

Fords' Golden Tour

A Short Wonka-expy by MirrorG

The Golden Tour Begins

After a second of silence, Azure stepped towards the sheep with her Golden Ticket held outwards. She spared a glance back at the other four and grinned for the first time since arriving before turning to address Fords.

"So, have any more hints of yours about the grand prize contest going on? The sooner it's settled, the sooner I can sit back and enjoy this," she asked.

Fords took the ticket with a hoof and looked it over briefly. "Ah, such motivation, Miss Burle! I'm sure you'll be pleased to know that everything you needed to know for that was already included in the five hints so far, so you've certainly had the most time to prepare."

The vixen mulled over the answer as she chewed away at her gum and stepped around the sheep onto the front steps. Delouise quickly filled her place, reaching into a pocket in her jacket to retrieve her ticket. When Fords extended a hand to take it she instead found a firm handshake from the wolf.

"Delouise Leclerc, DECO CEO," she began, not releasing Fords' hand, "and have I ever put the deal of a lifetime together just for you, Fords!" After another second of shaking hands she finally let the hoof go.

Fords' smile wasn't dampened by the rough grip, however. "Miss Leclerc! I suppose you would want to speak with me in the privacy of my office, today?" She attempted to reach for the ticket again, but the wolfess pulled it out of reach with a flick of her wrist.

"Well, it's not like they have anything to add with this," she motioned at the others behind her, "do they?"

"I suppose not," Fords nodded, "though you must excuse the wait until then. Our itinerary for today is simply too full, though I should have more than enough time to speak with you after the tour has concluded," she explained, and with another attempt was finally allowed to take the ticket and deposit it into her bag.

"We can walk and talk, while we're at it," Delouise noted before joining Azure by the door. Holly gripped her ticket slightly tighter in preparation for approaching, only for Bridgette to step ahead before the doe could work up the nerve. She glanced away from the bear, instead watching Faye wave to her fans in the crowd.

Bridgette gave a little nod to Fords as she offered up her ticket. "Fords," she greeted her simply.

"Feel free to simply call me Abby, Miss Grazeland," the sheep noted as she took the ticket. "I'd like to think we'll have more than enough opportunity to become that close today, what with you teaching me a thing or two and me teaching you the same!"

"Sure," the bear added, looking past her to the facade of the building. She adjusted her square-frame glasses slightly before joining the other two. Holly waited until Bridgette had gotten around Fords before taking a step forward. Before she could take a second, Faye's shoulder bumped against hers suddenly and sent her stumbling slightly as the rabbit bounded ahead.

"Why hey! If it isn't my favorite sheep," Faye said, brandishing her phone again, "picture?"

"Your favorite? What an honor," Fords beamed as Faye snapped a series of photos of the two of them together. "I would like to be able to say that you're my favorite bunny in turn, Miss Huffie, but I'm afraid that you have quite the steep competition on that front."

"Oh, for sure," Faye giggled in a tone that Holly found almost patronizing, "don't worry about it, alright?"

Fords nodded, and a silent second passed before she spoke up again. "Your ticket, Miss Huffie?"

"Ah, right, right," Faye finally remembered the ticket she held in her free hand and passed it over to the sheep before sidestepping her.

Holly straightened out her skirt and glanced behind her to the crowd beyond the fence. She knew that there wouldn't be a mysterious sixth ticket holder to step in front of her again, but felt compelled to double check.

Fords' voice pulled her mind back into the moment. "Miss Perez," the sheep said from the bottom step, "I believe your ticket is the only one left!"

The deer straightened up and hurried over to Fords, her ticket outstretched. "Of course, sorry," she apologized meekly, "I know I shouldn't be slowing things down, considering your itinerary."

The sheep shook her head reassuringly as she took the final ticket. It was only at this point that Holly acknowledged how much she had to look up to make eye contact with Fords, who must have been nearly a foot taller than the doe.

"It's nothing to worry about, Miss Perez," Fords remarked, "we're more than adaptable enough here to include everything planned for the tour at whatever pace works best for the group!" With that, she turned about to face the other four and tapped her cane once more against the next step. "And, speaking of, why don't we begin right away?"

The ewe searched for another key and unlocked the ornate doors before them. Pushing them open easily, she stepped aside to allow the others to pass. They all did so, and Holly spared one last glance towards the crowd before the doors swung shut behind her and the clamor of the crowd faded away into the silence of the complex's front office. Looking ahead again, Holly found the group standing in a modest lobby. It was unmistakably antiquated, with a simple, curved desk wrapping from one corner of the far wall to the other, beyond which opposite halls stretched further into the building. There didn't even seem to be a phone at the

front desk, let alone the array of receivers and computer monitors Holly had grown acquainted with in the Alabaster lobby. Hanging lights cast a faint sheen on the wood finish adorning much of the room and hummed idly to themselves.

"Now," Fords said, stepping slowly backwards to stand in the center of the room without looking away from the group, "I believe you'll be leaving through these doors as well, so if you have any things you wouldn't wish to carry around with you for the entire tour this should be a fine place to leave them." She motioned to some long, cushioned benches by the front wall. Only she, Holly, and Delouise were carrying them, and as Holly stepped over towards one of the benches to set down her purse, Delouise simply tossed hers onto the other and turned to face Fords again.

"So, Fords," the wolf began, "what took you so long getting here? It's not a good look, being late for your own event."

"Ah, I was just out on a bit of simple shopping. Groceries and the sort, and none of them related to the tour here today, so you shouldn't need to worry about them," the sheep explained, beginning to lead the group down one of the halls.

"You know," Delouise continued before anyone else could speak up, "you can get other people to do that sort of thing for you, yeah? A big place like this should have plenty of folks on your payroll, why go yourself?"

"I suppose that sort of job just wouldn't fit them," Fords shrugged.

Azure popped a bubble from her gum, and eyes traveled to her. "Who are 'they' supposed to be? This place is deserted."

"It's the weekend," Bridgette countered, "most people are home during those."

"But," Holly added after a beat of silence, "I did see some deliveries being made on my way here, so there must be *somebody*, right?"

"Indeed there are deliveries outgoing even today," Fords nodded. "In fact, we're already walking in the direction of the Packing Room, so why don't we make that our first proper stop on the tour?"

Delouise stepped ahead of the rest, her toothy grin emerging again. "Perfect! I've been meaning to talk logistics with you, you know that?" With that, she set a pace for herself and Fords, pulling ahead of the other four.

As soon as the pair were out of earshot, Faye looked up from her phone and at the hallway, then at the others. "Alright," she spoke up, "being honest, all of you, does that lady seem... 'all there'? Sounds like she's a *bit* old to be doing all this."

"Either she isn't, or she's putting up a good act," Bridgette added, glancing through an open doorway into a dark room as she walked by. Holly followed suit, finding a printing room containing little more than a printer which had accumulated a heavy layer of dust.

"It's an act," Azure concluded, locking eyes with the back of Fords' head ahead of them. "I can see right through it, already."

"The real question is what she thinks she's gaining from it," Bridgette nodded.

"Sympathy," Faye concluded simply.

Holly didn't know what to make of what the three were talking about behind the sheep's back. She didn't have anything to add, so she instead tried to distract herself by peeking into more open rooms along the way. One, labeled 'break room' by a nearby plaque, still had its lights on. Inside was a familiar sight to the break room she frequented at her own office, though it was much larger.

In the room's center was a simple wooden table, and on it was a discarded glass and plate. Holly blinked and took a slightly closer look. It seemed that there were some crumbs and chocolate chips left haphazardly behind on the plate, and a faint white still left on the inside of the glass. Whoever had eaten there had eaten recently.

"Hey," Bridgette's voice suddenly rang out, and Holly realized that she had stopped in the break room doorway. She glanced back down the hall, and all five of the others had stopped to look at her. "What's up?"

"Oh, nothing, it's just," Holly began, and she could feel her cheeks growing warmer. She began to think aloud. "Was that... milk and cookies?"

Delouise chuckled audibly, looking to Fords again. "Is that it? You're expecting a visit from Mr. Claus, and in May?"

Fords grinned as well, but shook her head. "No, that wouldn't be the case. Why, if even one of those festive wind-ups were set loose in here it'd simply be pandemonium!" Satisfied with her answer, she turned and continued trotting down the tiled hall. Faye shot a look of deep satisfaction from being proven right to the others before going as well.

A moment later, Fords paused before a particular closed door near the large, umber, metal door at the far end of the hall. This one had a plaque marked 'Office of Abby Fords' and a frosted glass window that obscured what was inside. "Ah," she said, tapping her cane, "would you all excuse me for just a second? I'd like to drop off my own bag, before we reach the Packing Room. In fact, it may even serve as an opportunity for you to meet my secretary, Debra!"

She didn't wait for a response, simply unlocking the office and peeking her head through the doorway. The ewe let out a disappointed hum. "It seems she's also out and about. Ah, well," she said, stepping in for just long enough for Holly to see an unoccupied desk with another closed door behind it, "she's bound to turn up sooner rather than later."

Closing the office door behind her, Fords turned her attention back to the metal door. The words 'Packing Room' were painted on it in bold, white lettering. "Now," Fords began, "some might find it odd for our tour to begin at the end, but through these doors is where everything the complex has ever produced is gathered to be shipped off across the globe!"

Fords pushed the door open, and the group stepped out onto a metal catwalk wrapping around the edge of a large, open factory floor. Holly immediately recognized it as the same view from the window of Fords' office during her first announcement video, and her eyes first traveled to the palettes of packaged Fords products from the same video. In person it was even more clear the vast space that the neatly stacked crates took up as they obscured most of the nearby factory floor.

From there her gaze drifted to the left wall. There, a row of small openings allowed products to be deposited directly onto conveyor belts. The belts stretched across the room, occasionally broken up by machines and mechanical arms which packed the wrapped sweets into Fords-branded boxes, secured them together in large crates, and ultimately carried them over to a long line of loading bays on the right side of the room. Most bays were shuttered closed, but one had an active conveyor loading up a familiar, maroon delivery van.

"Awfully expensive equipment you've got down there, Fords," Delouise remarked, leaning against the catwalk railing.

"Only the finest and most efficient would do, for how much needs to be packed in the average day," Fords nodded, walking further down the platform to give the group more room to stand.

"Efficient isn't the word I'd use for it," Delouise noted, rapping her claws against the rail. "Those things must cost an arm and a leg to keep working. It's no wonder you're running a ghost town around here, you must be bleeding your company dry with these gizmos."

"Or maybe," Bridgette said, "there's just more things in the world than the bottom line."

Delouise shot the bear a smirk before continuing. "If you think that, then I can already tell why I'm worth so much more than you." She pointed down at a few spots along the conveyor line. "See, just at a glance I can already spot three places where it'd be cheaper to put a body down on the floor doing the same job, and each of them would do it for a fraction of the price."

"Just one job apiece? I suppose that would be awfully tiring, which would only make them less efficient, in all," Fords pondered aloud.

"Sounds like the most boring thing I've ever heard, too," Faye added.

"Indeed, that's also an important consideration, Miss Huffie," Fords nodded.

"Eh," Delouise shrugged, "if they don't feel like working hard enough anymore you can just replace them."

"You mean," Holly spoke up meekly, "firing them?"

"Don't see why not," Azure remarked, "you can only cover for your weak links for so long. I've propped up too many cheap rookies to care."

"Point is," Delouise said louder to draw attention back to herself, "Leclerc Logistics has plenty of bodies to spare, if you ever decide on saving yourself some cash."

"A kind offer, Miss Leclerc, but I'm afraid I must decline," Fords responded. Holly swore she could hear a slight weariness in the ewe's voice. "The complex has always seemed to have enough workers to get by just fine on its own."

"So," Holly began, "there are people employed here? I looked into it some, but couldn't find any proof of it."

"What's that, Perez," Delouise grinned, "you're looking for a career change? DECO has plenty of PR you could be working on, you know."

Bridgette ignored the wolf's advance and spoke up instead. "Of course there'll be people around somewhere, how could there not be? Just because one room is automated, it doesn't mean you can run a giant place like this on your own."

"If not here," Faye piped up, "then where?"

"Why, I'm glad you asked, dear," Fords nodded at the rabbit, then began leading them across the catwalk to the left wall of the room. It hugged the wall briefly before ending in a set of stairs down to the concrete floor beneath. "I can show you one such place right now!"

"When did we get up onto the second floor, anyways? That hallway was flat," Azure remarked to the other guests.

"Maybe," Holly suggested, "it slopes down around the sides of the building?"

"Sure didn't look like it from the plane," Azure said, and popped another bubble, this one near Faye's ears.

"Can you *stop* that, already? The *last* thing I need today is gum stuck in my hair," she said, her voice raising slightly.

"No," Azure stated, and stepped by her as they reached the bottom of the stairs.

Fords trotted by several large doors like the one they entered the room through before pausing before one in particular. Its painted text read 'Canal Wing: Locks'. "Right through here should be a perfect place to start," Fords explained. "There's a great deal of the first stages of production which happen in this room."

"A canal," Bridgette said, glancing from sign to sheep, "are you serious? In a place this small a canal would be completely useless."

"I would agree, if it only went inside," Fords nodded, placing her free hand on the door behind her. "Luckily for us, however, that's far from the only place it goes!" With that, she pushed open the door, and Holly was suddenly hit with the light and heat of broad daylight. When her eyes finally adjusted, she could barely believe what she saw.