

25) Prize (What If)

The claw released, and their body tumbled down. It was only then you witnessed the machine's final trap. You'd never gotten a plush this far, and thus, had failed to notice the claw had been misaligned this entire time. Instead of cleanly landing into the chute, the body of your friend collapsed its plastic edge. They wobbled for a moment, and just when you thought they would tumble out, with one last burst of strength you watched your friend push as hard as their cotton filled stubs could manage against the interior of the chute, barely managing to get their torso over the edge and send them tumbling down to salvation.

Their body clattered through the prize chute as the machine let out a little tune of victory, and you quickly rushed to the slot, quickly rescuing them before it somehow changed its mind. The plush gryphon sagged in your grasp, whatever brief spark of life that had returned to them once more nowhere to be seen. You hugged the plush tight, cradling it in your arms, as you felt their body grow warm. They were turning back! You set the little Plush Gryphon on the ground as you watched a faint glow emanate from their body as life returned to it, limbs regaining their animacy as they flopped and flailed, as their stitched on eyes blinked, before looking around in confusion as they slowly stood up on two legs, the thread across their beak unweaving as it flopped open, letting out a audible gasp.

The two of you just stood there in silence, unsure what to say as their body slowly grew and gained definition, talons regaining articulation. They were almost half your size when... it stopped. The glow faded, leaving your friend stuck as a Jumbo anthropomorphic gryphon plush.

After everything, you couldn't help but burst out into laughter, a mixture of sorrow and relief, of joy and anger. Of course the machine would be petty to the very end and not turn them back all the way. Of course it'd be a sore loser.

Your friend, of course, was far less amused by their current predicament, pink thread weaving into a flustered blush as they crossed their arms, grumbling. "It's not funny! Look at what's happened to me! I'm stuck in... this! How am I supposed to do anything when I don't even have fingers!"

You brushed the tears out from the corners of your eyes. "Sorry... it's just... I'm glad you're okay. You're okay right?"

"I guess... that was way too close. I can't even begin to describe what it was like in there. Everything was so... foggy. It felt like I was buried under a pile of..." they gestured vaguely to the claw machine and its numerous inhabitants. "And my head... It was like I was trapped in a dream. Everything felt so slow. You know that feeling right? You try to move your body but everything is just so slow, but the world is still moving normally?. And I... I actually liked it. I was fully prepared to remain a plush. That... that was the worst part. But it's over now, I think. I can't believe I'm still stuck in this form though..."

"Hey, at least you're out. I'm sure it'll wear off over time, or something." You assured them, instinctively patting their head and eliciting another stitched on blush as they recoiled.

“Hey!”

You retracted your hand, letting out another nervous chuckle “Oops. Sorry. Force of habit. Come on, let's get out of here” You said, taking their claw in your hand as the two of you headed back home, leaving the Crane Game devoid of at least one more victim. In the Bustling Arcade, nobody even noticed the small plush walking about.

Time would pass, and your lives would return to a sense of normalcy. For the most part. In the end, their body didn't return to normal, and they remained stuck in Having to explain what happened to your friend's boss was hard, but they couldn't exactly deny what was before them either. Through the pulling of some strings, they were able to keep their job, though their smaller softer body made things more difficult, having to rely on their coworkers to reach high up shelves, or sign documents for them. From what you had overheard, despite their best attempts, they'd become viewed as the Office Mascot. Perhaps to their benefit in a way, as their business soon saw an increase in both productivity and customers, and despite everything, they found themselves seeing a pay raise. On top of that, a coworker with skill at 3D Printing managed to design some unique tools to allow them to once again hold items in their plush stubs.

Still, during your free time, you searched the internet, looking into rumors of magic and legends of other mysterious locations, searching for something that could restore your friend's form. After such a close call, you couldn't just brush them off as mere hearsay after all. Though many turned out to be dead ends, and of those that remained fewer still were benevolent in any form, you knew one would eventually have something that could save them. And even if it didn't, every encounter furthered your own understanding of these strange otherworldly forces. It was truly a possibility you yourself could be the one to save them by the end of all of this. A prospect that both excited and astonished you.

There were still many trials ahead of the two of you on your journey to try and find a way to restore their lost humanity, especially for your friend, who now had to get used to being a living creature made of soft fabric and even softer polyfill. But at least you had each other. You'd triumphed over the Crane Game, and you'd triumph whatever would come next.