

Friday, October seventh, 2030, 6:00 A.M.

As the clock struck six, the loud, incessant beeping blared from beneath Zoey's bed. Groaning, she covered her ears with a pillow, trying to block out the noise. After a few minutes of rolling around, she finally mustered the energy to sit up. Rubbing her eyes, she looked around her dim apartment, the only light coming from the gap in her curtains. She stretched, getting up and out of bed fully, only to bend back down to shut off her alarm.

Still adjusting to being awake, Zoey grabbed the almost-empty pitcher of coffee and poured it into a travel mug. After adding creamer, she walked over to swing the curtains open, revealing a grey sky with small droplets of rain pattering against her window. *As usual*, she thought, sighing as she took a sip of her coffee. The stale, bitter liquid stung on her throat, but she was far too tired to care.

After tossing on a shirt of some grunge band she barely knew and some ripped jeans, Zoey headed out the door, opening her umbrella as she walked out the main exit. As she rounded the corner, she ran a hand through her fur, trying to comb the ragged curls to look presentable enough for work. Taking the key around her lanyard, she unlocked the back door, pushing past some boxes to grab the broom before entering the shop proper.

After switching on some lights and turning on the coffee makers, Zoey began to sweep the floors, cleaning up the crumbs and wrappers the night shift had “forgotten” to clean up. Gods, she hated those guys. As she

ran her broom along the edges of the walls to sweep up the last of the crumbs, she spotted a small group of micros huddled around a makeshift fire made from paper scraps and a match. They were all mostly frozen, with a few slowly reaching to pick up whatever they were carrying in their bags. *jeez, Jan's gonna kill me if the health inspector finds these guys around,* she said, before swatting down on the group. The tinies instantly scattered to who-knows-where, except for one that was caught beneath her broom. She reached down, picking the vermin up with two of her claws before walking over to the front door and dumping them off at the curb.

Shaking her paw, Zoey made an audible “eugh” noise before going to wash her claws in the bathroom sink. *Isn't it management's job to make sure micro holes are patched up?* She thought, drying her hands on the cheap paper towel next to the sink. *If Jan blames this on me again, I swear to god I'll quit.* Even with her making the threat in her head, she knew she couldn't. This was the only job close enough that was willing to take her and had enough insurance to pay her bills.

Sitting down at her desk, Zoey sighed and pulled out the cash register from the locked cabinet. As usual, there was some weird or creepy note left by the late shift cashier for her. She crumpled it up, not even bothering to look at it. She knew it would always be the same thing, complimenting her body in a weird way, and begging her to go out on a date with him, usually with his phone number or a gross picture of him attached. She had *tried* to explain to this idiot the very simple concept of being a lesbian, but he didn't seem to grasp the concept.

Even as more light started to flow through the barred windows of the store, Zoey could feel herself drifting off. She debated refilling her mug at the store's coffee pot, but quickly decided against it. The coffee was far too expensive, and Jan watched the coffee like a hawk, counting every cent.

Zoey could feel her eyelids getting heavy, the weight of her exhaustion pressing down on them. She was just about to let them close, when the door swung open. It was the usual first customer on days like this. *June, was her name, I think?* She was a tall alligator, who was a bit on the heavier side, usually carrying a backpack or some odd protest sign. She was always into rioting, for some reason, and always found a reason to complain or blame "The System" for something.

But this time it was different.

For one, she seemed *livid*. Zoey had never seen her this angry. And for two, she was holding a micro. Upon closer inspection, Zoey noticed that it was the same micro she had shooed out just a few minutes earlier.

Suddenly, June spoke, sounding just as angry as she looked.

*"What were you doing, kicking this poor thing out into the cold!!? He could've frozen!!!"* In her exhausted state, it took a while for Zoey to realize who the Gator was talking about, leaving the 3 (2? 3.) people in the store in an awkward silence, until June cleared her throat, and Zoey remembered that it was her turn to talk.

“Oh. Ohhh. Uh.... Not my problem?” Zoey shrugged, her face still buried in her hands. That answer didn't seem to calm June down at all, if anything, it made her more upset. “*It is entirely your problem!! You could've just let him go!*”

Suddenly, Zoey felt alert. Alert, and very, very annoyed. “Oh, *sure!* I'll just let the pest run rampant around my store! And *then*, after I let the micros take over, Jan'll come in with the health inspector, and I'll get fired, and then I'll be the one on the street! Do you really care more about a pest than your fellow person!?!”

June was silent after that. The micro held in her palm just seemed more confused and scared than anything, and Zoey doubted it could even understand them anyway.

After a moment, Zoey sighed again, rubbing her face. “Now, unless you're going to buy something, can you *please* leave? And take the pest with you.”

Friday, October seventh, 2030. 7:30 A.M

As with every day, Esme woke up with a sore back and a massive headache. Ever since she left the restaurant, Esme's sleep had been plagued with nightmares. Every sleep was fitful, and one time she almost rolled off her bed and onto her needle. She started sleeping in the matchbox ever since then.

As she sat up, she immediately began to shiver. She cursed herself for going out and losing her warmest cloak last night. Tossing on some extra layers and a pair of gloves, Esme peeked out from her hideout, trying to gauge the time.

The sun was barely up, but the convenience store across from her was fully open. That meant it was around 8:00, or, in her terms, prime scavenging time. Very few of her fellow micros were out at this hour, and the giants above dropped plenty while on their way to work. Last week she scored half a bagel that had barely missed a trashcan! She probably could've made that last her till Friday, but she hadn't gotten much that week before, and she was starving. But now, she was paying the price.

Sticking close to the wall, she slipped out onto the sidewalk, where a cacophony of noise awaited her, a stark contrast from the peace and quiet of her "castle." It wasn't really anything special, she just liked to make herself feel like she was important. And mom used to call her "Princess," so she deserved a living space fit for one! *Right*, she thought as she scampered towards the open doors of the cafe on the corner. *as if*

*someone like me gets a castle... the most i'd get would be one of those mockup houses with the running water.*

She pushed her wishful thinking to the side as she scanned her surroundings. She would never come here normally, but she'd made it almost a month on her own! She was warranted a treat or two, courtesy of herself.

Esme glanced around the busy café, trying to locate the best spot to hide. Her eyes darted from table to counter to booth, until she spotted it. A crack in the siding of one of the cushioned chairs, perfectly sized for her to slip into. It was just what she needed! After checking that no one was looking, she darted over to the chair and squeezed inside.

Inside, it took her eyes a moment to adjust to the dim light. In side were several crumbs, some cobwebs, and a... bed? She froze. Why didn't she think that someone was staying here already!? She thought about waiting to apologize, or to just run, but she knew that wasn't how things worked. If she left empty-pawed, she would lose over half of her scavenging hours. After a moment, she had made up her mind.

Looking around the den again, she spotted several small stockpiles of crumbs, as well as an entire slice of some kind of cake! She was shocked. *Maybe I should move to live down here... Now, this guy won't mind if I just... take half? Sharing is caring, right?*

After using her razor-blade to (about) evenly divide the slice, Esme crumbled up as much of her piece as she could into her bag, before heating the rest over her shoulder. The stale frosting stained her overcoat, but it was a small price to pay for such a great haul. She squeezed back out of the hideout, and was about to jet, when suddenly-

“Hey! What are you doing with my loot?!”

An unfamiliar voice came from her left, and she whipped around to see a fellow scavenger. He looked to be about a few years older than Esme, and a whole head taller. But most importantly, he looked *pissed*. She stared at him for a moment, waiting for him to make the first move. Instead, he shouted again.

“Well?!”

She glared at him, already done with this guy. “Isn't it obvious?”

“You can't just steal my stuff and leave!”

Esme sighed, not wanting to converse any longer. She turned to leave, when suddenly-

*THUNK*. A large bag of... something... hit her in the side, making her stumble and fall. Looking back at the older man, she could see him holding another bag and spinning it like a morning-star.

Esme groaned, clutching her side. “Nngh.... What the hell, man!?” She stumbled to her feet, setting down the piece of cake and readying her needle.

“Yeah! Now get outta here! This is my Café!” He yelled back, before moving closer. Esme groaned again. Every time she spoke, or even breathed, her chest ached. “What are you talking about? I'm not working with you, so it's every person for themselves!”

The man didn't respond, instead hurling another sac at her head, which she thankfully was able to dodge.

“Dude, can you stop?!” she began to hurry away from him, not caring about where she was going, just attempting to put distance between her and her attacker. She didn't look back, not even when another random object was hurled at her head. She didn't look back until the angry shouts had been abruptly cut off. Cut off with a particularly loud *THUD* of a giant's foot behind her.

That's when Esme froze. She stared up, following the path of the boot that had so easily taken out her enemy and followed it until it, and its wearer, sat down at a booth in the corner. She looked around, half hoping that the man was somehow, someway, still alive. She watched for any signs of life, of movement, from the place where he was crushed, but got nothing.

Quickly, Esme hurried out of the building, barely noticing the ache in her ribs anymore. She stared down at the hunk of cake she had grabbed, and at the rest of it stuffed into her bag.

She suddenly wasn't feeling very hungry.

