a kiss-ass than resorting to kissing others on the street. "Any way to make it up to you?" Toal knows this was a horrible question to ask Dani of all people, but the words just slipped out of his mouth. The man would probably ask him something crazy. Of course, as expected, Dani's face slips into a large malicious grin, an obvious indicator of one word: trouble.

Dani lets out a low laugh. "I want you to try and find a richer sugar daddy from the same crummy place where me and Nikolai met. If you don't find one in a month, I'll stop my chess games with you, since now I also have someone else to entertain me, meaning that there's no reason for me to hire you. But hey, I'm not a complete monster so I'll let you get the job if you even take up the debt."

This was usually the worst part of Dani getting a partner. Dani would have someone else to entertain himself with, so he'd sometimes threaten their chess games. Toal knew Dani would

always return after he broke up with whoever was dating him, but Toal had too much pride to lose this one against Dani. “Why not a girlfriend? I’m straight.”

“Exactly! Because you’re straight, I made it harder for you by making you look for a boyfriend. Since there are fewer gay people than straight people, it’ll make it even harder for you to find someone richer than Nikolai!” Dani announces, smiling ear to ear in a terrifying manner as if the man was some kind of Lovecraftian monster.

Toal pauses for a moment, thinking of his options. In all honesty, he found the bet ridiculous and if the choices were even the slightest bit different, he would’ve declined, pride or not, but if he accepted, he’d get good money either way. Besides that, he knows while Dani is a cheater, liar, and scammer, he’s fair in the world of mind games, claiming doing so would be too tedious, meaning that Dani wouldn’t have made this bet for a random reason. Dani likely knew something that made this bet a fair option, something that Toal knows Dani always checks for before making bets. Even if he didn’t win, if he took Dani up on the debt, then he would still get a more or less stable job, and Dani would come back running for their chess games in a month or two.

Toal starts grinning too. “You’re on.”

Dani lets out a mocking laugh. “How about a toast then? To the bet?” he asks. Dani pulls out his signature water bottle that was always full of vodka, shaking it. “I always carry this around, just in case.”

Toal makes a disgusted face at that. “You’re weird. No wonder you reek of alcohol wherever you go.”

Dani only smirks. “And you act like you don't hang with me for exactly that reason.”

“You’re right,” Toal chuckles, taking the paper cup that Dani had filled with presumably vodka. He swirls it around, eying it. Toal wouldn’t put it above Dani to sneak in either rat poison or laxatives into the drink to fuck with him. “You sure this isn’t poison?”

“I’m drinking with you,” the man says, his smile even more terrifying than before. “Besides, even though I am particularly excited to see your downfall, I would rather keep myself intact.”

And with that, the two men raise the cups of vodka, not in proper glass cups or in a bar, but in paper cups and in a worn-down Chuck-E-Cheese.

“To Chuck E. Cheese,” both of them cheer as they press their paper cups together.