

Chapter 16 - A Painful Lesson

As Sonia fishes out her textbooks and worksheets from her backpack, you slide out of your seat and kneel next to the coffee table in order to get a better vantage point.

The pink hedgehog then places her math book down on the table, having decided the first course she'd like to tackle.

"Math, huh?", you query. "Anything in particular you have trouble with?"
"Ugh, just EVERYTHING", groans the bologna-colored critter. "NUMBERS. EUGH."
"That's fair, it's pretty far from my favorite course", you respond, chuckling sensibly. "Well, let's just jump right in, shall we?"
Sonia makes a disappointed grunt as she opens the dreaded tome to the assigned page.
"Don't worry too much, it's really not that hard once you get going", you reassure your colleague.
Aleena simply watches your tutelage from the corner of her eye.

After a few moments of Sonia staring blankly at her textbook, you start to grow concerned.
Is she really having trouble with the first problem? It's simple addition. There's no way she'd be struggling right now...right?
"Ssssomething up?", you hesitantly ponder aloud. You're trying not to insult your friend's intelligence, but it's clear that the cogs in her head aren't in motion right now.
Sonia merely adjusts her empty stare in your direction, clearly unsure of what to do next.
"Okay", you speak, "Let's just...start with the first problem. Uhm, four plus seven equals...?", you ask, trailing off, expecting an answer.
Instead, you merely get the same blank stare as before.

"Sonia, you, uh...you do know how to COUNT, yes?", you apprehensively quiz the poor ditz. There really is no way to approach this gingerly.
"Umm...like that vampire guy, right?", she asks in return.
Oh, lord, please send help.
No, wait, hang on, maybe she means The Count from Sesame Street, there's still some hope here.

Seriously, how the FUCK have our public schools fallen so far that a girl in fucking HIGH SCHOOL DOESN'T KNOW HOW TO COUNT?
As you struggle to think of a way to tackle this unbelievable hurdle before you, you hear loud, wet smacking of lips, like a hog chewing on some sort of bones.
You look up to see Sonia has produced one of those massive sharing-sized bags of Wild Berry Skittles and is currently munching down on a fistful of them.
"Where the hell did you get those skittles?", you ask, even more confused now than before.
Sonia simply shrugs with a thoughtless "iunno".

Though the inexplicable appearance of the snack sack was perplexing, it did offer you an idea on how to amend your current situation.
"How 'bout we play a little game to help you study, Sonia?", you pose to your academically challenged friend.
"Is this like the games Manic tried making me play after he binge-watched the Saw movies?", Sonia queried in response. "'cuz I don't wanna play those ever again"
...Just what the fuck is wrong with this family?

"No, it's nothing like that, I promise", you tell Sonia, "just give me a handful of skittles and we can start."
She eyes you pensively for a moment before finally shoveling a fistful of candy out and handing it to you. In a single motion, you flip your hand filled with skittles over onto an empty spot on the table and spread them out evenly.
You then begin to make some room in the center of the pile until it's almost a perfect circle. Sonia cocks her head and raises one of her eyebrows as she watches this spectacle.
"I think your biggest problem is you can't visualize the math problems", you begin to explain to your colleague. "This little exercise will help with that"
"I'll lay out the skittles like each of the math problems, and all you have to do is count the ones in this area here", you continue to elucidate, pointing at the empty circle you made on the table.
"If you get it right, you can eat the skittles we used for the math problem after you write down the answer", you say, ending your explanation.
Sonia has become completely enthralled.
"You think you can handle that?", you ask the rosy hedgehog. Sonia earnestly nods. Aleena glances over at you before returning to flipping through TV channels.

"Okay, let's begin", you say as you begin moving several skittles towards the center area. "Four...plus seven..."
You slide two distinct groups of the candies in the designated spot, each group totaling their respective integers. "Alright, what does four plus seven equal, Sonia?", you quiz expectantly.
Sonia squints at the bundle of skittles for some time, tapping her finger on her chin, deeply lost in thought. You really don't know how to make this easier for her without just telling her the answers.
Finally, after a minute or so, Sonia's eyes snap open, and she gasps slightly. "Anon, I just figured something out!", she exclaims.
"Y...Yeah?", you ask, wondering what her discovery was.

"Wild Berry Skittles are all the same colors as my family and friends!", she announces. Her declaration befuddles you, considering you were expecting something related to math.

"Look! Pink, blue, green, like me, Sonic and Manic!", she prattles, pointing at each color she lists. "There's even purple ones like you, Momma!", she excitedly shouts as she turns to her mother.

"Yeah, great, whatever", Aleena flatly replies, clearly not interested in whatever we're doing currently, instead devoting her attention to the countless TV channels she keeps flipping through.

"OMG, There's even red ones like Knuckles!", the pink dolt continues. She then gasps in shock once more. "And Tropical Skittles have cyan, yellow and orange skittles! Just like Uncle Chuck, Bartleby, and Mindy!"

Sonia continues to ramble on about the various kinds of skittles and how they're all colored similarly to people she knows. This clearly isn't going to stop without some input from you.

"Sonia!", you shout, grabbing her attention. "Can we PLEASE focus on the task at hand?", you ask, somewhat annoyed. Sonia pouts in response, but returns her attention to your makeshift diorama.

You exasperatedly sigh and reiterate the problem, hoping she can actually focus this time.

By some miracle, Sonia slowly starts counting with her fingers. "1...2...3...", she mumbles.

This would be so much more frustrating if this girl weren't so adorable.

"Umm...eleven?", she finally answers, having finally finished her tally.

"YES!", you excitedly praise. "Write that down, quick!", you order, causing the pink dummy to scramble around for her pencil before hastily scribbling down '11' on her worksheet.

"Alright, great job, Sonia!", you continue commending. "Go ahead, you've earned them", you then say, presenting the sweet candies to your associate.

Sonia quickly snatches up her prize and gobbles them down with an unexpected fervor. Her open-mouthed way of chewing, combined with her empty-headed stare makes you slightly uncomfortable. Like you were looking at a cow chewing cud.

Ignoring your discomfort, after she swallows, you continue the lesson, and the game along with it.

"Alright, next up, multiplication: two times three", you state.

"Multiplication? Don't you mean 'timesing'?", Sonia asks, puzzled.

Oh this girl is SO fucking dumb.

"Uh, that's the scientific term for 'timesing'", you explain, causing Sonia to go "OOOOOOHHHHHH" in response.

Yeah, it's a cheap hit of dopamine, but dammit, it's nice being the smartest guy in the room for once.

"How does Mm...muttlipulcation work again?", Sonia asks, clearly struggling to pronounce the proper term.

"MULL-TI-PLI-CAY-SHUN", you enunciate, "is basically taking the first number, and then making as many sets of THAT number as the second number", you attempt to explain.

Sonia is still clearly lost.

"Okay, for example, two times three", you plow right along, hoping the example will shed some light on the confusing concept.

You shuffle some more candy around to get the number you need to elucidate this problem effectively. Sliding three clearly defined sets of two into the arena, you continue your lesson.

"That's TWO", you proclaim as you place two of your fingers on the corresponding amount of skittles, "THREE times over", slowly hopping your fingers along the amount of columns you've created.

"Got it?", you ask. Sonia nods, utterly captivated by your tutorial.

"Alright, how many skittles do we have now?", you quiz. Sonia once again glances back and forth between her fingers and the candies several times before hesitantly replying "...six?".

You applaud her once again, causing her to blush with a meek smile spreading across her face. After scrawling down her answer, she grabs her prize and wolfs down the lot.

"Okay, a subtraction problem next", your lesson goes on. Once again, you move more skittles from the pile laid out into the empty lot.

"Five minus three", you state, as you slide five skittles into a row. This one's super easy.

"You got five here, now all you got to do is just take three away", you instruct.

As you slide three of the skittles away, Sonia begins loudly wailing, her face painfully contorted to show a horrible sadness. This display completely catches you off-guard.

"W-why is she crying?!", you frantically ask Aleena, whose attention has turned to her loudly whining daughter.

"ANON TOOK AWAY MY SKITTLES!!!", cries Sonia, wiping away the tears streaming down her face.

"ANON. GIVE HER BACK HER SKITTLES.", sternly orders Aleena.

"W-we were just playing a game, I didn't ACTUALLY take her skittles away!", you stammer out, still confused at how the mood suddenly shifted.

"I'm getting the gun", warns Aleena as she rises to her feet.

"No! NONONO, WAIT", you shout in a panic, waving your hands before quickly trying to get Sonia's attention again.

"S-Sonia, LISTEN to me", you hurriedly order the sobbing pink daughter, clutching her shoulders. "I'll give you your skittles back, okay?"

"You...y-you promise?", whimpers Sonia through sniffles and sobs. Aleena, still at the edge of the couch, watches with her signature cold stare.

"Yeah, I promise", you reply, nodding frantically. "I just want to keep playing our game, alright? W-we were having fun just a few seconds ago, right?", you ask, trying to defuse the situation.

Sonia feebly nods, her eyes bloodshot from the tears. She's obviously still upset, but she's at least trying to hear you out. You chuckle nervously, having made some progress.

Alright, time to think, FAST. She gets upset if you take away her skittles. But, subtraction is literally the act of taking shit away. How do you demonstrate subtraction to her without taking her stuff away?

"...Okay, here's an idea", you offer after some thought. "What if, every time we do a subtraction problem, YOU subtract the skittles instead of me? That way, I don't take them away from you, and you still learn stuff. It's a win-win!"

You can almost see the lightbulb come on in Sonia's head when she realizes your solution makes sense. Aleena, seeing the situation has been resolved, returns to her seat, albeit still glaring suspiciously at you.

"Okay", you sigh in relief, "five minus three. Sonia, please take three skittles away", you instruct, motioning towards the candies upon the table.

Eating the skittles one-by-one, Sonia follows your order. You have to stop her before she eats too many out of habit, which causes her some minor distress.

"How many do we have left?", you remind the Hedgehog acolyte.

"Um...two?", Sonia whimpers hesitantly.

You heavily sigh in relief. "Great job, Sonia, now write that down", you tell her. Sonia does as you say and munches the remaining candies immediately afterwards. Her demeanor has returned to her usual bubbly self.

The lesson goes on in this fashion for quite some time, making sure that for subtraction problems, Sonia takes control of the skittles. Eventually, every single problem is completed.

As you and Sonia are ready to begin her next lesson, however, the grandfather clock rings out from the waiting room, heralding the arrival of 4 PM.

Aleena immediately gets up out of her seat at the sound.

"Alright, 4PM, my obligation to help you has run out, time to go, Anon", Aleena quickly announces. Sonia whines in disappointment.

END CHAPTER 16

Chapter 17 - The Deal

You clumsily stagger to your feet, having sat seiza-style for somewhere around three hours without adjusting. Not the smartest move, considering you only just recovered your ambulatory abilities.

Fortunately, the tingling emanating from your legs does subside rather quickly, so no more limping about like a newborn calf for a day and a half for you.

Aleena marches towards the front door and grabs the fuzzy black coat off the nearby rack. The same one from which Chuck fished out her car keys earlier today.

As you're about to grab your textbooks, Sonia stands up and pulls out her cell phone.

"Hey, Anon, can I get your phone number before you go?", your rose-colored friend asks, wiggling her phone slightly.

Yet another first for today. You've never given a girl your number. You struggle to remember your own phone number, seeing as you hardly ever give it out, but after a quick search, you tell it to her, which she earnestly punches into her contacts list.

She then gives you a call in order to give you her number. A surprisingly clever trick you would never have thought up.

Wait.
WHAT WAS YOUR RINGTONE AGAIN

By some divine miracle, your phone was set on vibrate, sparing you from a horribly embarrassing moment in front of your friend. Explaining which Anime OP that song is from to a normie like Sonia would cause you to die from shame.

You quickly hang up Sonia's call and start to enter her contact info. "Hey, don't you screen me!", Sonia jokes, before breaking out into giggles. You smirk in response.

Wow. Including your parents, you now have THREE contacts on your phone. Look at you, Mr. Social Butterfly.

You slide your phone back into your pocket and kneel down to collect your books once more.

As you reach for them, Sonia assaults you with an unexpected hug, wrapping her arms around your neck and bringing you in for a deep embrace. She smells slightly of Strawberry shampoo and skittles.

Instinctively, your arms stretch outward as far as they can go to avoid touching any part of her body.

"Thanks for everything today, Anon!", Sonia chirps in appreciation. You barely register what she's saying, however, because in your brain, all you're thinking right now is

GIRL HUG GIRL HUG WHAT DO

You glance backwards towards Aleena, seeing if she's about ready to kill you if you so much as place one finger on her daughter. However, she simply motions her head as if to say 'go on, then'.

You hesitantly begin to fold your arms around Sonia's back, repeatedly looking back to watch Aleena's reaction. When it's clear that she's not going to do anything over a simple hug, you finally return Sonia's embrace, though much more anxiously.

"H-haha, Y-yeah, no problem, Sonia", you nervously chuckle, patting her gently on her back.

"Mm, yeah, that's nice", Aleena softly mutters. "Now squeeze her ass"

"What?", you query as you look back once more, befuddled by what you heard.

"I said, 'I'll drive you back home'", Aleena replies, obviously lying. She then twirls her car keys around her finger. You really weren't sure how to tackle that, so you simply accept it with a blank "Oh, Okay, thanks"

Sonia finally relaxes her grip and lets you get your books. "I'll see you tomorrow on the school bus, Anon!", the rose-colored maiden declares, beaming her signature smile at you.

You attempt to match her smile, but your self-consciousness regarding the way your grin looks holds you back somewhat. "Looking forward to it!", you cheerily reply as you head for the front door.

Aleena begins to lead you towards her SUV and Sonia eagerly waves you off. You'd wave back, but your arms are full, so you simply nod to her instead.

As you approach the vehicle, you notice several bullet holes running up and down its side. Some part of you feels ashamed that this damage happened while you were driving just a few hours ago.

"What're you waiting for, Anon?", Aleena questions, snapping you out of your guilt-ridden trance. "Hop in."

You awkwardly clamber into the automobile before sitting down with your books on your lap, slamming the door behind you. Some glass left in the shattered passenger-side window falls down onto the pavement.

After adjusting her seat and mirrors, Aleena turns over the steel beast's engine and begins backing out of the driveway. You glance back at the house and spot Manic waving you off from the bedroom window.

You wave earnestly back at your friends as Aleena pilots the SUV down the street, eventually causing the Hedgehog family home to disappear from your line of sight.

As insane as everything that's gone on in that house has been, you can't help but feel wistful after leaving the place. It's a strange feeling, honestly.

"So, where are you headed?", asked the matron/chauffeur, returning you once again to reality. You forgot to tell Aleena your destination, dumbass.

"Uhh, 25th and Maple, please", you politely request. Aleena responds with a simple "Hm" before returning her eyes to the road.

The cool Autumn wind seeps through the broken windows and brushes past your hair as the vehicle speeds along towards your address.

After driving for a few minutes, you come to a stop at an intersection in the middle of some unfamiliar suburban area.

"Alright, we're here, get out", announces Aleena. One look at the surroundings contradicts her declaration, however. You had no clue where you were, but it certainly wasn't home.

"Umm, Ms. Hedgehog?", you hesitantly ask, "I said I live on the corner of 25th and Maple, this isn't right", you then tell her.

"I know. You're walking the rest of the way", the purple queen tells you. "Whuh-WHAT?! WHY?!", you shout in response, confused.

"Take a look behind you, Anon", Aleena orders. You turn your head around and see nothing of note. Just another row of identical suburban homes.

"I don't see anything, Ms. Hedgehog", you say to your former chauffeur.

"Really? There should be a WINDOW there", Aleena responds, annoyed.

Oh.

"Did you ever stop to think about how you're going to pay me back for damaging my car?", quizzes the purple matriarch.

"It only got this way because Chuck got us in trouble!", you justify. "Make HIM pay for it, it's his fault!"

"If I confront Charles about this, the only thing I'm gonna get is a beatdown", Aleena ripostes. "Besides, he doesn't have a job, getting money from him's like getting blood from a stone"

"I'm not exactly rolling in money, either, ma'am", you retort. "How much would you even need to fix all this?"

"Last time Charles pulled some shit like this, it cost me about three thousand dollars", she proclaims.

Oh, fuck. That's a LOT of money. You only get about fifty bucks every two weeks for your allowance. You start doing the math in your head.

"Ms. Hedgehog, with all due respect, I don't think I'm gonna be able to pay you back within a year", you begin to explain.

"I get fifty dollars in allowance every two weeks. That's a hundred bucks a month", you continue. "Even if I paid you every single cent I get, that's only twelve hundred dollars"

"I could just send the bill to your parents", Aleena offers. "NO, ABSOLUTELY NOT", you frantically protest. "They do NOT need to know about this shit!"

"Then I guess you're getting a job", states the violet Mobian mother.

"Ms. Hedgehog, I'm underaged, I'm new in town, and I have zero connections", you respond bluntly. "NO place is going to hire me."

"Then how about working for me?", offers Aleena. "I have a house that has far too many chores for me to do by myself"

That's...an idea. It's better than nothing, at least.

"After I get the bill when the car is fixed, I'm going to write down the total in a little notebook and let you know exactly how much it is", Aleena starts explaining.

"Then, every Sunday, you're gonna come to my house and do whatever I tell you to do", she continues. "After completing a task, I'll assign a dollar amount to it and shave it off your debt"

"So I'm a debt slave, then", you put succinctly. "Welcome to the club", Aleena replies sardonically.

You let out a disappointed groan as you weigh your options. At least you would weigh them if you had more than one.

"I could just convince my kids never to speak with you again", suggests Aleena once more. You shoot her an indignant look.

"You wouldn't", you attempt to call her bluff.

"Wouldn't be hard. I'd just say you tried to rape me on the way to your home", she goes on. "After all, who are they gonna believe: their

beloved mother, or the guy they met just yesterday?"
That BITCH! How the hell can she be so cruel?! You only just accepted the Hedgehogs as friends, and now she's threatening to rip them away?!

Defeated, you unbuckle your seat belt and pop open the car door.
"...I'll see you Sunday", you mutter, climbing out of her SUV with your books.
"Good call, Anon", the purple tyrant cheekily replies. You slam the open door shut and more glass falls from the window well.
"Have a nice walk!", Aleena cheers as she waves before peeling out down the street and around a nearby corner.

...Where the fuck were you even at? You look around and spot the nearest street signs at a corner. They read "W. 4th St." and "Steubens Drive".
Well, that's no fucking help. You whip out your phone once more and open up the map application, punching in your address as your destination.
You notice that your phone is at about 6% charge. You haven't charged it once since yesterday morning. Great.

Unbeknownst to you, a shadow peers down at you from a nearby abode, watching your every move.

"It appears the Sonic Underground have recruited a new member in their ranks", states the shadowy figure to himself.
"What's that, your Roundness?", queries another, thinner shadow coming up behind him. "Who's that guy?"
"I'm not certain, but we're going to find out soon", responds the enigmatic leader. "Queen Aleena just dropped that guy off in front of our house"
"Wait, Queen Aleena actually gave him a ride?", replies the lesser being, surprised. "She just flips me the bird whenever I ask for a lift"
"Exactly", the shady onlooker states, "She obviously has hired this new guy to kill us or some shit"

As the two figures converse, the lights in the room they stand suddenly come on. Next to the light switch is a third, muscle-bound creature with a dog-like face.
"Dr. Robotnik, why are the lights off in here?", asks the massive meathead. "Were you listening to Linkin Park again and thinking about killing yourself, like Chester Bennington?"
"God damn it Dingo", Dr. Robotnik frustratedly cries, "I was trying to be menacing and imposing in here and now you ruined it!"
"But why? It's just us in here", responds Dingo, confused.

"Never mind", Robotnik grumbles. "Just take a look at that bitch out there"
"Oh, goody! A new friend has come to our neighborhood!", exclaims the canine chowderhead. "Should I go suck his balls?"
"Ding-face, why is sucking balls your go-to for meeting new people?", the now-visible thinner figure irritatedly queries.
This one also has a canine face, but more closely resembles a wolf, compared to Dingo, who's closer to a pitbull or something.
"I'm sorry, Sleet, I just got so excited", Dingo replies morosely. "Should I make him a pie or some shit instead?"

"ENOUGH, BITCHES!", shouts the pudgy Doctor. "Obviously as a new recruit of the Sonic Underground, this faggot will have access to all sorts of secrets and information on our eternal enemies!"
"So, should we just run out there and grab him or something?", asks Sleet.
"Too plain!", shoots down the dumpy dictator. "Give me two or three weeks and I'll have the most awesome plan to capture that fool, and make him our bitch!"
The EVIL Dr. Robotnik's EVIL laughter echoes loudly from his house.

You glance up from your phone's directions, thinking you heard something.
...Eh, it's probably not related to you.

END CHAPTER 17

Chapter 18 - Back To Normal

You spend the next forty-five minutes trudging across the suburban neighborhoods with your hands weighed down by several textbooks. Not exactly the highlight of your day.
However, after what felt like an eternity of marching across the repetitive suburban hellscape, FINALLY, you spot your familiar abode.

2502 Maple Street.
You wish you had the words to describe what made your house so unique from the rest. Mostly, it's those little numbers firmly plastered next to the front door.
Otherwise, it's exactly the same as the countless other McMansions lining the last few blocks.

As you advance towards your homestead, you realize that neither of your parent's vehicles are parked out front anywhere.
Well, it's not quite 5 PM yet, maybe they're still at work or something. That's why it's sometimes called a '9-to-5', right?
Well, whatever. You approach the front door of your house and set your heavy textbooks down besides you on the stoop. You stretch and rotate your sore wrists before fishing in your front pocket for your house keys.
After retrieving your keys, you unlock both the handle and deadbolt and open the door. The house is almost unsettlingly dark, as if no one's been here once since you left for school two days ago.

You grab your stack of textbooks and enter the home, shutting the door behind you with your foot, and flipping a nearby switch with your shoulder, filling the room with light.

The interior of your house is pretty bog-standard, just like the exterior.

You currently stand in the living room, which expands further to your left. Beige fabric couch, coffee table, TV resting on top of a wooden entertainment center, whatever.

There's a nearby stairwell leading to the second floor, where all the bedrooms are located.

To your right is the dining room. A large wooden table takes up the majority of space here, with surprisingly elegant wooden chairs lining the sides. Apparently, that tableset was inherited from your grandma after she passed.

Further in the house past the dining room was the kitchen. A large, gray marble countertop lines the back wall, housing a chrome sink and black electric stove. A silvery fridge sits near the right corner.

A sliding glass door with drawn shades is placed in the center of the right wall of the kitchen, leading outside to the back yard.

To the left of the kitchen are two doors, the left leading to the basement, and the right leading to the downstairs bathroom.

In the center of the kitchen is an island with a similarly colored countertop to the one along the back wall.

You wonder exactly why you're describing your environment to yourself, especially since you've been living here for over a week now.

You place your books on the nearby coffee table and head to the kitchen. Hopefully they restocked since you've been gone.

As you turn on the lights, you spot a twenty dollar bill and a sticky note on the island. You could already tell what it was going to say, but out of obligation, you read the note anyway.

Anon,

Had to take clients out for dinner to close this huge deal.

Use this to get some pizza. Don't stay up too late.

-Mom

You can't say you're terribly surprised. This is far from the first time she's pulled something like this.

You pocket the \$20 and check the fridge for a drink. Thank god, they DID restock. OJ, soda, and are those microwavable breakfast burritos in the freezer section? Hell yeah, you know what you're eating tomorrow morning.

You fish out a nearby soda and pop the tab before closing the fridge. Time to return upstairs and figure out dinner.

You head up the stairwell near the living room and enter the second door of the hallway. The first one leads to the bathroom, and your parents' room sits at the furthest end of the hall on the left.

Once again, you find yourself back in your room. Home. Safe. Secure. The picture of comfort.

You almost wanted to hug your computer after being away from it for so long. You instead fondly caress the top of the tower before pressing the power switch.

Your 'friend' comes to life with low hum as the monitor displays your operating system's logo.

After the lengthy boot-up, you proceed to open your browser and google for any pizzerias nearby. Unfortunately, the only place that looked like it might be good doesn't deliver, so you're stuck with Pizza Slut.

You browse their website for any deals that might help soften the blow to your wallet. The \$9.99 large one-topping is the most appealing to you, since the other offers involve getting several pizzas.

Two pizzas is way too much food for you, and it'd go bad before you could finish it all.

After resolving to order a large pepperoni pie, you pull out your phone to place the order. Most people would just give away their addresses over the internet to faceless corporations out of convenience.

Most people are FOOLS.

Click.

Click.

Oh god damn it, your phone's battery died. How could you forget?

With a sigh, you rise to your feet once more and plug in your phone to the charger. It's gonna be a while before you can make a call on that.

You decide to take a shower to kill some time.

None too soon, either. The stink of hedgehog farts was starting to seep into your skin.

You open the underwear drawer of your crappy beat-to-shit dresser and pull out a pair of gray boxer briefs. You then disrobe down to your underwear and head to the shower in the nearby bathroom.

As the hot water beats down upon you, you're left with nothing but your own thoughts for a few moments. You recall the events that transpired since you left here yesterday morning.

"Events". More like "Horrors". You were nearly killed at least 4 times yesterday. First from meeting eyes with Bartleby and almost dying of sheer joy.

Then Aleena holding you at gunpoint after somehow mistaking you for a pedophile.

Then nearly assaulted from the men of the Hedgehog family for the crime of your dad not killing anybody.

Then consuming that foul venom Aleena dared call 'wine'.

Then narrowly avoiding a hail of buckshot from a disgruntled store clerk after Chuck stole a case of beer from him.

Then nearly being arrested for being an accomplice to said theft.

Then almost receiving a cataclysmic beef stew from Bartleby before pawning it off on Chuck in the nick of time.

Then coming close to a stroke trying to teach Sonia basic math.

These last two days SUCKED. You couldn't be happier to be away from that madhouse.

...Is what any normal person would say.

But for some odd reason, despite you finally returning home and being free from that nightmare, you can't help but feel a bit empty after being away from them for an hour.

The faces of all the people you've dealt with so far flash before you.

Aleena's gentle, vulnerable smile after she bore her soul to you.

Chuck's friendly, helpful driving advice.

Manic giving his approving thumbs up after your heartfelt appeal to Sonic.

Sonic's confident smirk after forgiving you for embarrassing Bartleby.

Bartleby asking your n--

NO. You don't remember that. You can't remember that. You're not about to tempt fate and succumb to BMPS again.

But who could forget the countless times Sonia beamed her adorable smile at you?

Or how she clung to you while you slept, with her ear placed firmly against your chest to hear your heartbeat?

You've thought about it constantly as you were walking home. You can't get Sonia's last hug out of your head.

...God damn it. What are you doing?

You know damn well that getting too attached to them is just going to make the inevitable goodbye that much worse.

Why are you so damned invested in these psychopaths to begin with? More than half of them tried killing you, why would you ever want to see them again?

...Because being lonely is that much worse?

...

You silently scrub the filth from your naked and now pruning body after standing beneath running water for almost twenty minutes.

After rinsing one last time and watching the soap scum wash down the drain, you shut off the showerhead and exit the bath, grabbing a towel hanging from the shower curtain rod.

When finished towelling off, you return the towel from whence it came, fetch your clean undies and slip them on effortlessly. You then grab your old undies and exit the bathroom.

Back in your bedroom, you check your phone's charge to see how far along it's come. 8%. Good enough to make a call to order pizza. You turn on your phone properly.

After what felt like an agonizingly slow boot-up, your homescreen finally greets you once more.

As you're about to open up the phone app, your phone buzzes. Apparently you got a text.

No, scratch that. You got FIFTEEN texts.

All of them from Sonia.

Perplexed by the onslaught of messages, you open up your texting app to read all of them.

Sonia (4:17):

HI!!!! LMAO XD

<3 <3 <3

(4:18):

JUST WAnted to say Thanks for EVERYTHING!!!

(4:19):

sry, stupid caps lock at the start of the text XP

never using that agin ROFL

(4:20):

*again

LOL

(4:25):

you there? 030

(4:30):

hellooooooooooooo? anon?

(4:32):

are you mad at me or sum shit? ;_;

(4:39):

why wont you respond DX

(4:41):

TOT TOT >m<

(4:50):
oh shit did something happen

(4:52):
anon are you still alive?! D:>

(4:54):
I asked mama if she knew why you weren't answering

(4:55):
she said she didn't know DX

(5:00):
anon pls answer ;_;

(5:04):
if you don't answer in the next five minutes I'm calling the cops

OH SHIT
You frantically type up a message to let her know you're safe.

You (5:08):
sorry for not responding
phone's battery died on the way home
just got your texts now

You pray you sent that out in time. Almost as soon as it sends, your phone buzzes once more.

Sonia (5:09)
oh fuck LMAO
XDDDD
I was LITERALLY just dialing the cops when you texted >3<

You groan in relief/frustration before responding

You (5:09):
oh crap
thank god I made it on time


Sonia (5:10):
I was so worried XD
Dont ever not text me again!!!!!! lol
:3

Even in text format, you can't bring yourself to not find this girl adorable. Annoying, yes, but adorable all the same.

You (5:11):
I'll try to keep that in mind
Anyways, I gotta go get dinner
I'll talk at you later, K?


Sonia (5:12):
watcha havin? ,':3

You (5:12):
pizza butt
*hut
sorry, autocorrect

Sonia (5:13):
OMG ROFLMOA XDD
BEWARE THE PIZZA BUTT!!! RAAAAAWR >A<;
;D

You chuckle to yourself. She really found such a stupid joke that funny.

You (5:14)
lol
I really gotta go tho
later

Sonia (5:14)
K!!! enjoy ur pizza BUTT!

ROFLOL
;P

You finally peel yourself away from your texts to make a call to the local Pizza Hut.
To be perfectly honest, nothing else about tonight really strikes you as being noteworthy.
The pizza showed up on time, it was passable, you put what you didn't eat away in the fridge, and you browsed the internet for three hours as you contemplated playing one of the thousands of games sitting in your backlog.

However, you kept thinking about Sonia the whole time. You'd glance back at your phone on the charger, wondering if you should continue your conversation from earlier.
You kept talking yourself out of it, though. It's not like the conversation would go on much further than "how was dinner", "fine", "cool". You're not exactly interesting.
The lack of conversation doesn't stop you from fantasizing about your new friend, though.
You imagine walking alongside her in an open meadow, talking and laughing together.
She brings you in for a hug, and you embrace her back tightly, spinning her around before the two of you fall to the ground, with her on top of you.
You stare deeply into her eyes, filled with that same joy she had all day, as her cheeks have turned a rosy red.
She leans in deeper towards you and puckers her--

NO
STOP
STOP RIGHT FUCKING THERE

Anon, you've known this girl for a fucking DAY. She's not even HUMAN! Are you REALLY that fucking far gone that you'd even have these thoughts about someone you barely know?!
You're only feeling this way because you're so love-starved that you equate any sort of positive interaction from a woman to full-blown love, when that obviously isn't the reality here.
She's JUST being FRIENDLY. And she's only being friendly because she probably PITIES you. You're the new kid in town, of course you don't have friends here. She's just gonna lose interest in you when she finds out how weird you really are.

Having successfully doused any sort of positive feelings you might have had, you return to your favorite pastime of sulking in your room alone.
Completely bereft of motivation to do anything else, you elect to go to bed instead. It's a bit early, but after the couple of days you had, you felt entitled to more sleep than usual.
You run downstairs quick and make sure the house is locked up and turn off all the lights before returning to your room once more and shutting down everything.
As you crawl into your bed, your phone buzzes one more time.

Sonia sent you another text.

Sonia (8:48):
u still awake? .3.

You smirk slightly.

You (8:48):
yeah

Sonia (8:49):
i just wanted to say it was really nice hanging out with you yesterday
i'm glad we met on the bus :3

...

You (8:53):
same here.
thanks for putting up with me

Sonia (8:54):
no prob!! what r frens for??? ^3^ ~<3

...

You (8:58):
I gotta get to bed
I'll see you tomorrow

Sonia (8:58):
Night, Anon
<3

...You really wish you knew what love felt like before this. That'd make this so much easier.

END CHAPTER 18

Chapter 19 - Lost and Found

You awoke as the morning sun peeked through your crappy shades directly into your eyes. You felt an unusual stiffness in your neck as you roused from your slumber.

The culprit for this discomfort was the fact that you weren't resting your head on your pillow. It seems to have gone missing. No. Wait. You're clutching it firmly to your chest. It seems you clung onto it in your sleep last night. You do vaguely recall having trouble getting comfortable in the middle of the night.

You choose to ignore the odd sleep behavior in favor of going through your morning routine of shit, hair, teeth, and dressing before grabbing your newly charged phone and heading downstairs.

Yet again, the house was bereft of your parental figures, but you weren't too bothered by it. You fish out a couple of breakfast burritos from the freezer and set about heating them up in the microwave.

Upon finishing the cooking process, you immediately munch down on your hearty egg-and-sausage meal.

Eugh. It's still a bit cold and mushy in the middle.

After scrolling through your favorite imageboards on your phone and seeing nothing but topics that anger you, arouse you, or both, you proceed to grab your textbooks and take a bit of an early leave.

You only barely made it to the bus stop last time, and now you were carrying a much heftier load this time.

You make a mental note to ask Mr. Davisen what happened to your backpack after you fell ill two days ago. Hopefully it's in some sort of Lost-And-Found at the main office or something.

Once again, you make it to your destination just before your lemon-colored chariot rounds the corner and picks you up.

As you board the bus, you prepare for a new slew of insults and gossip from your peers to assault your ears.

However, you realize the bus falls suspiciously silent upon your arrival. Most of your fellow students are gazing upon you in wide-eyed wonder. Or perhaps 'Shock' would be more accurate.

Passing between the seats, you hear various murmurs from the kids gossiping about you.

"isn't that the kid that got BMPS the other day?"

"how the fuck is he still alive?"

"I heard his dad is a serial killer or some shit"

Oh god dammit. The rumors about your father have degraded much worse than you could have imagined in your absence.

"I'monna clap them cheeks one day"

Okay, that last boy really makes you uncomfortable. You're not certain if it's what he's saying, or the fact that he has an unusually bassy voice for a 14-year-old.

As you scan over the seats, praying you find one that's empty, a pink hand giddily waves near the back as a familiar voice rings out.

"Hi, Anon!", greets Sonia, who just barely peeks over the seat. Upon hearing her voice, it's as if your drab, dreary world has color once more.

Your expression brightens up as you make your way over to your friend.

However, as you approach, your mood suddenly drops, as an unfamiliar figure pops into view, taking up the seat next to Sonia. He's leering at you suspiciously.

The figure is yet another Mobian, but a different species from the Hedgehogs. He doesn't seem to have ears, and his nose comes to more of a point, compared to the flatter, rounder faces of Sonia and Manic.

His fur is a bright shade of red, and his hair, shaped into spiked dreads, drapes down around his head, touching his shoulders.

He's wearing a red hoodie, but the neckline has been stretched a bit, causing his left shoulder to be exposed, revealing his white t-shirt underneath.

This Mobian is also wearing light brown jeans of some sort, and his sneakers are red and yellow with green...are those socks, or something?

For that matter, are those Legos attached to his shoes, or some sort of metal plate?

But what really stands out are his gloves. They're more akin to mitts or boxing gloves, but have strange, spiked protrusions coming from the knuckles of them.

"Who's the new meat?", asked the unfamiliar creature to Sonia while still giving you the evil eye.

"Knuckles, this is Anon, the new kid", introduces the pink Hedgehog. "I told you about him yesterday, remember?"

So, this guy's name is Knuckles, huh?

"Anon, this is my friend, Knuckles the Echidna", Sonia finishes introducing the two of you.

"Knuckles the COOL Echidna", corrects Knuckles, glaring at Sonia.

"O-Okay...n-nice to meet you?", you awkwardly respond, unsure of how to feel regarding this development.

"WOULD YOU SIT DOWN ALREADY, YOU FUCKING QUEER?!\"", requests the bus driver. "WE'S IS GON' BE LATE FER SCHOOL!!!!"

Snapped out of your conversation, you desperately glance around, hoping there's an empty seat nearby. A few rows towards the front of the bus, you spot a head of white hair sitting by its lonesome.

Oh, lord, PLEASE don't let this kid have an autistic obsession with Final Fantasy or some gay-ass anime or something.

You hurriedly take the empty spot besides this white-haired person, muttering an awkward "Sorry" as you sit down and rest your pile of books on your lap.

The white-haired girl doesn't even seem to notice you. Good. You decide to focus on Sonia instead of bothering your seat partner.

However, the distance between the two of you is significant. You can't make out anything she's saying over the chatter of the other students.

Realizing that you're probably not going to get the chance to talk to her for the rest of the trip, you sullenly return your gaze down towards your feet.

You pondered the exact relationship between Knuckles and Sonia. Were they really just friends, or were they something more?

...Oh, hell, what does it matter to you? It's not like you're Sonia's boyfriend either. Maybe it's best to let her catch up with her friend, you need to focus on what you need to do today anyway.

First things first, find your backpack. It's been missing since you lost consciousness the other day. It had all of your paperwork which told you your schedule for the day, as well as which locker belonged to you.

You'll start by checking in with the principal's office.

After determining your course of action for the morning, you return to your usual regimen of staring blankly at nothing, interspersed with occasional forlorn glances back at Sonia and Knuckles.

The bus eventually rolls up to the school's walkway, and comes to a stop.

"I'M GIVIN' YOU LITTLE SHITS TEN SECONDS TO GIT OFFA MY BUS", calls out the bus driver, clearly happy with his lot in life, "'AFORE I STARTS LOADIN' MUH GUN!"

The riders collectively groan with excitement and begin ambling off the bus in unison. You shuffle along with the crowd.

Right after you exit your yellow metal chariot, you approach the front doors of the school. As you're about to enter, Sonia's voice calls out from behind you.

"Hey, Anon! Wait up!", shouts your pink friend. You turn your gaze back towards Sonia hustling after you. "Where are you going?", she asks.

"I need to go to the principal's office to find my stuff", you explain. "I'm tired of carrying THESE damn things around all the time", you then say, jostling your mound of hefty textbooks.

"You want me to come with?", Sonia offers. Some part of you wants to turn her down out of concern for her attendance record, but, truthfully, you're still unfamiliar with the layout of this building.

"If it wouldn't be too much trouble...", you say, implying you'd like her help. Sonia winks and gives a thumbs-up gesture.

"Stick close to me, I'll get you there!", she enthusiastically replies, before taking the lead. You shuffle behind her, taking care not to lose sight of her in the crowd.

Sonia's wearing a pink v-necked sweater with a white button-up collared shirt and black necktie underneath. She's also wearing a white pleated skirt and thigh-high socks, and black strapped shoes.

In short, she looks like a stereotypical Japanese schoolgirl. She pulls off the look really well. Though, you might be biased with all the Ugly Bastard porn you consume.

"I was a little worried you were upset with me, Anon", Sonia suddenly states, catching you off-guard. "You kinda ran off on your own without even saying anything"

"Why would I be upset with you?", you query in response.

"Because I wasn't available to talk to for the bus ride", she responds in kind. "You obviously wanted to chat with me, but you were stuck a billion seats away"

"It's not your fault there weren't any empty seats nearby", you riposte. "It's just what happens when you're the last kid to get picked up. I'm not angry or hurt or anything"

"So why'd you look so sad whenever I glanced over to you the whole time?", Sonia asked.

...Did you really appear that miserable? You didn't even notice. And you certainly didn't think Sonia would notice. She's much more observant than you initially thought.

As you attempt to think of a response, Sonia suddenly stops in front of you, causing you to bump into her by accident.

"S-sorry", you stutter out, before realizing you've reached your destination.

"Here we are! Principal Fattbut's office!", Sonia proclaims.

...What a lovely surname. Certainly one of prestige and honor, with a long, proud history. Just the sound of it causes a wry smile to spread across your face.

"Lemme get the door for you", the pink Mobian offers, opening the door to the office. "I gotta run to class, so I'll let you go. We can talk then, okay?"

"Thanks, Sonia", you reply before heading in. She shines her iconic smile at you and closes the door behind you before dashing off down the hallway.

...You realize you failed to memorize the route to the office. It was like the world melted away during that conversation. Great job, genius.

"Can I help you, young man?" a nasally voice drones from behind the nearby counter. You approach to see a chunky woman with her brown hair in a bun typing away at her computer.

"Umm, I was wondering if someone turned in a gray and black bookbag recently?", you ask, stating your business. "I lost it after I fell ill with BMPS"

"Oh, you're Anon, I see", states the portly secretary. You glance over at the nameplate situated on her desk. 'Secretary Spredd' is prominently displayed.

Mrs. Spredd reaches down below the counter and brings up a huge tote with 'Lost and Found' sloppily written on the side with various items and contraband within.

You set your books down and begin rifling through the miscellany. Cell phones, a Thomas the Tank Engine lunchbox, pencil boxes, sets of crayons, all of them missing several colors, is that a 3DS?

After a few minutes, you find something buried deep within the tote. With a concerted effort, you yank on the handle to produce a gray and black bookbag. It's yours, alright. It still has the padlock for your locker dangling from it.

"Thank you, Mrs. Spredd!", you exclaim gratefully. You open the bag to find that it's completely empty. What the hell, you had tons of papers in here the other--Oh.

Shit, that's right. You lost most of them on your first day here.

"Um, there wasn't any paperwork that was turned in alongside this bag, was there?", you ask the secretary hesitantly.

"Afraid not. Sorry", Mrs. Spredd states plainly. Can't say you're surprised. "Why don't you check with your homeroom teacher?"

Good idea. Back to homeroom. "You don't happen to know the way to room 114, would you?", you ponder.

"From here, go left and follow the hallway to the big open area, then take the second hallway on the left from the front doors and follow THAT until you see Room 114", Spredd rattles off in her monotonous voice.

You stuff your numerous tomes into your backpack and thank the secretary before beginning your new journey. As you meander about the halls, you wonder if there's some sort of minotaur wandering about the school.

At least that would explain why the fuck this stupid-ass architecture is so labyrinthian.

After a few minutes of trudging about, you finally come across somewhat familiar surroundings, and spot Room 114 on your right.

You enter the room and everyone's eyes are immediately locked onto you, including Mr. Davisen's. You spot Sonia chipperly waving at you, as Knuckles glares suspiciously at you.

"Uhm, s-sorry for being tardy, Mr. Davisen", you apologize anxiously to your teacher. "I was in the principal's office grabbing my bookbag"

"I'll let it slide this time because you're new, just don't let it happen again", warns Mr. Davisen. "If you could please take your seat"

"Uh, before that, sir", you hesitantly reply, "did you happen to still have that paperwork I dropped the other day? I need to know my schedule and which locker I'm at"

"Oh, yes, hang on a second", your teacher responds before heading to his desk and opening one of the drawers, fishing out a small stack of papers.

"I actually forgot to give these to Sonia yesterday, so I'm to blame for this in a way", Mr. Davisen says, handing you the paperwork you've been missing.

You thank your teacher before heading over to your desk. Finally, you're back on track. School should be a cakewalk from now on.

You rifle through your papers to find a map of the school's layout. Fuck, if you knew you had this, you wouldn't have bothered asking Sonia for directions on your first day here.

Well, whatever. You pore over it to spot where your locker's location is in relation to your homeroom. Fortunately, it's not far from here at all. Just down the hallway, in fact. Number 217.

Then, your next class: Math, Mr. Stevens, Room 123. Ha. Counting. The classroom is actually just a bit further down the hall, your locker being basically halfway between the two classes. Perfect.

You slide your papers back into your rucksack and turn your attention to the others around you. It seems they're all treating this as free time, considering none of them are nose-deep in a textbook or some shit.

Mindy's browsing Facebook on her phone.

Manic's playing Fortnite on his.

The white-haired blue girl (Flora, you think her name is?) is doodling something in the margins of her notebook.

Sonic is snacking on some Funyuns.

Who cares what that kid behind you is doing.

Bartleby is mysteriously absent.

Knuckles is still glaring at you.

Sonia--

"Hi, study-buddy!", the lively rosy Mobian girl interrupts your analysis.

Oh, right. You've been wanting to talk with Sonia all morning. Now you finally have your chance.

"So, what's up?", asks Sonia.

And then it hits you.

You have absolutely nothing to talk about.

"...not much, you?", you blankly state, shrugging your shoulders.

"Same here", Sonia replies, also shrugging.

...Why the fuck did you want to talk to her at all this morning? You said all you needed to last night.

END CHAPTER 19

Chapter 20 - The Cool Echidna

The bell rings out, signaling the end of Homeroom. You had about five minutes to get to your next class, so now was as good a time as any to stop by your locker and drop off your unnecessary weight.

You wave off Sonia as she heads in the opposite direction from you, and begin your scholastic journey.

First stop, locker 217.

Amidst the hustle and bustle of the other students, it's actually pretty tough to make out which locker is yours initially, but eventually, you find your designated locker. It's just across from the Drama Club room.

You grab the handle and open said locker with a clatter.

It's completely empty. It must be yours, alright.

You proceed to dump off your unnecessary books and papers, keeping only your math and English tomes, your schedule, and map of the school. You weren't one hundred percent sure about your day yet, so you figured it's better to be safe than sorry.

With the weight off your back, you feel more confident, and less likely to collapse from overexertion. Thank God.

You seal your locker and place your padlock on the latch, securing the contents within.

Having finished your task here, you confidently turn to your right to begin the next part of your journey.

And immediately, your eyes meet with Knuckles'.

The sudden appearance of the red Mobian startles you, causing you to jump back a bit with a less-than-dignified "GYK!"

After regaining your composure, you realize he's probably not here to hurt you. Although, Knuckles is barely over three feet tall. He'd have to stand on his tip-toes if he wanted to punch you in the stomach.

"Oh, heh, hey, sorry about that", you apologize with a light chuckle. Knuckles' steely gaze is still transfixed upon you.

"Umm, you're Knuckles, right?", you ask, hoping to break the ice. "W-what are you doing here?"

"Not much. Just getting some things from my locker", the Echidna coldly replies, before undoing the padlock on locker 218.

"Oh! I guess we're gonna be neighbors, then!", you exclaim, somewhat relieved. Knuckles responds with a wordless grunt.

Truth be told, you've been wanting to know more about Knuckles, but didn't think you'd have much opportunities to chat without Sonia nearby. This way, you get to see what the real Knuckles is like.

"Well, uh, I...hope we can be friends", you nervously offer. Knuckles comes to a stop as he pulls out a textbook.

"Friends, huh?", says Knuckles. His face is partially obscured by his locker. You can't see his eyes at all, but his mouth is visible. A smile begins to spread across his face.

"Yeah. We can be friends, alright", continues the crimson kid. There's an unusual tone in his voice. You couldn't help but feel a sense of unease from it.

Knuckles pulls his head from his locker, and his expression isn't one of friendliness. The smirk he has on carries a sinister vibe to it.

"You know what friends do for their friends?", asks Knuckles, menacingly, as he slams his locker shut. You instinctively take a step backwards.

"They give them twenty dollars whenever they ask for it", concludes the ruby ruffian.

Seeing an opportunity to lighten the mood, you reach your hand out and put on an awkward smile.

"Okay, can I have twenty bucks?", you innocently ask. Knuckles' expression changes from a wry grin to an annoyed scowl.

It appears that you have stepped in a shit pile. Well done.

"You know what you are, Anon?", queries the scarlet scourge.

"You're a smart-ass", he answers his own question. Knuckles then reaches past your hand and clutches your shirt. He then IMMEDIATELY pulls you down to meet his eye level.

You couldn't even muster any resistance to that yank. Knuckles might be short, but he is ABSURDLY strong. Part of you ponders how he got this strong in the first place.

"And I HATE Smart-asses", hisses the cherry terror.

Fear begins to grip you. Forget about making friends with this guy, you start to wonder if you'll even survive an encounter with him.

"S-s-sorry, man", you stammer, "I-I-I-I was j-just k-k-kidding"

"JUST kidding?", asks Knuckles. "'Kidding' means that you don't respect me enough to answer honestly. And NOBODY disrespects Knuckles the Cool Echidna"

You attempt to reason with this tiny tyrant, but your words refuse to leave your throat.

"Let me rephrase my suggestion from earlier, so you don't TWIST it with your little quips, like every Joss Whedon character", Knuckles states, tightening his clutch on the word 'twist'.

"Give me twenty dollars", orders the vermilion villain.

"I-I don't have twenty dollars", you hesitantly tell Knuckles. The twisted grin makes its return to his face.

"That's fine", he surprisingly states. "It...it is?", you ask, confused.

"Yep, after all, I can just get twenty bucks from the tooth fairy instead", declares Knuckles.

"T...tooth fairy?", you ask, perplexed, though you had an inkling of where he was going with this.

"The way I see it, the tooth fairy's gotta shell out at least a dollar per tooth, and you just happen to have more than twenty teeth in your skull", Knuckles explains with a bone-chilling plainness to his voice.

He's done shit like this before. Oh fuck.

Knuckles drops his book and begins to ball his free hand into a fist in front of your face.

"Just don't swallow your teeth. I don't want to have to wait for you to strain your poop to find your molars", threatens the diminutive dastard.

Your eyes rapidly dart about. You desperately try to think of a way out of this situation, but panic has completely overtaken your thoughts.

Knuckles rears his fist back, preparing a punch of no-doubt Herculean proportions. You might not survive this hit.

Just as he's about ready to deliver a wallop, the bell rings out. Knuckles stops right in his tracks.

"Shit. Coach Johnson's gonna make me scrub his wrinkly ballsack again if I'm late", Knuckles grumbles to himself.

...You really don't want to be late to gym class.

The Echidna tosses you to the ground with little effort. "Saved by the bell, freak. We'll meet again", says Knuckles as he grabs his book and heads off to class.

You stumble to your feet after grabbing your books as he disappears down the hall.

Note to self: AVOID KNUCKLES AT ALL COSTS.

END CHAPTER 20

Chapter 21 - By The Numbers

After the shock of your encounter with Knuckles had worn off, you realized you were late to math class. You'd already missed two days before, this wasn't going to leave a good first impression on Mr. Stevens.

From what you'd heard, Mr. Stevens was the worst teacher in school, who no one liked dealing with. Though, you have to wonder if it's just because most kids around here seem violent and retarded.

Whatever the case, you had to book it down to room 123, NOW.

Puffing and wheezing, you hustle down the twisting, turning hallway, before finally arriving at your destination. Anxiety strikes you once more as you grip the handle, unsure of how the teacher would react to your tardiness.

However, something was strange. Unlike most of the other classrooms you passed on the way here, there seemed to be a ruckus happening just beyond the door. Everywhere else had been silent.

You apprehensively open the door and behold a scene similar to the climax of One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest. Your fellow students were shouting, fighting, flinging paper wads everywhere, it was absolute chaos.

You again wondered if you hadn't been enlisted in the retard Math class.

Your eyes scan over the room, hoping to spot any familiar faces. Unfortunately, you had no such luck. You think you might have seen one or two of these students in your homeroom, but you weren't properly acquainted.

The desks are in complete disarray, vandalized with various incorrect swastikas etched into them.

The ceiling tiles were peppered with writing implements deeply lodged into them. The walls were coated in brown streaks, the consistency of which ruled out water or oil-based paints.

What's really odd, however, besides the unruly behavior of the students, was that the teacher was absent. His desk sits forlornly off to the side of the whiteboard, which is coated in graffiti of crudely drawn genitalia and more imperfect swastikas.

There must be a lot of burgeoning buddhists in this class.

"HEY!", a voice hollers out. Your eyes snap towards the source of the sound, as the rest of the class falls silent.

Sitting in the center of this rowdy group is a young, tan man, with his black hair spiked up in a sort of twin mohawk, the tips of which are dyed red. His arms are outstretched, as if to call everyone to his attention.

He's wearing a denim vest and red tanktop, shredded blue jeans, and a pair of beat-up white tennis shoes. He's also wearing fingerless leather gloves. The unknown young man lowers his arms and motions towards you.

"We have a new student joining us today", calmly declares the youth, as the group's eyes collectively lock onto you. You freeze, like a deer in the headlights. You've got no idea how this is going to play out.

"Aw, don't act so scared", encourages the leader of this hoodlum band, "Go on, tell us your name."

"Uhh, it's, uh, Anon", you hesitantly state. "Hi."

"Anon, huh?", asks the ruffian as he rises to his feet and approaches you. He's actually fairly tall compared to the other kids around here, even taller than you.

"My name's Rufio", the young man introduces himself.

No fucking way.

"L-like that guy from that live-action Peter Pan m--", you start to say, before Rufio firmly places his hand on your left shoulder with a grim expression.

"I'm gonna give you one chance to not finish that sentence", gently warns the shitskinned psycho. Clearly, this was a sensitive topic.

"...You rock the name much better than that fag anyway", you say, hoping ingratiating yourself might spare you the wrath of this young man. Rufio's expression slowly brightens into a smug grin. "I think we're gonna be good friends, Anon", he says, before turning his gaze towards the crowd of "students".

"HEY! Bring a fuckin' desk and chair over here next to mine!", orders Rufio to the gang. Immediately, the group shuffle around the furniture and place it haphazardly next to where Rufio was previously sitting.

It seems your desk has arrived. Rufio leads you to your seat before taking his once more.

..Jesus, it's just four fucking L's connected to each other, how braindead do you have to be to fuck up a swastika so many times?

"So, ya new in our school?", asks the Mohawk-wearing boss. "Y-yeah, uh, I just started a few days ago", you nervously reply.

"How come we ain't seen you 'til today?", Rufio asks with suspicion in his voice.

"I came down with Bartleby Montclair Proximity Syndrome in homeroom on my first day", you reply. "I spent yesterday sick at home."

"YOU came down with BMPS?", queries the brutish commander. "BULL. SHIT", he then loudly declares.

"What's hard to believe about that?", you ask, puzzled by his accusation.

"BMPS is basically a fucking death sentence if you're lucky", Rufio explains. "And if you ain't so lucky...well, just ask Tommy over there", he states, before motioning over to one corner of the room.

You glance over to see a horrifically gnarled quadroplegic child in one of those electric wheelchairs. He's currently flailing his arms about, making sickening gurgling noises and random unintelligible screams.

That must be Tommy.

"So you're tellin' me you came down with what Tommy had, and are walkin' and talkin' like you are now?", ponders the delinquent beside you.

"Forgive me if I'm a little skeptical of that excuse"

They really weren't kidding about BMPS. What a horrific disease. You feel kind of shitty complaining about being unable to walk for a day now.

"Eh, whatever. I'm just glad you're here now", says Rufio, changing the subject. "You're about to bear witness to another wonderful show!", he then declares, placing his feet up on his desk.

"Sh-show?", you inquire. "I'd heard everyone thought this class was the worst one in school"

"Whaaaaat? What kind of monster would spread such libelous slander?", quizzes the regent of the rogues. "Mr. S. is our FAVORITE teacher, RIGHT, GANG?!", Rufio shouts, causing the class to uproar once more.

"Soooo, where is he, then?", you ask. "I like to think he's building up some, uh...", replies Rufio, before making a drinking gesture with his hand and clicking his tongue. "...courage. Stage anxiety gets to all of us, ya know"

What the hell is this asshole talking about? As you sit, confused by the entire situation, you hear the doorknob slowly click open. Rufio raises his hand to silence his minions as a smile spreads across his face.

The door slowly creaks open. Standing in the doorway was a balding, mustached White man, shaking like a leaf. His eyes are as big as dinner plates, with countless bags under them from no doubt years of stress.

The mustachioed man timidly shuffles into the room, avoiding eye contact with anyone in the class.

""EY, TEACH!", bellows Rufio, nearly blowing out your ear drums. The man flinches, like he was anticipating someone throwing a punch at him.

...THIS trainwreck was Mr. Stevens? You almost felt sorry for him.

"...G-g-good morning, Rufio", whimpers Mr. Stevens. You barely heard him, and you're in the, uh...well, you're close enough to him to be considered in the front row.

"Ain'tcha gonna say g'morning to our new student, here?", asks the tyrannical terrorist. "His name's An-On", he introduces you...incorrectly.

"oh god there's another one", the teacher mutters under his breath. "Umm, I-I'd r-r-rather g-g-g-g-get started on t-t-today's c-c-c-c-c-curriculum", stammers the stressed-out Stevens.

"Yeah?", asks Rufio. As the teacher picks up one of those dry-erase markers, Rufio slams his fist down on his desk, shouting "GET ON WITH IT!", causing the teacher to flinch again and drop the marker.

The class derisively laughs at Mr. Stevens as he bends down to pick up his dropped writing utensil. A hailstorm of paper wads pelts the poor man before he straightens himself upright once more.

"Class, I'm I-I-I-legally REQUIRED to ask you at least one question related to m-ma-math for today", he explains, causing the peanut gallery to erupt in boos and hisses. "P-please, just I-I-let me ask this and I'll I-I-let you d-do whatever you w-w-want for the r-r-r-rest of the p-p-ppperiod"

"GET IT OVER WITH!", shouts the nearby ruffian. The others begin chanting the same thing until pretty much everyone (save for yourself, the teacher, and Tommy) is swept up in the ruckus.

Mr. Stevens nervously begins writing the equation on the whiteboard. His every stroke leaves a streaking noise. Finally, the problem is laid bare, and the chanting comes to an end.

"W...what is...f-f-f-five plus six?", asks the anxiety-addled arithmetic educator.

"FOURTEEN THOUSAND, DUHUHUHUH", shouts a roughneck from one corner of the room, throwing on an obnoxious chuckle for good measure.

"FIFTY SIX", Rufio interjects.

The classroom is filled with incorrect answers and mocking laughter. Unfortunately, one poor soul actually decides to answer correctly.

"Eleven?", you ask, raising your hand. The room falls deathly silent.

Wait.

YOU said that?

WHY did you say that?

WHAT THE FUCK DID YOU JUST DO

You feel the collective shift their glares of ire towards you. In one single word, you've effectively ostracized yourself amongst your peer group. You just set the speedrunning record of being a social pariah. Kudos.

"A-ANON!", suddenly shouts Mr. Stevens. "I...I WON'T STAND FOR SUCH DISRESPECTFUL OUTBURSTS FROM YOU!" You're completely lost at this point. What the fuck is even happening? "OUTSIDE! IN THE HALL! NOW!", frantically screams the teacher. You clumsily scramble to your feet, grab your things and shuffle out into the hallway, with Mr. Stevens hot in pursuit. When the teacher slams the door behind you two, apprehension takes hold of you. Mr. Stevens glares at you for a few moments before desperately asking "you're not one of them, are you?", dropping the facade.

"Sir, what the hell's going on here?", you ask, utterly perplexed by the situation. "Why is this classroom a fucking mental institution?" "It's obvious that you're already smarter than 98% of the people in this school, Anon", Mr. Stevens elucidates. "Revealing your power level like that is sure to get you killed here" "Wh-what can I do?", you query, unsure of your lot in life now. "If I send you back in there, you're as good as dead", your teacher reveals. "It'd be a complete waste of a good mind to have you die here" "From now on, you're free to wander the halls for First Period", Mr. Stevens offers. "Go to the bathroom, go to the roof, I don't care, just don't come here again for the rest of the year. I'll clear it with the rest of the faculty" "What about my assignments?", you ponder. "Meet me at the Teacher's Lounge between 3rd and 4th Period", instructs your instructor. "When you drop them off for me, I'll let you know the next assignment"

"Thanks, Mr. Stevens", you state, grateful for having such a dedicated teacher. As your teacher turns back towards the classroom, a question nags at you. "Sir, why do you let the other kids treat you like shit?", you quiz, concerned for your cool teacher's mental health. "It turns me on sexually when I'm subjugated by lesser beings", plainly states your newly revealed perverted teacher. "Okay, bye", you flatly reply before turning away and getting the hell out of there.

You know you said it before, but math really IS a free subject this year.

Fuck yeah.

END CHAPTER 21

Chapter 22 - Teacher Is An Anagram For Cheater

You gaze out at the empty hallway before you. You're almost overwhelmed at the feeling of liberation. You take a long, deep breath of air through your nose, savoring the smell of freedom.

hurk

Oh god. The janitors have obviously given up doing their jobs at this school. That stench is fucking FOUL. NEVER do that again here. You take a long, deep series of shallow breaths through your mouth, using your teeth as a filter. You're free to do as you please for the next forty-five minutes.

...Well, not really. Mr. Stevens hasn't had a chance to clear things with the faculty regarding your situation, so wandering the halls probably isn't the best idea. You can't just go outside, since the doors automatically lock you out of the building. You could go to the bathroom and jerk off, but then you have to clean yourself up, and if someone catches you, well, suffice it to say, your reputation would suffer immensely. Besides, you do enough of that shit at home. You've always believed in keeping your school life and home life separate.

So...what CAN you do? This 'liberation' was much more short-lived than you had liked it to be. After a little thinking, you come to the realization that you still hadn't memorized your schedule for the year. Maybe learning that might kill some time. You dig through your backpack and dig out your schedule and the map of the school. Okay, here we go. You arrive at school around 7:45 AM.

Homeroom lasts from 8:00 to 8:30. It takes place at room 114.
Next, from 8:40 to 9:30 is Math, room 123, though you don't really have to commit that to memory anymore.
After that, 9:40 to 10:30 is English, room 216. You haven't even been upstairs at this school yet.
Following that, 10:40 to 11:30, History, room 109.
From there, 11:40 to 12:30, is...gym class at the gymnasium. A chill runs up your spine as you recall all the horrific, torturous punishments for tardiness that are handed out by Coach Johnson. Tardiness for his class was unacceptable.
Shaking off the apprehension, you return to your schedule. 12:30 to 1:00, lunch.
1:10 to 2:00, Art, room 201.
2:10 to 3:00, Science, room 102.
And finally, 3:10 to 4:00, American Literature, room 212.

Ugh. What a twisted route. And you have to stop between certain classes to go to your locker. Fuck.

Oh wait, shit, you gotta stop at the teacher's lounge between 3rd and 4th period, where's that at?
Let's see, teacher's lounge, teacher's lounge...AHA! 2nd floor, right between Rooms 205 and 206. On the opposite side of the building from the gym.
Great.

You heave a frustrated sigh before putting away your documents and pulling out your phone. The current time is...9:02.

...fuck it, time to hide in the upstairs boy's restroom and shitpost on your favorite Tibetan Throat Singing Enthusiast's imageboard.
Stealthily making your way through the halls, you proceed up the staircase at the end to reach the second floor men's bathroom.

After about 30 minutes of ceaselessly berating the poor, unpaid moderators through your phone's internet browser, the bell rings, announcing the end of First Period.
You had about 10 minutes to find room 216 now. English class was next, with Ms. Clivinsky as your teacher. You pondered how she would turn out as a proctor as you marched through the now bustling halls of the second floor.
Fortunately, you find the place somewhat easily. It's actually just a few doors down from where you were. You enter the room to see several other students already seated.

Unlike your first period class, however, the mood was completely different. Rather than everyone being rambunctious hoodlums, the air was dour, filled with dread. Nobody wanted to be here.
Well, that's not exactly uncommon, who the hell actually WANTS to go to school?
As your eyes pass over the room, you feel someone tapping your right shoulder. You glance over, but nobody is there. You then turn your head in the opposite direction and suddenly see a familiar shade of pink.

"Hey, study-buddy!"

You instinctively jump back at the surprising appearance of Sonia. She giggles at your shocked reaction.
"I didn't know you had English at the same time as me!", exclaims the energetic hedgehog. "C'mon! I'll show you your seat!"
Sonia clutches your free hand and drags you through the sea of desks before you.

You start to feel blood rushing to your face as your cheeks turn a shade of beet red.

Girl hold hand
GIRL HOLD HAND
PANIC
SWEAT.EXE ACTIVATED
VOLUME: MAXIMUM (LEGALLY ALLOWABLE)

"Here ya are!", states Sonia as she releases her grip and presents the desk in front of you, before taking her seat next to yours. You awkwardly mumble as you sit down and place your books on the desktop.
"I'm so glad you're here", sighs the normally vivacious girl. "Maybe you being here can make this period at least a little more bearable. Ms. Clivinsky is the WORST"
"I thought you said Mr. Stevens was the worst", you recall. "Mr. Stevens is the worst TEACHER", replies Sonia. "Ms. Clivinsky isn't so much a teacher as she is a WITCH"
"Th-that bad, huh?", you query. "She takes pleasure in failing every one of her students", Sonia continues. "She's known as 'the GPA Black Hole'".

Aw, HELL. It would have been nice if she mentioned any of this earlier.
However, she did say Mr. Stevens was bad, but he turned out to be really nice to you (although he IS a bit of a pervert). Maybe Sonia's assessment of your English teacher might be misleading as well?
Most of the other kids here seem a special kind of 'tarded. Maybe they only think Clivinsky's bad because they struggle with her curriculum. You'd best keep that sentiment under wraps. Nobody likes the guy insulting everyone's intelligence. You fear you'd wind up strung up by your intestines before the day was over.

As you think to yourself, the door to the classroom creaks open once more. A hush falls over the crowd of students, save for a few gasps of terror.

Entering the room was a hunched-over elderly woman garbed in the most drab olive-colored dress you'd ever seen. Her gray, grizzled hair was pulled back into a high bun. In short, she had the attire of a stereotypical schoolmarm.

And then you look at her face and WOW that is a big fuckin' nose. Honestly, 'beak' would be more accurate. It takes up at least eighty percent of her face, and seems to be afflicted with some sort of rash or skin condition.

Her eyes are beady and black, sunken from age and perhaps contempt as well. Her mouth is downturned into what seems to be a permanent scowl, with a humungous, hairy mole protruding on her chin.

The phrase, 'resting bitch face', comes to mind immediately.

As she enters the room, her shriveled, wrinkly frown surprisingly turns upwards into a cruel smile. Her eyes narrow with a sense of superiority, and an unusually smug yet scratchy "Good morning, class" leaks out of her lips.

The class mumbles and mutters their morning greetings with little enthusiasm. Ms. Clivinsky takes her seat at the large wooden desk at the front of the class.

"With the morning's greetings out of the way", Clivinsky declares, "I'd like everyone to turn in yesterday's assignments so I may begin my favorite part of the day"

The class grumbles apprehensively as each student approaches the teacher's desk with their homework in hand. Clivinsky rhythmically taps her long french-tipped fingernails on her desk as the work comes piling in.

Sonia seems particularly ashamed of something as she hands in her sheet. You hand in your work without a second thought.

When everyone had finished turning in their work, Clivinsky slowly, dramatically pulled out a red felt-tipped pen and removed its cap. She then gathered the sheets into one pile and began to grade the assignments.

A wry smile cracked across her face ever wider than before. "JULIE!", she loudly calls out. One of the female students flinches upon hearing the name. You then hear Clivinsky making several marks on the sheet with her pen.

"F!", shouts the wicked teacher. Julie starts to sob silently. "TREVOR!", shouts Clivinsky once more. This time, one of the male students cringes at the sound of his own name. Once again, the felt-tipped pen squeaks multiple times against the sheet in her hand.

"F!", she bellows. 'Trevor' buries his face in shame.

This process continues for a while until finally, the teacher reaches a familiar name.

"Hmhmhmm...Sonia", chuckles Ms. Clivinsky. "My FAVORITE student."

You glance over at your neighbor. Sonia has tears welling up in her eyes and is clenching her fists. With how upbeat she usually is, you can't help but feel your heart sink, watching Sonia being so downtrodden.

"Wrong. Wrong! Wrong, wrong wrong", declares Clivinsky with each stroke of her pen. Every utterance of the word 'wrong' causes Sonia to squirm.

At last, Clivinsky finishes her corrections.

"F!", she shouts out.

Sonia slams her eyes shut and puts her head down, sobbing. You instinctively reach your hand out, but you're unsure of how exactly to comfort her. You just retract your hand, balling it into a fist.

Damn it. Sonia wasn't kidding. Clivinsky really IS a witch. This display just made you hate that wrinkly old bat.

"Oh?", vocalizes the miserable mentor. "I don't recognize THIS name. Does this say "Anus"?"

You dared not correct her now, lest your nickname for the rest of the year be 'Anus'. Let's see where this goes.

"No, wait, it's Anon", she says, pronouncing it 'Ayy-nin'. "Goodness, I know you kids get worse names with every generation, but still!"

"Perhaps it's NOT your real name, you're just being a class clown, hmm?", she ponders outloud, hoping to get a rise out of you. You keep your cool.

"Well, class clown or no, we'll just see who has the last laugh", she proclaims, before readying her pen.

She eyes the worksheet with a smug expression. After a few moments, her smile fades. Then, her eyes widen in shock, her mouth becomes agape. She then starts to wear a look of indignation, which turns into white hot fury by the time she reaches the end.

Clivinsky slams her pen-holding hand onto her desk, the noise echoing through the room.

"Who is responsible for this", hisses the misanthropic hag.

The students begin to exchange looks, perplexed by the situation. Clivinsky's eyes dart about the room, hoping to find the culprit, before they lock onto yours.

"YOU", she utters, pointing a single crinkled finger in your direction before rising from her chair.

Uh-oh.

You hear a sound like Lucifer's cloven hooves trodding along the fiery cobblestones of Hell as Clivinsky's heels clatter during her approach towards you.

"I don't recall seeing YOU in this class before", states the aged battleaxe. "Am I to assume YOU'RE Ayynin?", she then asks, glaring at you with pure hatred.

"It's 'Anon'", you finally correct her, the feeling being mutual. The teacher foists the sheet she's clutching into your view. "What is the meaning of this?", asks the cantankerous crone.

It's definitely your handiwork alright. "It's...the assignment you gave me?", you answer hesitantly. Clivinsky slams the sheet onto your desk.

"HOW THE HELL DID YOU MANAGE TO GET A PERFECT SCORE?!", screeched the malevolent pedagogue.

"Ma'am, the assignment was 'list seven adverbs'", you reply flatly. "I did shit like this back in second grade."

"I don't believe you", spat the crusty cunt. "I think you CHEATED!"

"Cheated?!", you shout with righteous indignation. "How the hell could I have cheated?"

"Because there's no amount of studying you could do to pass MY exams!", proclaims Ms. Clivinsky. "I made sure all the English textbooks had false information in them so I could maintain intellectual superiority over these snot-nosed cretins!"

"You...you WHAT?!", you cry, flabbergasted at such a revelation. Ms. Clivinsky suddenly realizes what she revealed. "I have no recollection of what I just said", she states, desperately trying to backtrack.

"You're feeding your students false information so you can remain smarter than them?!", you reiterate, still horrified by this information. How could someone with such little care for the younger generations be hired as a teacher?

"You have no proof that I said that", rebuts Ms. Clivinsky. "Without proof, those statements are just slander meant to make a poor, old woman look bad."

You can't stomach this anymore. You rise from your desk, furious. "I'll be DAMNED if I'm gonna sit here and listen to any lecture from some hag whose entire career is built upon LIES", you declare, ready to storm out of the class.

"You take one step outside that door and I will make sure you NEVER get a passing grade in this school again", threatens the malignant tumor of this school.

Damn it all...can you really not do anything to stop her? She WAS right in that you had no proof beyond the rest of the students as witnesses, but that could easily be thrown out as a bunch of kids ganging up on a teacher they don't like.

As you contemplate sacrificing your grade-point average, the door to the classroom flings open once more. Everyone's eyes are drawn towards the disturbance, gasps of shock tear through the crowd.

Standing in the doorway was Bartleby, his golden locks flowing gallantly in the breeze.

...Where WAS a breeze coming from, anyway? There's no windows nearby.

"Your reign of terrorizing your students is over, Clivinsky", proclaims Bartleby as he enters the room. "Or perhaps, I should use your REAL name...Miss Clivinsteinbergbaumsteinowitzki?"

Miss...your teacher is taken aback by the accusation. "What?!", she hisses stepping back from Bartleby.

After Bartleby entered the classroom, someone dressed in a policeman's uniform came in after him. You couldn't make out his facial features, though, as he was hanging his head low, and his hat covered his eyes.

"You've escaped justice for far too long, Clivinsteinbergbaumsteinowitzki...", says the unknown officer.

"Who the HELL are you?!", quizzes the wrinkled prune.

"You don't know me, but you knew my great-grandfather, back in Berlin", replies the concealed copper. "They said it was suicide, but the reality was, you and your Jew Crew MURDERED him"

"O-OY VEY!", the shambling Semite cries out. "These aryan men are harassing a helpless old Hebrew woman! It's another Shoah!"

The glint in her eyes tells you that she's used this line to get out of trouble before.

"That trick is as dried-out and crusty as your vagina", Bartleby firmly responds. "Besides, you can't make me feel guilty, because my family never owned any black slaves"

"...'Shoah' refers to the Holocaust, not slavery", replies your teacher, who actually isn't much of a teacher, so you're not sure why you keep referring to her as such.

"Oh", Bartleby says. "Well, it still doesn't make me feel bad"

"It's taken eighty years", continues the enigmatic enforcer. "Two whole generations of us hunting down each member of the Jew Crew, and now, finally, it's just you that's left."

The officer steps towards the shrivelled schoolmarm. She takes a good look at the cop before coming to a stunning realization.

"W-wait!", she shouts out in fear. "Y-you couldn't possibly be--"

Before she can finish, the officer pulls out his pistol and shoots her. She feebly clutches her chest before falling dead to the ground in front of everyone.

The policeman then unloads nine more rounds into her corpse.

"...Self-defense. You all saw her come at me with a knife", states the copper.

The classroom erupts in a series of cheers and applause. You have a horrified look frozen on your face. You just watched an old woman be murdered, and you barely understand why.

Bartleby places a reassuring hand on the cop's shoulder. "That was some fine policework, Officer Hitler", Bartleby praises.

"I couldn't have done it without you, Mr. Montclair", replies the cop, tears forming in his eyes. "I'm just glad to finally put the Jew Crew to rest. I wonder what great-grandpa Adolf would think now that it's over"

"He would have been proud", declares Bartleby. "You've done good, today. Go tell your chief that you're taking the rest of the day off, courtesy of Bartleby Montclair of Dresden"

"Heh. Thanks, Bartleby", retorts Officer Hitler. "I'm gonna need the rest. Tomorrow, the Floyd Family Crime Syndicate's going down"

The policeman exits the classroom. Bartleby turns towards the students in the room. "You're free to do with the corpse as you wish", he states before marching out of the class.

The majority of students proceed to leap from their seats and tear at the woman's corpse like monkeys tearing apart a squirrel. Loud squelching and bones crunching resound through the class.

You really weren't prepared for today.

You look over to see Sonia is back in good spirits. You finally had a question you could ask her.

"Sonia, is every period this...Lively?", you ask, pointing towards the absolute savagery before you. The children have begun stripping Clivins-whatever's carcass like a deer and beating the fleshy parts with the bony parts they break loose.

"Hmm...not always", Sonia replies after some thought. "Sometimes we get out early because of a bomb threat"

...You weren't 100% certain, but you swore you heard something like a 'pop' in your head.

END CHAPTER 22

Chapter 23 - Dope On A Rope

With the English teacher thoroughly slain, and the children's bloodthirst slaked, everyone in class decided to treat the rest of the period as free time.

Most chose to scroll through their tiktok feeds on their phones, some took selfies with Clivinsky's tattered remains, but you and Sonia decided to just chat for a few minutes.

"Hey, what's your schedule look like?", Sonia asked you. "Maybe we share some more classes!"

You proceed to pull out your schedule from your backpack and hand it over to her. She pores over your document for a few moments.

"Oh, cool!", she exclaims. "We share Gym class! Lunch, too!"

Her enthusiasm fades as she goes down the list, however. "Aww. We don't see each other after lunch", Sonia gripes. "That's a bit of a bummer"

That DOES suck. Sonia's pretty much the only person here you can rely on to not kill you or treat you like dog shit.

"...Well, we still ride the same bus", you say, trying to cheer up your friend. "Besides, they say 'absence makes the heart grow fonder', or something like that"

Sonia perks up a bit. "I guess that's true", she remarks. "At least gym will be fun! We share that with my brothers, Mindy, and Bartleby, too!"

Well, that's neat. You can't say it makes you any more excited to go to gym class, but at least there'll be people to talk to/suffer with.

You and Sonia spend the rest of the period shooting the shit. You also try to teach her a few things about English, but you fear none of it sticks without the skittles game to reinforce the lesson.

All too soon, the bell rings, and second period comes to an end. You step over the messy corpse of your once-teacher and return to your locker on the first floor.

Fortunately, you didn't run into Knuckles on the way. You replace your math and english textbooks with your history book and gym clothes. Following that, you head to room 109.

Ironically, nothing of note happens in History class. The only thing you learned was that your teacher, Mr. Rupert, was about as engaging as a bundle of wet newspapers.

It didn't help that his curriculum was more shit you already learned in Elementary school. Yeah, Grover Cleveland WAS the only president to serve two nonconsecutive terms. Whoop-de-fuckin'-doo.

You praise whatever deity caused the bell to ring, signalling the end of third period. Although, maybe that praise is a bit premature. Gym was next, but first, you had to stop by the teacher's lounge.

You quickly dash out of history class and book it to the nearest flight of stairs. Climbing up to the second floor, you had to now dodge the waves of traffic filling the hallways until you finally reach your destination.

The black placard next to a simple wooden door reads 'Teacher's Lounge'. You approach the door and knock on it a few times, hoping Mr. Stevens would answer. The door creaks ajar after a few seconds.

An unfamiliar teacher then appears from behind it. A middle aged-blond-haired man, wearing it in a high ponytail eyes you up suspiciously.

"Can I help you?", asks the unknown teacher.

"Uh, hi, is Mr. Stevens here?", you ask in response. "I need to see him about an assignment".

The man before you looks back into the teacher's lounge and calls out "Hey, Stevens, some faggot student of yours is here to see you"

That's just rude.

A few moments later, Mr. Stevens comes to the doorway.

"Oh, thank you, Brian", says Mr. Stevens. 'Brian' begins to walk away from the door, when suddenly, your math teacher stops him.

"Uhm, b-before you go", Stevens stammers, "W-would it be too much trouble to ask..."

Stevens trails off for some odd reason. He seems quite bashful about this request.

'Brian' rolls his eyes. "Ugh. Fine", he grunts. "Open your mouth"

Wait, what.

Mr. Stevens opens his mouth wide and sticks out his tongue.

'Brian' then hawks a loogie right into Mr. Steven's mouth before walking back into the lounge.

The sight of this disgusting act causes you to wretch and look away, uttering a mortified "Oh God"

Stevens swirls the spittle around in his mouth for a bit, moaning sensually. He then swallows loudly.

No therapist on Earth could repair what damage this school's done to your psyche over the last week.

"Oh, excuse me, Anon", Mr. Stevens apologizes. "I was just, uhm, getting a drink"

"YEAH, I SEE THAT", you loudly state, refusing to look at your perverted teacher. "C-can I PLEASE just get my assignment so I can go?", you ask, hoping to finish this awkward encounter as soon as you can.

Stevens reaches for a worksheet, and promptly hands it to you. "Page 17, problems 20 through 39", he then instructs.

"Uh, thanks", you mumble, still refusing to maintain eye contact with the masochist before you.

"I gotta go. Coach Johnson's gonna be pissed if I'm--", you start to declare, before Mr. Stevens interrupts you.

"C-coach Johnson?!", cries the cowardly preceptor. "Your fourth period class is GYM?! Why didn't you TELL me, lad?!"

"I-I only found out after I left your class!", you frantically respond.

"For God's sakes, GO, Anon!", shrieks Mr. Stevens, pointing towards the stairway you came from. "I might want him to step on my balls, but YOU don't deserve what will happen if you're late for his class!"

You desperately nod your head as you charge away to the gym, ignoring Mr. Stevens' odd remark.

You were running out of time. The gym was clear on the west side of the school's first floor, and you were in the east wing of the second. Fortunately, the trip back downstairs was much less crowded, as the majority of the other students had already filed into their classes at this point.

The soles of your shoes squeak on the tile floor as you beat your way through the labyrinthian corridors.

Finally, before you is a set of metal double doors leading to the gymnasium. You loudly burst through them, unsure of how much time you had left before you were tardy.

The bell rings out immediately as you enter. You made it by the skin of your teeth.

You glance around your surroundings. You entered from the bottom left corner of the gym. Bleachers line the wall opposite from you. To your right, at the furthest end of the gym, are entrances to the locker rooms.

Other than that, nothing else stands out. It's a high school gymnasium. Basketball hoops, wooden floor, if you've seen one, you've seen them all.

Your attention is drawn to the center of the gym, where a few students seem to be waiting in uniform in front of a man in unusually high-riding red shorts. Or are those hot pants?

Whatever, that's probably Coach Johnson. You hustle over towards him, panting and sweating after your mad dash. "I'm here! I'm not tardy!", you wheeze out loud, grabbing the teacher's attention.

Coach Johnson was wearing some sort of red baseball cap and white wife-beater. A silver whistle dangles from his neck on a chain, and he's holding a clipboard and pen in his hands.

"Name?", calls out the coach as he readies his clipboard.

"A-Anon, sir", you reply, saluting him as if on reflex.

"Put that fucking hand down, son", orders Johnson. "You're not in the Corps yet"

You hastily apologize and place your hand at your side, yet still you stand at attention.

"Seems you've been absent these last couple days", Johnson remarks. "You got any sort of explanation for that, pee-wee?", he then asks, shooting you a suspicious glare.

"U-uhm, I-I was sick, sir", you nervously stutter out. "W-with B-Bartleby Montclair P-Proximi--"

"YES, I'D ALREADY HEARD", Johnson suddenly barks out. His loud voice echoes through the gymnasium, causing everyone else to flinch.

"I received a note from that fat nurse HAG earlier today regarding your situation", Johnson explains. "It made for the SHITTIEST excuse for toilet paper! ROUGH! SCRATCHY! AND ALREADY COATED IN BULLSHIT!"

Oh lord. This guy was just as nuts as the rest of the faculty here.

"I do NOT want to hear your excuses!", shouts the increasingly red-faced coach. "TOMMY over there came down with BMPS, and he STILL comes to class every day!", he says, pointing towards a familiar quadriplegic child.

"H-hey Tommy", you meekly greet, waving at the crippled student. Tommy responds by flailing his arms and loudly gurgling out a "NYAAAAAGhGhH".

Coach Johnson glares at you. "W-we share math class", you justify, shrugging.

"I DID NOT ASK FOR YOUR LIFE STORY!!", screams Johnson, as he furiously points at the boy's locker room. "GET IN UNIFORM, SOLDIER! MOVE IT, MOVE IT, MOVE!!!"

You hastily scramble towards the direction he commands you to go. As you reach your goal, you spot several familiar faces exiting from the locker rooms.

Manic, Sonic, and Bartleby are all coming out, dressed in a simple white t-shirt, black shorts ensemble. Sonic's outfit seems to only barely fit him, as his shirt is bunched up around his nipples, leaving his massive gut exposed.

"Hey, Anon, you made it!", Manic remarks as he pats you on the back in passing.

You really can't get a read on Manic. One minute, you're good friends, the next, you're a pile of shit in his eyes.

Whatever, no time for that. You had to get changed. You stumble around the locker room, avoiding eye contact with anyone's genitals, before finding an empty locker to call your own.

Number 63. Good enough. Far away from anyone's lustful gaze. You fish out your uniform from your backpack, strip down to your underwear, and quickly get dressed for class.

You then stuff all of your belongings in your locker, close it, and pray no one steals anything from there before heading out to the gym once more.

It seems pretty much everyone has lined up around Coach Johnson. You notice that there's a rope dangling besides him hanging from the rafters.

You then spot some movement in your periphery. Sonia is excitedly waving at you, beckoning you to join her. You jog in her direction and stand beside her. She beams her adorable smile at you once again.

You return her smile, before someone runs their finger up your back, sending a chill up your spine.

You shift your eyes towards the source of the touching and spot Mindy in an ill-fitting uniform. Her breasts are barely held back by her cut-off shirt.

"I love a guy in uniform", she whispers to you, practically right inside your ear.

"H-h-hi, Mindy", you awkwardly greet, almost forcing a laugh.

"CAN THE CHATTER, LADIES!", bellows the coach. Everyone's eyes lock onto Coach Johnson as he presents the nearby rope.

"As you can see here, THIS...is a rope!", he shouts. "If you will point your FAT-ASSED heads upwards, YOU will see an orange flag tied to the END of this rope!"

You look up and, in fact, see said flag. Just barely, though. You try to measure just how high up it is from the floor.

Let's see...Coach Johnson looks like he's about six feet tall...stack him up on his shoulders...and...Holy shit.

HOLY SHIT, IT'S LIKE THIRTY FEET OFF THE GROUND! IS THIS NUTJOB SERIOUS?! WHY ISN'T THERE A FUCKING FLOOR MAT OUT TO CUSHION ANYONE'S FALL?!

"Attached to this flag is a BELL!", continues Coach Johnson. "When you have REACHED the flag, wiggle it to RING the bell, CLIMB back down, and get OUT of the way for the NEXT student!"

Bartleby eagerly steps forward. "Ah ha ha", he chortles. "Allow me to go first, coach, to demonstrate how easy this task is"

"That is a NEGATORY, Mr. Montclair", declares the drill sergeant. Bartleby is taken aback by this revelation.

"But...but, why?", asks the richest, sexiest man alive.

"Mr. Montclair, if you tug on that rope, the whole damned roof is going to collapse on us", explains the coach. "This school district CANNOT handle any more lawsuits. You are hereby EXEMPT from today's exercise"

"I...I see.", Bartleby somberly states. He balls his hands into fists. "Oh, woe is me. Why must I be cursed with such overwhelming amounts of strength, and beauty, and wealth, and fame, and kindness?", he ponders aloud.

"Don't despair, Mr. Montclair", reassures Mr. Johnson. "You aren't the only one sitting out the rope climb today"

Johnson shoots an irritated look towards Sonic. "Isn't that right, CHUNKUMS?"

"H-huh?" asks Sonic, confused by the accusatory proclamation.

"Hedgehog, you look at that rope and tell me with a straight face that it could withstand your 900-pound ASS dangling from it like a big blue DINGLEBERRY", shouts the coach.

"I...I was 812, when I last weighed myself...", Sonic bashfully retorts.

"I'm sure you were, FOUR YEARS AGO", mocks Johnson. "HEDGEHOG, you're a FUCKING FATASS, and that is WHY you will be spending the next forty-five minutes GETTING YOUR ANUS GAPPED BY YOUR BOYFRIEND IN THE LOCKER ROOM", he then proclaims.

"BARTLEBY!", Johnson calls out, "TAKE THIS FAT TUB OF SHIT AND SHOW HIM WHAT I'D DO TO HIM, IF HE WEREN'T CURRENTLY IN A RELATIONSHIP WITH YOU!!!"

Bartleby's mood has lifted significantly. "Ah ha ha he ha", he laughs. "Well, I suppose I can follow that order"

Bartleby drapes his massive, muscley arm around Sonic's shoulder. "Come, my bitch", he orders, "let's go get a REAL workout in"

"B-but Bartleby, I--", Sonic begins to say, before Bartleby slugs him in the face with a nasty right jab, knocking him to the ground.

"DID I GIVE YOU PERMISSION TO SPEAK?! ", Bartleby furiously asks. Sonic attempts to crawl away, but Bartleby grips him by his stumpy legs and launches him towards the boy's locker room.

Sonic lets out a blood-curdling scream as he hurtles through the air before landing near the entrance to the locker room. As he attempts to rise to his feet, Bartleby charges towards him and launches a savage haymaker, knocking Sonic down once more.

Bartleby then grips Sonic by his legs again, this time trying to drag him deeper into the locker room. Sonic desperately grabs onto the doorway. "Bartleby, my lover, please don't!", the blue bowling ball desperately pleads.

"Shut up, bitch!", Bartleby grunts with a strand of his golden hair stuck in his teeth. "Just let this happen! I NEED TO VENT MY FRUSTRATIONS!"

Sonic loses his grip and is dragged out of view, screaming bloody murder as various impact noises ring out from the room.

...You can't help but want what they have.

"AS FOR THE REST OF YOU MAGGOTS", shouts Coach Johnson, grabbing your attention, "YOU WILL NOT BE SO LUCKY!"

"We've already wasted enough time, so let's just get into it!", Johnson rapidly announces.

"SCRAWNYYYYYYY!", Johnson loudly calls out. The call echoes through the gym.

Nobody steps forward.

You glance around a bit, wondering if someone was distracted by something.

Wait.

Was he referring to you?

Are you 'Scrawny'?

Were you pissing him off even more by not immediately responding to him calling you by that nickname?

Unsure, you meekly step forward and raise your hand.
"U-uhm...sir? Am I...'Scrawny'?", you timidly ask.
"YOU ARE NOW! GET OVER HERE!", Johnson replies.

God...dammit.

You approach the rope before you. Somehow, the flag seems even further away from this angle than before. Apprehension has dug its talons deep into you.
You grip the rope and begin your ascent.

Oh holy mother of GOD, how do you have ZERO upper body strength?
You wriggle and struggle, you sweat and curse, and you inch your way up towards the tangerine-colored flag.
You dared not look down, either because you'd be either way too high up to survive a fall, or so close to the ground that you'd disappoint yourself into depression.
Eventually, you miraculously are within arm's reach of your goal. You stretch out your right arm, only centimeters away. With one more pull of your left arm, you manage to reach the flag, wiggling it frantically to signal your victory.
The tinny bell tinkles the most satisfying tune you've heard all day. You hear a few students below cheering at your accomplishment.

Now you just had to make it back dooooooOOOOOHHHHHHHHOOOOOOOOOOLY FUCK THAT'S A LONG DROP.
You fiercely clutch to the rope out of fear. After a few moments, you realize that if you DON'T move, you're definitely going to fall to your death at some point.
You now begin to slowly, SLOWLY, descend. Bring one hand down, grip, and then bring the other down below that. You repeat this process at a sluggish pace.
However, before you reach the bottom, the sweat from your hands causes your grip to suddenly slide down several feet.
The friction from the rope burns your palms, and, instinctively, you let go of the rope.

No.
NONONONOFUCK

...Have you ever heard the sound of a basketball being bounced really, REALLY hard in an empty auditorium or something? That really loud, reverberating POOHM sound?
That's approximately the sound you make when you land flat on your back from a height of about six feet.

You lay sprawled out on the buffed wooden floor, weakly moaning in pain. By some stroke of luck, you didn't break any bones, but your back was screaming at you for what you've just put it through.
Coach Johnson begins marking something down on his clipboard.
"Six minutes, forty-six seconds", he states. "Fucking dreadful"
Being too weak to tell him to fuck off, you groan in pain instead.
"Walk it off, sunshine, take a lap", Johnson callously orders.

Step one: acquire gun. Legal means or otherwise.
Step two: bring it to school. A pistol can certainly be concealed in a lunchbox.
Step three: KILL COACH JOHNSON. AND ANYONE ELSE WHO CROSSES YOU.

Sonia and Manic appear above you. "You okay, Anon?", asks Sonia with concern.
...You're gonna have to worm "Warn Sonia beforehand" into your plan somewhere.

"Eh...I've survived worse, you know", you weakly report. "...like, when I almost died. This is DEFINITELY a close second, though."
"Heheheheheh", Manic chuckles to himself, pointing at you. "You fell", he simply states.
Being too weak to tell Manic to fuck off, you simply shoot him a glare of disgust instead.

"Well, I'm just TICKLED PINK you found that so amusing, Manic", declares your sadistic coach, "'CAUSE YOUR GRASSY ASS IS GOING UP THERE NEXT"
"Ugh, maaaaaan", whines Manic as he approaches the rope of terror. "QUIT YOUR GRIPING AND GET UP THERE!", shouts Johnson.
"Jawohl, Coach Jarhead", Manic sardonically replies, giving a Roman salute.
"ONE MORE REMARK LIKE THAT, HEDGEHOG, SO HELP ME GOD, YOU WON'T HAVE ENOUGH ROOM FOR LUNCH AFTER WHAT I'M GONNA CRAM DOWN YOUR THROAT!!!!", blusters the coach, his face turning crimson from rage.

Manic rolls his eyes and begins climbing. In the meantime, Sonia has helped you to your feet once more.
"Thanks, Sonia", you tell her. "Seems you're always peeling me off the floor."
"No prob, Anon", Sonia reassures you. "You'd do the same for me, right?"
"Heh. If you're ever in that situation, gladly", you reply. The two of you begin walking around the perimeter of the gym. Hopefully this counts as 'taking a lap', you're not about to start jogging like this.

After a minute or so, you hear Manic ring the bell at the top of the rope. He then quickly clambers back down the rope and reaches the floor.
Coach Johnson marks down Manic's time. "Three minutes, four seconds", he remarks. "The second worst time of the day so far. Take a damned lap, you disgust me"
Manic gives a half-hearted salute and begins jogging around the gym, before reaching your position and meeting your slower pace.

"HEDGEHOG, SONIA!", Johnson yells out. Sonia perks up. "Shoot, I'm up! Keep an eye on Anon, Manic", Sonia chirps before dashing off. "I can see why everyone here fears Coach Johnson", you comment to Sonia's green brother. "The guy's a complete monster" "Eh, he's not so bad", replies the verdant hedgehog, "just don't be late for his class, don't fuck around, and don't be weak, and you're golden in his eyes"

You suddenly hear the tinkling bell of the rope ringing out. What the fuck, Sonia left, like twelve seconds ago, she already made it up to the top? Sonia rapidly climbs down and reaches the bottom in no time flat. "How was that, coach?", asks the pink Mobian, worn out from the exercise. "After a few adjustments...", mutters the coach. "FIFTEEN MINUTES, TWENTY-SIX SECONDS! GOD! DAMN IT!", he suddenly shouts, tossing his hat to the ground in disgust.

FUCKING WHAT?! That's BULLSHIT! She just blew through everyone's record like it was nothing! You stop in your tracks and voice your concerns. "Where the FUCK are you getting FIFTEEN FUCKING MINUTES from?!", you cry out. Johnson glares at you. "YOU failed to account for the FIVE minutes it takes for a woman to make a sammich, and the TEN minutes it takes to iron a man's CLOTHES!", bellows the sadistic bastard. "DON'T YOU FUCKING QUESTION MY METHODS, SCRAWNY", he continues shouting, "OR, SO HELP ME, YOU WILL BE THE OWNER OF A BRAND-SPANKING-NEW MUDHOLE, COURTESY OF MY FUCKING STEEL-TOED BOOTS!!!"

"FORTUNATELY,", he goes on, "due to our DEPRESSINGLY lowered standards for WOMEN, I am OBLIGATED to PASS such a terrible performance! By technical standards, she did fantastic for a fucking GIRL!" "BARBIE! LAP!", he beckons to Sonia, who happily complies. She briskly jogs around the gym until once again reaching your position and slowing to your crawl.

"Thanks for trying to stand up for me, Anon", Sonia whispers as she rejoins you. "Didn't take you for one of those male feminist types", Manic grumbles. "I'm NOT, I just think the way he treats Sonia when she did great was total bullshit", you reply. "Why are you upset?", queries Sonia. "He said that I did great for being a girl" "Sonia, you did great, PERIOD", you respond. "You blew both me and Manic out of the water. You should be proud of your accomplishments" Sonia starts to blush and shyly looks away, clasping her hands together.

"How the hell did you even do so well, anyway?", you quiz. "Well, we used to be Freedom Fighters back on Mobius", Sonia answers. "We had to do shit like that when we were, like, ten" "So, how come Manic took six times as long as you to do that?", you ponder. Manic lets out an offended "HEY" "'cuz Manic's fat and useless", replies Sonia, before giggling. Manic lets out an even louder "HEY!" while you two laugh at him. "Last I checked, I whooped YOUR sorry ass record!", Manic shouts. "...Okay, fair enough", you concede, rubbing the back of your neck in shame.

"Coach", calls out Mindy, "when's it gonna be MY turn to climb that THICK rope?", asks the buxom vixen. "LATOUR", Johnson shouts, "the SECOND you start climbing, that damn rope's gonna be COVERED in your boob sweat! You're going LAST!" "Three minutes, FIFTY-SEVEN seconds!", he declares, before ordering the previous student to run a lap. "TOMMY! GET YOUR ASS UP THERE!" Tommy goes "GAAARAAGHGHGAAGAHGRHG" in response. "DON'T YOU FUCKING SASS ME, HOT WHEELS!" furiously cries Coach Johnson.

The rest of the period basically went on in this fashion, Coach Johnson screaming out student names, the students climb the rope, do decently enough, the coach berates them anyway before ordering them to run a lap. Things only got interesting when Mindy finally took the challenge and wound up performing some sort of mix between a Cirque du Soleil act and poledancing routine. Johnson was fucking pissed, but it was pretty funny watching her respond by attempting to tease him sexually. You could see the veins bulging out of his skull near the end of the period.

You had the third worst time out of all the students, not counting Sonia, only barely beating out Tommy and Mindy. This was your wakeup call, you need to do some fucking push-ups every once in a while.

END CHAPTER 23

Chapter 24 - By The Razor's Edge

You manage to pry your belongings from locker 63 of the now completely fucking wrecked boy's locker room. It seems Bartleby had a lot of fun battering Sonic around in here, as most of the lockers were damaged beyond repair, as were the shower heads and urinals.

Now back in your casual clothes, you exit the locker room, and prepare to head to the lunchroom in the far east section of the first floor. Sonia, Mindy, Manic, Sonic and Bartleby are all gathered together near the exit to the gymnasium. Sonia happily waves you over.

Bartleby is cradling a bloody, bruised Sonic in his arms like a baby.

"Oh, my bitch, Daddy is sorry", Bartleby sorrowfully apologizes to his lover. "I guess I got a little carried away back there. I was just so frustrated and--"

Sonic interrupts Bartleby's apology by placing his broken hand upon his golden lover's mouth.

"Bartleby, my lover, I'll endure any pain you throw at m--", he begins to say, before once again being stricken by one of Bartleby's powerful punches, knocking out several teeth.

"WHAT DID I TELL YOU ABOUT SPEAKING OUT OF TURN, BITCH?!?", the richest man alive angrily shouts.

"As I was saying", Bartleby continues, seemingly returning to his calmer self, "for surviving my wrath for forty-five minutes, I'm going to give you the most luxurious lunch you've ever had, catered by the single greatest Mexican restaurant on Earth: Taco Bell."

Sonic's bloodshot eyes tear up at the generosity. "Oh...oh Bartleby", Sonic moans, before nuzzling into Bartleby's pecs.

"Ah ha ha", Bartleby laughs. "I knew that'd cheer you up, bitch".

Bartleby then turns to the rest of the group. "Sniff you farts later", he callously states before princess-carrying Sonic away down the hall. Only Bartleby could carry that load so easily.

"You know", Manic says to Mindy, "that little dance on the rope you did just for me really riled me up, slut."

"Oh Manic", Mindy replies in her usual sultry fashion, "It's so cute that you think that", she goes on, pinching his chubby cheek.

"Well, you're always calling me CUTE", he responds, loudly slapping her ass as the last word comes out. Mindy lets out a surprised whoop at the sudden spank.

"Alright, we're headed to the cafeteria", Manic announces. "See you guys there"

As the two of them leave, Mindy silently blows you a kiss.

...Why is she flirting with you?

"I gotta stop by my locker for something, is that okay?", Sonia asks you, as if your input matters.

"Um, that's fine", you reply. "I gotta stop by mine anyway, so we can just meet up later."

"Okay", responds the pink Mobian. "I'll see you at the lunchroom, then."

She then dashes off towards the east wing of the school. You head back towards locker 217, deeper down the hall you're standing in.

When you make it there, you unload your unnecessary stuff from the last two periods and load up your art supplies, and your science and literature textbooks.

As you finish your work and get ready for some prison-tier cafeteria grub, a strangely familiar voice calls out.

"HEY! A NERD!", the voice angrily bellows.

You glance up, and see Rufio from first period stomping up towards you.

...Why did he call you 'a nerd', instead of just 'nerd'? That doesn't make any sense.

...Oooooohhhhhh, wait, he wasn't calling you a nerd, he was calling you A-Nerd, like a portmanteau of 'Anon' and 'Nerd'.

It's not very clever, though. It's kinda clunky. A better insult would have been 'Ass-non' or something along those lines. Something that keeps the second syllable of your name intact. That's what's most identifiable.

As you internally ponder the best ways of insulting yourself, you fail to notice Rufio has approached you and is now grabbing you by the collar of your shirt and slamming you into your locker.

Your back aches in pain horribly, still bruised from your fall during gym. You're gonna be sleeping on a block of ice for a week at this rate.

"W-what the fuck, man?!", you shout, hoping for some explanation for Rufio's aggressive behavior.

"You got some BALLS, A-Nerd", Rufio hisses. "You know how bad you're making us look when you act all smart?"

"I...answered one simple question in math", you hesitantly retort, confused by Rufio's fury. Seriously, five plus six is something a fucking preschooler could answer right.

There was a crowd growing around the two of you. Many kids have pulled out their phones, hoping to record a bloodbath.

"Oh, most kids here already know that the curriculum's super fucking easy", reveals the swarthy hoodlum. "But the fucking TEACHERS don't know that we know!"

"Wait, so everyone here's just ACTING like they're retarded so they can get out of harder schoolwork?", you piece together.

"No, Anon", Rufio responds. "A lot of us NEVER want to leave high school, so we act stupid to get held back as much as possible"

"W-what?", you ask, confounded by this revelation. "Why would you never want to leave high school? This place sucks!"

"Let's face it, Anon", says Rufio, "for a lot of people, high school's the best time of their life. Everyone in on the scheme KNOWS life goes downhill from here. So, we're not gonna LEAVE here."

"Th-that's insane", you utter. Rufio responds to this by brandishing a fucking switchblade.

"NO! No, it isn't!", Rufio mutters with a deranged look in his eyes. His breathing has become haggard, like he's about to snap at any moment.

"...How 'bout we make your 'four-eyes' three, A-Nerd?", Rufio whispers as he slowly waves his knife before you. His right eye has a twitch.

"...I'm not wearing glasses", you flatly reply. "'Four-eyes' is only an insult to people with glasses"

"DON'T FUCKING SASS ME", Rufio barks, pressing the knife against your cheek. Its blade is cold.

As the realization that you're probably going to be seriously wounded or killed sets in, you hear a deep voice call out from the crowd.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing, Rufio", a familiar red figure coldly asks as he marches from the audience.

Aww, Knuck, it's Fuckles!

...wait.

Rufio is immediately taken aback by the sudden appearance of the echidna and releases his grip on you, causing you to drop to the floor. "Kn-nuh-nuh-nuh-nununuhh-KNUCKLES!", the ruffian anxiously stammers, stepping back. "Haaa-heyyyy! H-ha-how's it goin', bro?", he asks, nervously laughing.

"I asked you a question, RUFIO", Knuckles firmly states. "And I'm NOT your bro."

"Ruh-right!", Rufio answers, still anxious. "Uhm, I-I-I was just, uh, takin' care of this, uh, fuckin' NERD here, y'know? Hahaheh", he chortles, pointing to you.

Knuckles looks right at you. "...Really?", he states, before glaring at Rufio once more. "You're trying to poach MY mark?"

"Yuh...your mark?", Rufio peeps. "Oh. Uhm. I'm...sorry, Knux, uh...I-I-I didn't, uhm..."

"Of course you didn't know", Knuckles interrupts. "Because nobody who knows who I am bothers talking to you. Because you're NOT fucking cool, Rufio"

"Ah...c...come on, man", Rufio replies, holding back tears. "D...don't say that! I...I can be a real big help to you! I-I was just softenin' this turd up for ya, really!"

As the last words come out of Rufio's mouth, Knuckles grabs Rufio by his shirt and pulls him down to his eye level. Knuckles was livid.

"You think I NEED a shithead like you to soften my targets for me?!", Knuckles snarls. Rufio was completely lost.

"Ah...nuh...I didn't...I didn't mean it, Kn-Knux", he tearfully pleads. "I...I was just kiddin'..."

Ohhh, fuck, dude, BAD call.

Knuckles immediately responds to this blatant disrespect by delivering a terrific gut punch to Rufio. The impact lifts Rufio off the ground for a second.

Rufio immediately vomits up blood. Knuckles lets go of Rufio's shirt, allowing him to attempt to crawl on all fours for about a foot and a half. Rufio looks up at you with a face begging for mercy. "p-please help m--", he pleads, before Knuckles kicks him in his jaw, sending his face through the bottom of a nearby locker.

Rufio's body lies motionless. You can only mutter a "Holy shit..." under your breath. Your gaze returns to your crimson 'savior'.

"You got my money yet, BITCH?", Knuckles asks you, with the same cold glare he had when he first approached.

Thinking quickly, you dive towards Rufio's (probably) lifeless corpse and begin patting down his pants. He had to have something here you can use.

You feel his wallet in his back pocket and you immediately fish it out.

...He had a velcro wallet?

You were being intimidated by a punk with a fucking Little Einsteins VELCRO WALLET?

...You had no time to feel disgusted with yourself. You pry open the billfold and spot a picture of Andrew Jackson staring back at you. You never thought you'd be happier seeing the face of the man who hated Indians almost as much as you do.

You snatch the twenty dollar bill out and frantically hand it towards Knuckles.

"HERE, TWENTY BUCKS", you quickly offer. Knuckles eyes you up for a moment before grabbing the bill from your hands.

"...quick thinking, Anon.", remarks the echidna, stuffing the legal tender in his front pocket. "I like that. Maybe you and me CAN be friends, after all"

...Yay?

"ANON!", calls out a certain pink hedgehog from the now-dispersing crowd.

Sonia rushes up to you and immediately gives you a big hug. You keep your hands as far from her as possible, making sure Knuckles can still see them from where he's standing.

"Oh my god, Anon, I'm so glad you're okay!", Sonia cries, burying her face into your chest. Oh dear lord, you're turning redder than Knuckles right now.

"I was so scared, Anon", weeps the normally cheery hedgehog. "When I was heading to my locker, I heard someone call out 'A Nerd', and I instantly thought of you"

...that's...kinda hurtful, actually. Well, she was right, but still...

"So, I ran back to where you were and saw a big crowd gathering,", Sonia goes on, "and I spotted you being held up by that big guy in the denim vest"

"I wanted to help you, but I couldn't push past the crowd, and I started freaking out", blubbers the poor pink girl before you. "then Knuckles showed up and I pointed him towards you and I couldn't stop crying and..."

Sonia's speech trails off into incoherent crying and sobbing. Jesus, she was really worried about you. It...feels kinda nice, knowing someone cares about you this much.

You finally put your hands on Sonia's shoulders to try and push her away from you for a bit so you can look her in the eyes.

"Hey, hey, it's OKAY, Sonia", you reassure her. "I'm not hurt, see? Everything turned out just fine"

Sonia sniffles and tries wiping away her tears. "Yeah...", she whimpers. "...and...I guess it's all 'cause of Knuckles, huh?", she asks.

Aw, fuck, it IS all because of Knuckles.

"Y-yeah, heh, I uh, I guess I owe him one, huh?", you say.

Oooooohhhh, WHY did you fucking SAY that? Knuckles gets this mischievous smirk on his face the moment those cursed words leave your

mouth.

"Alright, enough crying like little fucking babies", Knuckles orders. Sonia finally stops crying as the two of you stand up. "C'mon, let's go get some lunch, bitch", he then declares.

"You too, Sonia", he then remarks.

...goddammit.

END CHAPTER 24

Chapter 25 - Collecting Debts

Knuckles, Sonia, and you proceed to the cafeteria together. As you head through the double doors, you're greeted by an absolute melee of a crowd bustling about.

It's hard to tell where you're supposed to go to get food in here.

At least, until you spot the absolutely fuckhuge line near the left side of the area, leading into the slophouse.

There's a sign nearby the line, with a note taped to it, reading the following:

TODAYS SPECIAL:
TACO THURSDAY

VEGAN OPTION:
TATER TOTS

Yes, they misspelled 'Thursday'. They also forgot an apostrophe. And WHY did they choose Comic Sans as their font?

You can see why the employees here chose Lunch Lady as their profession over Teacher.

Of course, considering the faculty you've come across all day today, they'd probably fit right in, regardless.

Well, there's no sense complaining about it, they don't need to be geniuses to slop some ground beef-like substance onto a styrofoam tray.

You, Sonia and Knuckles find your place in line and begin slowly lurching ahead with the rest of the student body.

Sonia prattles on at Knuckles, who shows absolutely zero interest in what she's saying.

As you enter the slop house proper, you examine your surroundings.

There were actually several serving areas, making the set-up like a buffet, though there were some people manning the stations instead of just letting kids grab what they want.

Not a bad call, considering the hygiene of the average student here would probably lead to massive increases in Typhus for the county.

The largest serving area was where the "special of the day" was served. Tacos, specifically. Although, these "tacos" were just a scoop of ground beef drizzled with shredded lettuce and cheese. There wasn't even a tortilla.

Though they did offer a small bag of plain Fritos as a side. Close enough, probably.

The other areas seemed to serve very basic replacements for kids that didn't want the special, but nothing in particular caught your eye as appetizing. You grab a nearby tray and hop in the taco line, waiting to be served.

You spot Knuckles making a beeline towards some freezers off in the corner. He proceeds to pile a number of ice cream bars onto his tray, chuckling to himself.

"Knuckles the Cool Echidna's eating like a fucking KING today", he says outloud, before entering the checkout line.

Sonia, having retrieved her meal, follows suit.

When it's finally time to get your food, some hag behind the counter slops the beef haphazardly onto your foam tray. To think, THIS was the most appetizing option here.

You head into the checkout line like the others before you. Realizing you're gonna have to pay for your food, you fish your wallet out of your pocket to get your money ready.

A single picture of George Washington stares back at you. Yet again.

...Aw, fuck. You haven't gotten your allowance yet.

The hag at the checkout eyes you suspiciously as you nervously glance between her and your nearly empty wallet.

You sheepishly pull out your single dollar and ask, "what can I get for one dollar?"

"You can get out of line", the lunchlady flatly replies.

...Yeah, that's fair. You abandon your lunch and sullenly head towards the eating area of the cafeteria. You spot Sonia giddily waving you over to a table where she and the others are sitting.

Sonia's expression quickly turns from cheery to concerned. "What's the matter, Anon?", she asks, "Not feeling hungry?"

"No, but I'm flat broke", you respond, despondently. "Can't buy any food without money."

Sonia's face then becomes shocked, before turning into one of resolve. She rises out of her seat and presents her tray of food to you.

"Here, Anon, you can have mine", she offers. "I'll go back into line to get another tray"

"Sonia, no, I'm not gonna take your food", you quickly decline. After everything this girl's done for you, you'd feel like a shitty leech if you kept taking her kindness without giving anything in return.

"It's okay, Anon", justifies the pep-filled Mobian as she leaves her seat. "Since we're poor, the government pays for our lunches!"

Sonia quickly runs off to get back into line. You're gonna have to think about how you can repay her at some point.

You take a seat at the table and slide Sonia's tray closer to you. You're about to dig into your donated food when you hear a series of loud, wet smacks coming from beside you.

Glancing over at the disturbance, you spot Manic and Mindy heavily making out right next to you. Before you can be too mortified to divert your attention away from them, you spot ground beef chunks wedged between the two lovers' tongues.

Well, so much for your appetite. And your chance at friendly conversation.

All you were left with was Knuckles, who was happily munching away at his veritable mountain of ice cream bars, bought by his ill-gotten gains, that YOU got for him.

Even so, you two might actually be on better terms than this morning, right?

What harm is there in trying to strike up a conversation?

Although, now that the idea's entered your head, you find yourself struggling to think of an icebreaker to get started.

As the gears in your head grind while thinking of a topic, Knuckles actually starts to speak.

"So, about you owing me for saving your life...", the Echidna begins, with his mouth full.

Ah. Right. THAT.

You sigh, frustrated at yet another debt you need to pay off. "Alright, I'm gonna lay down some ground rules about that", you start.

"I'm not gonna help you shake down any other kids for cash, and I'm not hurting or killing anyone else on your behalf either", you ramble.

Knuckles remains silent.

"Also, I'm not gonna do anything involving sex work, genitals, butts or anything related to excrement", you add, hoping to cover any depraved and disgusting bases for his no doubt torturous intentions.

"You know, you're making an awful lot of demands for a guy who owes someone their LIFE", Knuckles finally responds.

"My life ain't worth that much", you riposte. Knuckles smirks a bit.

"Fair", states the crimson terror beside you. "Wasn't gonna make you do any shit like that anyways."

A pleasant surprise. Still, better to be safe than sorry.

"Rufio was talking about how you're a fucking nerd, though", Knuckles continues.

"I've...heard that term lobbed at me a few times", you hesitantly admit.

"Then it should be no problem to do my homework for me for two months, right?", the Echidna finally reveals his offer.

Two months of doing Knuckles' homework for him? Normally, that'd be a tall order, but considering the difficulty of the curriculum in general, it shouldn't be a problem for you.

Having to endure it for two months is gonna suck, but you'll manage.

"Alright, deal", you acquiesce. As soon as your negotiations finish, Manic and Mindy finally untie their tongues, each gasping for air after making out like frenzied monkeys.

"Sorry about that, lust took over for a minute", Manic informs the table before glancing around. "What'd I miss?"

"Nothing, don't worry about it", Knuckles responds before returning to his increasingly sloppy ice cream. Manic then digs back into his 'taco'.

As you're about to start chowing down yourself, you spot Sonia coming back towards the table, though she seems downtrodden compared to earlier.

When she gets close and sets down her tray, you see it's full of tater tots and immediately figure out what happened.

"They were all out of tacos", Sonia pouts. "I got stuck with the shitty vegan menu."

Yep. You were afraid this would happen.

You glance back and forth between your tray and hers a few times before coming to a decision.

With a swift movement, you vivisect the taco scoop on your plate and slop it onto her platter. Like you could eat it, knowing your friend gave up her perfectly good lunch for your fuck-up, and got stuck with something infinitely worse because of it.

Sonia seems shocked by the gesture for a few moments, before grabbing a handful of her tots and dropping them on your plate in return. She beams her adorable smile at you.

"Now, we're even!", she chirps.

Not even close. But at least you improved her mood. Feeling good once again, you finally ingest the garbage in front of you.

It's certainly something one would eat to prevent hunger pangs. But the same could probably be said of sawdust.

END CHAPTER 25