

Cheat Code

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Emi was sitting in a shaped bench that curved around a large cement pot into which was set a number of ferns. The bench ad plant combo, one of four, was set in one corner a large, square courtyard formed by a book store, a retail clothing chain, a beauty salon and the mall's central walkway. The Rabbit's sweater-dress was pale gold in color, with a turtleneck and thickly textured hem that extended almost to her knees. One foot, clad in a black flat, crossed over the other. She had her head down, tapping away on a smartphone.

At least, Ravings was pretty sure it was Emi. She had the right fur color, a rich chocolate brown. Darker hair, wavy and shoulder-length, framed orange eyes. Her ears were thin and perky, her triangular nose reddish-orange. He knew her face from countless social media posts and a fair number of live-stream conversations. But seeing someone in three dimensions for the first time was different. It added an air of uncertainty, somehow. Was this truly the young woman that an older friend had introduced him to?

When he noticed that his fellow Rabbit was floating several inches *above* the bench, he was sure of it.

Standing just within the book store, Ravings whipped out his own phone. Pinkish-white fingers and dark pink pads tapped out a simple text to her. Just two simple words: *Look Up!* He added an arrow emoji just to drive the joke further before sending it. The icon attached to the text was an accurate portrait; very pale pink fur with a shock of pure, bright white mounted between two rakishly angled ears. Light blue eyes and a coal-black nose set in a devil-may-care smirk. He even had on the same top as in the picture, just to make his identity that much clearer; a long powder-blue vest over a shirt of gray with a neckline low enough to show off a thick patch of white fur about his collar. His pants were deceptively simple denim.

His surprise set, Ravings slipped out of the double-door to stand before it and waited.

She apparently needed to get through a text chain or two before she got to his. He knew the moment that she did; her eyes went wide with happiness and she looked up and right at him. A big smile lit up her face and she rose to a stand. After which her feet floated down to meet the floor.

He was already on the way to her, waving kindly. She raised a hand in return. His path to her was temporarily blocked by an who Elk passed between them, telekinetically hefting a large bag beside himself. When he reached her, she initiated the handshake that formalized the transition to IRL friends. She was quite a bit shorter than him up close, around five foot even to his five-and-a-half. He tended to notice that sort of thing, given his own power-set.

"I was kinda of expecting Nora to be here already," he admitted.

"Me too," Emi answered. But whatever's holding her up can't be that bad, or she'd have texted. And it's not like we can't enjoy this place on our own." She sat back down, setting her phone atop her lap. "So, we know we're going to end up at the arcade. But I'd rather hold that off until she turns up. Anyplace you need to hit?"

Ravings hummed to himself. "Let's see. I just finished checking for videos." He waved towards the book store. "There's always the game place... Comic shop. More to see if there's any interesting games out... But really, nothing important."

"And I need to look for shoes. Unless you want to sit around some more?" she giggled.

"Nah." He stood up and so did she. Was she... Was she a little taller? No! It couldn't be! That was Nora's thing. Expecting she was levitating again, he didn't bother looking at her feet to confirm. "She pointed past him; the courtyard they were in extended into another corridor, a fresh set of stores. Her fingerpads were dainty and the same color as her nose. "The shoe place is that way."

They walked side by side, chatting about the online gaming group that had brought the trio into each other's lives. Ahead of them, a male and female Cheetah reunited from across opposite stores, each with a child in tow. Twin boys. The kids ran towards each other, embraced, and became a single being.

"Haven't seen that one before," Emi grinned.

He looked over to her with a laugh. "They must spend a fortune in adaptable clothing. I think I--" Wait a tick! Were her ears different?

"You think you *what?*" she asked back, with a perfectly innocent face.

"I... I... I have no idea what I was about to say." Yes! Her ears were different! He couldn't tell *how* they were, but they *were*! They didn't seem to be standing the same against hair that barely reached the middle of her neck--

He jerked his head forward, directing his eyes squarely in the floor before them. *'Don't stare at her! We aren't that sort of friends!'* Looking for something to change the subject to, he locked in on the vending machine they were headed to. Out in the middle of the corridor. "I'm feeling thirsty. How about you?"

"Sure... Yeah!" Emi stood back and allowed him to make the first selection. He went with a grape-flavored energy drink, the same brand that often sat beside him when he was settled into his gaming chair, squaddled up with or going head-to-head against Emi and Nora and countless others. Be it in a crowded battlefield, opposite ends of scrolling duel backdrop, or any of a gajillion racing tracks.

Raving's friend didn't seem surprised. "Vervcano, as always? Green tea for me!" She pulled her purse over to her belly. It was such a little thing, her fingers had a bit of trouble fumbling with the zipper. She ended up catching the tab on her claw to get the thing open. Two dollars later, she was sipping from a long floral-print can. One that looked awfully thin in her hand.

"Shrinkflation," he sighed. "It's everywhere these days."

She let out a little laugh. "You'd know more about that than I would. Oh! That's the shoe place over there!" She trotted off ahead of him. By the time he caught up, she was inside the store. *Hooves, Pads, N' Paws* was its name and the Mare that welcomed him into the place was dressed in a peach-colored polo shirt. The three walls were practically stacked with footwear, and several display stands were laid out among the many chairs spaced throughout the floor. "This shouldn't take too long," Emi assured him. "I hope you don't mind?"

"This is a place for shopping, right?" Ravings found himself a corner seat, out of the way of anyone on the move.

Emi pointed out a pair of sneakers to the Mare, and then took the seat next to him. She wiggled her feet out of her flats.

"Maybe I should text Nora," Ravings decided, whipping out his smartphone.

"No, let me." Emi tapped away at her phone, set oddly on the armrest opposite him. A moment later, she reported, "No change," with little concern.

The Horse, whose nametag identified her as Gytha, came to them shortly thereafter with a trio small box. "Size-8 Jessik-brand slip-in flats, in brown, black and cherry. Do you need any help putting them on?"

"No thanks," Emi smiled. Gytha nodded and clopped back to her counter. With little else to do, Ravings went to his smartphone after all. Speed-swiping through messages, deleting the irrelevant ones and saving ones that needed his attention for later; matters of scheduling the next big gaming night given priority. No recent posts from Nora among them, but the Snow Leopard's circular portrait did appear repeatedly among the backlog. As did several other members of their group.

"Well that's funny." Emi said, drawing his attention back to the here and now. He looked to the Rabbit and saw her staring and absentmindedly pointing at her right foot, which was far too big for the brown shoe she was trying to stuff it into. Her toes had only gotten so far into the opening, and would go no farther no matter how hard she tried. With a stubbornly upturned lip, she set the shoe on the floor and tried to 'kick' herself into it. The front half of the shoe making obvious scuffing noises into the short beige carpet.

Ravings nervously looked over to the Mare, who was now helping another customer; an Iguana with an energy halo dancing around his head. Hoping not to gain the attendant's attention himself, he whispered warily to Emi, "Don't force it! If you tear it, you'll be stuck buying it!"

"You're right," she conceded, lifting her shin up. The effort of dislodging a tightly-wedged foot caused her to grunt. "Must have gotten the wrong size by mistake." She set that shoe and its partner down by the pair she already owned. To his eyes, the shoes were practically identical, save for the coloring. Ravings gave Emi a side-eye, making sure she was occupied with the next pair before leaning forward slightly and cocking his head for a better view of the reject.

From his new vantage, he could make out the number '8' stamped onto the heel of all four shoes.

"And now it's wrong *the other way*?" Ravings reflexively leaned back to look to Emi. Who was now gaping in frustration at both of her feet. They fit into the shoes alright, with too much room to spare. Her wiggling toes appeared to be producing bumps least an inch below the curving tips. She reached below to confirm with a pinch of her fingers. She let out a disappointed sigh and took them off. She set them beside the others and again he saw a number 8 looking back at him. He also saw her give him the briefest of side-glances as she reached down to unbox the red pair.

'Ahhh!' The pieces clicking together in Ravings' head. Could it be? No! But it had to be! Didn't it? There was only one way to be sure, and that was to give Emi a reason to come clean. He raised

his hand to attract the attention of the Mare, who had just finished ringing up a box for the Iguana. "Excuse me, Miss? Are these adjustable shoes?"

It took Gytha a moment to register which shoes he was talking about. "No," she said, coming forward. "But I can get some if you like. We only have one test pair in that style, though. Any pairs for purchase would have to be a custom order. Only three or four days for delivery!"

Ravings resisted the sly grin that wanted to paint itself on his face. "Well, I ask because these ones seem to be changing size on their own. And I know how pricy that can get--"

"There's no problem!" Emi blurted. "I'll take the red pair, thanks!" She hadn't even tested the red ones. That was when he knew he had her!

And she knew it too. No more strangeness about the length of her legs or any other part of her body while she was paying for her perfectly ordinary shoes.

Once they were, and Emi was free of any chance of over-paying on footwear, he dropped the bomb. "Cheat Code! You got into the closed beta!" Thrilling as the discovery was, he did have to bite back a taste of jealousy. For one friend to have been selected among tens of thousands of applicants -- including himself -- was a miracle. Something to be celebrated. *Two friends* felt more like being left out of an adventure. "Nora did too! Is that why she hasn't shown or answered her text? Is she watching us right now? Seeing how crazy you could drive me before I figured it out?" His head and eyes darted about, looking at everyone sound them, in or out of the shops. And then over their heads for a flying Snow Leopard. He double-checked the occupants of every one of the example massage chairs for a pale gray face and yellow-orange eyes peeking back at him.

Emi laughed. "No, no, silly! She didn't get in. At least, not that she's told me." She brought up her phone, which now that he could see it clearly did indeed have the Cheat Code logo emblazoned on the top half of the screen; a plus-sign-shaped directional control right out of a video game controller, the empty space occupied by four curved arrows that collectively made up a circle moving clockwise. Below it sat a number of control bars; Legs, Hair, Arms, Tails, and so on. "There just happened to be someone with mass-alteration powers in my Swap Pool, and they must have wanted to try out levitation because '*Ding!* here I am. If she's walking around invisible, or camouflaged into the walls, I'm as clueless about it as you are.'" She looked over the scene herself, ears darting about for the sound of big claws. They were closing in on the food court, and many more bodied to be paranoid about. "And before you ask, no I can't change my bust size. Not without shrinking or growing my whole torso, anyway."

"I wasn't going to ask that," he said, a little higher than he expected to.

She snorted through her nose. "Everybody asks that."

Ravings was spared the need to answer by a tone from his phone. That Emi got the same confirmed who it was before he got the screen to his eye. "Nora! Finally!"

"And she's already at the arcade?" Emi's jaw gaped open. "'*What's taking you guys so long?*' The cheek!"

"Looks like you're not the only one playing tricks. Come on." The arcade lay at the opposite end of the mall, nestled under the second-floor movie theater and connected directly to it via a glass-walled elevator. The bleeps and bloops of dozens, perhaps hundreds, of games going off at once

was a clarion call to the happy gamers. Ravings had never counted, but in a world that had moved on to gaming from homes and phones, it was easily the biggest cabinet stash in town.

The Snow Leopard was impossible to miss, with the flashing neon lights of the arcade -- red, yellow, and electric pink-- bouncing off of her pale fur. The colors contrasted against her sky-blue sweater and black leggings. A smokey gray puff of hair trailed down into a thick braid which incrementally darkened to black. Her double-sized feet padded across a carpet that was probably older than any of them, midnight blue speckled with stars, comets, spaceships, and asteroids. A double-length tail dragging behind her as she wandered the machines looking for favorites. She stopped pacing around the machines when she noticed them and waved her equally-large hands.

The pair became a trio and there was a hug between the ladies and a high-five between Ravings and Nora. Nora had to duck down for the hug; At eight feet tall, even without using her powers, she towered over both of them. The male Rabbit looked over the nearby collection of stand-up cabinets on display, several of which had quarters lined out to secure later plays. "What's playing on the big screen these days? *Martial Fist X*? *Path Of Justice 3*?"

"Oh, I wonder if this place has the new *Formula 50,000* in!" Emi gave the racing cabinets, her eyes lit up.

"Now why would I invite you guys here for video games when we can do that anytime?" She waved them towards the far right of the place. Past the Prize Booth and the seats for the snack stand. To a less populated area where a pair of air hockey tables stood surrounded by skee-ball tracks, an Electronic Baseball alley, a domed foosball table, a Whack-A-Human machine, and a number of things that could just as easily have come out of a fairground carnival.

"You know they make video games of those, too?" Ravings based skeptically.

"Well, yes. But I propose a series of physical challenges," Nora said with a big grin. A grin that got Cheshire wide as her natural-born stretching powers manifested. "Let's put our RL skills to the test!"

"And I know just what toy play for," Emi stated with a wink to Ravings. "How about you set us with some tokens and I'll fill her in.

"Alright, I'll bite." He happily took some bills from the women and set about converting them. When he returned to them, they had moved opposite the air-hockey tables, beside some working table-top games from the 80s. Both eyeballing Emi's app and giggling madly. "Did I miss something particularly amusing?"

Emi held up her phone. "Just Nora and I working out the kinds I can do with this program. Here's what we have in mind..."

. . .

One after the other, Ravings sent miniature basketballs into the air. The lights of the surrounding games and noise of the electronic basketball game set itself were becoming more distracting by the second. Strips of red neon traced out a miniature backboard for the hoop he needed to reach. A hoop that moved slowly from side to side, evading many of his attempts to sink a ball. The timer above the hoop counted down the seconds...

Nine... Eight... Seven...

He never stopped sending balls up as fast he could, keeping all four at his disposal in motion. Each one falling back down into the boxy collection bin. Beside him, Nora was chucking ball after ball, throwing underhand to compensate for height that was a disadvantage when tossing to a hoop a mere seven feet off the ground. Emi was to her other side, rendered invisible by peripheral vision. But every now and then he'd see someone else's ball enter a hoop and his hopes of winning whittled away. Not that he was going to give up! He'd make the best of every moment! Into his stingy hoop went a ball, and his prospects of at least coming in second seemed bright again.

Two... One... *Bzzzt!* The timer buzzed an end to their game, and the arrival of three sets of tickets. He was not terribly surprised by the result.

"Twenty-six, nineteen, ten! I win! Wool!" Emi leapt up with all the lift Rabbit legs could give. She landed into the arms of Nora, proud owner of Second Place. They turned to him, the phone shaking playfully in the She-Rabbit's hand, and he couldn't help but feel a little teamed up on.

But a bet was a bet, and the only thing one can ever truly control about any game is how gracefully one wins or loses. "Good game," he said, and willed his body to reduce to a height of four feet tall. The ceiling, and his friends' faces, drew further away. The whole of the place became even more vast, the walking distance extending in every direction. Adaptive clothing contracted itself as its wearer reduced in dimension within it.

"Good game." "Good game." Nora 'took' her share of the won height by simply growing herself eighteen inches taller, her proportionality-large paws and tail enlarging alongside the rest. Her head wasn't nearly at ceiling-level for the two-story chamber (yet!) but she towered over every machine and table. Emi applied a calculated mass boost to herself via the app, targeting her hands and feet Six-inch long hands doubled to twelve, and just as much was gained in width. With proportions now similar to Nora's, her fingers now dangled just below her knees. Her forearms were visibly tapered to accommodate expanded wrists. And her ankles and heels had enlarged to the point that she gained a whole six inches of height. Eight fuzzy toes wiggled about sixteen inches ahead of her legs.

There was apparently enough 'size' left over to make a cottony beach ball out of her tail. She held her free hand out to admire the difference in similar fashion to a gal who'd just gotten her claws trimmed. The big smile on her face made clear that she liked what she saw.

"Good thing you took those shoes off first, Emi" Nora chuckled, her voice sounding the same despite the change in her throat's size. Louder, maybe. "You won this round, so what's next?"

"Hmm..." Emi's eyes scanned the general area. Soon settling on a wide doorway at the far end of their alcove, rimmed in neon strips of yellow and orange. "I'm probably going to regret this, but I just can't resist... The shooting gallery!" A quartet of teenage Furs were just clearing the area having completed their match. One of the party, a Bear, was transparent save for a mess of glo-on-the-dark bands around his neck and arms.

"I love shooting galleries!" Ravings pantomimed blasting away invisible enemies as he marched confidently towards the passageway.

The trio entered the gallery in the teens' wake, Nora ducking deeply to get past the door. Ravings scooted ahead of the others, securing himself a spot at the exact center of the player's firing line. Emi took the spot to his right, Nora his left. A gun each was waiting each along the black bar before them, secured in a sheath of plastic and neon.

The gallery was posed to look like something from an alien invasion movie. A backdrop depicting a wide-open desert basin decked out with two-dimensional cartoon scenery: Tumbleweeds, civilian RVs, military installations, radar towers, tanks, and the like. Subtle layering of the backdrop hinted at where the targets would come from.

"Ready?" asked Emi. "Ready" came two answers.

Three token drops later, their weapons unlocked and lifted slightly higher in their holsters. The gun that Ravings pulled forth was something out of a laser-tag game. It sat heavy in his hand, so he put his other underneath the barrel to help prop it up. By contrast, Nora needed to hold the relatively puny weapon between the claws of one hand, and squeeze the claw of the other into the trigger guard. A back knuckle of that hand pressing onto the grip. Emi had the hardest time fumbling through a means of holding hers steady. Soon as all three competitors were ready, Emi pressed the button that would start the match.

P'DING! A electronic voice told the players, *"Prepare for IN-VA-SION!"* A countdown began on each of the scoreboard embedded in the backdrop. Ravings' arms tensed, fingers tightening around the weapon. But his legs were loose and active. Hopping in place, ready for anything.

When it hit Zero, all Hell broke loose. It started with the UFOs, saucer from on high. A line of them scooting left-to-right. Ravings aimed for the light center positioned on the doomed top; the white circle that surrounded it went red, and the flat model flipped out of view. The pre-recorded sounds of a crashing ship played out as Nora tagged the second and third hit of the round. All the while, frantic music boomed and walkie-talkie voices ran a play-by-play. *"Meteor bomb coming in to starboard! Watch out for that magno-scooper! Troop carrier, Nine O'Clock!"* These forces and more all fell to a barrage of invisible fire.

A bug-eyed beastie flipped out from behind the radar dish, and Ravings leapt sideways, turning in the air and using the whole of his little body to help turn the oversized weapon to the target. Bullseye! "Ha!" An alien mothership spun in from the other side of the field. And he strafed again to get it. "Yes!" More and more targets whizzed by or popped up for his Earth-defending pleasure and he put the whole of his little body into the attacks. Bouncing this way and that as the thrill of the hunt took over how whole being. Hover-tanks, tentacle-legged ground-pounders, brain-warped Humans with hypno-eyes, and UFOs galore went down to his blaster. All thought of the ladies' progress skipping his mind; he only had eyes for the targets and his own score.

"The people of Earth thank you, soldiers!" The display fell silent, the tickets began spooling, and the lights on their weapons holsters blinked a greedy red. The final tally stood at Ravings Ninety-Two, Nora Seventy-Five and Emi -- the one least accustomed to handling out-of-scale items -- Forty-One.

Emi blew away fake gun smoke before putting her toy away. "No regrets!"

"Ravings might have one," Nora laughed and pointed to the floor. "Look down?"

He did. And found that he had backed up into and was standing on her tail! Or, rather, inside it!

The sneak had gone and stretched her tail out during the match! It had to be twenty feet or so long! So long that it trailed past him to end beside Emi, so wide that either rabbit could have used it for a fluffy bench. The long, long, long strands of its fur subsumed his feet totally. "What did we agree about bumping into each other?"

"Hardly sportmanslike," Emi tsked, stifling a giggle.

She had him there. They both did. "Ah... Hmmm... Yeah. But I still won!" Ravings relieved himself of another foot and-a-half-of height and saw it 'added' to the ladies. At eleven feet high, Nora had yet to hit the ceiling lights. Her tail extruded on another yard or so out, wrapping around Emi's big ankles. Emi marveled at the difference between her and a now two-and-a-half-foot-tall Ravings. He waved back at her, which accidentally served to remind her to rescale herself.

She had to be very careful in swiping the phone screen with the edge of an already over-sized hand. When she was done, her phone nearly slid out of hands that doubled yet again in size. So long and thick that she could scratch her ankle while standing up straight. Her feet swelled to nearly a yard long, a foot and a half tall at their highest, and wider than her hips! Eight toes stood as big and round as the mini-basketballs they'd just been chucking. Emi delighted in standing tip-toe and spinning a clumsy circle, giant hands held high, high above her head in a mock ballerina pose. Laughing all the while, as did her friends. Nora wasn't afraid to clock a few pictures with a smartphone that in other hands would look like a coffee-table book but in hers looked a bit small for the task.

He was very much looking forward to seeing how she'd walk in those things.

She surprised him by floating nearly a yard up into the air, angling her toes downward until they were parallel with her legs, and letting only her big -- big, *big* -- toes touch the floor. She ballerina-walked past Ravings to press her palm against Nora's. While Emi's hands had doubled and then quadrupled in scale, Nora's had enlarged proportionally to the rest of her, albeit with a notably large hands and feet to start from. As such, the Snow Leopard's hands were only just a few inches longer than Emi's, and not much wider, despite a still very significant height discrepancy. Nora towering over her still by over three feet; even on her elongated tippy-toes, the top of Emi's head just barely came up to the other woman's waist!

The She-Rabbit was awestruck nonetheless by the look of her and in Nora's. "Oooohhh-hoo-hoo-hoo! Ravings, you have to get a picture of this!" She looked over to him with giddy glee.

"Sure thing." The male's clothes could shrink around him, but his phone, unfortunately, could not. It hung off his side big and heavy as a lady's handbag. Significantly longer than his hands, it may as well have been an e-book reader. "The thing I like about going small, I can still use all my toys." He gave the ladies a wicked grin as he set the photo function. He had to hop over to the far side of the gallery to get a decent shot, nearly running into Nora's tail in the process. "Oops! Almost got me again!" He had to lean way, way back to get the pair into the shot. Besides his subjects, he got a whole lot of ceiling. "Now, me!"

Emi gladly obliged, setting back down on her big feet. He walked on over to her and stopped beside her right foot. The difference in scale between himself and Emi was even greater than that of her to Nora; without the extra-sized feet, the top of his head would have barely made it to her groin; with them he didn't even reach her knees! The highest part of her foot, up front where it met the elevated ankle, was flush with his waist. Her toes went up to his knees.

"Hop on up!" Emi grinned. Nora eagerly aimed her phone-tablet.

There was no hopping. He'd have to climb. "Are we calling a pause on the no bumping rule?"

"*That* was about you getting carried away in the middle of a game. Like I knew you would," Nora told him. "This isn't that."

With that settled, he readily placed his palms on Emi's foot and scrambled on up. Standing atop his new perch, he was relieved to find his eyes were about level with the hem of her sweater-dress. No embarrassment to be found, then, in raising up his phone to get a close-up of Emi's grinning face well above him and Nora's above hers, their phones pointing right back down at him. He angled down to get a shot of both his feet standing atop her one; there was plenty of room! A throw-rug's amount of brown fur at least, set at a noticeable incline. His first shot was spoiled by a sudden movement on her part. It left him waving his hand and twisting his hips about to keep from falling over. "Whoa! New rule, if you make some body fall over, you lose size."

"Sorry! Tickles!" Emi held still for a second pic, and he came down from her.

He had a longer walk out ahead of him than he'd had coming in. "The skee-ball tables were over that way, yeah? That's my pick!" He had to jog to keep up with Emi's ballerina-steps, and Nora's supremely long legs swept right past both of them. She shrank herself down to her normal height to clear the doorway, and then back up to the full eleven feet without breaking stride... without ever changing the length of her tail, which trailed after the Rabbits and kept going well after they'd come across.

Out of sheer convenience, they lined up in the order of Nora, Emi, and Ravings at the skee-ball tracks. The far ends were dominated by successive tubes and circles, each marked with different point values. "We all got to be in the center!" Emi noted. "But wait, don't we all use the same table in this game?"

"Not the way I want to play it. First, I say we each play for all three rollers on our table. Second..." Ravings swiped his phone and his table came to life. An opening to the front of one of the sides filled with three-inch-wide wooden balls. He stepped up on top the front of the sloping table, shrinking as he did so to his smallest height; six inches high. He drew his hands together and focused his thoughts on the space between them. Separating his hands, he bright into existence a two-handed hamaxe. A thick square of anodized steel to one end, an axe of magnetically-sealed purple and pink plasma to the other. The axe-half of his weapon easily fished up the first ball. He held it in place with his foot and looked up, up, up to the giants beside him. "Don't worry. I'll still 'give' you all that height if I lose."

He received a pair of ready agreements, and the game was on! Nora plucked her first ball out with her claws with practiced ease; she was the first to roll. Emi, though, stumbled through getting her first ball, unused to using massive claws to do the work of dainty fingers.

In the meantime, Ravings lined up his shot, moved his foot away at the last moment, and smacked the ball dead center with his weapon's hammer end. *Pok!* Potential energy from the axe side added oomph to his blow, which sent the ball streaking up the incline, over the sudden ramp at the end, and flying down into the twenty-point ring. He didn't have much time to think through his next shot before fishing out a ball and putting even more power into Take Two. He made the forty, then the fifty, and then another forty before deciding he had enough of a bead on the physics of

the incline to try for one of the one-hundred-point tubes on the upper corners of the scoring area. The timer wasn't halfway done yet, and he had five balls to go.

Nora had settled into a rhythm of grabbing balls for Emi in between taking her own shots. The lady Rabbit was doing surprisingly well, big hands adding power that drove her balls towards the higher-scoring circles. Whenever Ravings happened to look the way of their boards, their scores were ticking up as fast as the timer was ticking down.

He took his shot and watched the ball rise high into the air, smack the rim of his target tube and bounce down and away. Swallowed by the wide ten-point horseshoe. He hissed in disappointment, and set up his next shot... *Pok!* Bullseye! one-hundred points! Alas, his last three shots netted him a mere thirty. For a total of Two-Hundred-And-Ninety.

Nora, meanwhile, was sitting pretty at Three-Hundred-And-Ten. While Emi had nearly closed the gap from the last game with an impressive Two-Hundred-And-Forty points. Again, she wasn't disappointed in the least. "I've only had these hands for a little while, and I'm already doing pretty well with them!"

"Everything you do will teach you something new," Nora told her as she scooped up a new pile of tickets. "You'll be running the tables on us in no time."

"Too bad I have to give some of it back now," Emi sighed, "I lost fair and square, and there was no way little ol' Ravings was going to bump into anyone this time." She reached for her phone, scrunching her eyes at how she was going to manage the recalling command.

"Ah, don't worry about it." Ravings leaned over on his axe handle. "I'm good staying like this for a while. Call it a last-minute forfeit."

"Oh? Really! Thanks!" Emi floated up on her toes once more, big hands smothering her cheeks. "I'd hug you, but I might squish you."

Ravings gave her a laugh and looked around the place. Acclimating himself to the view of the wide-open vistas that surrounded him. "You know, I've never played air hockey this size before..."

"Yeah, but it's my turn to pick," Nora interjected. "And... I... waaaaant--"

"Hey! Can't you read?" A beefy Emperor Penguin bellowed at them from behind the Prize Booth. He chucked a flipper over to a sign that was displayed over the basketball games: *No Weapons, Summoned Or Otherwise.*

The friends bid a hasty retreat from the arcade before they got into any more trouble.