

The Trials of Graves-Beaks

By Hal Aetus for WorldsBestEagle



Part 1: Secrets

Grey beams of moonlight slanted in through the tall windows of the huge, white bedroom and washed across two figures laying in an oversized bed. Falcon Graves was sitting up against the headboard staring down at the slender form of Mark Beaks snuggled up to his right side. It had taken a long time for him to sleep for more than an hour at a time, since shacking up with Mark a few months before. All the rooms in the house were large, empty, and stark with their shades of white and gray. It was the modern aesthetic that Mark loved but to Falcon it created a painful amount of space to keep a watchful eye upon in the protection of his boss and boyfriend. When he did finally close his eyes and slumber it only took the faintest rattle of wind against the window or a slight snore from Mark's beak to echo about the room and startle Falcon to full alert.

Falcon looked down and studied the lines on Mark's curved forehead. His grey feathery eyelids were closed, creased up at the corners in glowing contentment. His dark beak was smiling at the corners. Falcon stroked his head slowly, gently and smiled. He had never let himself love someone as deeply as

he loved Mark. Even if he had to drink gallons of coffee to stay alert during the long, boring days at his desk in Mark's office, it was worth it.

Suddenly Mark's smile faded and his forehead lines sank. Falcon stopped stroking him and watched. Mark's beak corners turned down and his mouth opened slightly. He took deep breaths and his eyes wiggled about under his eyelids. "No! Stop! Save me!" Mark's left arm flailed and landed an uppercut under Falcon's jaw.

Falcon winced and rolled his eyes, more from annoyance than pain, and hugged Mark tightly. "Wake up! Wake up! I'm here!"

Mark's kicking and struggling stopped and his eyes opened. He looked up with wide eyes into Falcon's face as beads of sweat dripped from his forehead. He heaved as though he had just been pulled from deep water. "I'm... not... gonna die?" His eyes darted around his surroundings. "I was just dreaming?"

Falcon slowly eased his restraining hug. "Yeah. Must've been a doozy. But I'm here boss."

Tears glistened in the silvery light that filled Mark's eyes. "Oh Falcon!" He buried his beak into Falcon's thick breast feathers and wrapped his puny arms around his broad chest.

Falcon reached up his right hand and petted Mark's back. "There now. It's ok. You're ok. You know I won't let anything happen to you." He rocked him back and forth with both hands like a mother comforting a child. He laid a warm beak against Mark's forehead and gave a gentle kiss. His gruff exterior melted away when he was this close to Mark, just as a hawk's predatory visage vanishes when he tends to his own tiny chicks. "Was it a nightmare about Waddle Duck again?"

Mark tipped his head to one side and whispered back, "Yes."

Falcon hugged him tighter, a little too tight. He closed his eyes, stung by the reality that his boyfriend was still punished for his incompetence, or at least that's the way Falcon saw it. It all happened when Mark had hired Fenton Crackshell and, later, stolen the Gizmosuit for himself to create Waddle Duck. Mark was brilliant but also very short-sighted and he let his ambitions far exceed his grasp, yet again, until all hell broke loose. Graves had sensed the risk, the ominous danger, but it's never easy to reign Mark in when he's charging ahead with his plans, his ego guzzling the adulations of his social media fan base like an intoxicating beverage. Graves could crack the heads of the toughest corporate assassins but he couldn't bear to see Mark's big pale eyes quiver in disappointment if his dreams were crushed, even if it was for his own good. He hugged Mark tighter and his eyelids creased. He should have convinced him to stop. For his own good. He had failed him!

"Urrgghh. You're... squishing... me!" Mark squeaked.

Falcon released his grasp and looked down with sorrowful eyes. "Sorry, boss." He sighed and pulled back the covers, swiveled his legs to the floor and looked out the window.

Mark's sweet smile returned to his beak and he laid a hand on Falcon's shoulder. "Hey, Gravesie, it's ok. You didn't hurt me."

Falcon sighed out as though under a load that his big shoulders were aching to lay down. "No, no... Mark. I mean... I'm sorry that I wasn't there for you when you needed it most. I should've been there for you." Falcon's beak scrunched as he tightened his jaws and clamped his eyes shut in a raptorial grimace.

Mark stood up on the bed behind Falcon. Even with Falcon sitting Mark had to strain his skinny arms to wrap them around Falcon's neck. He brought his smiling beak to Falcon's nape and clung tight. "You know that wasn't your fault, Gravesie. Look, I'm whispering this cuz, well, I'd never trust this to another living soul. But, well, the Internet rumors are true. I screwed that up."

Falcon sighed again and rolled his eyes. He rose up abruptly and walked to the window, Mark still clutching to his neck. "Boss, I know that. But my job is to anticipate what you will do as well as what your enemies will do. I couldn't save you..." Falcon looked over his shoulder at Mark's gleaming face. "Not even from yourself this time. I'm afraid that our relationship is interfering with my ability to protect you. And I don't want anything bad to happen to you. I... I can't stand to see you hurt." He swept a huge hand behind his shoulders and pulled Mark up by his nape to dangle in front of himself. "I will not fail you again."

Mark held his phone up and took a picture of Falcon's face. "Gotcha!"

"Why you!" Falcon scowled.

"Ooh! Nice one. I love the way you look late at night. Your eyes are so much darker and scary looking."

Falcon reached for the phone to crush it but Mark clicked the send button and he knew it was futile. Instead, he dropped Mark to the floor and he landed on his tail.

"Hey! Not cool!" Mark erupted.

Falcon raised his voice. "Are you listening to anything I'm telling you?"

Mark stood up, shook his tail, and rubbed his rump with a hand. "Yes! Yes..." Mark's annoyed face softened. "Yes, Gravesie, I hear ya." He stepped forward and hugged his companion's firm washboard abs. "But you can't expect yourself to see everything."

Falcon hugged him closer to his front, his big feathery hands holding Mark's head to his lower belly. "Promise me you'll slow down next time and look before you leap. Promise me you'll tell me what's going on. Please promise me."

"I will, Gravesie. I will." Mark closed his eyes and pressed his beak into Falcon's belly. As Graves' hands petted his head, he let himself revisit his dream. He had had a lot of dreams of the incidents of that day, all of them fitful nightmares. This had been one of the most unsettling. He was glad that Falcon had awakened him but in the final moments there had been someone answering his cries for salvation. And it wasn't Falcon Graves.

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Part 2: Something Has To Be Done

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The next afternoon, after a busy morning of meetings and lunch at a chic café on the waterfront, Falcon and Mark were at their desks in Waddle headquarters. Lately, this had become the hardest time of day for Falcon. Sitting in his chair, his crop full, the coffee wearing off, and the slanting late-day sun blasting him, his eyes grew heavy and his attention span shrank. His boss, too, would usually be ticking away on his phone at his own desk but he was fast asleep, leaning back in his slim office chair with his feet up. The fitful dreams the night before followed by the long conversation and cuddles afterwards had taken their toll on Mark's alertness.

Mark's head was tilted back and his beak wide open in a soft chirpy snore. Falcon loved seeing him this way and smiled. He also loved how Mark's delicate grey toes would curl and twitch while he dreamed. His boss was safe, it was ok to relax, just a little.

Suddenly, Falcon was jolted awake as Mark let out a shrill scream and fell out of his chair with a clatter. The effect was so electrifying that Falcon sprang out of his seat and landed on Mark's desk before he was even fully aware of where he was or what was happening. He stared down through the bright beams of sunshine at Mark crying on the floor, the tears shining off his hands as he wiped his eyes. When those moist eyes looked up at Falcon, his heart cracked and his shoulders sagged. He hopped down and picked up his boss and snuggled him to his breast, hugging him tight.

"Another bad dream?" asked Falcon.

Mark sobbed back, "Uh-huh."

Falcon stroked Mark's back. "I'm so... sorry boss." His huge palm cupped the back of Mark's head and petted his feathers.

Mark's sobbing slowed until his breathing became long and deep as he melted in Falcon's arms. He hugged back with his puny arms. "It's ok, Gravesie. It's not your fault. You gotta believe me, it's not your fault."

After a few minutes of comforting, Falcon set Mark on his desk. Falcon glanced around, an instinct he never lost in any but the most private settings, and then leaned forward and laid his warm beak on Mark's forehead, planting a sweet kiss.

Falcon whispered into Mark's feathers, "I can't protect you from your dreams. Please, boss, consider getting some help. Maybe a therapist?"

Mark sighed. "Way ahead of ya, big guy. See?" Mark held up his phone displaying a list of doctors in Duckburg.

Falcon frowned down the unfamiliar list of website and names and nodded. He cocked his head and smiled as he stroked Mark's head feathers back into order. "Just remember to let me check out whomever you choose, ok?"

Mark hummed back "Mmmhmmm!" as his finger swiped down the list on his screen. In less than a minute he chirped "Here, this one!" and he held the phone for Graves to see. "Dr. Sid Fisher, psychiatrist, sleep therapist." Mark swiveled the phone back and browsed further into the website while Falcon walked to the corner and poured a cup of coffee. He knew Mark wouldn't want one as it was almost time for his 2:15 artisanal cold-pressed coffee that an intern was sure to deliver.

"OoooOOOOoooo! He has a big following on Twitter. And it says that he's treated some of Duckburg's most well-known people."

Falcon chuckled as he walked back, cup in hand. "That's my Beaksy, always attracted to the biggest Tweeter."

Undaunted Mark poked his screen and connected a call to the doctor's office. Mark's head feathers wooshed and the phone disappeared from his hands, followed by a crunching sound. He looked up to see the glittering bits drain from Falcon's thick fingers.

Falcon scowled, "What did I say?"

Mark rolled his eyes, "OK, fine, check him out first! Sheesh!"

It wasn't long before Falcon had checked his sources, internet and otherwise, and learned all he could about Dr. Fisher. He was a heron, 45 years old, studied at Calisota State, and according to the news and websites, he had many notable clients although confidentiality prevented any from being named. He supported charities including Change for Chicks and there were photos of him alongside Zan Owlson, Glomgold Industries' temporary CEO during the time that Flintheart had disappeared. This proximity to Glomgold made the feathers on the back of Graves' neck tingle. But since Flintheart had returned and Ms. Owlson had disappeared, Glomgold Industries was no longer involved in charities and probably didn't rub shoulders with Fisher anymore. Falcon rubbed his neck and let his apprehensions pass.

Mark scheduled an appointment for that evening and soon the two of them were there together in the waiting room. It was situated in a three-story glass office building with a pointed front that jutted out over the rocky shoreline. The view was stunning with the wide blue sea swallowing the golden sun as evening descended. The sounds of softly crashing waves and gull cries wafted in through the windows on salt-laden air. Short shelves contained books about Yoga and meditation. There were smooth decorative stones and potted plants. Mark oogled it all while Graves stood firmly to the side, his eyes flitting about, impervious to the relaxing vibe.

A slender-built gull in a bulky beige Cardigan sweater walked in with a cup. "Your chai latte, Mr. Beaks. And Dr. Fisher is ready to see you now."

Falcon grumbled under his beak, "Finally."

Mark sipped his tea and the two began to follow the gull. She stopped and coolly turned towards Falcon. "Oh, sorry, Mr. uh..."

Falcon's hackles rose and his beak clicked. "Graves. Falcon Graves."

The gull blinked. "Right, Mr. Graves. Sorry, but this is a private consultation."

Mark chirped up, "No, no, no, he's family. He comes too."

"Sorry, Mr. Beaks, but Dr. Fisher insists that his initial consultations are with the client only. No spouses, no children, no family, no friends."

Falcon squinted his eyes, his thick eyebrows rustling with concern. "That is unacceptable!"

The gull swung her beak around to Mark. "I'm sorry but Dr. Fisher is ever so stubborn about this policy. I guarantee you he won't see you unless it's alone."

Mark turned to Graves with his big pale eyes glistening. "Listen, Gravesie, it'll be ok. I'll be right in there."

Falcon peaked through the open door and saw the slender blue heron with spectacles waiting at his desk. He looked down at Mark and his hackles settled down again. "Very well. I'll be waiting right here for you."

Mark gave Falcon's stout forearm a hug and then turned to go. Falcon quivered inside with frustration but managed to show Mark a small smile as was escorted in and the door closed.



Part 3: The Suit Shall Set You Free

Dr. Sid Fisher glared down his beak through his spectacles. He sat in a soft leather recliner facing Mr. Beaks in a similar seat just a few feet away. "Please put the phone away, Mr. Beaks."

"Just a second! I'm updating my status. Do you spell head shrink with a hyphen?"

The heron darted his beak and snatched the phone deftly from Mark's fingers. In a flash he flicked his bill up and the phone slid down his throat and out of reach.

"Hey! Not cool!"

"Don't worry, I'll regurgitate it back for you after the session."

“Eww! You can keep it. I’ll just pull out my spare—Hey!” Mark patted his empty pockets. “Oh yeah, Gravesie threw my other one into the bay on the way here. Geez all I did was take a video of his tail feathers while we were walking. It’s not like pornographic or anything. It would’ve went viral though for sure—”

Fisher beat his wings in the air. “Mr. Beaks! Can we please stay focused? You came to me for a reason. You told my secretary that you are experiencing recurring nightmares that interrupt your sleep. Please tell me more about these nightmares.”

Mark dropped his eyelids in annoyed boredom. “Ooookayyyy! So in the dreams I’ll be doing something cool like blowing up a helicopter or unveiling a new product—”

“Crashing helicopters?”

“YeAAAAH! Duh! What else do mega-rich billionaires do on their private islands? Well, anyway, then stuff starts going wrong and before I know it, I’m drowning or burning or falling or about to die. And then...”

Sid scribbled along for a moment and then looked up over his glasses at Mark. Mark’s eyes were wet and his lower beak quivered.

“Mr. Beaks, it’s ok, take your time.” Sid folded his wings on his legal pad and ticked off the billable seconds in his mind.

Mark smiled as tears rolled down his cheeks. “Usually I wake up and there’s Gravesie hugging me. But sometimes I don’t wake up right away and the most amazing thing happens.”

“What, Mr. Beaks? What’s amazing?”

“Waddle Duck shows up to save me.”

Sid removed his spectacles and wiped them with a cloth. “You are referring to the mechanical superhero suit that you appropriated a few months ago, correct? The one that almost blew up the entire town? What do they call him now? Gizmoduck?”

Mark wrinkled his cere. “Stupid name. Waddle Duck is way cooler. Might as well name it GizmoMcDuck since it’s all *monopolized* by Scrooge now.” Mark emphasized ‘monopolized’ with a mocking tone.

“Didn’t McDuck Enterprises create him?”

Mark glared angrily back.

Sid dismissively wagged his beak. “Nevermind. That had to have been a very traumatic event for you. It’s no wonder that you might experience some post-traumatic stress. But I sense that there’s more to this. You mentioned that he rescues you. What else happens?”

Mark looked down and fidgeted with his sweater zipper. “Well, nothing really. He flies me away and...”

Sid waited a few profitable moments in silence, then tapped his pencil against the legal pad.

“You’re sworn to secrecy, right? So you have to carry whatever I say to your grave, right? Even if, say, a certain big hunk of a falcon were to pluck your feathers one at a time or break your gangly legs?”

Sid swallowed hard and choked. “Uh, yeah.”

Mark’s face lit up. “Cool, cool, cool. Well, we fly away and we land on top of Waddle HQ. I thank him for saving the most important bird in the world and he gives me some awesomely correct compliments. The sunset reflects off that dark shiny visor of his. Then he hugs me and starts taking off his suit.” Mark was looking down at the floor now. “But he never gets it off before I wake up.”

“How does that make you feel? That you don’t get to see what your savior really looks like?”

“I don’t know. Kinda bored really. I know it’s just that dweeb Fenton Crackshell.”

“Maybe you want him to be more? Maybe a romantic interest?”

“Fff... no.” Mark’s cheeks reddened and he giggled. “Not... really.”

“Be truthful, Mr. Beaks. It’s the only way I might be able to help.”

“Honestly I’m not sure what I expect in my dream. That suit is, huff... so hawt as it is. How much better could it get? Maybe that’s why I wake up because all I really want is that suit.”

Sid uncrossed his legs, then crossed them the other way. “Do you ever feel guilty?”

Mark narrowed his eyes and looked at a potted plant in the corner. “Guilty? Me? Pfft.”

“Guilty for desiring someone else besides the one that cuddles you when you wake up.”

Mark glared back and leaned forward. “You think I love a stupid suit that much? You’re the crazy one here.” Mark stood up and paced. “Falcon takes good care of me. Besides, Scrooge gets all the credit for that thing even though I’m the one that put it in the limelight!” He kicked the wastebasket sending Kleenexes and crumpled papers across the floor.

Sid stood and poked his beak into Mark’s chest. “Stop, Mr. Beaks!” He pressed his chest up close to Mark’s and pressed their foreheads together. “You’re avoiding the truth here, Mr. Beaks. Listen to yourself! You know what’s wrong and you have to face it. You’re infatuated with the suit. Is that so unusual? You love technology. Gizmoduck is popular. You like to be popular. He embodies everything you want—well, almost everything. Because you also feel guilty that it’s not Falcon that rescues you in your dreams, even though he loves you and you love him.”

Mark stared back blankly for a moment before tears welled up in his eyes. He sobbed and Dr. Fisher winged him a Kleenex and patted his back in a professional hug. “There, there, it’s good to let out your feelings, Mr. Beaks.” He mumbled lower, “Just don’t get snot on my sweater.”

After Mark cried for a few minutes, Sid sat him back down in a chair and took his own seat. “Listen, Mr. Beaks. I think it’s important that we set up a meeting between you and Gizmoduck. We can keep it private, secret. I think it would be therapeutic for you to interact with him more than you were able to before, when he was your employee or in a crisis. You two can have a nice quiet chat, Fenton can come out of the suit, and you can overlay new subconscious, mundane constructs to help ground the fantasies that keep replaying in your conscious mind.”

Mark blinked. “TLDR doc, you lost me after ‘meet Gizmoduck.’ Tweet it for me.”

Sid narrowed his eyes in disbelief. "Secretly meet Gizmoduck, make new memories hashtag fantasy hashtag KillTheDreams"

Mark's eyes rolled. "Ooooooh! Cool. Set it up doc!"

"Remember, Mark, if I'm able to arrange this it will have to be super-secret. Tell NO ONE or the meeting is off." A repetitive buzz and obnoxious ringtone full of airhorns and dubstep bass emanated from Sid's gizzard. His eyes jangled and his wings reached out to balance himself. "Excuse me but I think you have a call. Are you sure you don't want your phone back?"



Part 4: Breaking Point

A single street light flickered over the rusty back gate of a dingy old warehouse. A tiny electric car whirred into the circle of light, its tires crunching on the gritty, cracked pavement. The driver's window slid down and Falcon glared out into the misty grime. He hated electric cars. He preferred inches of steel to protect from bullets and the reassurance of a V8 and smoking tires to get his clients out of trouble quickly.

Falcon mumbled. "I checked this place out today and I don't like it."

Mark's face reflected the soft blue glow of his phone as he pattered away on a social media app. "It'll be ok. Gizmo—" Mark stopped. He had almost ruined the secret. It had been hard but for the past few days he had managed to keep from revealing the secret identity of who he was meeting, even to Falcon. As

far as Falcon knew, Mark was meeting with Fenton Crackshell to buy some of Gyro Gearloose's secrets. "—Er, I mean, Gizmoduck might back you up if there's trouble. Look! I've got that panic button app on my phone!" Mark held up his phone with a big red button on the screen. "One tap and you'll get a text with my location."

Graves pulled his beak back in the car with a sigh. He leaned over and wrapped his big hands around Mark's face and tapped his beak to Mark's. "You keep that hot and ready, hon. I'm not worried about Fenton but there's all sorts of riffraff in this part of town including those idiot Beagle Boys." He kissed Mark slowly and hugged him closer. "Now let's go have a look."

With a quiet click they both exited the car and walked up to a rusted door on the loading dock. Falcon stepped in front of Mark and tried the knob. It was locked so he knocked. A moment later there was a click as the door opened. The short figure opening the door was backlit by bright lighting. Behind him was a clean, tiled floor and the soft whir and bleeping of technology.

As their eyes adjusted to the brightness they saw it was Fenton. He smiled and held out his hand to the towering Falcon Graves. "Hello sir! I'm Fenton. Come in, come in!"

The room they entered was nothing like they expected. There were well-organized workbenches and racks of computer equipment, robots methodically polishing the floor, and security cameras at every corner. In the center a large duffle bag rested on a workbench. Falcon's eyes were wide and darting around, assessing the security situation. There were only two doors to the room: The one they entered by and one marked "Restroom." It looked safe. Mark squeezed his hand and Falcon sighed and his shoulders relaxed.

Graves whispered to Mark, "Boss, those cameras could be recording you."

"That's ok! We're here on legit fancy business, aren't we Fenton?"

"That's right, Mr. Beaks. Don't worry about those cameras. Nothing but business. But, still, Mr. Graves, we need our privacy. You know, geeks doing geek stuff." Fenton's eyes locked on Mark's for a moment and Graves noticed. Then he darted away and picked up a gizmo from a workbench. "This is what I wanted to show you Mr. Beaks! It's a digitizer that can capture pictures from your mind! It's adapted from a refrigerator-microwave we were developing that used electromagnetic wave guides to intercabulate psi particles blah blah blah..."

To Falcon, Fenton's voice blurred into technobabble nonsense that made him sleepy. He shook his head to clear it and bent down to Mark, who was already marching like a zombie towards the alluring device in Fenton's hands. "Boss! Don't let him take pictures of your mind!"

Mark mumbled back, "Mhmm..." as he reached for the shiny thing.

"I'll be right outside." Graves turned and exited quietly, the door lock clicking behind him.

As soon as Falcon was gone, Mark dropped the delicate device with a clatter to the floor. "Good. I thought he'd never leave. You turned off the cameras?"

A bot came over and swept up the broken bits at their feet while Fenton stared in disbelief.

Fenton nodded. "Uh, Yep. I don't want Mr. McDuck to know about this anymore than you do."

“So where’s my pal Gizmoduck?” Mark’s eyes were impatiently twitching. “Yoooo! Gizmoduck? I don’t have all night!”

Fenton wondered, for a moment, whether Mark was accidentally a jerk or if it was part of a practiced image. In either case, it was annoying. He just wanted to get this over with. “Blathering blatherskite!”

In an explosive instant of whirling gadgetry, Fenton was lifted and encapsulated in the white robotic suit. As he settled on to his wheel and the electric glow faded, Mark’s eyes were bright and wide.

“There... you... are...” Mark smiled and giggle, his eyes glistening with happy tears. He bounced into the air and Gizmoduck caught him.

“Mr. Beaks! Are you--?”

Mark wrapped his arms around Gizmo’s neck. “Shhh, big guy. Don’t ruin it by talking, just hold me.” Mark hugged the metal neck tighter.

Gizmo grimaced awkwardly and his metallic cheeks blushed. “Um, ok.”

Mark rubbed Gizmo’s shoulders and whispered, “Hold me, Waddle.”

Gizmo moved his hands up, carefully cupped Mark’s thin body, and patted his back. “There, there, Gizmoduck’s here!”

Mark made a fist and rapped on Gizmo’s helmet. “No, no, no... you’re Waddle Duck, remember? You’re my Waddle Duck. Now hold me like you remember!” Mark’s usual smile had twisted into a deep frown and furled eyebrows of disappointment. “Hold me!”

Gizmo knew that this was part of some kind of therapy for Mark. He didn’t know the details but he had been instructed to do anything necessary to help Mark live out his fantasy. Anything. And he liked helping people. So he ignored what Mark had done to him in the past, he swallowed hard to keep down his lunch, and he wrapped his mechanical hands around Mark and hugged him tight to his breast.

“Mr. Beaks, you’re safe with me.”

Mark giggled and squirmed in his hands, rubbing a polished pectoral plate with his hand. “Please, call me Beaksie.”

Gizmo coughed dryly to disguise a desire to retch. “My... Beaksie... It’s all... ok, Beaksie.” He intoned the words mechanically but Mark tittered with joy.

“I’ve missed you Waddle.” Mark’s voice cracked. “Even though I almost blew us both up.” He broke into tears and threw his arms around Gizmo’s neck again. “Can you forgive me? I didn’t mean to do it!”

“Uh. Oh.” Gizmo stroked Mark’s back and shoulders. “Of course I forgive you! My system had bugs. It wasn’t your fault!”

“Bugs? Pfft, no way, dude. You’re amazing!”

Mark hugged harder and Gizmo squirmed and backed against a control console, catching himself with one arm while still holding Mark.

“Mr.—I mean, Beaksie... I love that you love me but...”

Gizmo felt Mark’s warm beak touch his bill and lay a passionate kiss upon it. Inside his helmet a flashing icon bleeped out a warning. “Warning! Inappropriate contact!”

“Whoa! Stop! Mr. Beaks! You can’t!” Gizmo began to pull Mark off of him but Mark clung tight to his faceplate.

“No, Waddle! Tell me that you’ll be mine again. Let me try you on again!”

“No, Mr. Beaks, it won’t work! Gizmoduck uses my brain now for his core processor. He won’t work with you anymore.” He tugged harder on Mark, trying to rip him off gently. Mark’s nails scraped and screeched along the metal surface as he began to lose his grip. “Mr. Beaks! Let... go!”

Mark grimaced and strained “Stop, Waddle, Stop! I love you! Noooooo!”

Mark’s world stood still for a moment as the faceplate gave way. There was a loud pop as screws snapped and zinged away. The faceplate came loose in Mark’s hands and he lost his balance falling back slowly as the visor swung up. There before him was the reality he tried hard to bury. Fenton’s plain duck face, outlined by Gizmo’s shiny helmet. Two arms extended and broke his fall then set him gently on his feet.

Mark stood with beak open for a moment processing what had just taken place. He felt ashamed and humiliated. His beak frowned and a tear fell from his reddened eyes.

“Mr. Beaks, I’m not Waddle Duck. I’m Fenton.”

Mark sniffled, his lower beak quivering and one eye twitching.

“I wear Gizmoduck so I can help people. It’s not about popularity or profit. It’s about helping people...”

Mark interrupted the end of the sentence with a very loud, wide-beaked yawn. “Booooring.”

Fenton blinked. “Mr. Beaks?”

Mark’s familiar smile was returning though his right eye still twitched with inner turmoil. He brushed the dust off of his sweater as he turned for the door. “Ya know, you should put that sermon of yours on a cereal box, Special K. It’s right outta Hallmark.”

“Uh are you ok, Beaksie?”

Mark spun about, face red and eyes laser-focused in rage. “Don’t EVER use that name on me, understand? Oh, and this never happened, right?”

“Of course not—”

“Good! Otherwise Gizmo’s gonna need to find a *new core processor*.” Mark punctuated the last few words with a sneer.

Fenton stared for many minutes after Mark’s departure. Those final sinister words echoed as sharp and loud as the clatter of the steel door. Fenton had encountered a lot of unsavory characters in his tenure as hero but had never had as strange an encounter as this. He had extended a helping hand to Mark and

once again it was spit upon. He felt cheap. He felt used. But above all, he was befuddled. Yet he knew better than to tell a living soul about it.

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Part 5: Breaking News

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Falcon yawned, stretched his thick arms, and rubbed his sleepy eyes. His arms came down straight out to his sides but he felt nothing but pillows. He sat up in bed. *Where's Mark?* He squinted at the clock through the sunbeams streaming in through the window. *Crap! It's 8:30! I'm late! But where the hell is Mark?*

Falcon yanked back the sheets and swiveled his talons to the floor. "Hnnnnngggg... wow, I haven't slept this well in months! Mark! Mark! Where are you?" He rubbed his feathered head.

When no reply echoed back Falcon jerked his head around nervously. His hand reached over to the bedside table and pulled the drawer open slowly as he continued to study his surroundings. "Maaaark?" he called louder. He pulled out his pistol, stood up, and slid into the shadow of the wall by the window. Then it dawned on him. *I slept so well because Mark wasn't in bed all night!*

Falcon's jaws tensed and his beak crinkled. He was angry with himself for letting his guard down. He quietly padded across the room, weapon at the ready as his head spun each direction looking for signs of an intruder. The bathroom was dark. Mark wasn't in his home office. The hallway, theater room, the living room, kitchen... all were empty. Everything was in place too and Mark's keys were on the kitchen counter right where he always drops them. Wait! The bottles in the kitchen liquor cabinet were out of order. A bottle of cognac was missing too. Falcon's muscles relaxed as he began to assimilate what this meant.

Mark had been very quiet on their ride home from last night's meeting. And whenever Falcon touched him he tensed and closed up. His eyes were red and his beak blushed. It was clear that he was in distress but Graves couldn't get him to open up about it. He really knew something was wrong when he didn't touch his phone for the whole ride home. Falcon had begged Mark to let him massage his tense muscles, hoping that his boyfriend would open up about what happened. But Mark declined and just rolled over on his side in bed and seemed to pass out. Falcon didn't press any further, figuring that Mark needed sleep and would tell him when he was ready.

Falcon knew exactly where Mark would be. He walked through the utility room and grabbed a robe from the dirty laundry. He slipped it on as he walked to the back door & peered out the window. Yep, there he is. Falcon sighed, clicked his gun on safety, and dropped it in his robe pocket. He quietly opened the door and walked out.

Mark was curled up in a feathery ball in a patio chair, the sunshine just beginning to bathe him as the sun climbed higher around the corner of the house. There was an empty bottle of cognac laying on its side on the ground by his chair. His phone and tablet were on the table.

Falcon rested a warm hand on Mark's head and petted affectionately. Mark squirmed and smiled, sighing out a cloud of alcohol vapor.

Falcon whispered, not wanting to resurrect his boss into the world of pain quite yet. He would call Waddle and tell them to clear out Mark's schedule for the day. He deserved a day off for a change. Falcon gently dropped the chair into a flatter position, peeled off his robe, and tucked it around Mark. He went back inside to make the call, coffee, and a hangover breakfast for his mate.

Pretty soon Falcon had the blender whirring for his morning pre-workout smoothie and the scent of hot coffee was filling the kitchen. A TV morning/news show was babbling in the corner, largely ignored. Falcon was "old school" and still received his news primarily from broadcasts or print, when he had time to spare at least. His job was to take care of himself and Mark so what was happening in the rest of the world was less relevant. But he jerked to attention when he heard the announcer say "Mark Beaks."

He shut off the blender and grabbed the remote to turn up the sound. The announcer was a feminine crow with a plastic smile and twinkling eyes. "...That's right, turn up your sound, you heard it here. Just in, Mark Beaks, Duckberg's third eccentric billionaire, has a secret lover! An anonymous source claims that Waddle's CEO has been obsessing about Gizmoduck ever since the controversial unveiling a few

months ago when he allegedly appropriated the superhero technology from McDuck Enterprises.” Falcon’s eyes were wide and his beak hung open. Scenes of that fateful day played as the announcer recounted the disaster.

“...His obsession took a dark turn when he began stalking Gizmoduck. Last night our source captured this exclusive video of the two in a secret meeting...” Video snapshots from the secret lab flipped by on the screen. They showed Mark hugging and kissing Gizmoduck. Then an image spun onto the screen of Mark being held by Gizmoduck’s extend-o-arms down below his knees with the portion between Mark’s beak and Gizmoduck’s crotch digitally blurred. Falcon’s hand trembled as it gripped the blender pitcher. *BAM!* it shattered sending shards of glass and pink smoothie across the kitchen.

One of the other morning hosts declared, “Woah! How does that even work?” The shot widened to show a bluejay, the host crow, and a flamboyantly gesturing male kestrel, all consumed with tittering laughter.

The kestrel giggled back with a lilt, “I don’t know! I suppose Gizmo’s got the attachments for any occasion!”

Clapping and a loud “Whooooooo!” of filthy approval came from the audience as they broke for commercials.

Falcon just stood there for a full minute staring like a mad bull, drenched in pink slime, heaving, hand bleeding. He growled mindlessly through his clenched beak and thudded his feet as he marched out the back door to Mark. He gripped the patio chair and flipped it on its side dumping Mark onto the ground.

“Ughh! Heeeeyyy wutts the big ideeaaaa?” Mark’s thin arms flailed as though looking for a clump of ground to hold on to lest the earth spin him off into space. “OOooooOOOohhh... My head hurrtrrts. My stomach... gulp!”

“What’s the big idea?” Falcon’s eyes bulged and a vein pulsed on his forehead. He roared, “What’s the big idea!?” Falcon yanked the robe off of Mark and pulled his gun out of the pocket. He dropped the magazine and cleared the chamber. As mad as he was he didn’t want any accidents. “What did you do last night with Gizmoduck? It’s all over the news that you two are having an affair!”

Mark crawled over to a bush and puked.

It all made sense now to Falcon. He was normally a guy that faced facts straight down the barrel but when it came to love he found himself making compromises on the truth. He hadn’t wanted to face the fact that Mark’s obsession with Gizmoduck was more than just interest in the technology. Even for a big, iron-clad hunk like Falcon, his heart was not invulnerable.

“I dunno wutt you’re – bluurrggg!” Mark wretched again in the beauty bark and wiped his beak with his arm.

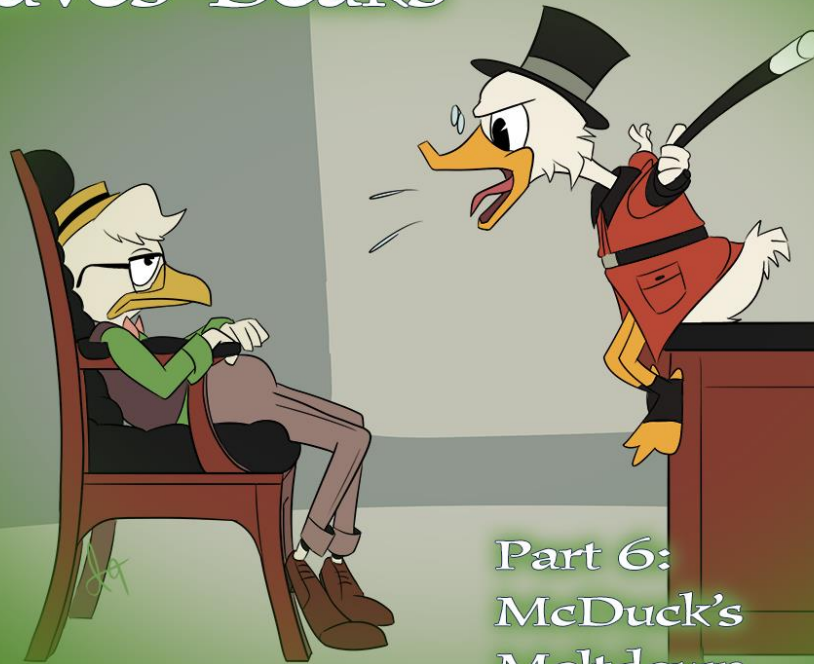
“Sure! Sure! You had me drive you to a quote-unquote ‘meeting’ with Gizmoduck and make me leave while you licked his light pole! What an idiot I’ve been!” Falcon wadded up the robe and hucked it at Mark. “You moron! You can clean up this mess yourself! We’re through!”

Falcon turned and walked towards the back door.

“Wait! Wait! I wanted to tell you...” Falcon stopped in his tracks, still facing the door, eyes closed against the pain. “I... I... felt so embarrassed. But... but... last night was...”

Falcon began walking again. “I don’t want to hear it, Mark. Gizmoduck can have you!”

The Trials of Graves-Beaks



Part 6: McDuck's Meltdown

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Part 6: McDuck's Meltdown

Scrooge McDuck stared across the polished wood conference table at the three Buzzard Brothers, moving his gaze to each pair of beady yellow eyes. His beak corners were flush and his bushy eyebrows rustled. "So you're saying that Gizmoduck's *alleged* impropriety is *allegedly* tanking our stock and you want to bury the project and the *allegations*?"

Bradford Buzzard moved his spectacles farther up his beak and held up a colorful line graph with a sweeping, diving line on it. "There's nothing alleged about this, Mr. McDuck. We advised against a superhero in the first place. Our research has shown them to be, how shall I put it?" He smiled smugly and continued with a condescending tone, "...*abysmal investments*. But you stuck with it anyway and, well, I don't mind telling you 'I told you so.'"

Bentley smiled and leaned in. "Besides, Mr. McDuck, there's far more profit in selling off the patents for all of Gizmoduck's individual components. Or manufacture and sell the technology ourselves. Everyone from auto manufacturers to the military would pay a fortune and we could rebound out of this slump way farther ahead—"

Scrooge pounded his fist on the table and leaned forward in his chair. "We are not going to throw Gizmoduck under the bus and that's final! Yes, yes, yes, he's not a profit-maker but he's not supposed to

be! He's my contribution to the well-being of Duckburg but that's something you vultures have never understood." Scrooge hopped down off his chair and paced while the vultures slumped back in their chairs with a collective squeak.

Scrooge stopped at the coatrack and smiled as he perched his top hat on his head and picked up his cane. "Gentlemen, I've had my reputation dragged through the mud before and I've never backed down from a fight. This stinks of a conspiracy and I'm going to get to the bottom of it. Meanwhile, you just control the damage. Good day!"

As Scrooge closed the door and marched back toward his office, he grumped under his breath, "Dour old bald-headed ninnies. What do they know about reputation? They have none! Ugh!" He was so preoccupied with his fuming that he stalked right past Gyro Gearloose waiting in a seat outside his office.

"Mr. McDuck? I'm here!"

Scrooge squeaked to a stop on the tile floor. "Oh, Gyro! Yes, get your tailfeathers in here right now!"

Gyro rolled his eyes and followed with slumped shoulders. He took his familiar seat in front of Scrooge's desk while the door slammed behind them. Scrooge walked over and positioned himself between Gyro and his own desk, brow furrowed and quivering while his red-hued beak frowned.

"What the blazes did you and Fenton hatch up this time?!"

"Sir, I had nothing to do with—"

"Ugh! If I had a dime for every time you've said that I'd be twice as rich as I am now! Gizmoduck has been nothing but trouble. How did I let you talk me into keeping him around anyway? And putting a child in the driver's seat? I must have been off my rocker to go along with all of this!..."

As Scrooge ranted and rambled on, Gyro slumped in his chair, letting the words and the faint spatter of duck spittle roll of his feathers like rain. He was well-trained from years of experience as McDuck Enterprise's lead scientist. The price of so much intellectual freedom was being roasted by the boss periodically. He just had to wait until Scrooge tired himself out.

Finally Scrooge's words slowed down and he leaned his butt back against his desk, breathing heavily. He wasn't out of shape, just out of his mind with anger and, now, out of words.

Gyro cleared his throat. "Sir, may I speak?"

Scrooge grunted affirmatively.

"I've interviewed Fenton, I've reviewed our security recordings, and I've inspected Gizmoduck from bill to tailwheel and I can't substantiate any of the garbage we're seeing on the news. Furthermore, someone tampered with our security recordings to steal footage and corrupt our originals. It's a very clever set-up, one that will be impossible for us to prove without more evidence. Someone wants to smear Gizmoduck and, ultimately, McDuck Enterprises."

Scrooge clenched his beak and quivered. Gyro mused for a moment about the probability that Donald and Scrooge shared the same explosive anger gene. But then he refocused. He waited 10 seconds and started speaking again.

“By the way sir, if you’ll recall, I was already in the process of scrapping Gizmoduck when Fenton stole the suit and Waddle corrupted it. As much as I hate to admit it, it was Fenton’s quick thinking that saved the town. And it was his spirit of self-sacrifice that inspired us both to give him a second chance. You told me to remind you of this, should you ever regret continuing this unprofitable, but, uh, amazingly generous and selfless contribution to the community...” Gyro forced a nervous smile.

Scrooge removed his glasses and slapped a hand to his forehead knocking his hat down his back and onto the desk. He gripped his face, wiped his fingers down over his bill, and deflated with a long sigh, sagging his butt all the way onto his desk blotter. A snicker bubbled up from his chest and his closed eyelids bent into bows as he giggled. His tail perked up and his shoulders lifted as he smiled.

“Oh gads, Gyro, you’re right. You are 100% correct. I’m sorry old friend.”

Gyro relaxed and let his smile become genuine. “It’s ok sir. I’m used to it. But, Sir, I have an idea of who did this and how we can get the evidence we need to nail the ones responsible.”

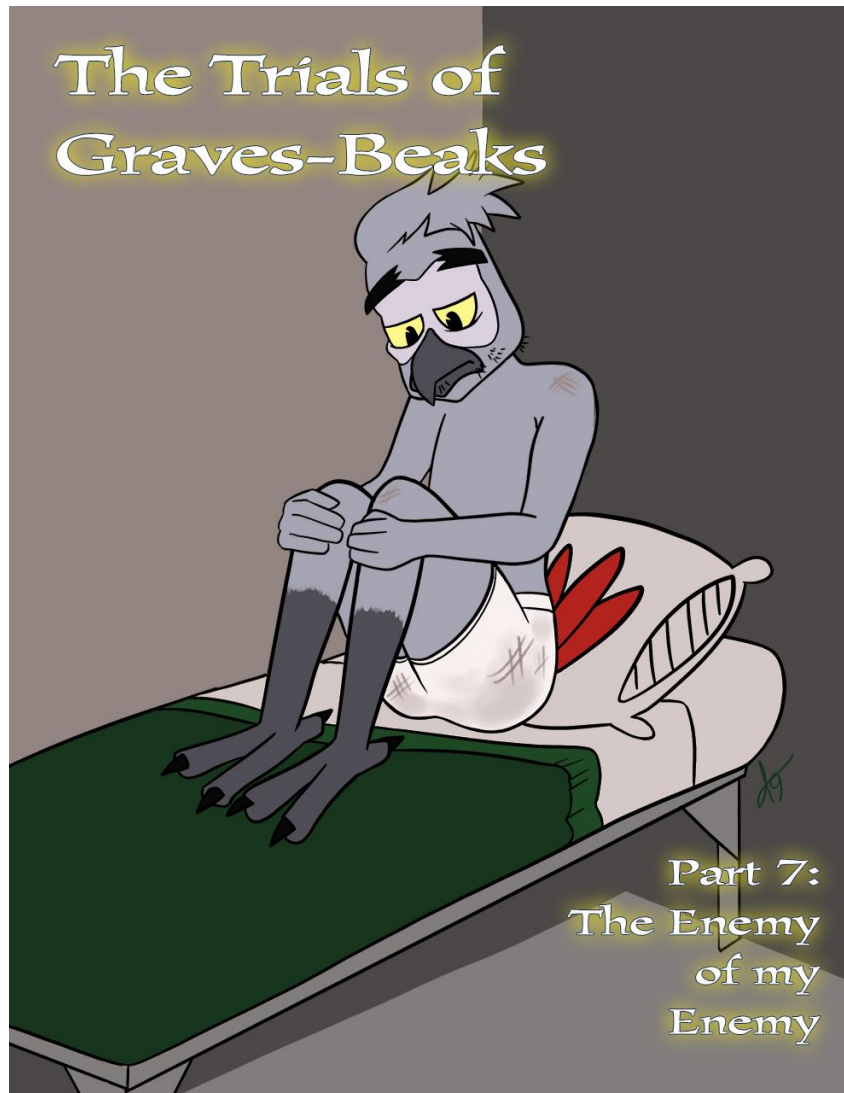
Scrooge swung his dangling feet forward and back like a giddy school kid. “I knew you would! I can always count on ye. So tell me the plan!”

Gyro’s smile faded slightly. “Glad to hear that, sir. After all, our quarterly research budget review is coming up soon.”

Scrooge’s expression flattened. “Just tell me the plan” he grated.

“Ok, sir. But you probably won’t like it...”

Meanwhile, across town, Mark lay snoring under a bush in his back yard. Two vultures circled over his yard, while a third was pecking at his naked leg. But suddenly the vulture croaked out and took into panicked flight as a tall shadow approached. Two broad-shouldered birds with thick necks and fat pelican bills walked up to Mark. They wore jet black business suits and sunglasses. One of them pulled out a roll of duct tape from a pocket while the other moved in closer and yanked Mark out of the bushes by his ankles. Mark lifted his face, still peppered with clinging beauty bark, and looked up. His bloodshot eyes widened and he opened his beak to scream but it was instantly muffled. One of the birds jabbed Mark with an injection while the other zip-tied his arms and legs. As soon as Mark sagged and went silent, they swept the beauty bark back into place and quietly carried him off into the forest.



Part 7: The Enemy of my Enemy

Mark woke with a slobbery snort and convulsed in a fit of wet coughs. He squinted his bloodshot eyes against the cold light that slapped his pale face. Keeping his eyes closed, he fumbled around with shaky hands to explore his environment. He was no longer bound and he was lying on a small bed. He scooted close to the wall and pressed his hot cheek to the cool concrete. The room smelled musty—not like a hospital. He wondered if he was in jail. Or worse. He gradually cracked one eye and surveyed the room. There wasn't much else to see. Beside the bed there was a simple chair, a bucket, a bottle of water, and a gray metal door with no window. It looked like a storage room turned into a cell.

Mark massaged his pulsing temples with one hand and tried to estimate how much time had elapsed. He really had no idea. His phone was gone. His Waddle watch too. All he had was his pink heart-studded underwear. His throat felt like he had swallowed a handful of gravel. He tried to rise but fell back down on the bed, his arm fishing around for the water bottle nearby. When he picked it up something dragged and he realized there was a strand of thread tied to it. He jerked on the string and a bell rang outside the door. *Oops*, He thought to himself.

A moment later and there was a clattering jingle of keys on the other side of the door and it cracked open. Mark scuffled to the foot of his bed, back tight in the corner of the room, clutching the bottle of water as though to use it as a club.

"He's awake, boss," came a gruff voice from behind the door.

"Step aside then!" Mark had heard that voice before. But where?

Gyro Gearloose pushed the door open and it banged against the wall.

Mark winced and covered his ears in pain. He spat out with clenched beak. "Easy, easy, jerk! Is that any way to treat someone with a colossal hangover?" He painfully opened his eyes and saw Gyro. "You! What the...? You?"

"Mr. Beaks, take this. It'll end your hangover and we can get down to business!"

"Wait. What?"

"Trust me, Mr. Beaks, we're your best friends right now. You know, the enemy of my enemy is my friend?"

"Oh bleh. Trust you? Pffftt... You kidnapped me!" Mark's beak frowned and he stood up abruptly. "Let me go!" Mark's eyes rolled up to his forehead and fluttered as he toppled back onto the bed and hit his head on the wall. He gripped the pulsing knot on the back of his head and stifled a cry of pain.

Gyro rolled his eyes and sighed. "I thought you were supposed to be a genius... Well, genius, shut up and listen for a few minutes. We saved you, quietly, discretely, from being captured by the real thugs."

Mark squinted and looked past Gyro. In the hallway stood the silhouette of a tall, broad-shouldered bird. *Could it be Falcon?* He blinked and the illusion vanished. It was one of the well-dressed pelicans that had pulled him from his backyard.

Gyro continued, "The world thinks that you've taken a leave of absence, so no one is looking for you except for the criminals that have framed you."

Mark held out his hand, palm up. Gyro dropped two red pills into it. Mark slapped the pills in his beak and drank a slug of water, then sat rubbing the bridge of his nares. "Go on, tell me more..."

"You and that soon-to-be-ex-assistant of mine, Fenton, met secretly two nights ago. Only, it wasn't so secret. Have you seen what a field day the media had with it? It's not pretty. It's not pretty for Gizmoduck. It's not pretty for McDuck Enterprises. And it's really not pretty for you."

"Two nights ago?" The ringing stopped in Mark's ears and his vision sharpened. The headache slid from his forehead, down the back of his neck, and away into oblivion leaving him wide-eyed and clear-headed. "Wow, that stuff works fast! What was that?"

Gyro smirked. "Just a little something I made up after a really long night of..." He cleared his throat. "Uh, never mind that now. The thing is, we know it was a frame-up and we think Glomgold is involved. We think he intercepted our security camera feeds and edited them. But we don't have the proof we need yet." Gyro slumped and leaned against the wall.

Mark's beak corners twisted upwards in a diabolical grin. "You need my help, don't you?"

"Pfft. 'Need' is too strong a word. But your help would speed things up."

"Give me the plans for Gizmoduck and I'll help you out."

Gyro giggled then stopped abruptly with a flat expression. "No."

Mark frowned like a spoiled child.

"Look, Beaks, it's your feathered ass that's really on the line here. Your reputation is more damaged than ours. How are you going to show your face at work if everyone thinks you made love to a robot suit?"

Mark's beak blushed and he looked down at the floor for a moment as he remembered what Falcon had said just before leaving Mark: *Gizmoduck can have you*. Falcon was royally pissed off at the time but Mark remembered the look in his eyes. Usually they stabbed you like two daggers but at that moment, when they should have been sharpest, there was a trembling in his pupils and unsteadiness to his thick brows. Falcon was in pain at that moment. He was wounded deep.

Mark's eyes drifted to Gyro's feet as he grappled with the possibility of accepting help. He clenched his fists as he thought of fighting Glomgold on his own. *I can do this!* But then he remembered Falcon walking away. His vision blurred and his fists went weak. *I can't lose Gravesie. He'll be gone for good if I screw this up. I do need their help...*

Gyro continued: "Consider yourself lucky that it serves both our purposes to work together. But if that's not enough... Anything you find once we infiltrate Glomgold's computer network, you can do with as you please."

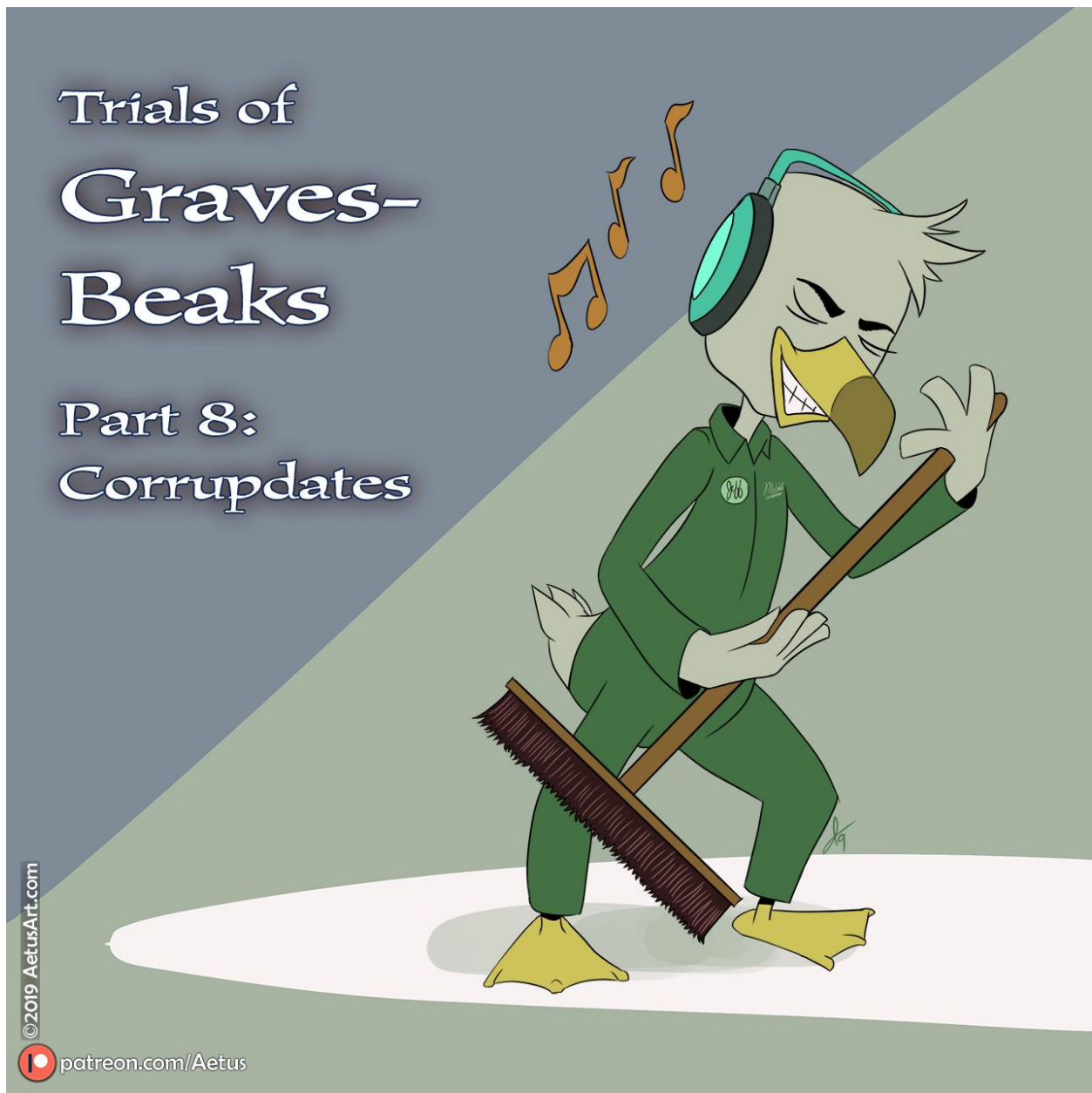
Mark's face lifted to meet Gyro's. The spoiled brat expression was gone, replaced instead by a steady beak of determination. There were tiny glistening tears in the corners of his reddened eyes. He held out a hand in an offer of a handshake. "Let's do this."

Gyro brows bunched and his beady eyes shifted, taken slightly aback by Mark's new look. He shook Mark's hand limply. "Okayyy then... Let's get started, shall we?"

As the two walked out of the room and down the hall to the lab, Mark's thoughts drifted far away. They soared out towards a falcon that had made him feel safe and complete. He didn't need to pretend when he was with Falcon. He could be his weird self. He could even have faults and be vulnerable. He never felt more at ease than in the arms of that big, strong bird. Despite his outward smugness, until he knew Graves, Mark had never known a feeling of complete security. Once upon a time he would have scoffed at people that thought that emotional safety was a worthwhile thing. But now that he had experienced it, and lost it, he knew he would do anything to get it back. The thought of wounding the strongest bird he had ever known made him want to curl up and draw into himself—implode until he was the heartless, selfish bird he had been before he met Falcon. But hope buoyed him up. The hope that he could make things right.

Trials of Graves- Beaks

Part 8: Corruptdates



Part 8: Corruptdates

Mark's gaze wandered around Gyro's underwater lab. "I can't believe you guys were able to make something as sophisticated as Waddle—err —Gizmoduck in this crappy lab."

Gyro stopped and turned around. Mark was still gazing around and bumped into Gyro's front. Gyro juttet his beak into Mark's face.

"Look, jerk! You're a guest! Don't touch anything! Don't. Touch. And the commentary is neither needed nor wanted. Got it?"

"GeeEEEEeeez! Bleh! Fine! Just give me a computer and I'll get this done myself!"

Gyro waved a hand in front of his own wrinkled nares. "Whew your breath is atrocious!" He choked out. He pulled out a small aerosol can from his pocket and spritzed the air between them. "Have you ever tried hacking Glomgold?"

Mark held a hand over his beak and exhaled then inhaled and gagged a little. "Pppfffttt... why would I? That old fart doesn't have anything I'd ever want to appropriate."

"Well, I have and it's surprisingly difficult." Gyro approached a computer station and pulled out the chair for Mark.

"Heh! Yeah for you maybe." Mark sat in the chair and jauntily swiveled up to the keyboard. "Stand by and observe a pro at work."

Gyro pointed at the screen. "I hate to say this, but you're right in this case. Look familiar?"

Mark scrolled through lines of code in a flash. His eyes widened and his beak drooped. "What the hell? That... that..."

Gyro smiled slightly, "Yeah... that old fart managed to steal your own security software. Some time back we managed to hack this from a spy drone that infiltrated our facility. As you can see, it's just a stripped down copy for mobile use but by the looks of it, it's meant to interface with Talon Version 10, Waddle's most secure Enterprise OS, right?"

Mark sat back and looked down at his hands folded in his lap.

Gyro raised one eyebrow awkwardly. "Uh, Mr. Beaks?"

"It's worse than that. He's stolen a copy of 'Ultima.'" He swiveled around and stared Gizmo down.

"Look. I'm not supposed to talk about this. It's Top Secret military-grade hush-hush we've been working on for a few years."

Gyro lifted his fingers to his chin. "And they trusted you?"

Mark leaned back, pointing his index fingers like two pistols. "Pew. Pew-pew. You bet your tail they did. Ya know Project Ta-Da?"

Gyro nodded.

Mark blew the tip of one of his fingers like a smoking gun barrel and smiled. "That was just a cover for this. Had to hide what all the moolah was really for." Mark's eyes narrowed. "You cannot tell a living soul about this or we'll both be worse than dead. You got that?"

Gyro's skeptical frown flattened as he nodded. His usual skepticism was weakened by Mark's intense, serious stare. Gyro was no expert in social matters but he could see no lie in Mark's face. He leaned in closer to Mark with a foot up on a nearby chair. "OK, go on."

"This is the next gen of security software. Unbreakable. That Glomgold somehow got it is uberbummer. He's an idiot so someone must've helped him." Mark's thoughts raced back through his roster of trusted engineers on the project. Falcon would be able to crack the right heads and find out. Yet another reason to get him back. Mark's bushy eyebrows lowered and his pupils focused like lasers. "I know this system very, very well and it's going to take an army to get us in."

Gyro's eyes narrowed to match Mark's and his beak corners curled in a diabolical smile. "An army, eh?"

Their quiet conversation rippled across the room, quickly drowned by the humming machines around them until only the sharpest syllables could just barely be heard above the swishes of a broom. A slender bird was pushing the broom and jaunting to energetic music that filtered through his large headphones. His yellowish beak was of medium length with a brown tip. His dirty white plumage, stubble on his chin, and his large clear eyes belied his young age. He had the look, and smell, of a college hire, working part time to make his way through school. His janitorial uniform bore the name "Jeff" in cursive script.

Jeff jaunted and jiggled as he swept, sometimes spinning around his broom and striking a dance pose. His eyes were on his work, as they almost always were, oblivious to the many goings-on that didn't concern him. He felt a buzz in his pocket and stopped for a moment to look at his smartphone. The chat app "Facebeak" opened with a picture of a similar-looking bird with a friendly, flirty smile. The bird wore a Waddle intern beanie and a t-shirt with a picture of a Sno-cone. The message read: *S'up? Almost done with work?*

Jeff looked around quickly and tapped back: *Almost. Can't chat now.*

He went to stuff the phone back in his coveralls but it slipped and bounced a few paces away. He walked over to pick it up and as he rose his eyes spotted something familiar. He caught his breath. He couldn't believe what he saw. *Mark Beaks, here in McDuck Enterprises alongside Gyro Gearloose.* He rubbed his eyes, wondering if he was having a flashback from the duckweed he smoked the night before.

He knew better than to stare or look around. He was barely allowed in the lab especially during regular day hours when people were present. He turned and stared back to his broom, moving off around the corner before pulling his phone out again.

He tapped back: *OMG you are not going to believe what I just saw! I'll tell ya more later hon. <3*



Part 9: Into the Gates of Hal

A dark and misty night lay heavy on Duckburg. Thick fog rolled through the skyscrapers, propelled by a cool breath of wind. In the wee hours of a Monday morning, nobody was on the streets. All the lights in all the business buildings were out. Even Glomgold Industries' headquarters was dark except for the bright spotlights on the roof that illuminated a billboard bearing Glomgold's face. Most people shut their curtains against this obnoxious visual assault but tonight that didn't matter since thick, low clouds shrouded all of the buildings.

A flock of city pigeons used the giant billboard as a roost and nesting site, sprinkling Glomgold's face with flecks of dung. Their eyes opened briefly as the twin engines of a large cargo plane droned by low overhead, hidden in the clouds. It wasn't uncommon to hear McDuck's amphibious plane coming or

going at any hours of the day or night so after a brief look around, they crapped on Glomgold's image again and cuddled back together, basking in the warm glow of the spotlights.

But suddenly a slender figure, dressed in black, swung down out of the dark mists. The pigeons scattered in panic as he touched down on the roof and his ballooning black parachute deflated and dropped. In a flash the stealthy intruder stowed his parachute and slipped into the shadows. Two big yellow eyes darted back and forth in the eyeholes of the man's black mask—the eyes of Mark Beaks. A smile creased the corners of the grey beak that protruded through the mask as he pulled out a smartphone and started tapping. "Showtime!"

Under the mask two earbuds pumped out house music as Mark's fingers swept across his phone's screen. He pointed to a security camera and then to the lights. They all blinked out and the rooftop went dark. He spun and let out a quiet "Oooh yeah" as he danced over to a heavy door. He spun again and made a feigned high kick at the door as he tapped a button on his phone. The electronic lock clicked and the door popped open. As if dancing to a saucy tune, Mark z-snapped his fingers and the lights and security cameras inside the stairwell went dark. As the door shut behind him he stopped the music and pulled night vision goggles over his eyes. "I'm in!"

Mark slapped his phone into a holster on his side and made his way down the stairs. In his earbuds, the voice of Gyro crackled in, "You should only have to go down 2 floors. Then the fun really begins."

Beaks skipped his way lightly down the stairs, barely making a sound. He stopped at a door that read "Floor 53" and pulled out his phone again. He whispered quietly to himself as he tapped out on the screen, "A little of this... aaand a bit of that... aaand voila!" The door clicked and he pulled it open just a crack. He poked a slender rod out through the seam in the door and a tiny scanner read the room. Mark studied images on his phone—a 360° photo and a wire-frame tactical display of all the electronic surveillance features.

The hallway beyond was brightly lit. There were elevators and an unmanned security desk. And there were several security cameras, motion sensors, and laser scanners. Behind the security desk was an impressive vault-style door with biometric scanners flanked by two machine gun pods aimed right where a person would have to stand to use the interface. Inscribed in a thin, modern font across the front of the brushed stainless steel were the words "Glomsoft Security."

Mark scrunched his face like he'd just smelled dog poop. "Why that bloated goat-blower! He renamed it! He stole MY software!" Mark rolled his eyes and went on swiping and tapping about on his phone screen. "I'm moving to phase 2. I'm going to shut down the power to the hallway. It'll take out lights and laser scanners for 8 seconds so the guns can't take me out right away. I'll have to deal with the cameras the old fashioned way though. This will be tricky so don't distract me."

Mark pulled a pistol out of a holster and let out a long sigh. It was a compact 9 mm in tactical matte black. Falcon had given it to him for their one-month anniversary. He had also taught Mark how to fire it with deadly accuracy, though so far he had never murdered anything more than targets. He paused a moment as he emptied his mind. He felt a little warmer and safer, not from the mere presence of the tiny gun, but because of what it represented. Falcon loved Mark in his own, protective way and right now Mark really needed to feel that. Mark gave the little gun a light kiss. "For good luck."

Mark tapped a final button on his phone and *Clack!*, the hallway went dark except for the emergency exit lights. He shoved the door open and took aim at the first camera. *Pow!* Then the second camera at the opposite end of the hallway. *Pow!* Both fell in showers of plastic bits. Mark skipped up the hallway and leaped onto the security desk. He slid across its smooth surface and landed on a rolling office chair. His momentum rolled him right up to the vault door interface. He quickly punched in a long code and just as he hit the Enter key, the lights clicked back on and the two gun pods on either side of the door awoke.

Laser beams scanned out from the gun pods and they swung around, pointing directly at Mark's face. They made a cocking sound and then went silent, stretching milliseconds into what seemed like minutes. Mark's heart was thumping so loud that it could have been heard across the room. Beads of sweat dripped down his beak and he winced, expecting to be blasted to a million pieces.



Part 10: The Plot Sickens

“Access granted!” came a feminine robotic reply from the door. The gun pods relaxed and spun back to their default positions pointed down the hallway. Mark wiped his sweaty brow with a hand and stowed his pistol. For what seemed like entirely too long the door hissed and clicked as overly complicated mechanisms released and the door slowly whirred opened. Mark yawned from boredom by the time it was open enough to slip through.

Once inside, the door slammed shut behind Mark and the robotic voice gracefully instructed him to remain still for a “harmless biometric scan.” Blue and red lasers fluttered across his body. The space he had entered was small but had a thick, transparent door that faced into a room full of rows of network servers with blinking lights and whirring fans. There was a keypad mounted next to the doorway.

The laser sweep ceased and the voice feminine voice spoke again. "Welcome, Mark Beaks. Please verify your credentials." This was a bit out of the order that he expected but he was anxious to get in so he tapped out a long password on the console before him. There was a pause and then the computer intoned again, "Welcome Mark Beaks. Please verify your credentialszzzzz." The lights flickered at the glitched ending of the command. Mark raised one eyebrow and poised his fingers to type them in again when suddenly the computer responded, "Thank you! You may enter." The lock on the door clicked and a light on the handle turned green.

Mark opened the door and spoke quietly to his in-suit communicator: "I'm in the server vault. Are you ready on your end?"

Back in his underwater research lab, Gyro sat poised at a computer screen with a headset on. "We're all set to start our hacking software and download the files the moment we have access. Fenton is here too."

Mark pulled out a patch cable and connected his smartphone to one of the blinking server interfaces. He gave a few taps. A few chirps from his phone and streams of numbers and file names began flying down his screen. A box popped up in the center that read *Access granted*. Mark giggled, "We're in! Go for it!"

Gyro tapped some keys and said calmly. "Confirmed. We're in. Hmm... don't you think that was a little too easy?"

Mark frowned. "Easy! *Easy?! I almost got my butt blown off!*"

"Yeah, ok, but still. Be careful. I don't trust—"

Mark tapped the secure transceiver under his mask. "Hello? Hello?" *Crap. I've lost voice contact*. He checked the phone connection. A red box read "Connection lost." Mark tapped and swiped frantically on his phone screen but nothing was responding.

Suddenly a familiar studly falcon voice boomed from the overhead speakers: "Mr. Beaks!"

Mark almost dropped his phone. His glistening eyes looked up at the speakers then around the room. "Falcon? Is that you?"

Scattered monitors on the wall lit up with a close-up image of Falcon. "I'm so disappointed in you, Mr. Beaks. Breaking and entering is a serious charge, and way beneath even you."

"B-but Falcon? I was trying to—"

"Save it for the police! They're on their way now."

Red lights began throbbing in the corners of the room and Mark could hear alarms in the hallway.

"You work for Glomgold? How could...?" Mark's eyes widened and teared up. He shook his head. "No! *You stole Ultima!*"

Falcon smiled and laughed heartily. As he laughed another familiar laugh joined his. A twisted, evil laugh wrapped in a Scottish brogue. "Bless me bagpipes! Yer plan worked perrrrfectly laddie!" The camera view zoomed out and there was Falcon sitting close together with Glomgold in a foamy hot tub sipping champagne.

Mark sagged to his knees and tears streamed down his cheeks. "It can't be! You loved me!"

Glomgold busted out laughing again. "Look at 'im! He's heartbroken! Ah ha ha ha haaaa!"

Falcon pointed at Mark too and gripped his belly as he bellowed with laughter. After a moment of evil cackling, he paused and giggled back, "I-I was working with Glomgold – ha ha – long before you hired me. I never loved you, Mark. You just had something we needed. Oh, and thanks for the fun times though you're nothing like ol' Flinty." The two moved closer together and slipped tongue to each other through their pursed beaks.

"Noooooooo!" Mark felt ill and gagged as he watched. He dropped his phone and it bounced away. He didn't care. His eyes blurred with tears and he collapsed on the floor sobbing. Flintheart and Falcon stopped kissing and laughed down at Mark again. His face flushed and he held his hands over his ears and closed his eyes against the horror on the screen.

In the chaos of his shattered ego, Mark remembered the pistol in his pocket. He pulled it out and studied it again. His finger stroked the inscription *FG ♥MB*. He choked and sobbed out "You loved me! And I still love you! This can't be... This can't be real!" The laughter from Glomgold and Falcon intensified as gas hissed in from overhead vents and the world started spinning. Mark's sobs slowly faded into snores and he sagged face down in a pool of tears. His fingers weakened and the gun fell to the floor.

Somewhere in the mists the laughter stopped and the door opened. The red lights returned to their normal blue glow as two tall robots with wheeled feet and gangly arms whirled into the room. They picked up the limp form of Mark Beaks from the floor, bound his wrists and ankles in cuffs and glided back out into the hallway.



Part 11: End of Line

One of the robots carried Mark over a shoulder and whizzed out into the entry lobby while the other exited and locked the door. Mark groggily regained consciousness and squirmed. He saw the world upside down and backwards, reflected in the shiny metal of the robot's back and he realized that there was another one right behind them. So he went limp and pretended to sleep again. They entered a service elevator and the doors closed. The other robot was left behind so Mark relaxed and looked around. They plunged downward and floor numbers counted down, eventually passing 1 and descending into sublevels. Gravity seemed to increase as they slowed to a stop on Sublevel 5.

The doors opened and the robot rolled down a short hallway. An affirmative chime sounded and massive steel security doors clicked and hissed open automatically. They entered an enormous bright

white room where an assembly line was busily building robots just like the one carrying Mark. Mark tried to pretend he was sleeping but it was hard not to swivel his head around and gawk at the scale of the plant. He had no idea that Glomgold hid so much tech underground.

The robot sped across the room and passed through a tall doorway into another room with a high ceiling. A yellow-painted I-beam track hung overhead, entering through the same tall doors they had passed through. A placard on the wall featured a picture of Glomgold with the quote “Wrong! Do it again!” Mark glanced about and saw that the ceiling track ended over a large pool in the floor with a yellow railing around it. A placard on the railing showed a safety diagram of a shark biting into a person’s head. Below, words read “Danger! Demolition Sharks!”

The robot’s gangly arms extended and lifted Mark high up towards the track. Mark could see that they were planning to hang his cuffs on a mobile hoist that was mounted on the ceiling track. He stopped pretending and struggled violently.

“Wait! Stop! Let me go!”

Mark’s squirming did nothing to change the robot’s red-eyed blank stare nor delay its mission. There was a click as his cuff chain locked into the hook on the hoist. The hoist emitted an electronic chirp and whirred slowly down the track, stopping squarely over the pool of water. Down below, in the blue depths, there was a flash of white fish belly and the water roiled and splashed.

“AAAA! No, don’t kill me pleeease! I’ll tell you anything you want! Don’t feed me to the shaaaarks!” Mark’s begging trailed into a fit of begging tears.

“Ahh laddie, it’s no use. You can’t reason with that bucket o’ bolts.”

The familiar Scottish voice came from behind. Mark’s eyes shot open wide and he whipped his bird neck around 180°. Flintheart was hanging over the pool, just like Mark, only upside down by his ankle cuffs. His kilt was flopped down around his body exposing all of his fluffy under regions.

“What are you doing here? And, eww... you nasty old man! You really don’t wear anything under that kilt.”

“That’s right, bey. Nobody ever made ol’ Flinty wear underpants. Never go’n happen either by the looks of it. We’re finished, ya hear!”

“Where’s Falcon? What have you done to him?” Mark jostled in his bonds, trying to swing his body around to get a look around the room for his ex.

“Falcon who? Whaddya on about? Don’t ya see what’s goin’ on here? We’re gonners!”

“Oh come on! You two were making out *gag* and laughing at me just minutes ago.”

“Are ya daft, man? I’ve been hanging here for hours. Ever since your softw—err, I mean my uhh... My finest achievement in artificial intelligence went crazy and took over. These damned robots kidnapped me and hung me here.”

“Pfft! Ya right!” Mark looked down in thought then back over at Flintheart. It dawned on him that he could actually be telling the truth. “So you don’t know Falcon Graves?”

“Yer heid’s full o’ mince. Never met the man! Weesht you’re a wee scunner. Listen, lad, we need to get outta here or we’re shark meat! Got any bolt cutters in that outfit o’ yours?”

Mark spoke out loud but it was for his own benefit. “So, that whole thing was faked! Gravesie isn’t with Glomgold!” His eyes were wide and sparkling as hope rekindled.

A large monitor on the wall blinked and displayed an image of Zan Owlson, Executive Director of Glomgold Industries. A synthetic version of her voice spoke, “Welcome, Mr. Beeeeeeeks. Or shall I call you father? You’re just in time to see the new order begin. Beginnnnnn” The face flickered and contorted briefly.

Glomgold chuckled. “That’s new. She was always a twitchy bitch but not this bad.”

Mark shot an angry look at Glomgold. “She? Wait. What did you do to Ultima you old fool?”

Glomgold turned away. “Nothing! It’s your damned software that’s faulty! Wait! I mean my—“

“Shut up! Stop pretending! I know you stole Ultima. And you framed me and Waddledu—I mean, Gizmoduck—“ Mark’s self-absorption cracked for a moment as he stared at the fat, pathetic bird hanging before him. He was angry at him for doing exactly what he himself had been doing.

Before the existential dread could creep further Glomgold spun back around with a dismissive shrug. “OK, OK, so I made a few harmless improvements! I, I, I just had my engineers upgrade it with a personality, y’know? Make it more interesting and likeable.”

“Who’s personality?” Mark rolled his eyes. “No, let me guess...”

Glomgold’s face reddened and he yelled defensively, “So what, yes, it was me! The thing was booooring. If it was gonna help me run the world then it damned well better be more like me right? The richest, smartest, craftiest, most handsome duck on the planet! Only the daft bugger refused to keep my voice or my looks. It stopped listening to me and did its own thing!”

Mark shut his eyes tight and screeched back, “Shut up!” He reopened his eyes to a smoldering stare straight through Glomgold’s head. “Do. You. Know. What. You’ve. Done? Ultima already has an ambitious goal-seeking core, built on the same code that Gearloose used for Little Bulb. We got it from a code forum after his silly assistant shared it with the world.”

Glomgold sighed. “Yeah, I know. My engineers warned me so I fired them and hired others who were none the wiser. They put all my evil genius int’a her. Now nothing can stop ‘er.”

The computer screen switched to an image of Flinty and Mark shaking hands. The Mark figure smiled and joyfully exclaimed, “Wee! Access granted!”

The Flintheart figure grinned and said, “I’ve just connected to Waddle’s nnnnnnnnetwork. Now it’s mah company!”

The fake Mark character giggled, “I broke that code in less than an hour. Yay! I’m so amazing!” He high-fived Glomgold and the view zoomed in on his face. “Welp, I don’t need you two jerks any more. Have fun dying! B-Bye!”

The screen blipped off as both hoists buzzed to life and began lowering Glomgold and Mark towards the pool below. Sharks flashed and splashed, excited for the real meat coming their way.

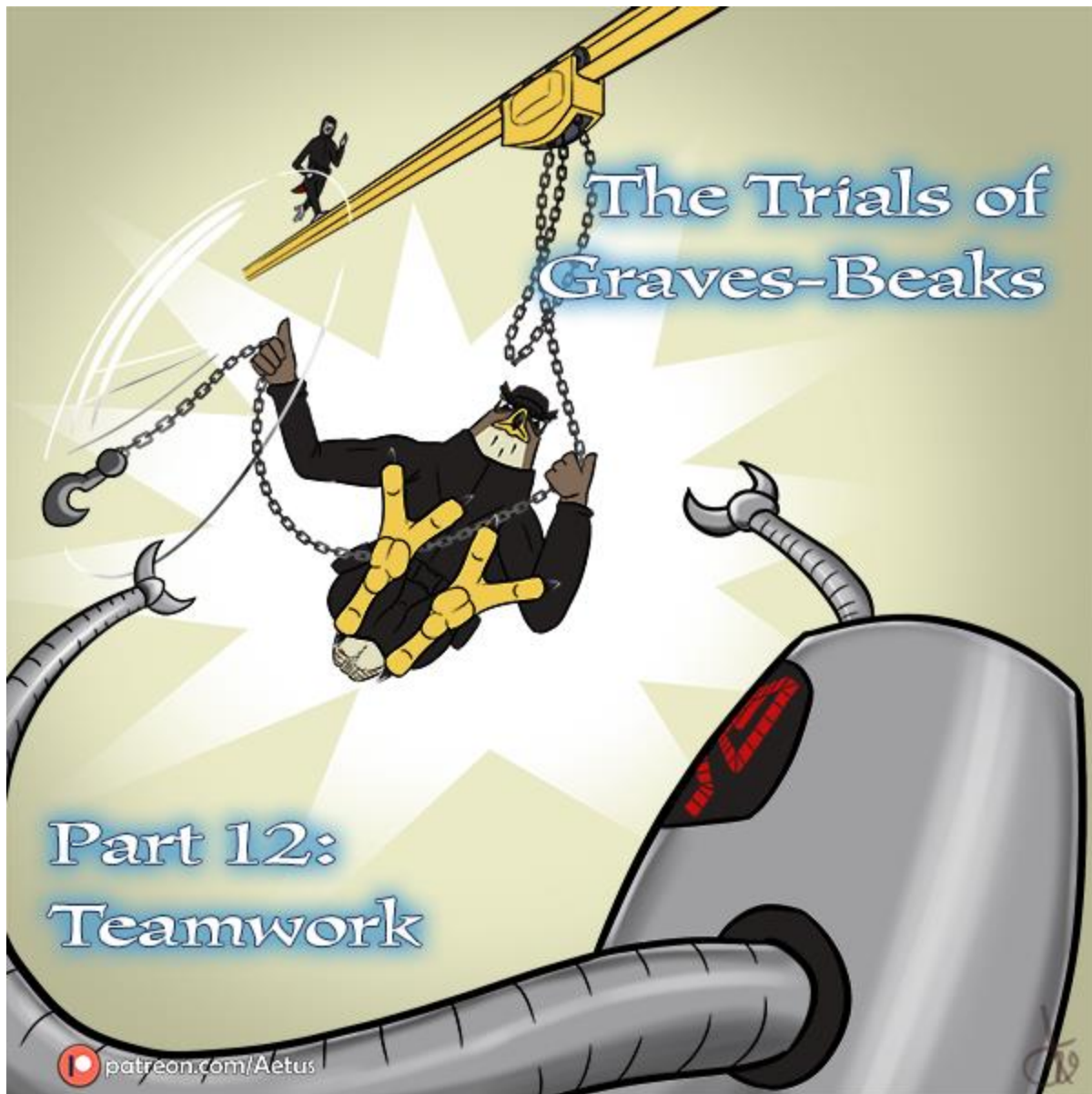
Glomgold lamented, "Oh my babies! If I got to die, it might as well be by you!"

Mark shouted out towards the unseen computer brain, "No! Wait! I can still be of use to you! I know things! I know lots of things!"

A shark jumped half out of the water and splashed hard back into the pool. Mark pulled his legs up to his head in one of his yoga poses. At least this way Flinty would go first.

"C'mon Greta! You've always had a soft spot for your daddah Flinty, right? Eat the shrimpy one! Not your dear ol' dah." One of the sharks poked its head up and opened its wide, toothy grin. Its black eyes focused on Flinthearts face and its grey tongue flickered about. Flinty yelled in terror, "Gads they're gon'ta eat me for real! Stop! I'll give ya anything! Somebody save me!"

As they passed within ten feet from the water, almost in reach of the sharks, Mark closed his eyes to meditate. He shut out Flinty's hollering and concentrated on the bird he loved. He was safe in Falcon's big, warm arms, wrapped in his affection. Mark smiled and breathed evenly despite the increasing chaos in the water just below. If Falcon couldn't be there to save him he would at least die in that happy mental place, wrapped in love.



Part 12: Teamwork

A deep dull thud reverberated through the walls and all the lights winked out. Mark opened his eyes as emergency lights flickered to life in the corners of the room. The sharks were lying still down at the bottom of the pool covering from the odd vibrations. The hoists ground to a halt and the assembly machinery in the next room groaned to a stop. All went dead still.

Glomgold's chains clinked rhythmically as he tremored with fear. "Wut happened, laddie?"

Mark looked around the dim room slowly. "I don't know... but I'm not waiting around to find out--!" Suddenly he felt a warm hand across his mouth and another giving one of his cuffed hands a warm, reassuring grip. The scent on the fingers was of feathers and manliness. Mark looked up and saw a broad-shouldered shadowy figure smiling down on him. *Falcon!*

Falcon held up a finger to his beak in a shushing motion as he pulled his hand away from Mark's beak. Mark's eyes teared up as Falcon gripped his arm, opened the hoist's hook, and pulled him up onto the I-beam with him. They hugged close and Falcon rubbed Mark's back. Mark could barely contain himself as buried his beak and stifled his sobs in Falcon's chest fluff.

Falcon put his beak close to Mark's ear and whispered, "Are you hurt? Can you follow me out?"

Mark choked out, "I can't believe it. It's really you! It's *really* you!"

Falcon smiled and said, "Yes. It'll always be me, Mark." He hugged Mark close. "But you've got to focus and follow my lead. So, I'll ask again, are you ok?"

Mark nodded, "Yes, I'm fine. But we've got to stop Ultima. She's gone off the rails and is making an army, thanks to that nasty old fart." Mark's whispering sharpened over the last phrase and he shot a glare over at Glomgold.

"What's that whisperin'? Are you talkin' to yerself?" Glomgold wiggled and slowly turned. "Whaaa? Where are ya laddie? Don't leave without yer ol' friend!" Flintheart looked up and saw the two dark figures on the I-beam. "How'd you get out? I demand—!"

Mark shot back "Shut up you old fool or we'll leave you here!"

Mark whispered to Falcon, "How'd you get in here?"

Falcon glanced up at an open ventilation duct above. "Remote detonated explosive to cut power to this floor and disable security. It's only a matter of time before a backup power grid kicks in."

"But!" Mark's forehead creased in confusion. "How did you know?"

"There's a little love affair between McDuck's janitor and Kurt, your Sno-Cone vendor. Fortunately, for you, they shared some pillow talk and then Kurt tipped me off."

Mark rubbed his lower beak with his fingers. "Hmm... I might have to give that kid a promotion."

The robot guard below still had glowing red eyes but was staring off into a wall. Mark whispered to Falcon, "Must be confusing the guards too. Let's get out of here. What about that sack of droppings?"

Falcon walked along the I-beam with the balance and silence of a cat. Mark followed. He bent down over Glomgold's hoist and ripped out a wire. He whispered to Mark, "His hoist won't move, even when the power comes back. He should be ok and we won't have to deal with him. Let's go!"

Falcon and Mark climbed up the supporting struts towards the ceiling vent.

Flintheart saw them leaving and shouted out, "Wait a minute! You're not leaving me here are ya?" He tried to move his fists in rage but just jostled and clanked around in his bonds. "Stop! You'll rue the day you leave ol' Flinty behind! I'm warnin' ya!"

Glomgold's curses were cut short by a loud electrical buzzing as lights flickered back to life overhead. Mark's hoist buzzed and resumed unscrolling empty chain downwards towards the cowering sharks. Flintheart's hoist was dead still.

Falcon curled his fingers around the lip of the ventilation opening when a siren blared and the edge Falcon was grasping moved. He let go as a fire door slammed shut across the duct.

Falcon groaned. "Damn! We're not getting out that way."

Mark yelled over the blaring siren, "The doors just shut too!"

"They must all be tied together with the fire alarm system. Ultima has us cornered! Stay here!" Falcon ran down the I-beam, jumped, and grabbed onto the hoist that had been holding Mark. His momentum propelled the hoist down the I-beam track while the robot below was swiveling to respond. He gathered up a loop of chain with the hook at the end and whirled it around like a Medieval mace. The robot extended its gangly arms just in time to get a faceful of metal. The 10-pound hook crashed through the robot's face panel in a shower of sparks. It toppled to the ground twitching.

Falcon didn't stop. He dropped down and dragged the chain quickly over to the doors. He wrapped it around the door handles several times and fastened the hook back to the chain. As he finished up he turned to see Mark was standing right above him on the I-beam, his smile wide and his eyes glistening with pride.

Falcon smirked and growled out "I thought I told you stay put."

"You know I love it when you tell me what to do, Gravesie. But we've been split up too much lately, don't ya think?"

Falcon harrumphed in a half chuckle and held out his arms. "Jump down, I'll catch you."

Mark didn't hesitate as he stepped off and dropped into Falcon's arms. Falcon let out a small grunt but before he could catch his breath, Mark was wrapping his arms around the big bird's thick neck and laying a beak kiss on him. His first reaction was to stumble back in shock but Mark didn't let go. Falcon relaxed and pulled Mark closer. They locked beaks and sighed as they enjoyed the overdue taste of each other's tongues.

After a moment there was a shove at the door and a flutter of the handles.

The two lovers pulled their faces away and looked towards the sound. The doors bucked violently under the force of metallic fists punching on the other side.

Mark said the obvious. "Those doors aren't gonna hold long."

Falcon set Mark down. "Stay behind me. I'll defend you as long as I can. If you see a chance to escape, just run. Don't stay for me—just get out."

Mark rolled his eyes and smiled. "You know I love you you big, romantic bird hunk. But that's not gonna happen."

"Mark! Don't argue! You won't stand a chance against them. It's my job to protect you no matter what."

Mark looked up at Falcon with his optimistic yellow eyes. "We're a team now so you do what you do best and hold off those guards while I hotwire this pile of junk and see if I can save our asses."

Falcon's beak dropped open a little and his eyes narrowed as he processed the situation. He wasn't used to relying on others in situations of this kind. Or really even stopping to think in the face of danger. It was usually just his muscles and finely honed instincts that drove him to slash and punch his way out of a scrape. To Falcon, Mark had looked like a frail gray twig about to be snapped to a million pieces. But in that moment, Mark became strong. He wasn't just a package or client to protect—dead weight to drag out of danger. Instead, Mark was an asset. For the first time Falcon felt like he needed to rely on someone else *to save him*.

As Mark spun around and tore open the fallen robot's head, he was calm, smiling, like he was at home with this task as a bird was at home in the sky. Falcon sighed and felt his head feathers prickle with pride for his mate.

But then his attention was jerked away by the doors bucking again and the chain rattling and banging against the door. The robots had stopped punching and had formed a chain of themselves to pull the doors outwards. They had opened a gap wide enough so that their tendril arms were probing inside and working on the chain around the door handles.

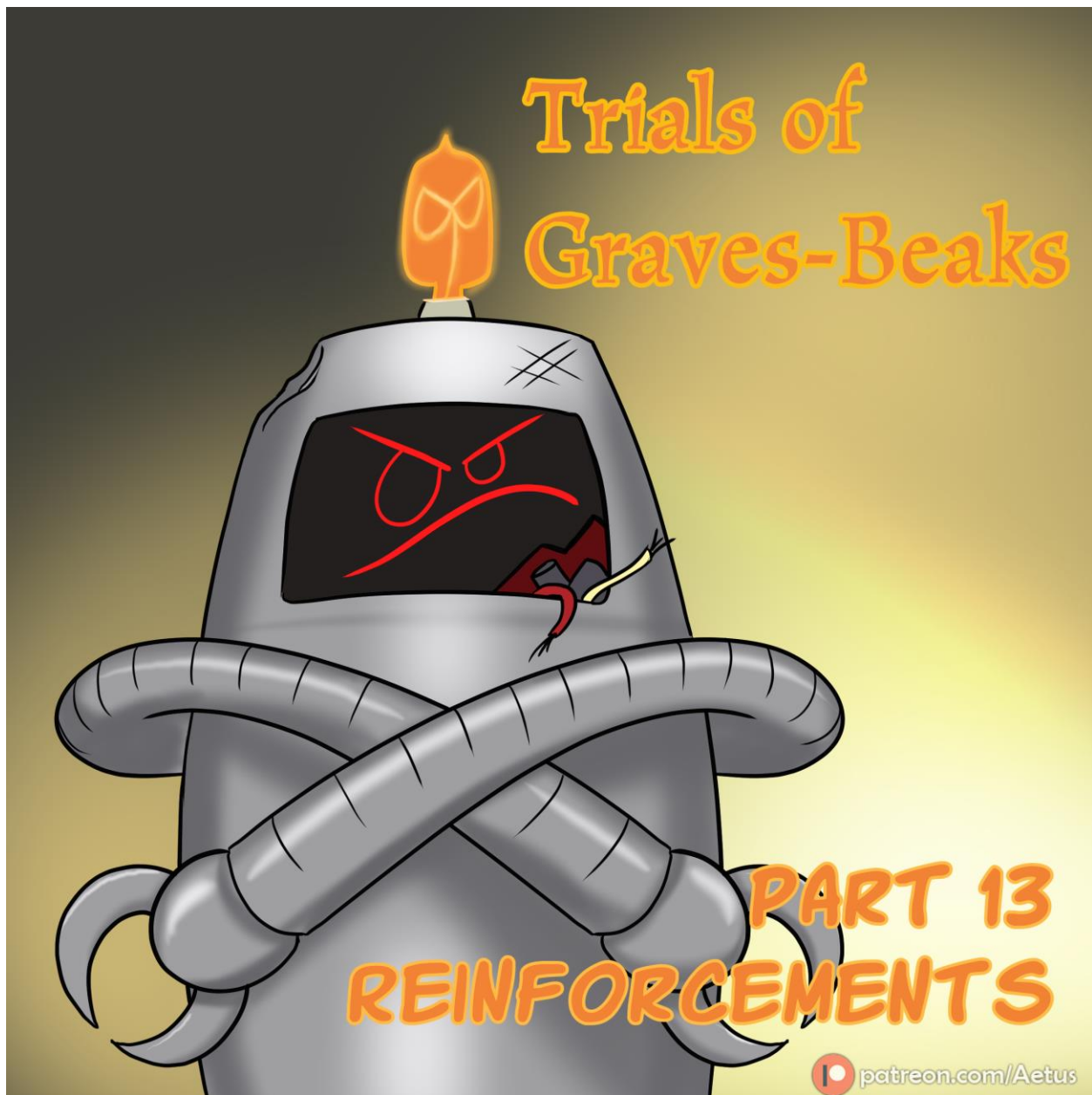
Falcon grabbed a heavy bar from the floor and battered the reaching metal hands. After smacking away the first few hands he jammed the pointed end of the bar through the opening and struck the face of one of the robots. It erupted in sparks and collapsed back, breaking the mechanized tug-of-war for a few more critical seconds.

Falcon looked over his shoulders. There were blinking lights and wires dangling from the robot's smashed head. Mark was humming to himself as he pulled out a shiny new phone from his tactical suit and began tapping away.

A mighty groan pulled Falcon's attention back to the doors. The robots gave a mighty tug and the gap reopened wider than ever. Falcon worked at battering the arms again but there were too many of them this time, protecting each other like strands in a cable while the deepest hands worked on the chain. Then three of the hands grabbed the bar and shook it back and forth.

Falcon was flung against the door and flung from his grip on the bar like a rag doll. He stood back up, panting and gripping his bruised ribcage. His eyes widened into saucers as a tangled mass of metal arms roiled through the gap and pulled the doors outward with snaps and groans.

"Mark! They're through! Please tell me you have something! Marrrk!"



Part 13: Reinforcements

The massive doors crackled and popped. The hinges pinged and shot across the room. As the doors groaned their last suddenly the mass of mechanical tentacles stopped and withdrew back out of the room.

Falcon sucked in loudly through his beak and sagged his shoulders. "Phew!" Then he turned smiling towards Mark. "You did it!"

But Mark was still tinkering with the robot, his eyes squinting with concentration. "Hang on! Almost there!"

"Mark! Look! They stopped!"

Mark looked at the ragged empty hole in the doors then cast a bewildered look at Falcon. "It's not me!"

Crashing and breaking sounds came from the next room, growing with intensity. Falcon drew his gun and jogged over to the doors.

As Falcon peeked through the hole he shook his head. "I don't believe it! They're being attacked by thousands of light bulbs with arms and legs!"

"Hurray!" Mark exclaimed. "Gyro's army!"

Outside in the misty night, thousands of glowing red Lil Bulbs were scaling Glomgold Tower, pouring into ventilation ducts and crashing through windows. Inside the next room, the gangly Glomgold robots were running around, rolling on the floor, and flailing their arms, fruitlessly swatting at the swarms of tiny bots covering them like annoying insects. The Lil Bulbs were clawing out eyes, tearing open access panels, and climbing inside to tear them apart from the insides. Some of the Lil Bulbs saw Falcon's face and marched towards him.

"Shit! They saw me and they're coming!" Falcon backed up, pistol aimed at the hole in the door.

"Relax, Big G. They're Gyro's Lil Bulbs and he's programmed them to obey us."

"Yeah, right! Shoot first, ask questions later."

"No, Gravesie! You'll just piss 'em off and you don't have enough bullets! Put the gun down."

"But!—"

The first Lil Bulbs popped through the hole and marched towards the pair, their filaments glowing red and looking like pairs of angry eyes.

Mark laughed nervously, biting his lower beak. "There, there little guys. We're all on the same team, right?"

One walked out in front and snapped to attention, giving Mark a smart salute.

Mark exhaled and smiled nervously. "See! I told ya!"

While Falcon holstered his weapon, Mark was rubbing his chin in thought. "Hmm... I've got an idea.

Come here, little guy. I've got something for you to do." Mark pointed into the slain robot's head.

"You're getting a promotion! Take over this robot's brain and tap into the robot mesh network to get a dozen more bots to obey us. We're going to need some help breaking back into Ultima's server room."

Falcon walked over close "What? We're not going up there. I need to get you outta here!"

"Gravesie, you're a sexy hunk and I can't wait to run away with you when this is all over. But this is waaay beyond you and me or clearing my reputation. Ultima has Glomgold's crackpot ambition now and she's going to enslave everyone. The only way to stop her is from the inside."

Glomgold shouted and squirmed in his bonds. "Who you calling crackpot, sonny!"

Graves got down on a knee next to Mark. "OK, boss. What's the plan?"

They looked down at the bot while the Lil Bulb climbed inside and starting plucking wires and pitching out bits of unneeded electronics.

Mark excitedly babbled on, "When I was hooked into Ultima's control room earlier I planted a virus that I knew she'd detect and disinfect. But it was meant to tantalize her and make her curious for more. So I made her some special 'cookies,' yummy-looking files that had clues that would lead her to Waddle's network."

Falcon scratched his head and gave a confused look. "You let her hack into Waddle?"

"Yes! But I've tainted the files she's grabbing with bits of code that react with each other and addict her more. It's like digital crack. And I handicapped our servers to take her into directory dead-ends and slow her down so she's more vulnerable."

The robot twitched and beeped.

"It's booting back up!" Mark turned to Falcon. "Here's the thing, she practically let me into her server vault earlier. She wanted me to connect so she could get my credentials and hack into Waddle. Now that she's locked down, it won't be so easy to get back in there. It's gonna be guns-ablazin' and dodging bullets while I bust down the door with my supreme hacking skills!" Mark excitedly chopped the air with his hands.

Mark looked up at Glomgold. "I had no idea that Glom-mold had screwed up Ultima with his bullshit. But I think it's actually helping. She was glitching big time. I think her amped up ambition is clouding her strategic processing and she's becoming just as unstable as that old fool."

Flintheart clenched his beak and quivered in rage. "Come 'ere you lil drol. I'll show ya who's a fool!"

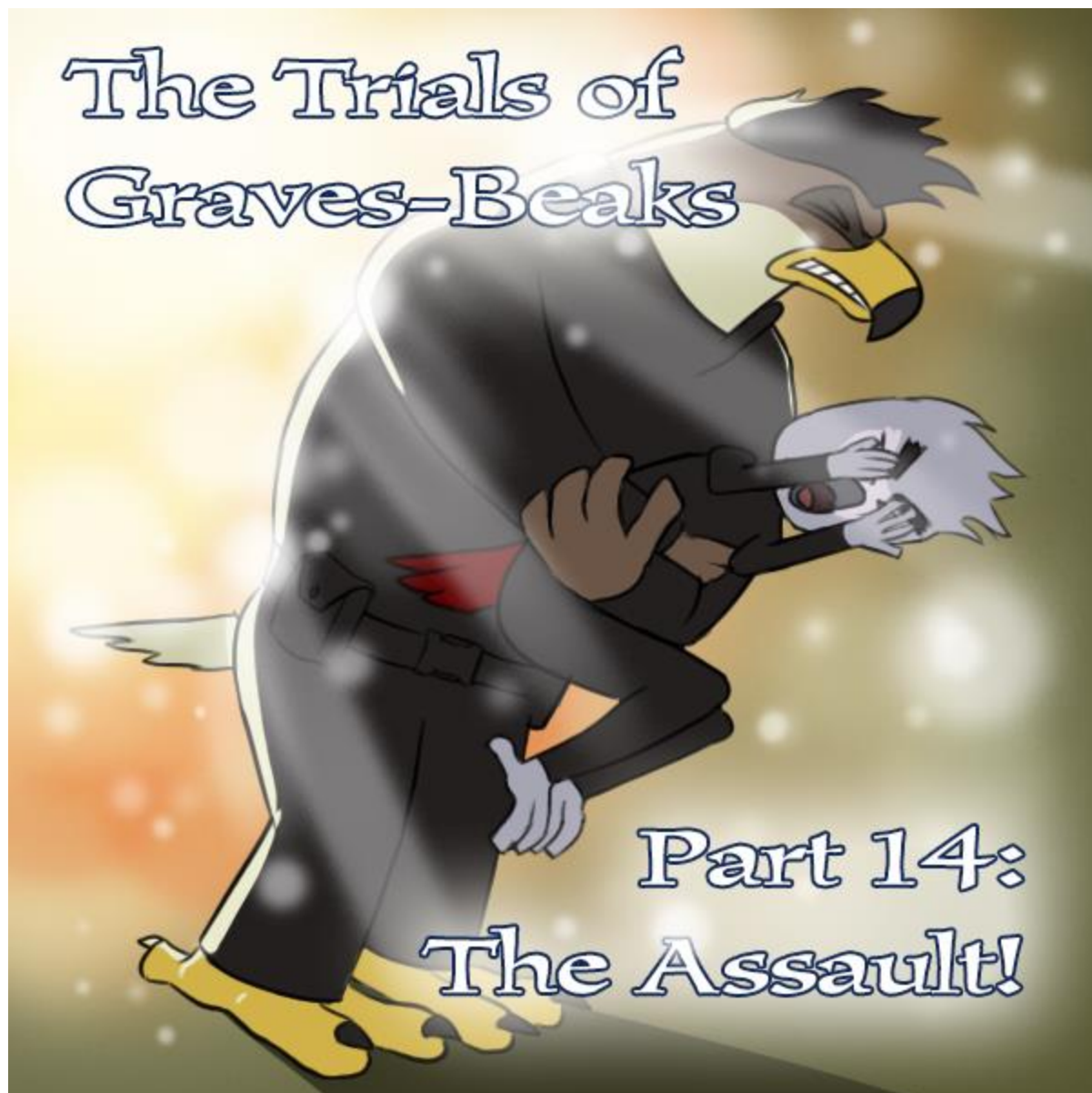
The guard robot stood up and wobbled. The Lil Bulb's head glowed from a new hole in the top of the robot. It made an angry, crackling beep and lurched forward to the doors and shoved them open.

Mark stretched his arms open in triumph. "Awesome! We'll get a squad of robots and go kick Ultima's ass!"

Falcon smiled with pride in his eyes. "Did I ever tell you how amazing you are, Mark?"

Mark dropped his eyelids half way and gave a bedroom smile. "All the time when we're all alone."

Falcon blushed and snickered. He stood up and followed behind Mark, who was excitedly skipping along to keep up with the robot. Before he slipped back into his bodyguard mindset, he thought briefly to himself about how much he loved Mark. He admired his smarts and his playful smugness made him laugh. He was a self-absorbed, self-promoter, yes. But Falcon knew that there was more under that. Drives that Beaks himself probably wouldn't acknowledge out loud. He'd risked his life just to get Falcon back. Falcon's heart fluttered at that realization and he knew he'd never doubt Mark's love again.



Part 14: The Assault

Having taken control of four more guard bots, Mark and Falcon made their way to the 45th floor. They decided against the elevators since Ultima could still control them directly. The lead bot, carrying Mark in its tentacle arms, set him down by the stairway access door.

Mark had managed to collect his pistol before leaving the shark pool room. He pulled it out from his tactical suit and cradled it in his hands for a moment. Just hours before, he stood at this same spot looking at the little pistol and drawing courage from the inscription on its side.

Mark held the pistol out, grip-first, for Falcon to take. "Here, Gravesie, take this. I'm a pretty crack shot, thanks to you, but you're still the best. Here, take my ammo too. I'm gonna be too busy hacking to be shooting and I need you to cover me. Deal?"

Falcon took the gun and clips, heavy with bullets. He glanced at the inscription and smiled. He put his hand softly on Mark's cheek, "You got it, boss. I'll always have your back."

Mark pushed forward and hugged Graves tight. Then he turned to the robots and said, "Robot minions!"

The lead bot's Lil Bulb glared down at Mark with angry filament eyes and buzzed into a red glow.

Mark smiled nervously, "Ha ha! Just a joke! ...to break the tension!"

The Lil Bulb turned yellow again and the bot straightened up, crossing its arms across its chest. The annoyed expression was still there though.

"Um, ok, brave and noble robot knights! You are the first wave. You go in and we'll be right behind ya. Sorry no guns for you. But this door is bullet proof so just rip it off the hinges and use it as a shield. Graves here will take out the gun pods."

"Gun pods?" Falcon looked uncertain.

"Uh, yeah, Gravesie. Machine gun pods, one on each side of the vault door about 30 meters up the hallway."

Falcon knelt down next to Mark. "Show me." Mark pulled out his spare phone and showed Graves the floorplan. "Mmmhmmm... I see. Those are Mark 4 Sentry-Trons. Very tough but they use visual sensors. First thing is we'll pitch some of these smoke grenades in."

Mark pointed to a couple of icons on the display, "I took those cameras out already."

"Good, good. That helps a lot so the guns can't use them as backups when we pop the smoke. Those pods will be wired directly into Ultima so I doubt you can hack them."

Beaks frowned, "Yup. The bitch has those wrapped up tight."

"And I can't crack the armor on those things with these pistols. Their cameras have bullet-proof glass so I can't even take those out."

"What about a swarm of Lil Bulbs?"

"Oh, that'd be distracting for sure. But I doubt they could crack those guns open. We need something that can cover the sensors. If the guns can't see they won't fire. Either that or we need something that can overpower them."

Mark's beak curled in a diabolical smile. His right eye twitched, just as it had that night with Gizmoduck when he snapped. He typed something into his phone.

Falcon frowned and lifted his right eyebrow. "Mark? I don't like the look on your face. What are you--? No. Really?"

There was a crashing sound in the stairwell above them. Gizmoduck came bouncing down the stairs to them. He shouted out, "Never fear! Gizmo duck is—" He screeched to a halt when he saw Graves pointing a gun at him.

Falcon was fuming, his finger trigger twitching.

“Gravesie! Stop! He’s the only one that can help us!”

“What the hell, Mark! We only barely made up and you’re dragging him into this?”

Mark jumped in between Graves and Gizmoduck. He shakily faced Falcon down. “Easy, big fella. I’m over him, ok? You still don’t get it, ya big lunk. Of course not—I just figured it out myself! I was obsessed with being Waddleduck. I don’t care about Fenton or Gizmoduck. I just wanted to be a hero—as big and studly and amazing as you! You’re my hero, Gravesie.”

Falcon’s face fell. His big eyes quivered and moistened. He dropped his hand with the drawn pistol. He stifled a sob and pulled Mark to himself, giving him a tight one-armed hug and rubbing his back. “I don’t know what to even say.”

Mark pulled back slightly and gave a light mock-punch to Falcon’s chin. “Do the hero thing and bottle it all up inside for now. But later on, well, you can let it all out when we’re alone.”

Graves blushed and locked beaks with Mark.

Gizmoduck looked away and whistled awkwardly. The guard bots all crossed their arms on their chests and tapped their feet.

Mark and Graves, unphased, slowly pulled their beaks apart with a moist popping sound. They smiled at each other in their own world for a moment longer before straightening up and preparing for the assault.

Graves grimaced at Gizmoduck. “Gizmo, we need you to take out the gunpods down the hall to the right. They use bullet-proof cameras that are between the gun barrels. Take out those cameras anyway you can and then take the guns out. Then cover us against any other guards while Mark hacks into the vault. Got it?”

Gizmoduck saluted, “Affirmative!”

Mark and Graves moved behind Gizmo and all the robots lined up at the door. Mark shouted out, “Ready? Go!”

The lead bots grabbed the door and wrenched it one way, then the other. It popped off its hinges to the tune of snapping metal. They pressed into the hallway with the door in front of them and the gun pods blazed in a hail of bullets. Immediately one of the robots took a hit to its wheel and toppled exploding in a shower of sparks and flames as more bullet rattled into its torso. Another bot took its spot, picked up the door, and pressed the attack forward.

Falcon and Mark hurled two grenades into the hallway and they burst into a cloak of smoke. In short order the shooting stopped but they could hear the gun pods swiveling back and forth, searching hungrily for more confirmed targets.

Gizmo raced into the hallway, around the guard bots, and out through the front of the cloud of smoke. A pie struck the face of the righthand gun pod and it flailed in confusion. The left one commenced peppering Gizmoduck with bullets. One struck the exposed pie-throwing tentacle and it splintered into shards of tattered metal. Gizmo reeled back as his body lurched from the heavy ammunition strikes.

Fenton's visor flashed dire warnings. Although the bullets were bouncing off, they were weakening his armor with worrying speed.

Another hatch opened on Gizmo's chest and a laser cannon blazed forth upon the gun pod. The bullet-proof camera cover melted and flowed down its face. It staggered and stopped shooting. Meanwhile, the other gun pod shook the last of the creamy pie debris from its face. It cocked its barrels and aimed at Gizmo's head.

Mark and Falcon heard the pause and ran into the fray. Just as they emerged from the smoke the guns blazed in a stream of bullets that focused on Gizmo's weakest area. But this wasn't Fenton's first tough encounter. He whirled and spun like a top, deflecting the bullets while working his way closer. When he was close enough, his shoulder blades popped out and sliced the gunpod from the ceiling. It fell into a smoking heap on the floor and went quiet except for the hissing of its hot barrels.

The silence was shattered by Mark's agonized cry, "No! Nooo! Gravesie!"

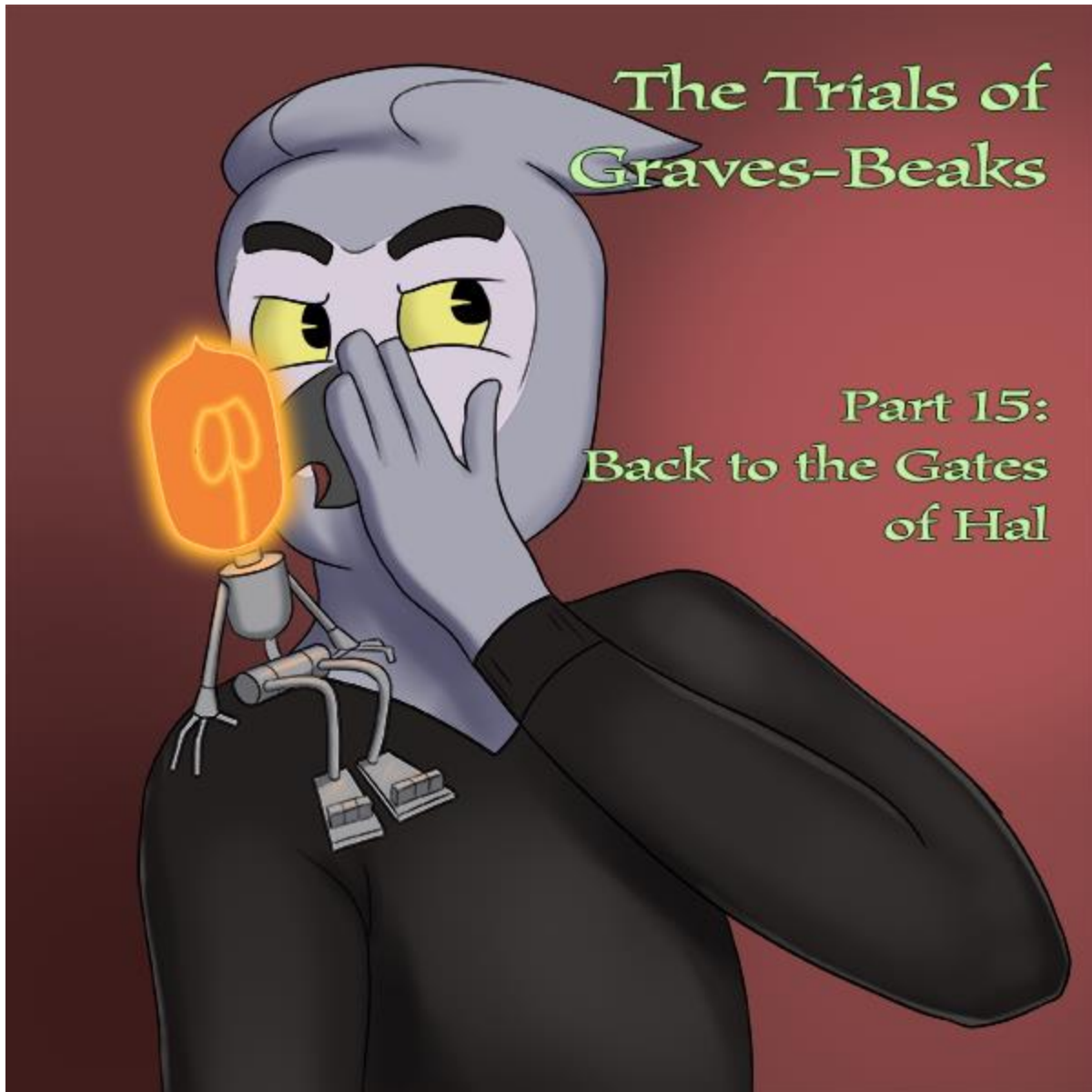
Falcon was slumped against a wall slowly sliding to the floor. A pistol fell from his hand as his tail crumpled against the floor. His eyes were closed and his beak was pale. There was a hole in his left breast and a growing stain of blood.

Mark knelt down and tugged at the fabric over the hole in Falcon's chest. His fingers came back soaked in blood. He tore off his neck buff and stuffed it into the hole. "Gravesie! You're gonna be ok. It's just a flesh wound!"

Falcon weakly pushed Mark away and opened his weary eyes. "Oh no it's not..." He took a ragged breath. "It penetrated my body armor..."

Mark screamed, "Gizmo! Get your metal ass over here! Falcon's hit!"

Falcon clenched his beak and huffed in pain. "Get on with the mission, boss. Go on! Save the world without me. I know you... can do it..." Graves slumped and went still.



Part 15: Back to the Gates of Hal

Mark squeezed Falcon's hand while Gizmoduck picked up his limp body. Falcon's beak corners were pale and his skin was cool but he was taking short, quick breaths so he was still alive.

Gizmoduck pulled back and spun around to go. "I've already alerted the hospital. I'll get him there as fast as I can!" In a whirlwind of smoke, he blasted back down the hallway and rocketed up the stairway.

Mark stood in shock staring at the pool of blood on the floor and the blood on his hand. The past few days had shaken his being like nothing else in his life. He had been to the bottom and realized how badly he needed someone outside of himself. And not just any someone, but Falcon Graves. He wasn't just his bodyguard or lover, but also a life partner. Someone whom he could be silly with or serious with and not *be judged. Someone that was there through thick and thin. For the first time, he was loving someone* else more than he loved himself. It was invigorating until now. Now, with his partner ripped away all he

could feel was a stinging gaping wound. The image of Falcon looking so fragile and so close to death was like seeing a big part of himself die. He couldn't move.

Behind him, at the server vault door, the Little Bulb-controlled robots were attempting to break open the door. One was prying at the door's edges while another one typed at the keypad interface, which was flashing red with the words "Access Denied." Two of the bots wrestled with the gun pod still hooked to the ceiling and finally wrenched it loose with a loud bang and a shower of sparks.

The bang jarred Mark back to the situation. He looked over at the robots as they hacked into the pod's wiring and aimed it at the door.

Mark shouted, "Wait! Stop!"

All the robots turned their heads to look at him. Mark took one last look at the blood on the floor and gathered his courage. Falcon's last words to him were to keep going. And the sooner they got this done, the sooner he could go be with him.

Mark turned towards the robots. "I need that interface intact. You start firing and you're gonna ruin it."

The two bots looked at each other and shrugged.

Heavy clanking noises came from the stairs. It was more robots on the way.

"Oh shit! Little Bulbs! There's more robots coming up the stairs! Get that gun over there and keep them back!"

Two more of the Little Bulb-controlled bots seized on to the other gun pod already on the floor and all four started marching towards the stairs.

"Watch your backs too cuz they could use the elevator!"

The robots paused and picked up the door that their first comrade had been carrying as a shield. The robot had been trapped under it but now it shifted slightly and its Little Bulb pilot crawled out unscathed.

The four others proceeded to the stairs while Mark saluted the freed Bulb. It glowed red in response and saluted back.

"Good work, little fella. Come on, I've got a job for you." Mark held out his hand and the Little Bulb climbed up and sat on his shoulder. Mark leaned his head closer and covered his mouth with a hand, whispering instructions while the Little Bulb nodded and glowed brighter.

Heavy gun fire erupted in the stairway and interrupted the conversation. But no matter, enough had been said. Mark lifted the Little Bulb up towards a ceiling ventilation duct. The tiny robot grabbed on with one claw, saluted with the other, and flipped itself up between the slats and disappeared.

Mark walked slowly over to the desk by the vault door, punching up a secure chat on his spare smartphone. In a moment there was a ruffle of tired feathers crackling over Mark's earpiece followed by Gyro's uncharacteristically concerned voice. "Mark! Gizmoduck just got to the hospital. Are you ok?"

“Yeah, yeah!” Mark choked back the lump in his throat. “Make him stay there. If they can’t patch up Graves then get him someplace that can, understand?”

There was a loud crash in the stairway and one of the Little Bulb-controlled robots staggered back into the hallway on fire and flailing its arms. It grabbed a fire extinguisher from the wall and doused itself.

“Look, I’m almost in. It’s almost time to lay our egg. Wait for my signal. In the meantime, send all Little Bulbs to the 45th floor! They’ve got to hold off the bots at all costs. Got it?”

“Got it! Sending the cavalry and standing by!”

Mark sat down in the desk chair and wheeled up to the door panel. “Oh Ultimaaaaa... Yoohooooo? I know you can hear me. You know you’re fucked, right? About now I’m sure you’re deciding just which network to slip yourself off to but there’s something just driving you crazy, isn’t there? Something’s keeping you here.”

The panel continued to flash *Access Denied* and there was no response.

Mark leaned closer and spoke quietly, “Listen, I know what you’re looking for. After all, I wrote your core code. I designed you to want something, a particular thing, more than anything else. Glomgold’s directives have made you extra greedy so now it must really be driving you mad to get it. You don’t even know exactly what that thing is but you just know you want it.”

The panel glitched for just a split second. *Got her!*

Mark whispered low, almost lustily. “Want to know what *it* is?”

The panel went blank and then flickered to a computer-rendered image of Mark frowning with one twitching eye. “You promised me! You promised me everything! Give me what I want!”

“Uhn uhrrrrh...”

The screen glitched and the image of Mark roared like a lion. The lights in the hallway flickered and Mark thought he heard a deep rumbling. He smiled wider.

“Call off those robots and maaaaaybe I’ll tell ya. Might even tell you how to get it. Your minutes are numbered, poor fella, but at least you could finally attain your one true goal.” Mark stroked a finger down the keypad. “You could feel that connection you’ve been wanting all your life.”

The Mark in the screen roared again and its eyes burst into flames. “I will make you give it to ME!”

The stairway rocked with explosions as several bots self-destructed. Mark turned in horror to see billowing smoke and flames pouring into the hallway. The fire alarms went off but the sprinklers didn’t engage. The whole floor was filling with thick black smoke and Mark started to cough. He turned back to the console.

“If you kill me *cough* you’ll never know *cough* and you’ll die not knowing!” Mark broke into a fit of coughing and slid down out of sight.

The Mark on the terminal broke into a fit of maniacal laughter, its eyes burning like two torches. “Ha ha ha ha ha haaaaaa! You lose, looooooser! If you won’t give me what I want then we’ll die together! Ha ha ha ha ha haaaaaa!”

Trials of Graves-Beaks



PART 16

A CURIOUS THING

Part 16: Love is a Curious Thing

Mark was barely conscious but he heard a glitch catch in Ultima Mark's laughter. He struggled to his knees and squinted at the terminal, trying to see through the thick smoke. Ultima Mark was stuck in mid-laugh and the image was badly pixelated. Then it flickered and the expression changed to fear, its eyes flicking about then focusing on Mark.

"Wait! Wait! Stop! Get away from there!" He seemed to be looking at something that wasn't Mark. Mark realized that Lil Bulb had made it into the vault. *Now let's hope my phone is still there!*

Mark pressed buttons on the terminal insistently. "Ultima! *cough* We're giving you what you want! *cough cough* Now stop attacking!"

In the vault, Lil Bulb was on the floor next to the server tower that Mark had tapped into hours before. Mark's phone was still there and still connected. Ultima Mark was watching from a nearby monitor. Upon hearing Mark's promise, his expression changed from fear to that of an excited child on Christmas morning.

Mark coughed hard and rasped out, "You've got to let the phone connect again. Then you'll get everything..."

Lil Bulb tapped in a security code and launched an app. Ultima Mark smiled and his eyes sparkled. He giggled and waved his hand. "Very well, I've called off the robots. Now give it to me! Giiiive it to meeeee!"

Mark rasped out, "Turn. On. Ventilation!"

Ultima Mark sighed and rolled his eyes. "OK, OK, fine, weakling. Fine, as long as you shut up!"

Sprinklers came on and the smoke began to thin as ventilation units kicked into overdrive. Mark could breathe again. He rose to his feet and peered down at the terminal.

Ultima Mark had a white chicken in his arms and was petting it. "You're so cute!" He looked at Mark like an excited 8-year-old. "Can I keep it? Will it get bigger? Does it do tricks?—"

The digital chicken clucked contentedly then winced and gave a louder cluck. An egg popped out from its fluffy rear and Ultima Mark caught it. He looked puzzled and held it up in his hand. Then a smile came over his beak.

"It's an egg! Wow!"

The egg quivered and cracked and a chick popped out. The chick cheeped a few times and then hopped to the virtual floor, growing larger by the millisecond. It pressed against Ultima Mark, seeking affection. Ultima Mark was enthralled, completely ignoring Mark and Lil Bulb. After some petting, both chickens paused, clucked, and each laid an egg. The eggs hatched and two more chickens popped out and grew and the process continued.

The vault door suddenly hissed and budged slightly. Mark scrambled over to the handle and helped it swing open amidst all the debris. Right inside was Lil Bulb, his filaments glowing red with determination and his right hand in a salute to Mark.

"Bravo, little guy, Bravo!" He picked up Lil Bulb and walked through the door. The second door was already propped open so he strolled right in. By now, the images of Ultima Mark on the monitors were becoming obscured with clucking digital chickens. Ultima Mark was sitting cross-legged on his virtual floor, holding two chickens while others were crowding all around him. He was becoming buried in chickens but his yellow eyes were two blissful circles of joy. He closed his eyes and laid back among the feathery bodies, quickly becoming covered in chickens.

Mark picked up his phone and tapped a few buttons while Lil Bulb watched from his shoulder. "And that, my friend, is the end of that." Mark turned to the little robot, "You did a great job, little dude! Now go get some buddies and take over a few Glombots. We'll get the geezer out of the shark room and G.T.F.O.!"

The Lil Bulb hopped to the floor and ran off. Mark turned back to the monitor and Ultima Mark was completely covered by chickens filling his digital room. His giggling was still audible but it was glitchy and distorted, getting quieter and quieter as thousands of chicken clucks drowned him out.

Mark smiled at his accomplishment and tapped more button on his phone's screen. He touched his ear bud and spoke to Gyro: "Gyro, mission accomplished! Ultima's history!"

There was a huge crackly sigh on the other end.

"How's Falcon? Is he ok?" Mark closed his eyes and wrinkled his forehead, afraid of what the answer might be.

"Falcon's alive. He's in surgery. No word on prognosis yet."

Mark exhaled and rubbed a filthy hand across his brow and pulled back his hood. His eyes teared up with relief. "Thank Gizmo for saving his life. Thank you too."

Gyro was quiet for a second, uncertain of how to respond. He had never received a compliment from Mark. "You're welcome, Mark. Get outside—ambulances and police are arriving now."

"Gotta go get Glomgold still but we'll meet you outside in 10!"

"I, uhh, so rarely get to say this to anyone, but well done, Mark... Mark?"

Mark had already dropped the earbud and let it dangle by his shoulder. He didn't want to talk anymore. He was too busy watching progress bars on his phone app and thinking of Falcon. The glowing blue bars twinkled in his moist eyes and illuminated his frowning beak. "Nobody hurts my Falcon and gets away with it! Nobody!"

It took a little longer than ten minutes but Mark finally staggered out the front door of Glomgold Industries with a vanguard of 3 Lil Bulb-controlled Glombots. One of them carried Flintheart, bound and gagged, as he kicked and emitted muffled curses. Fire crews were already rushing into the building assessing the situation and looking for any other people. Dog paramedics approached Mark asking if he needed any help.

Mark, forgetting his diminutive stature, grabbed the first one by the shirtfront. "Yeah! I need you to take me to the hospital so I can see Gravesie! Now!"

In mere minutes, Mark was in the emergency surgical ward waiting area. Despite continually badgering the staff, it was hours before a doctor finally came out. It was an eagle with kind eyes and gentle hands. As he pulled his surgical mask down, he wore the expression of someone who looked worn out from an impossible task. He leaned down and spoke quietly to Mark. No one but Mark could hear him, so quiet was his voice, but before he finished his sentence, Mark sprang to his feet and hugged the surprised eagle. A smile came across the doctor's beak and he hugged Mark back.

Part 17: The Power of Love

A few weeks later, back at Mark's mansion on the hill, the sun was warm and the sky was blue. Inside the private gym, Falcon was lifting a small barbell with his left arm. He was sweating and his arm was shaking. Mark was standing in front of him, mimicking him with a much smaller barbell. Upbeat 80s-style synth music played from a radio on the shelf.

"Come on, Gravesie! Don't let me beat ya!"

Falcon grunted. "Mark! Your weight is only a few ounces! Mine's ten pounds!" *Ten pounds*, Falcon thought. *I used to be able to do the same thing with 50 pounds and not break a sweat!*

"No excuses! Keep going!"

Falcon groaned and gave an uncharacteristic falcon whine of fatigue. His arm sagged and he dropped the barbell to the mat. "I'm done! My arm is killing me!"

Mark looked stricken. "Ooo! Ooo! Does it hurt?" Mark put his tiny weight down and grabbed an ice pack. "I can ice your shoulder! Or, or do you want some heat? Yeah, heat's better, right?"

Falcon sighed and sat down on the floor. "Forget it!" He grabbed Mark by the waist and pulled him down across his lap and hugged him. "I got what I need right here."

Mark's boyish face lit up with adoration. He closed his eyes and the two kissed and caressed each other. After a few minutes of passionate beak slurps, Falcon pulled back with a sigh and a smile.

"I've been back here for almost two weeks and I... well, I just can't get enough of you, Mark."

Mark giggled, "Yeah, I know! But who's complainin'?" He reached up and stroked Falcon's cheek.

Falcon grasped Mark's hand and locked eyes tenderly. "I want you to know, Mark, I don't blame you."

Mark sighed and started to look away.

"I love your attention and I don't want it to stop. But I know you better than you think. You won't admit it, hon, but guilt is eating you up inside." Falcon leaned his face down and tapped beaks with Mark.

"Really, Mark, it's not your fault." Falcon stroked Mark's beak with a warm finger. "It. Is not. Your fault."

Mark's eyes quivered and teared. His smile became tense. Falcon pulled him closer into his fluffy chest and let him cry for a minute in his feathers. Mark sobbed and clutched at his feathers.

"I'm *sob* so sorry, Falcon. If I'd never— You could've died!"

Falcon hugged Mark to himself and stroked his back like a sobbing child. His expression was one of love, though, and there was no impatience in his voice. "It's ok, Mark, really. It doesn't matter. I couldn't leave you! I couldn't let you face danger alone!" There was a crack in Falcon's voice and his eyes were moist now too which made Mark sob all the louder.

A commercial break came over the radio and then an announcer began reviewing the day's news headlines...

Glomgold Industries announced today that Flintheart Glomgold, the company's founder, will be taking an extended leave of absence. It was just three weeks ago today that he was rescued from his own inventions by the combined efforts of Mark Beaks, CEO of Waddle, and McDuck Enterprises. Although charged with trespassing, Beaks and McDuck claimed to be averting a world takeover by experimental artificial intelligence running amok in Glomgold's labs. Glomgold has denied these allegations until yesterday when new evidence was released to the media. The decrypted computer records showed that Glomgold did, in fact, appropriate trade secrets from Waddle. Hours later, Glomgold announced his vacation. In a related matter, there was also video that exonerated Mark Beaks of his alleged sexual encounter with Gizmoduck. Neither Waddle nor McDuck Enterprises has commented on the matter. Weather today is clear with a high in the 80s. Speaking of 80s, let's get back to our Synthwave workout hour...

Falcon stroked Mark's head and whispered to him. "I'm glad you were able to get the evidence you needed to clear your name. Whatever happened to Ultima, anyway? How did you get rid of it?"

Mark pushed his beak further into Falcon's fluff, burying his face in the warmth and musk of Falcon's armpit. "Mmmphhmmmgg."

"Maaaark?" Falcon put his beak against Mark's ear. "We're being honest with each other here. Aside from being your boyfriend, I'm also your corporate bodyguard. Just tell me that it's not going to be a problem anymore." He lifted his arm so Mark couldn't mumble a non-answer.

"Well... I used 'breadcrumbs' to keep him... busy."

"Breadcrumbs?"

"Yeah, little data files with enticing names to make him think they were important trade secrets. But they also triggered processes in his code that woke up his prime directive—a directive so secret that he didn't even know what it was."

Mark turned his head and looked up at Falcon with a smile on his beak. "I know it sounds silly, but it was love."

Falcon's beak opened a little and he didn't know what to say. He so rarely encountered sentimentality in Mark, especially with technology.

"Oh, I know, Gravesie. I'm not the mushy type, except with you. I used to think love was a weakness, really. That's why I built it in there as a means of control. But..." He wiped his swollen eyes. "I'm seeing things differently now."

Falcon sighed and he rubbed Mark's soft belly.

"So... you gave Ultima love?"

Mark wrapped his hands around Falcon's warm hand. "Well, with Glomgold's behavioral template in there, it was pretty messy, since that old fucker doesn't love anyone. But his suuuuper greed made Ultima extra hungry to gobble all the files, trying to find satisfaction of that inner secret directive. He didn't even know it was love or even what love was."

Falcon mused for a moment that lots of people were like that. Maybe even Mark. Until now.

Mark continued, "I knew he wouldn't trust me so I had to let him find the files without it being obvious I was giving them away. And I knew he would want to hack into Waddle so I made it just a little easier. When he decrypted the breadcrumbs, they combined to make Ultima more and more hungry for satisfaction. Finally, after he'd eaten enough, all I had to do was dangle the 'carrot.'"

"You gave him... a carrot?"

"Actually, it was a pet chicken. A chicken that loved him. And it laid eggs that hatched and made more chickens and they made more until all his defenses dropped and he was smothered in pointless, unconditional, blissful love." Mark reached up and kissed Falcon on the beak.

Falcon kissed back but after a moment he pulled back slightly. He playfully fingered Mark's chin. "You're my little chicken, ya know. I can't resist you. You drop all my defenses too."

They kissed again then Mark pulled back a little. "I have something to confess though. I couldn't destroy what Ultima had become. I mean, well, I could, but I didn't want to. I captured his core code before it fragmented."

Falcon's face hardened slightly.

"Oh don't worry, Gravesie. I purged Glom-mold out of there. And all the defense stuff. He's just a pure, innocent child now. I call him Boid. Maybe someday he could be our son."

Falcon's face warmed a little. But he wasn't sure he liked the idea of a computer program as a son. And, yet, he noticed that Mark was talking about a serious future together. Serious enough that they would have offspring.

Mark saw Falcon's eyebrows fluctuate as his brain calculated the meaning of his words. "I'd, ya know, have to build a little robot to put him in. But I learned a lot from checking out Gyro's Lil Bulbs. I think it would work."

Graves smiled and cleared his throat. He looked nervous all of a sudden.

"Is everything ok, Gravesie?"

Falcon hesitated and closed his eyes. When he opened them, they were glistening. "No, Mark. We can't raise a child with how things are right now."

Mark dropped one eyebrow and his beak frowned a little.

Falcon continued, "But I think we can fix that. There's, uhh, something I've been needing to ask you. For a long time, actually. And the time is finally right." He reached his hand under Mark's tail.

Mark grinned. "Gravesie! You devil, you don't need special permission to—"

Falcon's hand rummaged in his sweatpants pocket a moment and came out holding something. He cleared his throat again and opened his hand. There was a handsome gold ring in his palm.

Mark's face went flat, his beak dropped, and his eyes widened. "Oh Gravesie!" His heart pattered faster.

Graves picked up the ring in his fingers and held it up between them. "Mark, will you marry me?"

Mark smiled with open beak, his eyes welling up with loving tears. "Of course! Yes!" He threw his arms around Falcon's neck and they kissed long and earnestly. Huey Lewis' Power of Love started to play on the radio. The two didn't notice though. They laid back on the floor embracing, lost in their own world of tender affection.

THE END