

Chapter 16

“Why a bowling meet?”

“It’s a nice break from the cons and parades we’ve had Mal appear in over the summer. Also, it’s a very popular way to hold a local furry gathering year-round,” Rick explained. “The owner here has been very supportive of the furry community for years.” Rick shrugged. “I suppose it helps that we bring them steady business year-round. White Mountain State University’s Furry Club has been hosting these here every other month for many years. Sometimes, local alumni show-up, or we’ll get students from Dartmouth too as it’s about half-way between both communities. The only drawback here is that it is such a small business that they don’t have an alcove or separate room to change-up in other than their small restrooms. That’s why I needed to have the suit partially on for the trip over from Groton. I really appreciate you coming up and agreeing to this. I could have attended without Mal, but folks up here have been asking to see him. Mal’s Chatter account following surpassed 10,000 two weeks ago as you’re aware. It’ll also be a nice small meet compared to some of those Second Fur has had me attend these last few months. That has been a challenge to do around my usual work schedule. And it’s been tough for me to participate in the events the WMSU Furry Club has put on making it difficult for me to do my job as their advisor. As fun as it is to perform as Mal, it doesn’t pay my day-to-day bills, Jim.”

Jim bit his tongue. He knew Nate planned to offer Rick a paying position at the company meeting arranged for Saturday and it wasn’t his place to mention it in advance. He pulled into the small parking lot outside the Canaan Bowl-o-Rama. It was a typical mid-September “false summer” evening in west central New Hampshire. Lightning flashed in the distance and thunder rolled through a few moments later.

“Obviously, we’re here. Good thing we’ll be inside,” Jim quipped as he parked the vehicle in the small parking lot. They walked in. He looked around. As Rick had mentioned, it was rather small, smaller than Jim expected. Then he realized it was a candlepin bowling operation, which explained why it seemed smaller than he expected. Twelve lanes with candlestick-style pins and balls a little larger than a softball. A birthday party was happening at one end. The furry group was gathered at the other.

“Stash! You made it!” a few students exclaimed as Rick put his head and paws on, pushed the power button, waited a moment and then crouched down into his squirrel squat. He looked at Jim briefly. “One potential problem just occurred to me. I’m not sure how I’m going to walk-up to bowl. I may need to switch this to anthro-mode when it’s my turn. We’ll see. At least I’ll be able to keep the paws on with the small candlepin balls.”

Mal’s tail wigwagged and he scampered over to join the crowd consisting of mostly college students. They cheered his arrival. Jim ordered a pizza. As he was technically working and the driver, he got a soda rather than a beer, sat back, and monitored things through his tablet.

A boy from the birthday party came over and held-up a hand for a high-five and the five or so suiters gave him one. He laughed and ran back down to the other end of the alley to the birthday party. Some of the adults started pointing at Rick/Mal after glancing at their phones. Rick turned

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to Jim pointing to this. "I'm sure before the evening is out his family will be asking for pictures. It's good PR for the furry community, and hopefully, for Second Fur." He turned to the others. "Hey, everyone, before I forget! This is Jim. He's head of the team at Second Fur Mascot Costumes who designed Mal."

Jim spent a lot of time after that explaining about the suit and Second Fur. Soon, his pizza arrived along with several others for the furry group and several pitchers of soda. He glanced up in time to watch Mal and tensed up. Mal attempted to pick-up a candlepin ball with his teeth and chattered when he couldn't.

"Pistachio!" One of the students called out. "Those aren't nuts!" Everyone laughed. Jim relaxed not realizing he had tensed up. Of course, Rick would goof off in suit.

"They aren't?" Mal/Pistachio responded and drooped his tail briefly. He then gathered a ball in his right paw. "You're right. It's way too heavy to be a nut, even if it was a coconut. Maybe a little over two pounds (one kg)." He wigwagged his tail. "But if they were nuts, I wouldn't need to gather all that many to make it through the winter." He paused turning his head one way and the other, staring at the balls. "So, why should I gather these if I can't eat them?"

"Pick one up and roll it at the pins is what you're supposed to do, silly squirrel."

Mal stared back at the student. "You're telling me I should roll one of these at those stick-pin thingies? And you call me silly? Doing what you say sounds silly to me. This doesn't help me gather food for the winter." He shrugged and his tail flicked up and down. "But I'll give it a go!" He careful scampered up to the line using his other three paws and then rolled the ball, straight into the gutter. "This isn't as easy as you describe it to be." He tried a second time with the same result and drooped his tail. "Well, I guess I need to go from feral to anthro." He paused a moment and then was able to semi-stand. He picked-up a third ball, took a couple of tentative steps and rolled. This time he knocked four pins down and did a little victory dance, much to the amusement of the others. He crouched back down as he turned around and started to scamper back.

"Don't forget to push the button!" Several exclaimed, pointing to a red pin reset button on the side of the ball return.

Mal paused and pointed. "That button?" He looked back at the crowd. "You trust me with pushing a big, shiny red button? Nothing will explode, right?" His tail flicked back and forth a couple times.

"No, just reset the pins."

"Alright, here goes."

Mal pushed the button. At the same moment, there was a bright flash outside, quickly followed by loud thunder as the lights flickered out. The emergency lights kicked on as startled adults and youth jumped or yelped in surprise. Mal seemed unphased in the emergency lighting. (Chatter!)

“Don’t you dare blame me!” He stamped one of his feet for emphasis. “You told me nothing bad would happen if I pushed the button!” His comical outburst seemed to calm those who had been startled. He scampered back from the lane like nothing happened. He switched to anthro mode so he could stand-up and then powered off the suit, pulling the head off, and then the gloves.

“Problem?” Jim asked.

“Well, I can’t exactly eat pizza with the suit head on, can I? And until the power comes back on, I, nor the others can continue to bowl.” Rick replied picking-up a slice of Hawaiian pizza and taking a bite, chewing appreciatively, and then swallowing before continuing. “They make a good pie here, Jim. Homemade crust and sauce. And, as you can see, they don’t skimp on the toppings.”

“And the power outage doesn’t bother you?”

Rich shrugged. “Up in this part of the state, Jim, it can be common during both thunderstorms and snowstorms. I’m sure it’ll be back on shortly.” As if on cue, the lights flickered back on. It was only then Jim noticed all the background noises that hadn’t been there during the brief outage such as the mechanical grind of the bowling pin setters, the video games, and beer cooler motors. A red light came on over the lane Rick had bowled on and the lane sweep dropped with a loud thunk to clear the lane and reset the pins. The pins made a loud different thunk as they were dropped into place. Balls rattled as they rolled back down a set of rails between the lanes. Following Rick’s lead, the furry group chose to pause from bowling to enjoy the pizza and chit chat.

As Rick predicted, the parents and kids at the birthday party came over asking for pictures, some of whom asked if he was Mal on Chatter. Rick indicated he was. He and the other suiters agreed to pictures and posed with the kids and the parents along with the owner and his two workers. The party attendees shared birthday cake with the furry group. Soon after, the birthday party attendees packed up their stuff and departed, leaving the furry group as the only people in the place.

Rick pulled his vibrating phone out of his pocket and opened up his Chatter account and showed Jim. Some of the photos had already been posted tagging Mal with the excited comment, *Look at who we met tonight!!!! Who would have thought we’d meet Mal at the Canaan Bowl-a-Rama during Tony’s birthday party!!!*

It didn’t take long after that to finish the first game. Rick passed on participating in the second game as he sat down near Jim. “Now I do have a problem,” he said as he reached-up to power-down the suit and pulled the head off. “Low battery.”

“What!? It’s only been about ninety minutes. Taking into account the brief performance you gave your wife; you should have at least one more hour of juice. I plugged it in last night and it should have been fully charged before I came north with it. The LED was glowing steady green when I unplugged it this morning.”

“Well, either I’m low on power or there is a malfunction with the power monitor in the suit. I got a low power warning. I assume you can check it through your tablet.” Rick grabbed a slice of now cold pizza, this one all meat and dug in.

“Hey! Squirrels aren’t carnivores!” one of the students ribbed.

Rick chuckled as he swallowed. “You’re right, Josie. However, like you raccoons, us squirrels are opportunistic omnivores.” he took another bite of pizza to prove his point, chewed and swallowed. “Seeing no one had finished this slice yet, I’ve taken advantage of the opportunity to enjoy it myself.”

Jim tapped a couple icons on his tablet and stared at it with a perplexed look on his face. “I’m reading that the batteries are low. But that’s impossible.”

“Impossible or not, they’re low,” Rick replied before taking another bite. After a moment of chewing, he continued, “So, what do we do? I didn’t bring a change of clothing knowing there really isn’t anywhere here to change except the small restroom. I suppose we could call it an early night. Or would there be any harm if I set this stool over by that outlet and plug in while wearing it?”

Jim got up and walked over to the bowling alley entrance, opening it a bit, and looking around outside. The storm had moved further east revealing stars overhead. There was the occasional rumble of thunder but it was obviously distant. He glanced back at Rick. “No, there shouldn’t be a problem. But I don’t know how effective it will be. And you won’t be able to recharge the head properly.”

Rick eyes lit up. “Maybe that’s the problem.”

“What?”

Rick pointed towards Jim. “What if someone had accidentally nudged the suit while it was charging overnight? Not that I want to blame your custodial staff. But let’s say it did get nudged, resulting in the head not connecting quite right. Maybe only the suit batteries charged and not the head. Put the two together and the charge wouldn’t last as long as the depleted head pulled power from the body.” Rick moved his stool over and grabbed a third pizza slice, setting it on a paper plate near his stool. He pulled the charger out of his pocket and plugged into the outlet.

Jim thought for a bit. “No, I don’t think so. The light wouldn’t have been steady green this morning. It wouldn’t have lit at all if it wasn’t connected. I’d have known something was wrong.”

Rick shrugged. “Well, it was just a theory.” He bit into his third pizza slice and chewed. “It could also be that it didn’t properly power down in the vehicle for the drive here after we showed Mal to my wife.” He took another bite.

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“We spent about 15 minutes at your place and it was 25 minutes to get here. Though I didn’t take that into account, you should still have sixty to ninety minutes of power left. It shouldn’t be this low this soon.”

“Oh well. I’ll try recharging for a little bit and if it doesn’t show signs of recharging, we’ll just call it an ear...”

CRACKBBBBOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM!!!! A stray bolt of lightning, what some might call lightning out of the blue, struck the power pole outside the bowling alley. The transformer on it exploded, throwing debris across the parking lot. The building shook from the concussion of the thunder. Within the alley, the main power breaker panel blew open, showering the area around it with sparks. Some of the video games shorted out in their own firework display. Overhead fluorescent lights popped raining debris onto the floor. Power visibly surged from the outlet Rick was plugged into and through the suit. Rick snapped rigid as the fursuit began to smoke before tumbling off the stool. The charger’s power converter plugged into the outlet sparked, caught fire, and melted. Rick landed on his side in a slight heap on the floor unconscious. The smell of burnt plastic and flesh hung in the air as the suit continued to smoke while its tail briefly twitched.

Some students screamed as the alley owner pulled out his phone and called for help. Two students rushed over to Rick going through the preliminary steps for basic first aid. Josie grabbed a chemical fire extinguisher, pulled the pin, aimed, and doused the smoking outlet. At the two students’ urging, she doused Rick’s smoking body. She then doused the breaker panel and proceeded to check the video games for potential fires.

“Stash! Can you hear me!?” one of the two students said to Rick and shook him gently. He felt along his neck. “He’s got no pulse.” He looked to the other student. “Grab the AED.” (automated external defibrillator)

The other ran over to the AED mounted on the wall. Smoke wafted from the unit. “It’s fried!”

“He’s not breathing either and he’s burned. The suit has fused to him in places,” the first student said. “Oh, God, this isn’t good,” he added under his breath. “Give me a hand here.”

The other rushed back over and together, they carefully rolled Rick onto his back. The first one started CPR, while the second one counted off.

In the distance outside red lights flashed as the owner relayed the info to emergency dispatch. The suit’s tail again twitched briefly. Through all this, Jim stared at Rick’s still form lit in the emergency lighting, frozen in shock. All that went through his mind was this was probably the end of *Second Fur* and maybe he should have ordered a beer after all.