

The Mall Rats Collection

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A room where Ratbert has gathered a bunch of rats together for a meeting.

(There are many rats, but for the purposes of this skit the roles are overlapped.)

RATBERT

Although times are tight, a great opportunity lies ahead. But sadly there aren't many of us left, and so we need to agree *together* on which road to take. Our very survival depends on it.

PETTIGREW

Enough with the exposition – couldn't this have been a title crawl like in Star Wars?

RIZZO

Don't be a dingus! We're rats. How many rats can read?

PETTIGREW

What about the ones on Twitter?

RIZZO

I rest my case.

RATBERT

In short, we have a choice: Main street vs. the shopping mall. I call the first presenter.

(Kylie comes up to the dais and sets up a slide projector.)

KYLIE

It is my carefully considered opinion that Main Street holds far greater promise for the future of Rat-dom. Slide one please. Oh, that's me.

(He starts the projector.)

Behold, the back of the café. Nobody sees it, so nobody cleans it. It's all ours. And here, on slide two...

RIZZO

(loudly interrupting)

Show us wintertime!

(sotto voce, to the neighbor)

It's like a real estate scam – they only show the pretty seasons.

RATBERT

Quiet Rizzo. You mall rats will have their chance.

RIZZO

Mall rat? You have no concept of the modern world. Central heating. Central feeding. Free wifi.

PETTIGREW

Look you – stay inside like you always do and you'll get soft. You'll get friendly with cats. And you'll starve if the power goes out.

RATBERT

Can we *please* stick to the presentation?

KYLIE

Thank you. Now on slide two is a street grate – the one at 38 Main Street. I doubt you softies have ever seen the underside of a grate, let alone know the good ones from the... uh... great ones. But strong, independent rats know how to live in the wild world.

RIZZO

Smart rats know not to.

PETTIGREW

Do you see any smart rats here?

RIZZO

There's one coming to the floor right now.

(Rizzo goes up to the dais and pushes Kylie off the stand.)

I say we take over the mall. It's warm all year, there's a smorgasboard right in the middle of it, and best of all, there's no people after midnight.

PETTIGREW

What's wrong with people, scaredy cat? They're the ones that bring us the trash!

RIZZO

They're fine as long as they come around on schedule, like any orderly society. You could learn something from that.

(Kylie belches)

Well, maybe not you.

RATBERT

Have all the arguments been made, and all the cases rested?

PETTIGREW

We ain't **begun** to argue!

KYLIE

My presentation is up on Parler – you can read it there.

RIZZO

What did I say earlier about reading?

PETTIGREW

Nothing intelligent.

RIZZO

Maybe that's why it's all pictures.

RATBERT

Look... we have to decide this – we have to attack this with a unified front or we'll be extinct.

KYLIE

Hah! Rats, extinct?

RIZZO

Conquered by cockroaches.

KYLIE

Bring it on.

RATBERT

I'd really rather not. So... all in favor of the mall?

(Ratbert and Rizzo raise their hands. Kylie and Pettigrew attack them and forcibly put their hands down. A melee ensues, and a cat appears, causing Pettigrew and Kylie to flee. The cat takes off his cat-mask, revealing it to be a rat: Remy)

RATBERT

Perfect timing Remy! I knew you'd come through!

REMY

(speaking with a French accent...)

Ze is like fleeing from a sinking ship!

RATBERT

All in favor of the mall, raise your paws!

(All remaining rats – Ratbert, Rizzo, and Remy, raise their paws.)

It's unanimous – the mall it is!

(The lights go down. Somebody comes in from offstage, and there is a melee in the dark. The lights come up and Ratbert, Rizzo, and Remy are dead on the ground. Pettigrew and Kylie stand triumphant.)

PETTIGREW

Softies. If they'd'a had street smarts...

KYLIE

...they'd'a been one of us!

*(Raucous laughter as the lights go down. **Blackout.**)*

The food court of a shopping mall, after hours.

Two janitors, Quinn and Ryan, are cleaning the floor and tables. Quinn picks something up off the floor, looks at it, and tosses it.

QUINN

Looks like it's started.

RYAN

What's started?

QUINN

The war. Every year, about this time. Look at this.

(Quinn reaches into the trash can and pulls out the thing he picked up off the floor.)

What do you make of it?

RYAN

It's... trash?

QUINN

(sarcastic)

Sounds like you went to one of them fancy colleges!

RYAN

Actually I went to –

QUINN

Actually smactually. Just **look** at it!

RYAN

They don't pay us to **examine** the trash, they pay us to clean it up.

QUINN

No. They pay us to **keep** it clean. How you gonna do that if you don't know what's going down? Look at these marks.

RYAN

Oh...kay.

(Ryan examines the item. It's part of a styrofoam serving container.)

Yeah... so? It's scratched, dirty, has some ketchup on it. It's trash, not a museum piece.

QUINN

How does a serving container get scratched?

RYAN

I dunno. Somebody scratched it. Or a fork. Or a knife. Or a very hard French fry.

QUINN

Good. Which is it?

RYAN

(Ryan becomes interested, and looks again.)

Well, it's not a fork. Too sharp. A knife could do it, but why so small, and so close together?

QUINN

Now you're thinkin'.

RYAN

Fingernails!

QUINN

Maybe, but look closer. They're scratches, not indentations.

RYAN

Yeah... right. You notice all that right away?

QUINN

Every year, about this time. Always the same. Look at the ketchup. Right here – see this pattern?

RYAN

Uh... if you call it that.

QUINN

Let's say I've developed a discerning eye over all theses years.

Those are paw tracks. You don't see that in the summer. And right here, I'm pretty sure that's a nose print. But not 100%.

RYAN

(Ryan is suitably impressed, takes the item and goes over to Cleo, cleaning nearby.)

Hey Cleo! Take a look at this. What do you make of it?

CLEO

(Cleo takes it and examines it. After some consideration, he replies...)

Somebody left it on the table after eating some, but not all, of the onion rings. See this stain here? That's onion juice. Whoever ordered it has no taste 'cause they ate 'em with ketchup. No wonder they didn't eat 'em all. Okay, so it's late, not much call for tables, and nobody else sits there. The place closes, it's like... oh, eleven, eleven thirty. **We** don't start until one, so plenty of time. **That**, right there, scratch marks from a rat's claw. A little one, could be Kylie.

(beat)

I hope it's not Kylie. I like him.

RYAN

Wait – you got all **that**?

QUINN

He's wrong. It's not Kylie. Kylie don't like onions. Besides, you won't find him at the mall.

CLEO

Unless...

QUINN

Unless what?

CLEO

Mr. Fox sends him out on some mission. He'll do whatever Mr. Fox wants.

QUINN

Mr. Fox won't send him out to eat onions, and whatever reason he'd be here, he wouldn't be eating onions on his own. It's not him.

RYAN

Wait a minute. You have names for... rats?

QUINN

Of course not. Rats have names for themselves. We're just using them. It's courteous. And Cleo here sometimes goes a bit overboard. Why do you do that Cleo? Why?

CLEO

Well...

QUINN

Tell me.

CLEO

(meekly)

It makes me sound smarter than I am.

QUINN

Yeah. You keep that in mind.

CLEO

(strongly)

But I'm not as dumb as you paint me, Quinn. Most the time I get it right.

RYAN

Why does it matter?

QUINN

'Cause there's gonna be a war. Some of the rats here at the mall, some on Main Street. And then the ones from the swamp out back. And we gotta clean it all up by quitting time.

CLEO

If we know who's made the first move, we can get a jump on the

situation. How can you not know this after working here all these years?

RYAN

I guess I just don't hang around with the crowd that knows all the rats.

QUINN

You work here long enough, you can't help it.

CLEO

You learn to think like a rat.

QUINN

If you don't, you spend all day cleaning things that don't need to be cleaned, and then wondering why things smell bad.

RYAN

I get it. And then management...

CLEO

Management don't give a rat's ass. But I take pride in my work.

QUINN

When we're done here, you can eat off the floor.

CLEO

After all, Kylie does.

(they both laugh. They both then continue their work.)

RYAN

Wait a minute. Quinn was talking about a war.

CLEO

It's not a war, it's an invasion.

QUINN

It's a **war**.

RYAN

What's the difference?

CLEO

In an invasion, the rats come in and take over. In a war, the rats come in and fight among themselves.

RYAN

So a war is worse.

QUINN

Damn straight.

CLEO

No. In a war, they kill each other off. Saves us the trouble. You see, we don't have to fight them if they are fighting themselves.

QUINN

Cleo, you're doing it again.

CLEO

No I'm not.

QUINN

You're making yourself sound smarter than you are.

RYAN

Cleo has a point though.

CLEO

See. Sometimes I'm smarter than I sound.

QUINN

If you were smarter than you sounded, would you be picking up garbage at the mall?

CLEO

You're picking up garbage at the mall.

QUINN

No, I'm being a detective. I'm figuring out what they're up to. I'm staying one step ahead of the rats. It's like I'm a general, but like the ones in Washington that never actually have to go to war themselves.

RYAN

Are you getting paid like a general?

QUINN

No. It's like a secret agent. Do secret agents get paid?

RYAN AND CLEO

Yes.

(Quinn thinks for a moment.)

QUINN

Well, it's like I'm a **secret** secret agent.

RYAN

But... you're telling everyone.

QUINN

I'm telling **you**. You gonna rat me out? You're part of this thing now.

RYAN

I didn't even know there was a thing to be a part of.

QUINN

'Cause it's secret.

(Quinn goes off to "gather more evidence". Cleo waits until he is out of earshot.)

CLEO

You know he's crazy, right?

RYAN

I'm getting the picture.

CLEO

But he's also right.

RYAN

Now I'm getting a different picture.

CLEO

Those scratches **are** rat prints. They do start up every year, around this time. There is a pattern to all this. But it's not what he thinks it is.

RYAN

And....?

CLEO

Yes?

RYAN

You gonna keep me in suspense?

CLEO

You gonna believe me?

RYAN

I dunno.

CLEO

Then I won't tell you. But I'll ask you. Do you know how small

tape recorders are?

RYAN

Like... a walkman?

CLEO

Smaller. They make tape recorders that don't use tape. And that record video. And they are **small**!

RYAN

What are you getting at?

CLEO

You won't believe it unless you figure it out yourself. But let's just say... they are smaller than a rat's nose.

RYAN

Smaller than.... wait... you mean... a rat can carry an entire video studio on its back?

CLEO

I'm not saying that. But you know how big a rat is, and you can go right over there into Sears and see how big some of those little spy cameras are. And you can go on youtube and see videos of "dog's eye view" and "cat's eye view" of the neighborhood.

RYAN

So... the rats are planning an invasion, and they are strapping cameras to their backs to scope the joint?

CLEO

Now you're thinking. But you're not thinking the right things. How do you think a rat is going to buy a video camera?

RYAN

The same way it buys onion rings?

CLEO

They need help, you numbskull! Gee – **you** make me sound smarter than I am. **Somebody** is putting the cameras on their backs. Or maybe not. It's hard to tell.

(beat)

RYAN

(Ryan leans in)

Cleo – who's the crazy one here? 'Cause I'm not sure any more.

CLEO

Your paychecks still clear?

RYAN

Yeah.

CLEO

Mine too. So none of us is crazy.

RYAN

Yeah.

(beat)

None of us is crazy.

CLEO

(Cleo walks away and continues working.)

Keep that in mind, Ryan. None of us is crazy.

RYAN

(Ryan waits until Cleo is offstage.)

Maybe **I** should put some cameras on these damn rats. See what's **really** going on.

(blackout)

The food court of a shopping mall, after hours.

Two janitors, Quinn and Ryan, are cleaning the floor and tables.

RYAN

You and Cleo got me thinking last night

QUINN

Don't bust your brain kiddo.

RYAN

I'll try not to. But I think you're on to something with that rat war.

QUINN

Every year, the same thing.

RYAN

Have you ever **seen** these rats?

QUINN

Don't have to see 'em. Just look around and you'll see the results.

RYAN

Yeah, but that's the people. I'm talking about the rats. It's hard to tell the difference, isn't it?

QUINN

For a new guy, sure. But I've been around. C'm'ere.

(Quinn beckons Ryan to look at something near the toekick of one of the shops.)

See that? Just big enough for a rat to get through.

RYAN

Yeah... so?

QUINN

You'd think "Now why would a rat go through that when he could just go around?" Right?

RYAN

That thought did occur to me.

QUINN

Yeah, 'cause you're "college educated".

RYAN

It occurred to **you**.

QUINN

Yeah, 'cause I'm **observant**. People can't go through there. So... if you see a dropped French fry there – it's from a rat.

RYAN

Makes sense. But still, wouldn't you like to see it happen?

CLEO

(Cleo enters with what looks like a cage under wraps.)

I got 'em. They're a little bigger than you said, but I think it'll work.

QUINN

What's that?

CLEO

W. R. A. T. Studios!

QUINN

What's that?

RYAN

It's what I'm trying to tell you.

CLEO

We can see the rats! On TV!

QUINN

Cleo, what do I keep tellin' you about trying to sound smarter than you are?

RYAN

No, it's cool. This'll work.

(Ryan lifts the wrap off of the cage, revealing a rat with a contraption on its back. He pulls out a smartphone, punches a few icons, and shows the result to Quinn who waves at the rat and sees himself on the smartphone.)

CLEO

Cost me a fortune, but it'll be worth it!

QUINN

You're tellin' me – that this... this... This is the most batshit crazy thing I've ever seen.

CLEO

Yeah. One of us is batshit crazy. We're trying to figure out which one it is.

RYAN

C'mon Remy – stay still for a minute!

QUINN

Remy?

CLEO

So... we let him loose, and we follow on video.

QUINN

Hmmm...we'll get to see their battle plans!

RYAN

What's the range on this thing?

CLEO

The guy told me about thirty feet. You have to be on top of it.

RYAN

Or underneath it.

CLEO

See... that's why I like you. You're smarter than you look.

QUINN

Don't get any ideas Cleo.

CLEO

Well, he is. Would you have thought'a sneaking in the basement?

QUINN

Food court's on the second level. You're in the basement you're gonna hafta go twenty feet **and** two floors full of metal beams. And that's not countin' the angles and such. Stop tryin' to sound smarter than you are Cleo. Here's what we're gonna do...

RYAN

Lay offa him Quinn. Cleo's right.

QUINN

Cleo didn't say nuthin'

RYAN

'cause Cleo knows. When does shift end?

QUINN

Three thirty. You know that. Don't you?

CLEO

He just wants to see if **you** know it.

QUINN

Shut up Cleo.

RYAN

Mall don't open 'till ten. Staff don't get here 'till eight. We stay in the stockroom at that...uh... what shop is under us?

CLEO

Some used clothing outlet.

RYAN

Used clothing?

QUINN

It's the end of civilization. I keep sayin' that and nobody listens.

CLEO

Shut up Quinn.

RYAN

Ease off you two. Three thirty. Four, five, six, seven, eight. Over four hours for them rats to show themselves. We'll be right there waiting. Ain't this better than examining garbage for clues?

QUINN

If it weren't for the clues, you wouldn't even be **doing** this.

RYAN

If it weren't for this, those clues wouldn't be worth dingle poop.

You're on to something – are you afraid to find out what it is?

QUINN

Them's fightin' words.

RYAN

Then you're in?

(beat)

QUINN

Yes. I'm in. But it better be good.

CLEO

You mean "Quinn better be right!"

QUINN

Shut up Cleo.

CLEO

Pressure's on!

QUINN

Not like the war that them rats are planning. This thing record audio too?

RYAN

Yeah. Do you understand rat-speak?

QUINN

(beat)

No.

RYAN

Ok. M. O. S. it is.

CLEO

I know what that means!

QUINN

Stop trying to sound...

CLEO AND RYAN

Smarter than you are.

RYAN

Cleo **is** smarter than he is.

CLEO

Now where's that rat?

RYAN

You're holding it.

QUINN

Well, maybe not.

RYAN

Commence "Project..." what shall we call this?

QUINN

How about project idiocy.

RYAN

Commence "Project Italian Cooking"!

QUINN

What?

RYAN

Ratatouille.

(Ryan takes the cage, opens the door, and lets the rat out. The rat scampers through the hole in the toekick indicated earlier.)

QUINN

Right where I said he would go.

RYAN

Now... we don't know if he'll be accepted into the brigade, but we'll get to see something. Battlestations!

QUINN

Who's the crazy one?

CLEO

We'll let you know when we figure it out.

(blackout)

A nondescript room where a bunch of rats are meeting. One of the walls has a hole in it and a giant shoe is visible behind the opening.

(A rat comes through the opening, with a large backpack of some sort on its back.)

PETTIGREW

Remy! I thought you were killed in that... unfortunate event the other night.

REMY

(In an overdone French accent)

Ze is mistaken – we're rats. Eeen-destructable. But now I know you tried.

KYLIE

Tried what?

PETTIGREW

...and will you stop that stupid French accent!

RATBERT

Leave him alone – he was undercover.

RIZZO

Yeah, as a cat.

PETTIGREW

Cats don't speak French.

RATBERT

French cats do.

PETTIGREW

Cats speak cat.

RATBERT

Do you speak cat?

PETTIGREW

Of course not.

RATBERT

Then how do you know what a cat speaks?

RIZZO

He **was** crossdressing.

PETTIGREW

That's typical French.

RATBERT

Then leave him alone. He had to speak the part.

KYLIE

Tried what?

REMY

What tried what?

KYLIE

You said you know he tried.

REMY

To kill me. But he can't. We're rats.

PETTIGREW

I can't believe I actually made the effort.

RIZZO

Look – let's stop arguing over who killed who, and get back to business. We have a war to mount.

KYLIE

Nobody killed anybody. We're all friends here, right?

RIZZO

Right.

KYLIE

Ok. So what's the plan?

PETTIGREW

Besides feasting on the corpses of our enemies?

RATBERT

Yeah. I have a plan. An actual plan. With strategies, tactics, circles

and arrows, and a paragraph on the back of each one.

RIZZO

Remember what I said about rats and reading?

RATBERT

Yeah. That's why I'm making a live presentation. I can't believe I actually made the effort. But here it is. Kylie – you like to be the tough one – you take the Mexican stand.

KYLIE

Mexicans ain't any tougher than any of the other wusses in this mall.

RATBERT

Yeah, well you try their hot sauce and get back to me. Pettigrew, you're the one with all the laziness. You attack the garbage cans.

RIZZO

Right up his alley.

REMY

Do you think he's up to it?

RATBERT

Yeah. They gather all the food for him, he just has to recognize what a garbage can **is**. Remy, you hit up Sbarro's. It's the closest thing to French Cuisine in the mall.

REMY

A pizza place?

RATBERT

Think of it as Italian Fusion. Rizzo gets Red Lobster, and I'll take on... oh, I don't know. None of us can read the signs anyway, so just go for it.

(Most of the rats scatter. Kylie stays behind.)

KYLIE

What you got against Rizzo?

RATBERT

What do you mean?

KYLIE

Red Lobster? There's no food there!

RATBERT

Since when do rats care?

KYLIE

You have a point.

(Kylie doesn't leave.)

RATBERT

Anything else Kylie?

KYLIE

Yeah. I have an idea. You'll probably think it's dumb.

RATBERT

I don't think ideas are dumb. **People** are dumb, but not ideas.

KYLIE

Ok. Well, you know how Pettigrew likes to just have his meals delivered to him? It's why he chose the mall to begin with. I think he's soft, but he's not dumb. What if we could **encourage** people to leave food for us? We wouldn't have these yearly wars.

RATBERT

So... how are you going to do this? Dress up like a cat?

KYLIE

No. Art. I know a mouse that's good at it, and she thinks that we can influence people using art.

RATBERT

Art?

KYLIE

Yeah. Like the stuff that people put around the house, that isn't food. Art.

RATBERT

Art. You're going to use a mouse to create art?

KYLIE

I knew you'd think it was dumb.

RATBERT

(beat)

Either dumb, or brilliant. I'm not sure which.

KYLIE

You think?

RATBERT

Gave that up years ago. But in any case, let's keep this between us.

KYLIE

Done.

(blackout)

Stage right (lit): The small and low-end office of mall security. Stage left (unlit): The mall.

Quinn has been summoned to the Boss' office. He motions to his laptop.

BOSS

What's this?

QUINN

What's what?

BOSS

It's all over the Internet, that's what.

QUINN

What's all over the Internet?

BOSS

Quinn, you really are dumber than you look.

Quinn turns the laptop around so we can see a video is playing on the screen. It resembles a rat cage.

Do you recognize this? At all?

QUINN

(Quinn looks at the screen)

It looks a little like... wait a minute – that's the food court!

BOSS

Yes. The food court. **Our** food court. The one I hired you to clean every night.

QUINN

(still studying the video)

That's... that's the gap under the toekick. They gotta fix that.

BOSS

Never mind the toekick. Do you see the rats?

QUINN

Oh yeah.

BOSS

Somehow it got on twitter not ten minutes after the timestamp, and in the morning, channel two news was in my face about it. Every one of the “fine restaurants” that grace our “ambience-centered dining court” has been making not-so-discreet suggestions about how they intend to fix the problem, and they all involve me in unspeakable acts. Which means they all involve you.

QUINN

How did... I mean – that is pretty fast.

BOSS

Somebody knows something, and **you** are going to find out who it is and what they know. **And** you are going to clean this thing up before we both lose our jobs.

QUINN

Yes sir. I am hereby declaring war on the rats!

BOSS

I like your style. I like your enthusiasm. I like your determination.

QUINN

Thank you, sir.

BOSS

But I don't like your approach. This is not a war. It has to be secret.

QUINN

Of course, sir. A special sanitary operation. But how are we going to deal with this video?

BOSS

I'll think of something. No – **you'll** think of something. You noticed how shaky it looked, didn't you?

QUINN

Uh... yes?

BOSS

It's like somebody strapped a camera to a rat.

QUINN

Uh... maybe?

BOSS

And that's ridiculous. We'll say it's a fake video. In fact, it **is** a fake video. Make sure the public knows the truth.

QUINN

The truth...

BOSS

The truth.

QUINN

You do know that there are rats, right?

BOSS

Not here. There are no rats in this mall. There never were.

QUINN

Yes, Sir!

(Quinn exits into the mall, where lights come up as the lights dim in the office. Ryan and Cleo are there waiting for him.)

RYAN

What'd he say?

QUINN

(Quinn moves them discretely away from the office.)

You know that little project you had? Well, it went viral.

RYAN

How could it? I never sent it anywhere.

CLEO

It's wifi, right?

QUINN

Cleo...

RYAN

Between the camera and the smartphone, yes. What else is it gonna

be? Co-ax?

CLEO

So, who else can pick up the signal?

(They all look at each other, with dawning realization.)

Somebody else with a smartphone picks up a video like this, it's goin' up on youtube before you can say...

RYAN

It's a problem.

QUINN

Yeah, but not the problem you think it is. You see, I'm a secret agent...

RYAN

...and your job now is to figure out who did this.

CLEO

But you **know** who did this!

QUINN

But my boss don't know I know. Besides, that's not what my mission is.

RYAN

So what's your mission?

QUINN

It's a secret war on the rats. Nobody's gotta know.

CLEO

But we're cleaning people. We're **supposed to** have a war on the rats!

QUINN

The rats are having a war on themselves, remember?

CLEO

Oh yeah.

QUINN

So, our mission is the same as it was. Only that's a secret. A secret from the very guy that gave us the mission!

RYAN

Now **that's** devious.

QUINN

It's how we do things here. Now, let's see the recording. We gotta do some analysis.

(Ryan pulls out his cell phone and taps some icons.)

RYAN

Here's where he goes in. Man there are a lot of rats there!

QUINN

You expected zebras?

RYAN

No, but...

QUINN

It's a food court. In the middle of a rat war, remember?

CLEO

What's with the food?

RYAN AND QUINN

It's a food court.

CLEO

I know. But look.

RYAN

That's odd. They're just playing with their food, not eating it.

QUINN

Taking turns, even.

CLEO

It's a huddle. Like football.

QUINN

Don't be stupid, Cleo. This is a war, not a game. Must be their central command.

RYAN

Now they've scattered. Remy's off to... looks like Sbarro's.

CLEO

That explains their bad teeth.

QUINN

Hey – what's wrong with Sbarro's?

CLEO

... Everything?

RYAN

Remember, we're not rats. We have different tastes in food.

CLEO

Doesn't look like it to me.

QUINN

Shut up, Cleo. We're lookin' for clues. This could be a breakthrough.

(Quinn bobs his head erratically as they continue watching the video.)

RYAN

Maybe we should put it on the Internet. Do some crowd funding.

CLEO

It's called "crowd sourcing".

RYAN

I like crowd funding better.

QUINN

First of all, it's **already** on the Internet. Second of all, the boss **don't like it** on the Internet. And third of all, this is a **secret** mission. So no crowd nothing. Pay attention.

CLEO

What's all that jumping around?

RYAN

Looks like Remy is trying to jump.

CLEO

That's not gonna be easy with a TV studio on his back.

(Quinn, watching the screen, suddenly cocks his head all the way to one side. Cleo takes the smartphone and rotates it 90 degrees as Quinn un-cocks his head in sync.)

RYAN

Looks like that problem is solved.

QUINN

At least the picture is steadier now. Let's take notes.

CLEO

Will you look at that! I think those two are humping.

RYAN

(Ryan looks closer)

Wait a minute – that's Remy!

(shouting to the smartphone)

Stop that Remy! Shame on you – you're on TV for chrissakes!

CLEO

Ratings just went up. How we gonna keep it secret if this stuff ends up on PornTube.

RYAN

There's a porn tube for rats?

CLEO

Rule 34.

(Ryan and Quinn just look at Cleo. Beat.)

RYAN

Maybe I should rescue that microcam.

(Ryan exits in the direction of Sbarro's.)

QUINN

You know, Cleo, you know a lot about some pretty weird stuff.

CLEO

It's just that...

QUINN

Never mind what "it's just that". I don't wanna know.

(They return their attention to the smartphone.)

CLEO

What happened to the picture?

QUINN

Dunno. Is that all there is?

CLEO

(Cleo swipes the slider a few times.)

Looks like it. Maybe the lights went out. Or the battery died.

RYAN

(Ryan returns with his microcam covered in sauce.)

Or a pizza fell on it. That's a wrap for today.

QUINN

Ok guys. Good work. Let's get cleaning. But don't destroy any

evidence. Anything looks funny, put it in a box to preserve it.
(Quinn and Ryan exit, Cleo remains thoughtful, saying to himself:)

CLEO

Now who would be listening in on the Rat-cam?

(blackout)

An open area on the floor of the food court. Chair and table legs are visible, as are various pieces of trash.

RIZZO

A mouse?

KYLIE

She's really good at what she does.

RIZZO

Yeah, but I didn't know you meant a **mouse** mouse.

KYLIE

What other kind of mouse is there?

RATBERT

What's her name?

KYLIE

Macaroni.

PETTIGREW

Of course. What else would it be?

RATBERT

Let's not get petty.

KYLIE

Her friends call her "Mac". Anyway, she's really good at art.

REMY

(in a phony affected French accent)

Zere is no "art" beyond ze art of ze food.

KYLIE

She knows the art of the food. But she also knows the art of the presentation. Food says something even when you don't eat it.

REMY

Zat is heresy.

RIZZO

I saw you at Sbarro's

REMY

Yeah, even a French rat has to eat.

PETTIGREW

You're about as French as a taco.

REMY

You wouldn't recognize a taco if it swallowed you whole.

RATBERT

Can we get back to this mouse thing?

RIZZO

Rats asking mice for help... that's just not a thing.

KYLIE

...which is what makes it so brilliant.

PETTIGREW

So, when do we meet this... Macaroni mouse?

(Mac enters. She is a very sexily attired mouse.)

MAC

Right now. If you can handle it.

RIZZO

Va va voom!

PETTIGREW

And so another rat finds his ideology disposable in the heat of passion.

RIZZO

Pettigrew, let's just say I had my eyes opened.

MAC

Oh, I doubt it, kid. Not yet.

KYLIE

Everyone, this is Macaroni.

MAC

Just call me Mac.

RIZZO

I don't think "Mac" suits you.

MAC

Listen bud – you "Rizzo". I "Mac".

RIZZO

Ok, ok.

PETTIGREW

So, what is it that you can do for us?

MAC

I can communicate with a higher plane. I can unleash the unseen forces of the world around you. I can control your destiny, if you let me.

RATBERT

With what?

MAC

Art.

PETTIGREW

Art schmart. What is art?

MAC

(Mac maneuvers herself in front of a particularly interesting piece of human-sized garbage.)

Art is the language of our innermost desires. Art is what tells you the stuff you don't know you want to know. Art is how you get what you want, without asking for it.

RIZZO

You're cute, but that's a bunch of hooey.

MAC

Just look over me.

RIZZO

Lord – what is that?

MAC

You tell me.

RATBERT

It's a sandwich that somebody bit into and threw away.

REMY

It's a croissant, made of pizza, hinting at peace between countries in the Old World, despite their culinary differences and cultural rivalries.

(beat)

KYLIE

Is that what it really is?

MAC

That's kind of the point, isn't it?

RATBERT

I don't know. I'm kind of new at this "art" stuff. Come to think of it, what **is** the point?

MAC

Everyone gets their own answer. There are no wrong answers. It's not about answers – it's about effect. This thing - I made it when you weren't here.

RIZZO

So?

MAC

So... it gives a new appreciation for the world – it gives meaning to life – it...

RIZZO

...is a waste of time when you could have eaten the thing instead.

REMY

No wait - the mouse makes a good point.

MAC

Look Rizzo – your eyes popped out when I walked onto the scene.

Why?

RIZZO

Um...

MAC

Not because you liked me – you never seen me in your life. It's because I **look** good. And why do I look good?

RIZZO

Um...

PETTIGREW

Articulate, as usual.

MAC

(Mac gestures to her attire.)

It's because "Art". You see me, you want me. Because when you see me, you see my art. Art is what gets the job done. Now... what job do you need done?

RIZZO

Uh... I dunno.

REMY

Well, we know art can completely shut down Rizzo. That's worth something.

RATBERT

We want to take over the mall. Or the street.

MAC

No, you don't.

RATBERT

What do you mean, no we don't? You asked us what we wanted. I told you.

MAC

Why do you want to take over the mall? You wanna sell stuff? You wanna advertise? You wanna speak corporate jargon? If you had the mall, what would you do with it?

KYLIE

We'd walk around like we owned the place. Broad daylight, eat what we want, dance in the street.

PETTIGREW

This from somebody who don't know what a dance **is**!

REMY

If we took over the mall, who would cook?

RIZZO

Not me.

PETTIGREW

Certainly not me.

KYLIE

Rizzo – I thought you was tough. You getting' soft?

RIZZO

You gonna cook?

KYLIE

Nope.

MAC

So, you get the picture. You like the **idea** of taking over the mall, but you don't **really** want to take over the mall.

RATBERT

I hate to say it, being a rat and all, but I think the mouse knows more than we do.

KYLIE

That's why I brought her here.

RIZZO

So, if she's so smart, why is she with you?

KYLIE

Look me over.

RIZZO

Lord no!

MAC

I tell you what – you tell me what you want to do, and I will create the art that will get it done.

RATBERT

And what do you get out of it?

MAC

I'm not sure yet. But don't worry about that. When the time comes, you'll know.

PETTIGREW

I have a bad feeling about this.

RATBERT

I don't. All in favor, raise your paws.

(Everyone but Pettigrew raises their paws.)

Duly enacted. Mac The Mouse is on our team. Kylie, figure out what it is we want to do.

PETTIGREW

I don't think that's how this is supposed to work.

RATBERT

It's time for new thinking. If we have to learn to use a mouse, we'll use a mouse. Dismissed!

(blackout)

The tech store where Cleo bought the minicam.

Ryan is talking to Dweezel, a classic nerd who runs the store and shows him a video on his smartphone.

RYAN

Do you know anything this video? Looks like it was shot here in the mall.

DWEEZEL

Yeah – that video is **gold** man! My channel just blew up!

RYAN

Blew up?

DWEEZEL

I put that thing up; next thing you know I got sixty thousand hits. In thirty minutes. You know what that means?

RYAN

It means a lot of things...

DWEEZEL

Do the math! It's probably close to a million now. You know how

long it takes to get a million hits on a channel?

RYAN

That's probably happened to me twenty times.

DWEEZEL

Really? What's your channel?

RYAN

Actually, it's a secret channel. That's why it gets all the hits. Keep it secret; people want to see it.

DWEEZEL

Makes sense to me. Wait – no it doesn't. What about the algorithm?

RYAN

I don't know nothin' about the algorithm. I just know what works. But about this video...

DWEEZEL

Yeah. A guy came in yesterday and wanted to put a camera on a rat.

RYAN

On a rat?

DWEEZEL

Crazy, but who knows, right? Whatever they need, I help them out. The loopier the better. So I set him up with this teeny wireless nanny-cam.

RYAN

And he just gave you the video?

DWEEZEL

It's in the contract. Who reads them, right? Even though the camera's very short range, I could still pick up the signal... with this:

Dweezel reaches behind the counter and pulls up a complicated looking antenna.

My own design. It's a circular yagi with log periodic elements for digital filtering. Has a gain of 200 Dee Bee, so I could just sit out in the parking lot.

RYAN

Yeah – but you see... it's causing a bit of a problem here. People

think there are rats at the mall.

DWEEZEL

Anyone who's eaten at the food court knows that.

RYAN

Yeah, but now everyone who **hasn't** eaten there knows it too. Look – I know a little bit about the algorithm too. And the first thing is you're not gonna collect for any of this.

DWEEZEL

I thought you said you didn't know anything about the algorithm.

RYAN

I know a little. And I got a proposition for you. If you leave it on your channel, Youtube – I mean Google – I mean Alphabet – they're the ones who are makin' the bucks. You make bubkus. Maybe. Because anyone can see it. It's out there. You wanna make real money? Let me put it on my secret channel.

DWEEZEL

What channel was that again?

RYAN

I said, it's secret – that's why I get all the hits. And I make bank on it. You want bank? Take the video down and make them **really** want it.

DWEEZEL

I dunno.

RYAN

(Ryan checks Dweezel's nametag.)

Dweezel, look at your antenna again. If it weren't secret, what good would it be? Everyone would have one, right? But no – you're the only one. So, you get to be a secret agent, right?

DWEEZEL

I never looked at it that way.

RYAN

Listen to me. I am, myself, on a secret mission. I can't tell you about it, because secret, but if everyone knew about it, I couldn't do it at all.

DWEEZEL

Makes sense.

RYAN

So trust me. A million hits means nothing if you can't do anything with them. On my channel, you can parlay that million hits into a million bucks.

DWEEZEL

Really?

RYAN

Almost. Let's say up to a million bucks, or more, even. And you'll be a part of my secret network. Crazy, right? And that's the way you like them.

DWEEZEL

You know, I like your style.

RYAN

Great.

(they shake hands)

DWEEZEL

So how do we start?

RYAN

First send the video to my email: mumble mumble at protonmail dot com.

DWEEZEL

Protonmail. I like that. I need the real username.

RYAN

Mumble mumble. Just like that. It's the address I use for secret stuff.

(Dweezel takes out his smartphone and taps a few keys.)

Next, delete the video from your channel. Completely so no hacker can get it back. That's important.

DWEEZEL

(Dweezel taps a few more keys.)

Done.

RYAN

And last – this is most important. Don't tell anybody about this.

This meeting never happened. This whole deal is secret, or it's blown.

DWEEZEL

Understood.

(beat. Dweezel then addresses Ryan as if he just walked in.)

Good evening sir; welcome to The Tech Corner. Can I help you?

RYAN

(with a knowing look)

No thanks – I'm just browsing.

(Ryan exits the store, but just before leaving gives a wink.)

(Lights down. Lights up on:)

The small and low-end office of mall security.

The boss is on the phone; Quinn is waiting.

BOSS

It can wait – we have a situation here.

(beat)

No, I can't just come out there – the press will have a field day.

"Mall boss leaves post as rats take over." Except they'll spell it

"Mob boss" and a week later print one of those tiny corrections nobody sees.

(beat)

I don't trust those machines. Who knows what they're thinking?

(beat)

Tomorrow, 2pm. Your office.

(Boss hangs up the phone and addresses Quinn)

Quinn – remember that secret mission you're on?

QUINN

What secret mission?

BOSS

Good. I like that. You're going to Toledo tomorrow morning.

QUINN

What's in Toledo?

BOSS

Nothing worthwhile. You'll be meeting somebody who is trying to let computers handle all the food ordering. The computers analyze the food court garbage, figure out what people are eating, and then place the appropriate orders. You know what that means?

QUINN

I hope it doesn't mean I'm going to Toledo.

BOSS

It means I'm going to Toledo. Except that you're going instead. As me. They have no idea what I look like, and I have to stay here to keep the press from making a mockery of our fine dining establishments. So, it's you.

QUINN

With all due respect, sir...

BOSS

There's a 6 am flight out of Westchester, gets into Toledo at twelve noon.

QUINN

Six hours to get to Toledo?

BOSS

(Boss hands Quinn a business card)

You change planes twice. Get a taxi to this address, be there at two pm. You'll be meeting a Ms. Capellini. She can be very convincing, but under no circumstances are you to agree to her system. I don't trust those computers, and you know it.

QUINN

Right boss. So... I just call in sick?

BOSS

I already did that for you.

QUINN

You're so efficient.

BOSS

That's why I'm the boss. Back to work – you know what to do.

QUINN

Yes, sir!

(Quinn starts to exit, is stopped by the Boss who hands Quinn a suit on a hanger)

One other thing – you’ll need this. Looks like it’ll fit well enough.

(Quinn exits the office; lights go down on the office and up on the mall food court, where Cleo and Ryan are working.)

CLEO

What’s with the suit?

QUINN

I’m going to take the rest of the day off and go to the doctor.

CLEO

Now? What about our secret mission?

QUINN

For somebody who acts so smart, you sure can be dumb. My doctor’s in Toledo.

CLEO

I didn’t know **anything** was in Toledo.

QUINN

Nothing worthwhile. But right now I have to get ready for a six o-clock flight.

CLEO

Have a nice trip, I guess.

QUINN

Thanks.

(Quinn exits. Ryan comes up to Cleo.)

RYAN

What was that about? Quinn didn’t seem too pleased.

CLEO

He has to go to Toledo.

RYAN

Oh. Totally explains it.

CLEO

His doctor is in Toledo.

RYAN

That explains a lot of other things.

CLEO

He’d have to be pretty sick to go to Toledo to see a doctor.

RYAN

That’s probably why he’s not so pleased.

CLEO

You’re not getting it. Does he look sick to you?

RYAN

No... but that doesn’t mean anything. He’ll probably feel better soon.

CLEO

Soon? When?

RYAN

He’s going to Toledo, right? So probably at the airport on the way back, but who knows?

CLEO

Ryan – **this is** the secret mission. This is the key to the rat war.

RYAN

How?

CLEO

I have no idea, but I’m gonna find out.

RYAN

How?

CLEO

I’m going to Toledo.

RYAN

That’s nuts! Even **you** should know that’s nuts. What are you going to do in Toledo?

CLEO

What does anybody do in Toledo?

RYAN

I don’t want to find out.

(Cleo exits. After a beat, Ryan pulls out his cell phone and dials)

When is the next flight to Toledo?
(blackout)

A messy art studio, where Macaroni is creating her latest artwork, which is based on a giant dog paw mounted on a styrofoam plate.

Pettigrew enters

MAC

Pettigrew – what are you doing here?

PETTIGREW

Just checkin' out the... “art”.

MAC

I thought you didn't approve.

PETTIGREW

Don't matter. You're doin' it. I want to see what you're doin'.

MAC

“What I'm doin'” is creating subtle suggestion on the part of the viewer, that will capture their imagination and catapult them into a new way of acting.

PETTIGREW

Looks like a dog leg to me.

MAC

Pettigrew, you are so... petty. Tell me – what is man's best friend?

PETTIGREW

Besides a good taco?

MAC

I see you're not very literate.

PETTIGREW

I'm a rat – what do I know about the friends of those giant creatures

that drop food all over the floor for us? As far as I know, rats are their best friends.

MAC

You have a point. But the answer is: a dog.

PETTIGREW

What do you know about dogs?

MAC

I read. And I'm not afraid of other cultures, like people are. I have cat friends, I have dog friends.

PETTIGREW

Dog friends?

MAC

Pretty bohemian, no? Such a life artists lead!

PETTIGREW

Pretty “out there”. Not worth it though.

MAC

Dogs can be pretty nice people. Expand your horizons and you'll have a much better perspective on life. I hear Remy has some interesting social contacts.

PETTIGREW

If that's the word you'd use.

MAC

Come, make yourself useful. Bring that pile of ice cream over.
(Pettigrew looks around, and Macaroni points to a large cylindrical tub on its side.)

Just roll it over here.

(Pettigrew grabs a shovel, and when the cylinder is in place, shovels a huge amount of pink goo onto the huge plate that holds the dog's paw.)

PETTIGREW

Nice colors.

MAC

The irony of warm colors for cold ice cream. It makes people want to do things.

PETTIGREW

Like what?

MAC

Set the scene. You're walking along, and you see a little kid eating an ice cream cone. Bess, for instance. She's not that coordinated, and the ice cream falls off the cone. Her little dog instantly starts eating it off the ground, because that's what dogs do. Bess of course starts crying, because that's what kids do when they lose their ice cream.

PETTIGREW

Yeah, so?

MAC

So, what would a person do in that situation?

PETTIGREW

No idea. I don't pay much attention to people.

MAC

Which is why, like it or not, **I'm** here. I do. People love mice, and mice love people. So, I get a lot of insight into this. The grownup is going to get the kid a new ice cream cone. Probably for free, because the ice cream should be better anchored.

PETTIGREW

"Anchored"? Where's you learn words like that?

MAC

Like I said, I read.

PETTIGREW

So this... what do you call it?

MAC

I call it "Corgy and Bess". We leave it out tonight, and people who see it will be reminded of their own childhood. They'll become just a little more sympathetic. Sympathetic to us. But they won't know it's happening. This is the power of art.

PETTIGREW

It'll never work.

MAC

It will. Just give it time.

(blackout)

The food court of a shopping mall, after hours.

Two custodians we have not seen before, Angie and Biff, are cleaning up. Angie reaches down to pick up a discarded dish of food from the floor.

ANGIE

People got no taste in food no more. Fried chicken and ice cream?

BIFF

Maybe that's why they threw it on the floor.

ANGIE

You ain't kiddin'. But don't laugh – Quinn'd have a field day with this!

BIFF

Should we save it for him?

ANGIE

Nah.

*(Angie dumps it in the trash bin. **Blackout.** Lights up on...)*

The aisle of a commuter airline.

Quinn enters and takes the window seat, stowing his bag in the overhead bin. Cleo enters, stows a bag in the overhead bin, and sits next to Quinn in the middle seat.

QUINN

Cleo! What are you doing here?

CLEO

I have some important business in Toledo, so I took the day off.

QUINN

No you don't. Nobody has important business in Toledo.

CLEO

Didn't you say something about a doctor out here?

QUINN

If a doctor has to come to Toledo to practice, I ain't seein' him.

CLEO

Yeah. I figured. So why'd you tell me you were seeing a doctor in Toledo.

QUINN

Oh.... **that** doctor!

CLEO

Come clean.

QUINN

Look. First of all, I'm not who you think I am.

CLEO

We all know that.

QUINN

No, you don't get it. I'm the boss.

(Ryan arrives, stows a bag in the overhead bin, and sits down next to the other two. Cleo notices, Quinn does not.)

CLEO

Ryan?

QUINN

No, the **boss**. Ryan's just a smart-ass who thinks he knows too much.

RYAN

I know enough to know I don't know enough.

QUINN

Ryan?

RYAN

Fancy meeting you here.

(A flight attendant comes by.)

FLIGHT ATTENDANT

Please buckle your seat belts for takeoff – we'll be leaving in just two minutes.

QUINN

The plane seems pretty empty – aren't there any more passengers?

FLIGHT ATTENDANT

Nah. Nobody flies to Toledo.

CLEO

Except people who aren't who they say they are.

QUINN

You're gonna blow my cover!

RYAN

In an empty plane?

QUINN

Can I trust you?

CLEO

Look – we just followed you onto a plane going to Toledo. Either we're totally empty in the cabesa, or there's something fishy going on that we're going to get to the bottom of.

RYAN

So, what's your cover?

QUINN

I don't even know! The boss wants me to meet somebody, – **as** him. So I'm him.

RYAN

And how do you know he's not a dishonest crook instead?

QUINN

What other kinds of crooks are there?

CLEO

The kind that says they have a doctor's appointment in Toledo.

QUINN

That's not fair.

CLEO

It's about the rats, isn't it?

RYAN

We **know** it's about the rats.

CLEO

You've discovered something and you're keeping it from us.

QUINN

Cleo – have I ever told you that you keep making yourself sound smarter than you are?

CLEO AND RYAN

All the time.

QUINN

I'll tell you this: You blow this and we're all out of a job. So everything on the Q-T. Sub rosa. Escondido. Under the hat. Get it?

PILOT (ON INTERCOM)

Welcome to flight three seven seven to Toledo Ohio. We will be making two stops, and changing planes each time. Please put your seats upright for takeoff, and good luck.

(blackout)

A nondescript corner of the floor of the food court at the mall.

PETTIGREW

So, what do you think of Macaroni?

RIZZO

Not as good as pizza, but I take what I can get.

PETTIGREW

I mean the **mouse**.

RIZZO

Oh, Mac! She's a sight for sore eyes, don't you agree?

PETTIGREW

If you're into playing with a mouse, I'm not going to judge you –

RIZZO

You're the one that asked the question. I like her; is that ok?

PETTIGREW

I'm talking about the art thing. Corgi and... something. I don't know. We put it out there and nothing happened.

RIZZO

Give it time.

PETTIGREW

Time? That was a perfectly good chicken leg – Remy risked a lot getting one in such good condition.

RIZZO

Mainly keeping Ratbert from eating it.

PETTIGREW

Ratbert had a point. This is food – we shouldn't be playing fun and games with it when we could be –

RIZZO

Tell me about Macaroni.

PETTIGREW

This a trick question?

RIZZO

No. What do **you** think of our little mouse? Never mind the art stuff – what do you think of **her**?

PETTIGREW

(Pettigrew thinks a moment.)

She's... pretentious. Egotistical. Cocky. Fanciful.

RIZZO

...but you like her.

PETTIGREW

Stop it! She's a **mouse**!

RIZZO

It's just you and me. I'm not judging.

PETTIGREW

Look – I like her fine. I just don't think she's doing anything.

RIZZO

Ok, so you **do** like her. Why?

PETTIGREW

I dunno. Why do I like anything?

RIZZO

Exactly. But still, she gets you to **feel** something. To **want** something. And you don't know why. Look – this is gonna work. Those people out there – they're gonna do stuff for us, and **they** won't know why.

PETTIGREW

When?

RIZZO

Patience. We just gotta find the right approach – the right algorithm, as it were.

(blackout)

A conference room in the Toledo office of Total Panopticon, Ltd., with a video projection screen at the head. The walls are glass and we can see beyond them the reception area, where displayed on the back wall is their logo – a cross between an eyeball and a target.

(Ms. Capellini, Quinn, Cleo, and Ryan enter from the reception area. Ms. Capellini is very sexily attired and looks remarkably like Macaroni.)

QUINN

These are my associates, Cleo and Ryan.

MS. CAPELLINI

Nice to meet you all. Did you have a nice flight?

CLEO

Yes. Three of them.

RYAN

We had two stops.

QUINN

...and changed planes each time.

MS. CAPELLINI

Why? There's a nonstop at eleven thirty out of Westchester. It gets in at a quarter to one.

QUINN

(beat)

I guess our travel department doesn't know about that one.

MS. CAPELLINI

Toledo is a very popular destination.

RYAN

(to Cleo)

Are we in the Twilight Zone?

MS. CAPELLINI

A lot goes on here, and I'm going to show you some of it. As per our proposal, we'd like to –

QUINN

That's not going to be possible.

MS. CAPELLINI

You actually **read** the proposal?

QUINN

It involves computers, right?

MS. CAPELLINI

Well... yes.

QUINN

Then we already know it won't work, and we're not interested.

MS. CAPELLINI

What won't work?

QUINN

The system. I'm not going to let a computer tell me what to buy, especially since it doesn't even know what we have and what we do. Our people are extremely competent and we'd prefer to continue doing everything manually.

CLEO

By hand.

RYAN

Not automatically.

CLEO

It's more organic, more real.

RYAN

Food service is very hands-on. We don't know whose hands these computers have been with.

(beat)

MS. CAPELLINI

(Ms. Capellini addresses Quinn)

You say the computer doesn't know what you have and what you do, right?

QUINN

Right. And we're not going to tell it.

MS. CAPELLINI

You don't have to.

(Ms. Capellini uses a remote control to light up a display screen on the wall showing spreadsheet pages and graphs.)

There are thirteen food establishments in the food court alone.

Three are Mexican, two are Italian, three are Chinese, one Thai, three are standard American fare, and one is in a class by itself. On a typical night, they serve sixty-eight pounds of beef, seventy one pounds of chicken, five hundred peppers, forty-four ears of corn, two hundred twelve taco shells –

QUINN

So? Where are you going with this?

MS. CAPELLINI

Do you know how much of this gets thrown out?

QUINN

Actually, I'm pretty much an expert in that.

MS. CAPELLINI

We all have our hobbies, I guess. Twenty pounds of bone, thirty-three pounds of vegetables...

QUINN

Wait – How do you know all this?

MS. CAPELLINI

Fairly standard. EasyTable and Grab-a-Bite reservations, customer cell phone capture, grocery store data linked to these customers... it doesn't matter really. Point is, we're already doing this. We're not asking for anything. We're offering a service that costs you nothing.

RYAN

You mean, like "free"?

MS. CAPELLINI

Yes. Free. Gratis. No cost. On the house. Complementary.

CLEO

Why?

QUINN

Shut up, Cleo.

RYAN

No, keep going. Why?

MS. CAPELLINI

Why what?

RYAN

Why are you doing this?

MS. CAPELLINI

With all due respect, you don't know yet what it is we are doing.

QUINN

(to Ryan)

Ryan, let me handle this.

(to Ms. Capellini)

Why are you doing this, and what is the “this” you are doing?

MS. CAPELLINI

It’s all explained in these documents.

(Ms. Capellini hands Quinn some papers.)

But in short, we’re already collecting this information for... research, information, and security purposes. It turns out that it can be helpful for the important people like you who are in charge of making big decisions. And that’s what we’re offering. By letting the machines handle all the unimportant details we can provide you with advanced research summaries like these...

(Ms. Capellini clicks the remote and other graphs and spreadsheet pages appear on the conference room projection screen.)

...and not only will business be better, just think about your reputation as a purveyor of fine dining.

QUINN

You’re telling me that I can –

RYAN

Let me handle this Quinn. Ms. Capellini, doesn’t this remove us from the loop completely?

MS. CAPELLINI

(puzzled, to nobody)

Quinn?

QUINN

(Quinn nods to Ryan)

Listen to him. Does it?

MS. CAPELLINI

He called you Quinn. I thought you were Mister... uh...

(Ms. Capellini leafs through a folder. There is an awkward moment until Cleo pipes in.)

CLEO

We all call him Quinn. It’s a university nickname from when he was on the advanced management team.

RYAN

Only certain people get to call him Quinn.

QUINN

You can be one of those people if you like.

MS. CAPELLINI

(Ms. Capellini easing up)

Ok. ... Yes. ... Quinn.

QUINN

Does this remove us from the loop?

MS. CAPELLINI

Calling you Quinn?

QUINN

No. This computer thing you’re giving us. Free.

MS. CAPELLINI

Only if you want. Once you see the results, you see. Every mall owner in the country will want to know your secret.

RYAN

(to Quinn)

That can be worth something. On the side.

MS. CAPELLINI

Ryan is quite perceptive.

QUINN

(Quinn stops a moment to consider)

I think, maybe, perhaps we could do business.

CLEO

Wait – there’s something missing here.

QUINN AND RYAN

Shut up Cleo.

MS. CAPELLINI

Just sign on the bottom here. You’ll see just above, right here, it says “free”.

QUINN

(Quinn picks up the pen and is about to sign, then hesitates.)

I guess I shouldn’t sign it “Quinn”, right?

MS. CAPELLINI

Probably not.

(Quinn signs the documents and keeps a copy.)

It's a pleasure doing business with you all.

(Ms. Capellini leaves, and the three are alone in the conference room.)

CLEO

Are you sure about this, Quinn?

QUINN

What's there to lose?

RYAN

They already have the data. Why shouldn't we wet our beak?

CLEO

I think we're gonna find out.

RYAN

How are you going to deal with the Boss?

QUINN

I **am** the boss.

CLEO

(unconvinced)

Right.

RYAN

What if they're right?

QUINN

About what?

RYAN

About all this computer stuff. Everything's automatic, optimized, and all those buzzwords. There's less waste, right?

QUINN

Right. Profits go up. Customers are happier.

CLEO

Doesn't that make our jobs harder?

RYAN

Doing less work makes it harder?

CLEO

There's less... evidence. To analyze. For our little project.

RYAN

I think Cleo's on to something.

QUINN

(It slowly dawns on Quinn)

You know Cleo, maybe you're not as dumb as you are.

CLEO

Thanks... I think.

QUINN

Now don't go getting a swelled head. Maybe they're wrong. This whole computer thing could be a bust.

CLEO

You signed it. That don't look good for you either.

QUINN AND RYAN

Shut up, Cleo.

RYAN

What are we gonna do?

QUINN

First thing, we go back to work. Act like everything's normal.

Angie's covering for us; if there was something even slightly odd, she'd let me know.

RYAN

If anything's moved, out of place, sure. But can she read paw prints?

CLEO

Wait – I thought this whole thing was secret.

QUINN

Secret yeah, but it can't be secret without secret agents, right?

She's a secret agent. And now, she's the key to this whole mystery.

RYAN

Yeah, fine, ok. But there's a difference between a table that's on the wrong side of the room, and pepperoni that's on the wrong side of a pizza slice. We'd better get back.

QUINN

Right. Let's go.

(Quinn and Ryan exit, Cleo lags behind.)

CLEO

(musing to himself)

I wonder how many other secret agents there are.
*(Cleo follows Quinn and Ryan out. **Blackout.**)*

**The food court of a mall is illuminated;
 there are other areas of the stage that are
 in darkness.**

Angie is rolling a trash cart and picking up.

QUINN

Anything happen while I was gone?

ANGIE

You were gone?

QUINN

Ouch!

ANGIE

Look Quinn. You ain't the King of the Hill here. There's no hill,
 there's no king. There's just trash, and we pick it up.

QUINN

There's more than just trash. Things. Are. Happening. And they're
 happening **here**.

ANGIE

Quinn, I like you, but really. You belong in Florida.

QUINN

The boss thinks I belong in Toledo.

ANGIE

If you went to Toledo, Florida would annex it.

QUINN

Angie –

ANGIE

Nothing happened. There was trash, we picked it up.

QUINN

Yes, but was there anything **special** about that trash?

ANGIE

When you're not here, trash is trash.

*Angie is about to pick some trash off the floor when Quinn
 stops her.*

QUINN

Wait!

ANGIE

Wait **what?**

QUINN

Quinn points it out:

See what I mean? A hamburger bun – just the bun – and on each
 side a chicken bone. That's not a coincidence.

ANGIE

What else is it?

QUINN

A message. It's a bed! Headboard, footboard, soft mattress... what
 else can it be?

ANGIE

It's **trash!** Even **more**so, it's **garbage!**

QUINN

Look – how many people eat chicken and hamburger at the same
 time. And then arrange their... leftovers so artistically?

ANGIE

Maybe some kid is just playing with its food?

QUINN

Yeah – now you're getting it. Only it's not a kid...

*(Lights gradually shift to illuminate the rats and darken the
 food court. In doing so, the scale and perspective change; we
 are still in the food court, but now from the POV of the rats.
 Human dialog continues OS; rats dialog is in focus.)*

QUINN

(continuous)

... it's a **rat**. They're talking to us!

ANGIE

Oh – so now you speak Rat? That explains a lot.

QUINN

Angie – Don't you realize...

ANGIE

The only thing I realize is that I'm tired. I'm turning in early. This shift is yours.

(Angie leaves. Light change is complete. Rizzo, Kylie, and Mac are watching from their corner of the stage.)

KYLIE

It really **is** working!

RIZZO

I knew it would.

MAC

Ok – phase two. What exactly do you want to say? And to whom?

KYLIE

I didn't think it would work so fast.

MAC

It won't work every time. But over time, it works.

RIZZO

Great. So now what?

KYLIE

I don't know. It's like we have the script but we can't read it.

RIZZO

Is that a surprise? Rats can't read.

KYLIE

Wait – we have a mouse. Doesn't that mean we have a computer?

MAC

Are you daft?

KYLIE

Are you sure you don't have Final Draft on it? I hear that program can read anything.

PETTIGREW

(Pettigrew has materialized without them being aware.)

Final Draft? That can't even read a box of corn flakes, and when it does, it makes it look like a nineteen thirty's typewriter pecked it out.

REMY

(Remy has also appeared without being noticed.)

Ze software is no match for ze wetware. Eef you know what to zay, you can zay eet sans zees – how you zay – crutches.

KYLIE

Now wait – Final draft is great – it does all sorts of things.

MAC

Let's not get off the point. First, tell me what "sorts of things" you are actually trying to **do**? Because if they are good things, you can do them with hamburger buns and chicken bones. And if they are not, then you might as well use hamburger buns and chicken bones!

RIZZO.

Again the mouse has a point.

PETTIGREW

Rizzo and the mouse. I think I see a pattern.

KYLIE

If it's working...

PETTIGREW

I don't care **what's** working. We're not working with a mouse.

(Pettigrew leaves in a huff. Those remaining are dumbfounded. Finally...)

KYLIE

Do you smell trouble?

RIZZO

(beat)

No. I smell pepperoni.

(Rizzo scurries out, followed soon by Remy. Mac and Kylie remain.)

MAC

Ok... if you're not telling me what to say, I'll say what I want.

(blackout)

On one side of the stage, the food court of a shopping mall, after hours, is lit. On the other side of the stage, dark, is the office of the Boss. There is a door between.

...where Quinn, Cleo, and Ryan are busy cleaning up. Ryan beckons Quinn to a table, where there is a bit of a food mess.

RYAN

Okay Quinn, you're so into analysis – what do you make of this?

QUINN

Wow! Where did you find this?

RYAN

(wondering if Quinn is all there)

Right here.

QUINN

This is incredible! The rats are talking to us! I **knew** it!

RYAN

Angie said you were daft, I think I believe it.

QUINN

Who was the one that put a TV studio on a rat?

RYAN

Ok, well, maybe I'm daft too. But it's your fault. Anyway, what's it say?

QUINN

(Quinn examines the... garbage on the table)

Hard to say.

RYAN

Was it hard for the rats to say?

QUINN

You know.... I think it was. Look at the detail. Rats can't do such detailed work – their paws are too big.

RYAN

So maybe... what?

QUINN

I don't know. Cleo – what does this look like to you?

CLEO

I dunno. Are you sure you want me to answer? You'll just insult me.

QUINN

Cleo – when have I ever insulted you?

RYAN AND CLEO

All the time.

QUINN

Well, ok. But not this time. What's it look like?

(Cleo comes to look at the mess in question, and ponders for a while.)

CLEO

It reminds me of the Curio of Pompey.

QUINN

The what?

CLEO

In Rome. A lot of people don't know this, but it was where Julius Caesar was murdered. The senate used to meet...

QUINN AND RYAN

Shut up Cleo.

QUINN

You think the rats really know the history of Rome?

CLEO

I don't know what the rats know, but the resemblance is striking.

QUINN

(Quinn leans into the mess on the table.)

Hey... If I lean in and listen closely I can hear them saying "Beware the Ides of March"!

CLEO

Actually that would be “Et tu, Brute”.

RYAN

He’s right. The ides thing is from the soothsayer.

QUINN

And there’s no such thing as a soothsayer.

RYAN

We **are** reading coded messages from rats.

QUINN

Or mice. The irony doesn’t escape me.

ANGIE

(Angie has entered unnoticed.)

Everything escapes you, Quinn. This is a food court, not a crime lab.

(Angie picks up the garbage and dumps it into her bin.)

It’s **you** that should beware the Ides of March.

QUINN

Angie – that was **important!**

ANGIE

Not to the boss....who’s on his way.

BOSS

(The boss has also entered, unnoticed.)

Do you know what yesterday was?

CLEO

Pi day!

BOSS

Pie in the face day. Yesterday I got a notice that I have agreed to certain terms and conditions that under no condition were you to agree to let me agree to.

QUINN

What are you talking about?

BOSS

Does Toledo, Ohio mean anything to you?

QUINN

Does flight twenty-seven mean anything to you?

BOSS

What’s flight twenty-seven?

QUINN

Nonstop to Toledo. An hour and forty-five minutes. Leaves during the sane part of the day.

BOSS

Yeah. We saved twenty dollars.

QUINN

Do you know what today is?

BOSS

What are you getting at?

QUINN

It’s a day you ought to beware of. You’re about to make a big mistake, and I can stop you from it. Let’s go to your office.

(Quinn exits the mall with the boss, entering the office. There’s a “what just happened” moment. Then...)

RYAN

Maybe the rats know more than we thought they did.

ANGIE

The rats sure know more than the people do!

(Angie, Ryan, and Cleo go back to work.)

(Lights out on the mall, and up on the office.)

(continuous)

QUINN

It just fell in our laps.

BOSS

I don’t care if it fell from the sky – I told you specifically not to sign us up for anything, especially computer things.

QUINN

I know how you feel about computers, but I also know how you

feel about “free”. And this stuff is free.

BOSS

So?

QUINN

So, you don’t have to pay for it. You were happy to put me through hell to save twenty bucks. Here I’m saving you more money than I even make, and guess what – **you** get the credit for it. Because it was you that signed up for the deal.

BOSS

No, I was never in Toledo.

QUINN

Yes you were. I was there, remember? **As** you. Now, you can go public, or you can play along.

BOSS

(beat)

I’m listening.

QUINN

There’s this company called “Total Panopticon” – they will be monitoring all of the garbage –

BOSS

See, that’s the part I don’t like.

QUINN

They are doing it anyway.

BOSS

They’re watching our garbage?

(The boss looks around and closes the blinds on the window frame.)

QUINN

Not you – the food. They know what gets thrown out – so they can order the stuff that people actually eat. Restaurants make more money, you get a raise, and guess what happens to the rats.

BOSS

They become waiters?

QUINN

Not enough garbage, so they go away. Like magic. You get another

raise. Lookin’ good, right?

BOSS

I’m beginning to catch on.

QUINN

I thought you would.

BOSS

But I don’t trust it.

QUINN

You don’t trust money?

BOSS

That computery stuff. If they’re doing everything, what am I here for?

QUINN

The same thing you’re always here for. Only now it’s easier – you don’t have to do anything.

BOSS

I’m already doing that.

QUINN

Yeah, but nobody knows it. Trust me – we’ve got you covered.

BOSS

Last time I trusted you –

QUINN

...you sent me to Toledo on a six hour flight that changed planes twice. You owe me one.

(Quinn exits into the mall.

Lights out in the office, up on the mall.

Angie, Ryan, and Cleo are waiting for him.)

QUINN (CONTINUOUS)

Angie – that Pompey thing – we need it back.

ANGIE

Say **what?**

CLEO

The **curio** of Pompey. If that’s what it really is – we don’t know yet.

QUINN

...and we need to find out. We may be running out of time.

RYAN

That's not the thing you're out of.

QUINN AND CLEO

Shut up, Ryan

RYAN

Say **what?**

ANGIE

(to Ryan)

Looks like we're in the same boat.

RYAN

Yeah, and it's sinking.

QUINN

(to Ryan)

You know what happens when there's less garbage?

RYAN

Yeah. Two things. One – there's less evidence to analyze. And two – there will be fewer of us to analyze it.

ANGIE

Ain't none of that happenin' here. What's happening is that there's garbage in the food court. If we pick it up, we keep our jobs. If we don't, we are on the street. I don't want to hear no analysis shit.

(Angie picks something else up, throws it in her trash bin, and exits.)

QUINN

You know what that is, right? That's war.

CLEO

Careful Quinn. Don't be like the rats.

RYAN

Too late, I think.

QUINN

War!

(blackout)

An open area on the floor of the food court, from a rat and mouse POV. Chair and table legs are visible, as are various pieces of trash. But most evident is a large (in scale to rats) human body laid out on the floor holding a bottle, next to a slice of pizza.

The rats come upon this body and begin exploring.

RATBERT

Looks like somebody doesn't know the mall is closed!

RIZZO

Is he dead?

RATBERT

(Ratbert pokes around)

Nah. He's sleeping.

KYLIE

Maybe that pizza didn't agree with him.

(Ratbert takes a bit of the crust.)

RATBERT

I dunno. It agrees with me.

RIZZO

All food agrees with you, Ratbert.

KYLIE

So, what are we going to do?

RATBERT

Ignore it? We have food to eat, why waste time on this?

PETTIGREW

I'm not sure it's really a waste of time.

RATBERT

Don't tell me. You want to use a mouse.

PETTIGREW

How crude of you. But yes, I think the Mac could give us some great insight.

RIZZO

Oh... it's "The Mac" now?

REMY

Eez ze romance, no? Eez a love affair between you and ze "mouse".

PETTIGREW

I just think Macaroni would have some good ideas.

MACARONI

(Macaroni shows up, as if on cue.)

Did I just hear the call of the wild?

RATBERT

It looks like some "art" was left on our doorstep. Pettigrew wants to know what you make of it.

MACARONI

(Macaroni scampers over to the prone body and pokes around)

Let's see... Italian spices, polysoberic oleofins, red dye number two, gluten, and a glass container. Clearly a message. If I created it, I'd call it "Thyme in a Bottle".

KYLIE

What about all the other stuff?

MACARONI

They're in the background. Thyme will tell.

REMY

Zee other spices are ze spice of life – you can't leave zat out!

MACARONI

(to Remy)

Art is a lie that reveals the truth.

(to all)

We've got to send a message back. But what?

RATBERT

Tell them "more pizza".

RIZZO

Be careful what you wish for.

REMY

Ze pizza eez ze food of love.

KYLIE

I thought you were French.

REMY

Even zee French get hungry zometimes, no?

MACARONI

I've got it!

I'll just nibble a bit here, and a bit there...

(Macaroni nibbles part of the crust of the pizza)

RATBERT

Why does she get to eat the pizza?

PETTIGREW

Because she knows what she's doing?

KYLIE

Yeah, but do **we** know what she's doing?

REMY

Do you even know what **you** are doing?

MACARONI

Done!

RATBERT

What done? You hardly did anything.

MACARONI

Art is knowing when to stop.

KYLIE

Art is a lot of things, it seems.

MACARONI

It is. Now off – all of you. Let this thing be discovered.

RATBERT

Are we going to take orders from a **mouse**?

MACARONI

Think of it as a suggestion. One you agree with. In fact, one you thought of first.

KYLIE

Makes sense to me.

*(The rats disperse. **blackout.**)*

The same open area of the food court, but to human scale. Quinn is asleep on the floor, with a bottle in his hands and a pizza slice next to him.

Angie, Cleo, and Ryan discover him.

ANGIE

Well, will you look at that!

CLEO

(Cleo rushes up to him)

I hope he's all right. Quinn! Wake up!

ANGIE

Looks like he's been drinking.

RYAN

I'd be drinking too if I had to eat that pizza.

CLEO

Wait a minute. Take a look at that pizza. Who eats the middle of the crust first?

ANGIE

Well I'll be.

RYAN

Looks like a heart.

(Ryan picks up the pizza and holds it up. With the way it was nibbled, it does look like a heart.)

CLEO

...and this bottle... Absinthe. Where did he get this?

RYAN

Not at the mall.

CLEO

He's sending a message.

ANGIE

Message my ass! The boss is going to send us all a message if we don't get this cleaned up.

RYAN

No really. Who eats a heart-shaped pizza?

CLEO

...with absinthe, no less. Maybe that's what the computers are shipping us now. Some sort of high class thing.

ANGIE

Are you guys **daft**?

CLEO

This has to mean **something**.

ANGIE

OK, fine.

"Here's a mystery to ponder
while you're out consuming lunch:
Absinthe makes the heart grow fonder
while it lands a mighty punch."

RYAN

Angie, that's **brilliant**!

ANGIE

Great. Now let's clean this shit up.

CLEO

Don't you think we ought to... say... wake Quinn up?

ANGIE AND RYAN

(after a beat)

Nah.

RYAN

Yeah, probably right.

(They toss the pizza and bottle in the trash bin and move on.)

blackout

The break room at the mall...

...where Cleo and Ryan are talking.

CLEO
Maybe she's a drunk?

RYAN
Angie? I'm pretty sure she never touches the stuff.

CLEO
Then where did she learn about absinthe?

RYAN
Everybody knows about absinthe. And knows to stay away from it.

CLEO
She was pretty quick and poetical when she saw the bottle.

RYAN
(beat)
I see why you might think that. But wasn't it Quinn that was found with the bottle?

CLEO
Yeah. By Angie. So where'd Angie get the absinthe?

RYAN
From Quinn?

CLEO
That's not his style.

RYAN
And just what **is** his style?

CLEO
Beer. Cheap beer. The kind of beer that doesn't go with anything, so you drink it with everything.

RYAN
I don't know. Quinn was pretty upset about that Pompey thing.

CLEO
Yeah... it's almost like... I hate to say it, but...

RYAN
He's on the Rats' side.

CLEO
Whoa! I mean, right, but I never thought I'd hear you sayin' it.

RYAN
You know Quinn's off the deep end, don't you?

CLEO
I dunno. You saw the video. It's unmistakable.

RYAN
Unmistakable **what**? There are rats in the mall. Everyone already knows this. Rats building the Colosseum? That's not on tape.

CLEO
You want me to get another camera? Those things **cost**, man!

RYAN
You wanna build a case, you need evidence, not the ramblings of a lunatic.

CLEO
It works for Fox.

RYAN
Fox is a rat.

CLEO
Wait – really?

RYAN
It's... never mind. Quinn's gonna do something rash.

CLEO
Not until he wakes up.

RYAN
But when he does, we gotta be out in front of it. **IF** there's rats painting the Mona Lisa, we gotta see it happen. If Quinn is just an absinthe-addled aardvark, we gotta stop him.

CLEO
Ok, but which is it?

RYAN

That's the question. I have thoughts, but we need data.

CLEO

Then I need another camera. That pizza wasn't very nice to its innards.

(Angie enters, unnoticed)

RYAN

I still have the Boss' credit card. Let's go.

ANGIE

Where are we going?

CLEO

(beat)

I hear Toledo's nice this time of year?

ANGIE

Toledo my ass!

RYAN

Angie, why do you always show up at the most... appropriate times?

ANGIE

Dunno. I guess I have a nose for trouble.

(Angie realizes...)

You're going off to get more absinthe!

RYAN

Uh...

ANGIE

Drinkin' on the job's not allowed. You wanna end up like Quinn?

CLEO

How is Quinn anyway?

ANGIE

Shut up, Cleo.

RYAN

No, we weren't going to get absinthe but I'll change my mind if you keep showing up like this.

ANGIE

I **work** here. And you're supposed to too.

RYAN

Ok, fine. I remember that ode of yours. What **is** with you and absinthe?

ANGIE

Oh, I know a few things.

RYAN

Yeah, we're still trying to figure out what they are. Back to work!

(Angie and Ryan exit the break room.)

CLEO

Maybe she **is** a drunk.

(blackout)

The Boss' office in the mall.

The boss is standing behind his desk, while Quinn is seated in front of it.

BOSS

Give me **one** reason I don't fire you right here and now.

QUINN

Because I was the one that made it possible for you to do so.

BOSS

That makes no sense at all.

QUINN

But it **is** a reason.

BOSS

I pay you to **clean up** the garbage, not to nap with a bottle of whatever-that-stuff-was in your arms.

QUINN

Absinthe, if you must know. And I know where it came from, too.

BOSS

What you know is that there's no drinking on the job.

QUINN

I wasn't drinking.

BOSS

Of course not – you were snockered out on the floor.

QUINN

(more to himself)

Angie. It has to be Angie.

BOSS

You have a problem with Angie?

QUINN

I was having a pizza. Before work. Angie shows up with a bottle. She makes a toast. I can't say no; that would be rude. And I'm not at work yet. So, I had one sip. Stuff is vile. Next thing I know, it's Thursday.

BOSS

Look Quinn, I'm trying to be understanding. But Angie tells me –

QUINN

...stories. I'm tellin' you the real deal. It's been a week, how has business been?

BOSS

What does that have to do with it?

QUINN

How's business? You know – the rats, the restaurants, the garbage?

BOSS

Business is fine. No thanks to you.

QUINN

So you can fire me? And not notice?

BOSS

That's right.

QUINN

But four weeks ago you were begging me to do overtime, and I know that's against your religion.

BOSS

Four weeks ago the garbage was up to here. Restaurants didn't care, patrons didn't care, the only one who cared was me.

QUINN

And me.

BOSS

And you.

QUINN

And Ryan. And, I hate to say it, Cleo.

BOSS

If you care so much, whyja get drunk.

QUINN

Angie – I told you. But it don't matter. Point is, something happened in Toledo that you didn't like at first, but tell me how it's playing out. You can sit back and fire me – your most senior...

(beat)

organic removal engineer – and not lose a beat. And *I* made that possible.

BOSS

And if word gets out that I am letting you sleep drunk on the job, I *will* lose a beat.

QUINN

And if word gets out that it wasn't you in Toledo, you will lose more than a beat. Remember all that free stuff Panopticon is giving you?

BOSS

I do. I admit – you were right about the computery stuff. I play with the mouse, and the rats go away.

QUINN

What you don't realize is that that's my mouse you're playing with. You can fire me, but I won't be gone. We'll end up trading places. If you're lucky.

BOSS

Don't threaten me.

QUINN

I wouldn't dream of it. But you need me. Here. To keep you from making other mistakes.

(Quinn leaves.)

BOSS

Quinn – you’re a bastard.

blackout

A nondescript corner of the floor of the food court at the mall...

...where Pettigrew, Kylie, Rizzo, and Ratbert are having a huddle.

PETTIGREW

It’s working.

RIZZO

Hmmm.

PETTIGREW

I hate to admit it, but the Mac is amazing.

KYLIE

So... she’s “the Mac” now?

RATBERT

I’d be careful here.

RIZZO

Because affairs of the heart are fraught?

MACARONI

(Macaroni enters, as if on cue)

Where’d you learn the word “fraught”?

RIZZO

Hey – I listen to things, yanno.

RATBERT

No – because even though it works, you don’t know **why** it works.

Which means you can’t control it.

MACARONI

I can control it – after all, I’m the one who did it, right?

KYLIE

Can’t argue with that.

RIZZO

(to Kylie)

Sure you can.

(To Macaroni)

So, little Miss Mousie... how is it that when you did what you did, you got them to do what they did?

MACARONI

I already told you, Mister Rat-who-just-saw-a-dictionary. Art. A-R-T. Only three letters, and it’s right in the front of the book. If you know which end is the front.

RATBERT

Go easy on him, Macaroni. The jury’s still out on this “art” thing.

MACARONI

Is it? Ask Pettigrew.

RATBERT

Ok. Pettigrew – what exactly is it that is working so amazingly well?

PETTIGREW

Well...

RIZZO

Deep thought.

PETTIGREW

Have you noticed that since we started our... how do I say... “gallery events”... that things have been rather nicer around here?

RATBERT

No.

KYLIE

Have you noticed **anything** Ratbert?

REMY

(Remy had entered unnoticed)

Zee cuisine is... “beaucoup more magnifique”.

RATBERT

Ok, I’ll give you that.

REMY

Clearly ze chefs appreciate ze arts.

RATBERT

Or ze mouse.

RIZZO

Come to think of it, the place is... cleaner.

RATBERT

Which means less food for us.

REMY

But still... zere is plenty, and eez zo much tastier.

KYLIE

And that's just the food.

RATBERT

What else is there?

KYLIE

Good point.

MACARONI

For my next masterpiece...

PETTIGREW

Whoa... hold on there!

MACARONI

I thought you liked my stuff?

PETTIGREW

I do. Well, more than before anyway. Not to argue with results, but don't you think we're going a little too fast here?

RATBERT

I'm with Pettigrew. We don't know what's going to happen next.

MACARONI

I do.

KYLIE

What's going to happen next?

MACARONI

That depends on you. To pull it off, I will need something long and colorful, some small green things, a backdrop of some sort, something rough and bulbous, and a red sauce.

RIZZO

"Sauce" is the only word that makes sense to me.

PETTIGREW

Yeah. We're rats. Stop talking art and start talking food.

KYLIE

No – I think I get it. Carrots. Long and colorful.

MACARONI

Now you're thinking! We'll make a mouse out of you yet!

RATBERT

Don't scare me.

MACARONI

Now I also need...

PETTIGREW

I don't care what that girl needs.

RIZZO

A potato! Bulbous, rough, tasty.

REMY

Ze haricot verts! Petit, green, délicieux.

RATBERT

Or you could just use peas.

PETTIGREW

This is getting out of hand! Is the mouse working for us, or are we working for the mouse?

RATBERT

Wasn't it just a minute ago you were saying the Mac was amazing, and that it's all working so well?

PETTIGREW

Yes, but that doesn't mean...

MACARONI

First one back gets to lick the spoon!

(All the rats except Pettigrew scurry off in search of art supplies. Pettigrew is at a loss.)

Trust me - it'll be just fine.

(blackout)

Half the stage is lit as the break room in the mall custodian area. The other half is in darkness. There is a door upstage.

...where Quinn, Ryan, and Cleo are huddled over a smartphone watching video of the rats.

RYAN

Where'd they get a freaking chafing dish?

QUINN

This **is** a restaurant.

CLEO

Yeah... I'm not used to thinking of these... fine food establishments as "restaurants".

RYAN

Still... what do rats know about cooking?

QUINN

Yanno Ryan, sometimes I think you're remedial.

CLEO

Cooking means food... and aromas... and –

QUINN

The rats have had the run of the place for years. You think they don't know where the food is?

RYAN

Yeah, but get this. They actually are putting the food in the chafing dishes themselves. Not taking it out. That Pompey thing was **real!**

QUINN

But why? Don't tell me the rats are getting religion.

CLEO

It's not just rats. Look.

RYAN

It's.... a **mouse!** Will you **look. At. That.**

QUINN

(peers in)

Ok, maybe the rats **are** getting religion. This must be some sort of ritual.

RYAN

They are praying. To us. Imagine that!

QUINN

But we still have no idea what they are saying.

CLEO

Yanno what's interesting? Look who's in charge.

RYAN

How can you tell who's in charge?

CLEO

Just look.

(They watch intently.)

QUINN

Well... it looks like the rats are doing most of the work.

RYAN

Makes sense. Rats are bigger, stronger. That's why they carry the camera.

CLEO

Then what's the mouse for?

QUINN

Mouse isn't doing anything.

(beat, drawn out)

Just like a boss.

CLEO

You're getting' it. Mouse is in charge.

RYAN

(beat)

Whoa – freeze that!

(Cleo taps an icon)

QUINN

Where are they going?

RYAN

Dunno, but I think they left the mouse there. **Doing** something.

QUINN

So... keep playing it. Let's see what the mouse is doing?

CLEO

Can't see – the rats took the camera with them.

RYAN

What time was this taken?

CLEO

(looks at the smartphone)

An hour ago.

RYAN

And that restaurant opens in...

QUINN

Two hours. The employees will be getting there... about now.

RYAN

We've got to get there first! The chef finds this, we're going to be in the chafing dish ourselves!

(All three exit in a hurry through the upstage door. The lights come down on this area and up on the adjacent area, revealing a small restaurant kitchen, with an island that has a chafing dish on it. There is a door upstage and a door on the opposite side from the break room area. Two chefs, Alfredo and Giuseppi enter through that side door and begin setting up. They notice the chafing dish has something in it just as Quinn, Ryan, and Cleo enter hurriedly from the upstage door. Seeing the chefs, they know they are too late.)

ALFREDO

(Alfredo looks at the trio, looks at the chafing dish, and looks back at the trio, expectantly.)

Your handiwork?

QUINN

(hesitantly)

No.

CLEO

No.

RYAN

Yes.

CLEO

Yes.

QUINN

Yes.

GIUSEPPI

Yes? No? Which is it?

RYAN

It was something I was doing for my kids birthday party. I was going to remove it but I got called away. A massive garbage accident we had to attend to.

ALFREDO

You know... this is supposed to be a closed-off area. Once we clean up, nobody is supposed to come in.

GIUSEPPI

That way we know it's still clean.

ALFREDO

Sanitized, for your protection.

GIUSEPPI

We don't want the same... reputation as the rest of the mall.

RYAN

Yes, that's why we put booties over our shoes.

(Giuseppi and Alfredo look down at Ryan's feet. There are no booties.)

We took them off when we were called to the emergency cleanup.

Everything's spotless – I swear.

GIUSEPPI

What about the food in the chafing dish. How can things be spotless if that happened?

RYAN

I can assure you everything is perfectly clean. We'll just take this away, and then I'll come back and personally help you prepare for

today.

ALFREDO

Who **are** you?

RYAN

Ok.

(beat)

I'm Deputy Inspector Erich Kohley. And I'm happy to say you just passed inspection. Most restaurants would let something like this go, but you caught on right away. I'll be sure to let the Boss know you folks are top notch. What are your names?

GIUSEPPI

I'm Giuseppi, and this is my boss Alfredo.

RYAN

Splendid! A+. Now we'll just get this out of your way, and I'll go write that report.

ALFREDO

Thank you. We just opened, and I wouldn't want to get closed down in the first month!

RYAN

We'll make sure that doesn't happen.

(Ryan takes the tray from the chafing dish and all three exit through the upstage door. Lights go down in the kitchen and up in the break area as the trio rushes in through the upstage door with the chafing dish.)

CLEO

Brilliant!

QUINN

Damn near gave me a heart attack.

RYAN

Them too, probably.

CLEO

"Deputy Inspector Erich Kohley"

QUINN

Booties? Really?

RYAN

Let's hope they don't ponder it too much.

QUINN

Say, I didn't know you had kids.

RYAN

I don't.

CLEO

Ryan's not as dumb as I look.

QUINN

(takes a glance at Cleo)

I'll say.

(They put the chafing tray down on a table and begin to examine it.)

RYAN

Well, I'll be darned.

CLEO

Look at all these little handprints! That mouse was busy!

QUINN

Nobody's going to believe this.

CLEO

We have the video to prove it.

RYAN

We have half the video. Nothing with the mouse.

QUINN

You don't know that. We haven't watched the whole thing.

RYAN

I'll leave that to you. But we're definitely onto something.

(Angie enters unnoticed)

RYAN

Never mind the video. We have the actual thing right in front of us.

What does it look like to you?

QUINN

(Quinn notices Angie)

Shit!

CLEO

It's not Michaelangelo, but I think that's a bit extreme.

QUINN

Angie, what are **you** doing here?

ANGIE

Takin' a break. That your lunch?

QUINN

Very funny.

ANGIE

Wait a minute... what's it doing in a chafing dish?

RYAN

We thought we'd, you know, chafe it a little before eating it.

ANGIE

Oh yeah? Well, where's the rest of it?

RYAN

We forgot it.

ANGIE

Forgot my ass. That belongs to that new restaurant – the fancy French-Italian one. They know you have it?

QUINN

Of course they do.

ANGIE

Well, what if I just checked...

QUINN

Angie, why you gotta stick your nose into everything?

ANGIE

Funny thing for a rolling-down drunk to say.

RYAN

Lay offa him Angie. This is actually a special treat for my son, and I don't want any messing around with it. Just stick it back in your hat, ok?

ANGIE

I didn't know you had a son.

CLEO

He doesn't –

(Cleo stops himself but it's too late.)

ANGIE

He what?

QUINN

He doesn't usually talk about him. Sad story, just let it go Angie.

ANGIE

Ok, but I still smell fish.

(Angie leaves)

RYAN

... on her breath.

QUINN

Another close shave like that and I'll be bald.

RYAN

It's quitting time. I'll take this home. To my son. We'll do more research tomorrow.

QUINN

Sounds good to me.

CLEO

I'm gonna stick around and try to get the camera back.

RYAN

Good luck!

(Ryan and Quinn exit.)

(blackout)

Macaroni's studio, which keeps getting more elaborate each time we see it.

Macaroni is working on another project, along with another mouse (Andy). They continue working during the scene. Rizzo is wheeled in on a roller skate by Kylie and Ratbert.

MACARONI

Well, what brings **you** here?

RIZZO

Kylie and Ratbert.

MACARONI

I can see that – but what I meant was why?

RIZZO

Well, I'm not feelin' too well. Not up to walkin' much.

MACARONI

I'm sorry to hear that, but what I was asking was... never mind.

KYLIE

He wanted to see what you were up to.

MACARONI

That's not like him.

RATBERT

Well, he's not feeling too well.

MACARONI

Yeah, he said that.

KYLIE

So, what **are** you up to?

RATBERT

...and who's your helper?

MACARONI

Oh, that's Andy.

ANDY

The name is **Android**.

MACARONI

Oh, that's so cute, Andy.

ANDY

Android.

MACARONI

Yeah, whatever. He's helping me put together your latest project.

It's a big one.

RIZZO

I didn't even know we had a project.

KYLIE

Yeah, the thing with the carrots and haircut things.

RATBERT

That already happened. Even Remy was impressed, and he's hard to impress.

MACARONI

So this one's going to... well, just look at it!

ANDY

It's not even done yet, what's there to see?

MACARONI

Over here is the head. It doesn't have horns yet, but you'll see.

This is the foreleg

KYLIE

Very clever. You only need one to have all four legs.

ANDY

There are two forelegs, you idiot rat.

MACARONI

Be nice, Andy.

ANDY

Call me by my proper name and I'll be a lot nicer.

MACARONI

This will be the tail. A string of little hotdogs – perfect.

RIZZO

What will we be getting out of all this?

MACARONI

I'm thinking a steakhouse. A real one – with steaks as thick as you are.

ANDY

Be nice, Mac

MACARONI

Can you believe what I have to put up with?

ANDY

He's not even feeling well.

MACARONI

Bet it's something you ate.

KYLIE

We're rats. It's always something we ate. What else do we do?

RIZZO

It's those little pellets, I'm sure of it.

KYLIE

What little pellets?

RIZZO

All over the place. Little boxes with pellets.

KYLIE

How did I not notice that?

RIZZO

Maybe you're dwindling.

RATBERT

You're the one in the roller skate.

RIZZO

You're the one that didn't notice food.

KYLIE

No, **I'm** the one that didn't notice food.

ANDY

Maybe it's not food.

RATBERT

Everything is food.

RIZZO

Remy would disagree.

KYLIE

Remy's French.

RATBERT

In his own mind, he is.

ANDY

Yanno, I'm working my tail off on this project so that you folk can have Sirloin and Porterhouse steaks, and for what? You guys can't tell the difference between steak and sausage!

KYLIE

Remy can. But he doesn't like steakhouses – they don't do any fancy French shit to it first.

RATBERT

He's not French!

MACARONI

How would you know? Ever been to France?

RIZZO

All this arguing... I'm getting tired. I seen what I want to see.

RATBERT

Maybe you're the one that's dwindling.

RIZZO

I'm not dwindling. I just want to go to sleep. You know who's dwindling – all the rest of you.

KYLIE

Us? Us that are pulling you around like a pair of oxes?

ANDY

Oxen.

RIZZO

Whatever. You know you're dwindling when you can be here with Andy – uh, excuse me - “Android”, this whole time, and have not noticed that he's **another mouse!**

KYLIE

Ratbert noticed. Right away.

RIZZO

He asked his name but he was fine with him being another mouse.

MACARONI

What's wrong with mice?

KYLIE

Nothing. We brought you into this remember? We like mice.

MACARONI

You like what mice can do for you.

RATBERT

Well... that helps.

MACARONI

But you don't care about our feelings, do you? To you, we're just tools. Ways of getting food. Ways of doing things you can't figure out. You know who's dwindling? **All of you!** But you don't know it yet.

(Nobody says anything for a moment. Then...)

ANDY
 Feel better?
 MACARONI
 Yeah.
 ANDY
 Does it make a difference?
 MACARONI
(beat)
 No.
 KYLIE
 Rizzo's not feeling himself right now. Maybe we'd better go.
 RIZZO
 Yeah. I'm tired. Stay away from those pellets.
 RATBERT
 Right.
(they wheel Rizzo out on the roller skate.)

ANDY
 Is that us? In the future?
 MACARONI
 I sure hope not, Andy. I mean, Android.
 ANDY
 Andy's fine.

(blackout)

The break room at the mall.

Cleo is sitting at a table, a bit morose. He has recovered the camera and it is in front of him on the table. Ryan walks in.

RYAN
 Cleo – you look like shit. You find the camera?
(Cleo holds it up)
 It still work?

(Cleo nods)
 You been here the whole time?
 CLEO
 I found Rizzo.
 RYAN
(Ryan indicates the camera)
 And...?
 CLEO
 No, he's not on the video. I found Rizzo. Himself.
 RYAN
 Did you ask him about the Pompey thing?
(Cleo looks up in disbelief)
 CLEO
 You think I speak rat?
 RYAN
 Well, no...
 CLEO
 Or maybe Rizzo speaks the Queen's English?
 RYAN
 Rats are pretty smart, you know.
 CLEO
 Yeah, I know. Smarter than some people, I'm led to understand.
 RYAN
 Now what's that supposed to mean?
 CLEO
 Think of the people you know. Head to head against a rat, who wins?
 RYAN
 The people – always. Well, sometimes, anyway. Not against squirrels though. Squirrels win every time.
 CLEO
 Rizzo's dead.
 RYAN
 Rizzo's.... how do you know?

CLEO
I saw him.

RYAN
What – when you were getting the camera?

CLEO
Yeah.

RYAN
Oh, I'm so sorry.

CLEO
He wasn't my boyfriend you dimwit! He wasn't even my pet. He's just a rat.

RYAN
He wasn't "just a rat", Cleo. We've been watching him and his clan for quite a while now. It's understandable you could get attached to him.

CLEO
Really? We have a few days of video, he appears for an hour or so, tops. We've been analyzing footprints and mashed potatoes. That's it.

RYAN
I kinda liked him.

CLEO
Yeah, but he's just a rat. Thing is, he was buried.

RYAN
Buried?

CLEO
Yeah, like people.

RYAN
In the dirt? In the middle of winter?

CLEO
No. In mashed potatoes.
(beat)

RYAN
You ok?
(Quinn enters)

QUINN
Another night, another garbage pail.

CLEO
Quinn – ever wonder about your place in the universe?

QUINN
What?

RYAN
He's had a hard day.

CLEO
What it all means... why we are here?

QUINN
No, and I don't hafta. Angie will tell me, whether I like it or not.

RYAN
Angie ain't even here, why bring that up?

QUINN
Angie's always here – haven't you noticed?

CLEO
Rizzo's dead.

QUINN
Really...? Couldn't it've been Angie?

CLEO
And buried. Like people.

QUINN
Really...

CLEO
You know... elephants, when they die, they go off to a secluded location to pass on. Some elephants even bury their dead.

QUINN
Cleo... stop making yourself sound smarter than you are.

CLEO
It's true though. Ants, bees, they do too.

RYAN
He's right.

QUINN
So what?

CLEO

Rizzo was buried. In mashed potatoes. By mice.

QUINN

Nah. Rizzo was just hungry and made a pig of himself again.

RYAN

Wait a minute... by mice?

CLEO

Explain the mouse footprints. And tombstone.

QUINN

Woah – tombstone?

CLEO

My camera – standing up right there. That's how I found it. Then I noticed the footprints. Mouse, not rat. Tiny. Two of them. A him and a her, if I'm analyzing correctly. Then I dug into the mashed potatoes and there he was.

RYAN

You took pictures...

CLEO

I didn't think of it 'till it was too late. And the battery was dead anyway. So I just put him back. Out of respect, you know.

QUINN

Cleo... I never know what to make of you.

RYAN

Sometimes he runs a TV station, and sometimes he does some grave digging.

QUINN

But not both at once, apparently.

(Angie enters, unnoticed.)

RYAN

At least you got your camera back. There will be more rats.

ANGIE

Not on my watch.

QUINN

Angie, why do you always **do** that?

ANGIE

Because I work here. And I don't like rats. And neither does the boss.

RYAN

The boss don't care about rats, he just cares people know about rats.

ANGIE

Good enough for me. Grey pellets – no more rats. Easy peasy!

(Angie leaves)

QUINN

I'm going to have to have a talk with the boss, who will then have a talk with Angie.

CLEO

What are you going to tell him? "We need more rats!"?

RYAN

I wanna be a fly on the wall when the boss tells Angie!

QUINN

I'll think of something.

(Quinn exits.)

CLEO

I actually liked Rizzo.

RYAN

I know.

(blackout)

The Boss' office in the mall: a small, low-end office of mall security.

Quinn enters

QUINN

Hey Boss – got a minute?

BOSS

Rather informal today, are we?

QUINN

Sorry, Boss.

BOSS

No matter. I'm rather informal too. I'm leaving.

QUINN

Going to Toledo?

BOSS

Funny you should mention that. Toledo is putting in two new restaurants.

QUINN

You're going to Toledo for dinner? It'll take six hours just to get there. You change planes twice.

BOSS

No, you ass. The restaurants are coming here.

QUINN

For dinner?

BOSS

Sometimes I wonder why I hired you. Then I remember and I get heartburn. Read this.

(The Boss hands Quinn a letter, which he scans through.)

QUINN

Panopticon, Limited... to inform you... ***fine dining establishments***... "Pommes and Aubergines"... "Samurai Season"... looks good – congratulations! You're going out there to coordinate things?

BOSS

No. Things are already coordinated. The trucks are on their way. The restaurants will open in a week and a half. Coupons are already in the mail. It's this damned computer thing you hooked me up with.

QUINN

Now wait a minute, computers don't build restaurants.

BOSS

No, but they send letters to people who do.

QUINN

So, why are you going to Toledo?

BOSS

I'm not ***going*** to Toledo.

(Quinn points to himself, questioningly.)

No, ***you're*** not either.

(relief!)

I'm superfluous. You know what "superfluous" means, right? I'm leaving the job. I'm putting Angie in charge.

QUINN

They ***fired*** you? Wait – ***Angie?***

BOSS

No, they actually gave me a raise.

QUINN

Angie – you can't – Angie's gonna... You're leaving a job where you get paid to do nothing, got a raise, and can take all the credit for turning the food court around?

BOSS

I wanted a ***steakhouse***. Just the other day I was passing by the food court, and, I don't know, looking at the food left around, it was just like a vision. There was this... cow... a male cow, you know. With horns and everything. I don't know what they call it.

QUINN

You know "superfluous" and you don't know "steer".

BOSS

Anyway, it looked lonely, and it got me to thinking.

QUINN

Did you start thinking "what the ***hell*** is cattle doing in a mall?"

BOSS

It wasn't real.

QUINN

I'll say.

BOSS

It was in the food. Like... I don't know. You know those bagels that look like the Madonna? It was like that. And then I really wanted a steak. And then I realized we have no steakhouses at the mall. Closest is a second rate burger joint called "Americana".

QUINN

You can't leave Angie to run the place.

BOSS

Who's gonna run it? You? You're the one what got me into this mess!

QUINN

What kind of mess is it where you get paid to sit on your ass?

BOSS

Steakhouse, Quinn.

QUINN

Run your own steakhouse!

BOSS

I know nothing about running a restaurant.

QUINN

Then let Panopticon run it.

BOSS

How? Do you like, write a letter saying "I have an idea that I know nothing about, and I want you to do it for me?"

QUINN

That's what everybody else does.

BOSS

...and it works?

QUINN

Look around you. How else do you explain it?

BOSS

(The Boss ponders.)

You may have a point there, Quinn. A letter. Will you help me write it?

QUINN

Sure, Boss. I'll take good care of you. Just one request.

BOSS

Sure – anything.

QUINN

About Angie. She's been leaving poisoned pellets around the food court. She's going to claim it's for the rats, but it's not a good look.

And you wouldn't want the chefs at your new steakhouse to mistake it for peppercorns, would you?

BOSS

No. She's *doing* that?

QUINN

Yeah. All on her own. She thinks she's doing good, but you gotta stop her.

BOSS

I'll talk to her. And Quinn – thanks. I owe you one.

(blackout)

Macaroni's art studio, where many rats are lying motionless on the floor, and a few roller skates are lying around.

(In the background, other rats are tending to them as best they can, including Pettigrew, Ratbert, and Kylie. Macaroni is absent.)

PETTIGREW

It's the softies. All of them.

RATBERT

What about the pellets?

PETTIGREW

Nothing about the pellets. We should have stayed on Main Street where we belong.

KYLIE

Rizzo said –

PETTIGREW

Whose side are you on?

RATBERT

This isn't about sides, this is about –

PETTIGREW

It's about survival. We can't survive if we get soft. Kylie knows it, don't you Kylie.

KYLIE

Main Street does have its points. But that doesn't make the mall a bad place.

PETTIGREW

A bad place? We are working with mice in order to survive.

RATBERT

You were on board with it.

PETTIGREW

I was never "on board" with using a mouse. Kylie brought one in and now we're doing whatever The Mac says.

KYLIE

So, now this whole thing is my fault?

PETTIGREW

You were once a real rat. Hardened, mean, a survivor. I don't know what happened to you.

RATBERT

Look Pettigrew, we have a situation here and fighting amongst ourselves doesn't do any of us any favors.

KYLIE

We have to get to the bottom of this. Why is everyone dying?

PETTIGREW

Because they're softies. I don't see why we even need them.

Toughen up – if you stay soft, you'll be next.

KYLIE

Rizzo was my friend, you know.

PETTIGREW

Voted for the mall. Got us into this mess. Still your friend?

(Remy, Macaroni, and Andy enter.)

MACARONI

How are things?

KYLIE

Getting worse. We have no idea what is going on.

RATBERT

Never seen anything like it.

PETTIGREW

You never see this out on the streets.

RATBERT

(to Pettigrew)

That's not helping.

MACARONI

Android and Remy had an idea, and I think it will work.

PETTIGREW

Nixed.

KYLIE

What do you mean, nixed?

PETTIGREW

Vetoed. Declined. Overruled. Negated. Deep sixed. Not gonna happen.

RATBERT

You're not in charge.

PETTIGREW

I am now. Ain't doin' it. And neither are you.

KYLIE

Well, I'm listening. Go ahead Macaroni.

PETTIGREW

At least get it from a rat.

KYLIE

Ok. Remy, what's this idea?

REMY

Ze issue eez zat –

PETTIGREW

And stop with that stupid accent!

REMY

It would do you good to learn a foreign language, you know.

PETTIGREW

Yeah, I'm not gonna be speaking with foreigners.

RATBERT

If this thing hits you, you won't be speaking with anybody.

ANDY

Look around you. It started with Rizzo. One. How many are there now?

RATBERT

Looks like thirty.

PETTIGREW

How do **you** know? You're a rat. You can't count.

RATBERT

I'm not counting, I'm doing statistics. It's a rat specialty. I say thirty.

KYLIE

I don't think it went up **that** much.

ANDY

I do.

PETTIGREW

I'm not listening to a mouse.

MACARONI

You listened before. What happened?

PETTIGREW

Rats are dying. Because they got weak. Because they live at the mall and listen to mice. That stops here.

RATBERT

You don't get to decide. We vote on it, like we vote on everything.

PETTIGREW

Ok, vote. Kylie – you're with me. Main Street tough.

KYLIE

I'm not so sure about that.

PETTIGREW

With me or against me. You don't want to be against me.

RATBERT

Those who follow Pettigrew, raise your paws.

(Pettigrew raises his paw. He glares at Kylie. Kylie meekly and slowly raises his paw.)

Those who want to listen to the mouse, raise your paws.

(Remy, Ratbert, Macaroni, and Andy raise their paws.)

PETTIGREW

The mice don't count. And neither does Remy – he came in with them. Two to one. Follow me.

RATBERT

I don't think that's the way this works.

PETTIGREW

(Pettigrew heads for the exit, Kylie follows.)

We'll see about that.

(Ratbert looks at Remy.)

RATBERT

Where have I seen this before?

(blackout)

The new steakhouse at the mall.

It's the grand opening. Ryan, and Cleo are waiting for their table. Cleo picks up a menu from the podium at the front and begins perusing.

CLEO

Man, this place is all fancy-like. I don't even know I'm at the mall!

RYAN

Seems to be a trend. You think maybe this is what the Boss was meant for?

CLEO

Dunno... it's not like him. He knows nothing about wine; this thing has two pages of wines. And not bad picks, either.

RYAN

So... what... he's got a partner?

QUINN

(Quinn arrives, overhearing this.)

Panopticon. That's what. I set him up.

RYAN
You....set him up?

QUINN
It saves the rats, and keeps Angie out of our hair.

CLEO
Back up a minute. I may be slow, but –
(The Matre d' arrives, shows them to their table.)

MATRE D'
Your table is ready. If you come this way...

QUINN
Angie's the new boss. And as you know, she had declared war on...
our experimental subjects. I got him to get her to stop.

RYAN
Angie's not the new boss any more.

CLEO
Back up a minute.

QUINN AND RYAN
Shut up, Cleo.

QUINN
Wait a minute – Angie's not the boss? Who's the boss?

RYAN
What difference does it make? We don't listen anyway.
(The waitress arrives and hands them menus. It's Angie. She speaks in her waitress voice, but only when speaking as a waitress.)

ANGIE
Hi, I'm Angie, and I'll be your waitress for today. Can I start you off with anything to drink?

QUINN
Back up a minute. Angie? You're offering me something to drink?

ANGIE
Yeah, it's whatcha do as a waitress. Ever been in a restaurant?

QUINN
In Toledo. But I didn't get heartburn.

ANGIE
The Boss needed some help on opening night. Gal's gotta make some coin, no?

CLEO
How about we start with the 2015 Alexander Valley Petit Verdot?

RYAN
Cleo, what do you know about wine?

CLEO
I think you'll like this one. Petit Verdot tends to be deep and velvety, and the Alexander Valley is an ideal area for it. It'll go with eggplant, beef, *ratatouille*, even chili. You can't go wrong.

RYAN
I don't mean "regale me with your extensive oenological expertise", I mean how did you... never mind. Sure, the Petit Verdot.

ANGIE
An excellent choice. I'll be back in a moment to take your orders.

QUINN
That'll be the day.

CLEO
Say, where is the Boss? We should say hi to him on his opening day.

ANGIE
He's... well, he won't be in for a while. He had a hotdog before he came in this morning, and it didn't agree with him.

CLEO
Back up a minute. He's opening a steakhouse, and he ate a what?

ANGIE
He never liked steak. You knew that.
(Angie leaves.)

CLEO
I'm not getting a good feeling about this.

RYAN
Maybe we **can** go wrong.

QUINN
Don't worry. The Boss has nothing to do with the restaurant.

RYAN

I thought you said this was his restaurant.

QUINN

Yeah, but Panopticon's doing it all. Their computers send out letters and checks, workers show up, things happen, and the Boss just sits back.

CLEO

Back up a minute.

QUINN AND RYAN

Shut up, Cleo.

CLEO

You always say that. But this isn't making sense. Why is the boss getting paid?

QUINN

Panopticon. Dunno why, but as long as they keep doing it, things are good.

RYAN

Actually, Cleo has a point.

QUINN

Look – the Boss was feeling depressed because he got a raise while the computers were running the food court. He was going to quit because he wasn't doing anything. Then he had a vision of a steakhouse, I helped him write a letter, and now he's doing nothing for even more money while –

CLEO

...while Angie takes orders from us, and we pick up the trash afterwards. Do you see where this is going?

QUINN AND RYAN

No.

CLEO

Exactly. Neither do I. But it's going **somewhere**. And I'm not sure we want to be there when it gets there.

ANGIE

(Angie arrives with the wine, shows Cleo the bottle, opens it, and pours him a taste. He approves, and she pours all around.)

Have you decided what you would like for your entrée?

QUINN

I'll have the 8 ounce tenderloin, rare, mashed potatoes, baby vegetables.

ANGIE

Grilled or sautéed?

QUINN

Grilled.

RYAN

The strip, also rare, asparagus and baked potato with sour cream and chives.

CLEO

I'll have the tri-tip, madiera sauce, mushrooms, and baby red potatoes.

ANGIE

Rare, medium, or dead?

CLEO

Rare. I'm not an animal.

ANGIE

Tell me about it.

(Angie leaves with the order.)

CLEO

Something's...off.

QUINN

Just don't use the pepper grinder. Unless you are **absolutely sure** that what's in it is pepper.

RYAN

Angie wouldn't...

CLEO

She's being awful nice.

QUINN

Mistakes can happen. Just sayin'.

RYAN

I'm getting an urge for a hot dog.

CLEO

Why is Panopticon doing this? Paying the Boss, I mean.

RYAN

What happens if Panopticon doesn't pay him?

QUINN

Nothing? After all, the computers are doing all the work. He does nothing.

RYAN

No, you're the boss, and you're "running" the restaurant. If Panopticon cuts you off, what do you do?

CLEO

Look for another job?

RYAN

There's an opening at the mall. Remember, Angie's not the Boss any more.

CLEO

So, he becomes the Boss again, and things are like they were before.

QUINN

Except now he's got a vendetta.

RYAN

And movies of rats.

CLEO

And an insider at the restaurant. Maybe Panopticon's smarter than all of us put together.

(Angie returns with the food.)

Angie – why'd you quit?

ANGIE

Who said I quit?

QUINN

The Boss put you in charge while he was doing the restaurant thing. But you're not the new Boss. I'd've thought you'd jump at it.

ANGIE

Let's just say the Boss had a more interesting proposition. Would you like fresh pepper?

(She proffers a huge pepper grinder.)

RYAN

I think we're good. Thanks.

ANGIE

Ok, enjoy your meal!

(Angie leaves.)

QUINN

I think the wine's going to help. A lot.

(blackout)

Macaroni's art studio.

Macaroni, Andy, and two other mice (Marvin and Watson) are working on some sort of art piece. Watson is bright and chipper, Marvin is much more introverted. Kylie comes in.

KYLIE

Hi Mac! Hi Android! Who are your other helpers?

MACARONI

Marvin and Watson. I pulled them in from some bigger projects because I think we're going to need their expertise.

WATSON

Hi. You must be Kylie.

MACARONI

Yes, that's Kylie. He's the one that brought me in.

KYLIE

Yeah, about that. Pettigrew is putting the keboosh on all this.

MACARONI

I heard. What went down?

ANDY

Rizzo ate a pellet and died, and they're blaming it on us.

MACARONI

Let Kylie tell it.

KYLIE

Not all of them are blaming us, but Pettigrew is.

MACARONI

Just Pettigrew?

KYLIE

He's got... some followers.

MACARONI

I figured as much. And you are one of them?

KYLIE

No. Um... yes. But not exactly. I kinda didn't have much of a choice.

WATSON

There's always choice.

KYLIE

Not with Pettigrew. He gets an idea in his head, and that's the end of it.

MACARONI

So what... Pettigrew says nix and you go along with it?

KYLIE

Look, I don't agree with him, but he and I go way back. We were the only ones that didn't want to come to the mall. But we were outvoted, and here we are.

MARVIN

Dying.

WATSON

We can fix that.

MARVIN

No we can't.

MACARONI

Who's side are you on?

KYLIE

I didn't know there were sides.

MARVIN

There's the bright side, and the real side. The real side is it doesn't matter what we do, you rats are going to muck it up because you just don't get it.

MACARONI

Marvin, please keep your doomsday to yourself!

(Marvin sulks and goes back to work.)

Now Kylie, you didn't come here to tell me it's over, did you?

KYLIE

I'm not telling you –

MACARONI

Because it's not. This artwork is making progress. We will continue doing it. We can do it without your input, if that's what you prefer.

KYLIE

It's not what –

MACARONI

Pettigrew wants to be tough, he can be as tough as he wants. But he doesn't tell me what to do or not do. You can take that back to him.

(Kylie is speechless for a moment.)

WATSON

Stick by us. We don't always get it right, but we get closer in the long run.

KYLIE

I'll let Pettigrew know, but he's not going to like it.

MACARONI

I know **he** won't like it. But do you?

KYLIE

I'm not sure it matters.

MARVIN

It doesn't.

(Marvin indicates the artwork they are making)

Look at this. Tell me what you see.

KYLIE

(Kylie looks, gives it some thought)

I see food.

MACARONI

Of course you see food. That's what it's made of. But what is the **it** that it is making?

KYLIE
(Kylie thinks some more)
 I don't know. I'm a rat – I see food everywhere.

ANDY
 You're better than that. What's the first thing that pops into your head when you see it all at once? As a whole. The entire gestalt.

KYLIE
 Don't swear at me!

ANDY
 That's... never mind.

KYLIE
 Okay – I see...

ANDY
 You're overthinking it.

MACARONI
 That's hard for a rat to do!

KYLIE
 You're not making it any easier.
(There's a noise, and Pettigrew enters. The noise startles the mice and a piece of the artwork falls off right in front of Kylie. Kylie takes it and runs off.)

MACARONI
 Come back with that Kylie!

MARVIN
 Let him go. We'll get another.

PETTIGREW
 I take it Kylie gave you the news.

MACARONI
 He gave it to me, but I didn't take it.

PETTIGREW
 We are no longer working together.

MACARONI
 But that doesn't mean we are no longer working. If you don't want to give us input, that's fine. We'll make our own decisions.

PETTIGREW
 Your decisions are killing us.

ANDY
 No, **your** decisions are killing you. Who told you to eat pellets?

PETTIGREW
 We're rats. We eat everything.

MARVIN
 Maybe that's a poor decision.

PETTIGREW
 Who are you?

MARVIN
 Marvin. I work with Macaroni sometimes.

PETTIGREW
 Not any more. Scram.

MACARONI
 He doesn't work with you, he works with me.

MARVIN
 It's ok. I'll go. Maybe something will pop up later.

MACARONI
 It's not ok. Stay right here.

PETTIGREW
 The only thing that's going to pop up is –

MACARONI
 Mister Tough Guy huh? Okay, you try. See if **you** can make a steakhouse pop up in a week.

PETTIGREW
 Rats don't need a steakhouse. We'll eat the first thing that pops up. And the second thing. And every other thing.

MACARONI
 Funny you saying that. You were warming up to me, and then something popped up. What was it?

PETTIGREW
 Those damned pellets. All over the place. All of a sudden.

MARVIN
 When you're a rat, you're supposed to take something that just pops

up. And eat it.

MACARONI

And your weakness is our fault?

PETTIGREW

I. Am. Not. Weak.

MACARONI

Prove it.

PETTIGREW

I can eat you before you can say oops.

MACARONI

But you won't. Because you secretly like me. Because "art". Art you can't do, but art that works. And art that might make you need to change your ways in order to take advantage of it. But I don't think you can do it. And if you eat me, that will only prove that you can't do it. Because it would mean you are weak.

ANDY

Come back in seven days. You know, a week. See if you feel the same way.

MACARONI

Meanwhile, you can tell your rat-friends that you gave the mouse your message.

PETTIGREW

Very well. Seven days. Nothing had better pop up in the interim.

(blackout)

The new steakhouse at the mall.

Cleo, Ryan, and Quinn are leaving after eating a sumptuous meal. They pause outside the restaurant to chat:

CLEO

No, hear me out. We saw Panopticon. They don't care about **us**. They got lots of shopping malls. They're building something **big**. So if they're giving out free salaries to people who are *supposedly* running one of their restaurants, but aren't, there's gotta be a reason. One that works at all the other malls.

QUINN

You sayin' all the other malls are the same?

CLEO

Not identical-like. But similar-like.

QUINN

Come to think of it, all the malls I've been seem to have the same stores.

RYAN

No, it's not the stores. It's something else. Something about the way they work. Something...

[beat]

...people something.

QUINN

What – you're telling me they all have people?

RYAN AND CLEO

Shut up Quinn.

QUINN

That's **my** line, and it's for –

CLEO

What does Panopticon **want**?

[beat]

QUINN

Money?

RYAN

No, they're giving that away.

QUINN

They don't want money?

CLEO

They do, but not right away.

RYAN

Control.

QUINN

But why would they need the Boss?

RYAN

So nobody catches on.

[beat, as it slowly dawns on them]

CLEO

Ryan, I think you're on to something.

QUINN

But if nobody catches on, why are **we** catching on?

RYAN

Who's gonna listen to three custodians?...

CLEO

...who look for paw prints in mashed potatoes...

QUINN

...and talk about rats making art. Yanno, I think the Boss might have been right about those computer things.

(Angie emerges from the restaurant. She's her old self.)

ANGIE

Hey, you guys – scram. No loitering in front of the restaurant.

QUINN

Angie – let me ask you somethin'.

ANGIE

I don't have time for that. Three people just dropped out today and I'm filling in for all of them.

QUINN

Just a quick question. On your paycheck for this new job, what's it say up top? Who's actually payin' ya?

ANGIE

I dunno. A restaurant company. Pots, or Pans something-or-other.

QUINN

So, you're not working for the Boss.

ANGIE

Look, I don't care who I work for, as long as the check clears.

QUINN

Ok. But when you come in to work, who is it that tells you what to do?

ANGIE

I'm a **waitress**. I know what to do.

QUINN

Yeah, but like, what if you didn't do it? Who would be complaining.

ANGIE

(such a dumb question)

The customers?

QUINN

No, what I mean is –

CLEO

Angie, for the record, I think you are a terrific waitress, and the very idea of customers complaining about you is laughable.

ANGIE

Why thank you Cleo! You can sit at my table any time you like. But right now I've got some fires to put out.

(Angie goes back in)

QUINN

(to Cleo)

What was that about? I'm trying to find something out.

CLEO

You know – being nice. It kinda greases the wheels.

RYAN

And now we know she's clueless.

QUINN

We knew that before.

RYAN

No – about Panopticon. But to us, she's an insider.

CLEO

So being nice might even pay off.

RYAN

She's real people that Panopticon actually needs to pull of whatever

it is they are doing.

QUINN

"Computers send letters out, people show up, things happen."

That's the way the Boss put it.

RYAN

...and the Boss is needed for **something**. The question is what.

BOSS

(Boss comes in unnoticed)

Tell him, Quinn. What am I needed for?

QUINN

(thinking fast)

Uh... Well... he's the one that came to me with the idea of a steakhouse. If it weren't for the Boss, there wouldn't even **be** a steakhouse. He's the dreamer of dreams that got the whole thing rolling.

BOSS

I like that. "Dreamer of dreams". And all it took was one cow.

(The boss goes into the restaurant.)

RYAN

One cow?

CLEO

I thought you set him up to get rid of Angie.

QUINN

He said he saw a cow in the mall. A food cow. That is, a cow made of food. Well, scraps.

CLEO

Who makes a cow out of food?

RYAN

(realizing)

I got to get another camera.

(blackout)

The tech store where Cleo bought the minicam

(Ryan sidles up to the counter to talk to Dweezel, who's with another customer.)

RYAN

Six old men sat at a table.

(Ryan makes a head gesture indicating the exit.)

DWEEZEL

What?

RYAN

(Ryan looks around furtively.)

Six old men sat at a table.

(Ryan makes the gesture again and leaves.)

DWEEZEL

(realizing)

Oh....

(to the customer)

Excuse me, there's something I need to deal with.

(Dweezel also heads for the exit, while the customer, put off but curious, follows him. Dweezel catches up with Ryan near the exit, the customer holds back and listens, unnoticed.)

RYAN

I need another.

DWEEZEL

For the six old men.

RYAN

Yeah. Because now it's five old men. And I'm not sure it's a table.

DWEEZEL

I'm following.

RYAN

Good. Because your peeps will be **real** happy.

DWEEZEL

Do I still gotta be hidden? 'cause my traffic is crickets.

RYAN

That's how it is if you want to crack it. All on the down low.

DWEEZEL

Same as the last one?

RYAN

Got something... more powerful?

DWEEZEL

The Mark 4. It'll cost, though.

RYAN

I'm going to need a front, if you know what I mean.

DWEEZEL

No bread, no eyes.

RYAN

No eyes, no dish.

DWEEZEL

Crickets, man.

RYAN

When it blows, do you want to be in, or out? We're a team, right?

DWEEZEL

Look – I can maybe let you use the demo overnight. But I have to have it back by tomorrow morning or it'll be four old men.

RYAN

That just might be enough. I'll wait outside. It'll be worth it.

(Ryan leaves. Dweezel goes back to the counter, picks something up from behind it, and heads out the same way as Ryan. The customer looks around, and satisfied, also exits to follow them.)

(blackout)

A nondescript corner of the floor of the food court at the mall.

(Kylie, Remy, and Ratbert are discussing Pettigrew)

RATBERT

We can't let Pettigrew bust around and tell us what to do, who to associate with.

KYLIE

He's got followers – think rats gotta be tough.

REMY

Zere eez no "tough" zat a nice marinade can't...

KYLIE

He's **already** marinated.

RATBERT

Half the rats are marinating with him. So, what do we do.

(Macaoni and Pettigrew enter, arm in arm)

PETTIGREW

Plotting against me, I presume? No matter, Macaroni has come around.

RATBERT

Come around to what?

MACARONI

We've reached an agreement.

KYLIE

(warily)

What sort of agreement?

PETTIGREW

The best agreement. There's never been an agreement as good as this one.

RATBERT

Fine, but what did you agree **to**?

PETTIGREW

Macaroni here, I like to call her “The Mac”, is going to be looking into everything to figure out the best work of art that will get the results we want. That’s the problem – we need to get the best results – the ones that are going to give us what we are looking for. The Mac said it herself.

MACARONI

I asked what you wanted; you wanted to lick the spoon. But with Pettigrew, I know what you are looking for, and I will get it for you.

KYLIE

Imagine that – a mouse and a rat working together.

RATBERT

A mouse and a muskrat if you ask me.
(Andy and Marvin enter unnoticed, except for Remy)

REMY

Twah mouses. Un deux, trois.

KYLIE

Nobody here speaks French! Including you!

ANDY

Au Contraire, mon petit rat!

REMY

What did he say?

RATBERT

Never mind, it’s French.

PETTIGREW

And we won’t be parlay vooing any foreign languages here.

REMY

Meow.
(everybody jumps and looks around)
Just kidding.

KYLIE

So what’s the plan, if I may be so bold?

PETTIGREW

The plan is to figure out the plan. I have a concept of a plan, but we need the best plan. So the plan is in development. The Mac here

will be interviewing all the rats, starting now. So plan on the most beautiful plan you’ve ever dreamed. Ours is better.

RATBERT

Ok, we can start with me. Mac... what do you want to know?

PETTIGREW

Not **you!** Real rats. Decent rats. Now off with you all – the Mac and I have work to do.

KYLIE

(timidly)

What if we don’t leave?

PETTIGREW

That would interfere with the plan. That would be bad. For you.
(Pettigrew, Macaroni, Andy and Marvin begin to exit one way, and all the rest except Remy exit the other way. As they do, Remy catches the eye of Andy and motions Andy and Marvin to stay a moment. They are the only ones left on stage.)

REMY

Sil vous plait...
(they draw near)

So, do you have a concept of the concept of a plan that is being planned?

MARVIN

You won’t like it.

ANDY

He might.

MARVIN

It’s not a good plan.

ANDY

That matters to a rat?

REMY

A rat zat speaks French cest ne pas une ordinary rat, non?

ANDY

I’m actually more impressed that you speak cat, and lived.

REMY

It’s **why** I lived. Anyway, this plan...

MARVIN

Yes – Actually Pettigrew came up with it. It's not food though.

REMY

Heresy!

ANDY

Hear him out. It's brilliant.

MARVIN

Really? Well, okay. You know those cauldrons that they serve cereals and soups in? We found some clean ones.

REMY

Why are you looking for clean ones? There's nothing to eat in them!

ANDY

We can change that.

MARVIN

Don't give it away! Anyway, they are pretty shiny. Some of them are see-thru. Put things in it and they look very inviting. Very artistic. They give people ideas.

REMY

What kind of ideas?

ANDY

Depends what we do with it.

MARVIN

You know all those pellets you've been complaining about?

REMY

Yeah, they're getting scarcer.

ANDY

We're gathering them up. They're grey, dull, uninteresting by themselves. Kind of like rats.

REMY

Now hold on there!

ANDY

No, think about it. Rats get no respect, right? They're not cute. They're seen as pests. We're going to change that by putting ideas in people's heads.

MARVIN

So, imagine this. A clear, clean, shiny cauldron, filled with what would usually be thought of as dull, grey, unappetizing slop. But we make it look interesting. We put it under a spotlight, all by itself.

REMY

Where are you going to get a spotlight?

ANDY

Look up, will you?

(Remy looks up and blinds himself on a ceiling spotlight.)

MARVIN

Yeah, like that. Only over there. On that table. All alone. By itself. Drawing attention to itself by its own solitude. The contrast of the dull grey pellets with the bright yellow table, the glint of the light off the clear cauldron, and the piece de resistance – three colored pellets carefully placed in the center.

ANDY

With an 'm' on them.

MARVIN

Nice touch!

REMY

I... don't know what to say.

ANDY

Don't say anything. Macaroni doesn't know the plan yet.

MARVIN

I think she does. She just ain't sayin'.

ANDY

Anyway, just keep it on the down low. Very down, very low.

REMY

So... what's supposed to happen?

MARVIN

It's about taking things for granted. The sparkle in life you don't see. The beauty in ordinary things. Or people. Or rats. You don't like being looked down on, right?

REMY

Right. I think.

ANDY

Right, of course! You're an ordinary grey rat that nobody gives a rat's ass about. But you speak French. And Cat. You're a very special individual. But overlooked.

MARVIN

So, imagine this: It's the start of the day. People come to set things up, to shop, to eat, whatever. This thing is sitting in the dark on the table, nobody notices it. Somebody hits the switch, the cauldron lights up on the ceiling hit it, and it sparkles, drawing everyone's attention to it. Simple grey pellets, but they are paying attention now. It hits their brains; they can't help but think differently after that experience.

ANDY

Then when they see a common grey rat, they think "This is not a common grey rat – this is an **individual!** With talents, feelings, friends..."

REMY

Now **that's** a concept! And a plan!

MARVIN

It will be **glorious!**

REMY

I hope so! Au revoir, mon cher ami!

(blackout)

**Stage left, the break room at the mall is lit.
Stage right is unlit.**

Ryan, Cleo, and Quinn are in the break room, hunched over a

*tablet, which is showing the latest rat footage from the Mark 4.
There is a door upstage.*

CLEO

Why so dark?

RYAN

The lights are off, dipwit.

QUINN

If I may be so bold to ask, **why** are the lights off?

RYAN

So I could hide the camera. You guys have no sense of this, do you?

CLEO

But...

RYAN AND QUINN

Shut up, Cleo.

RYAN

I had to return it this morning, so I couldn't chance putting it on a rat. Once I set the camera up –

CLEO

The lights are on – I can see now. That's the steakhouse!

QUINN

Brilliant, as usual.

RYAN

Well, he **is** right.

CLEO

(to Quinn)

See, I'm not as dumb as you look.

(noticing something)

Who's that walking away from the camera?

RYAN

Me. I had to watch the camera from afar. Just in case.
(They hunker down to watch the video.)

QUINN

So... when does something happen?

RYAN

I don't know. I heard noises after a while, but couldn't see anything because I was guarding the camera.

CLEO

So, fast forward.

QUINN

Finally, a good idea!

RYAN

(Ryan fast-forwards for a bit)

Here's something.

QUINN

What...

CLEO

It's so far away.

RYAN

So's the moon, but we still study it.

QUINN

What's that? Looks like... I don't know. Too far away.

RYAN

I can tell you. When I picked the camera back up, I also did a little look-see. At the end, there was a bowl of... Cocoa Puffs or something, with three M&Ms in it. I left it there, but now we'll know how it got there.

QUINN

Maybe.

CLEO

It does sort of look like a bowl is being pushed along the floor.

QUINN

Yeah, but not by rats. Too small. Something else.

RYAN

Mice! Like... what was it – the Pompey thing.

QUINN

Are you daft?

CLEO

No – it makes sense. We already saw the tiny pawprints. And

remember Rizzo's funeral? That was mice.

QUINN

Mice. Mice are serving cereal. Why? Fast forward – what else happened?

RYAN

Fast forwarding... Nothing... nothing... Wait – somebody's approaching the camera.

CLEO

That's you.

RYAN

Yeah. So it is. So, that's all the footage.

QUINN

So, the bowl is still there?

RYAN

Unless somebody picked it up. And who's gonna do that? Us?

CLEO

Let's check it out.

(They exit through the door upstage, lights go down stage left, and up stage right, revealing the entrance to the steakhouse. There is a bowl on the floor.)

QUINN

There it is.

RYAN

Yeah, but somebody messed with it. It was all neat when I left.

CLEO

(Cleo picks up the bowl, which still has some "cereal" in it. There is more scattered on the floor.)

This ain't CocoaPuffs. Look.

QUINN

That's... *Angie!*

CLEO

That's not Angie. Unless she's been cremated.

RYAN

We can only hope.

QUINN

Those are rat pellets.

CLEO

How did rat pellets get here?

QUINN

Shit. Better check the pepper grinders.

(blackout)

A nondescript corner of the floor of the food court at the mall.

There are a lot of dead and dying rats. Ratbert enters, looking very pale and weak.

RATBERT

I can't believe we ate the whole thing.

(Ratbert sits, uncomfortably. Pettigrew strides in boldly.)

PETTIGREW

You too? I picked you for smarter.

RATBERT

Smart? We're rats. You know that – what did you expect?

PETTIGREW

To aspire to something greater. That's why I'm working with The Mac. She knows greatness. She knows art. She knows how to get people to work for us **through** that art. And you gotta go and mess it all up.

RATBERT

It smelled good – like food.

PETTIGREW

I never knew you were so weak. Everyone here is weak. Losers. Don't deserve the greatness the Mac and I are bringing you.

RATBERT

I'd prefer you stop bringing me greatness, and bring me food instead.

PETTIGREW

Where you all are going, you won't need food. And where I'm going, I don't need weaklings. If I had a black cape, I'd whip it around over your pathetic head as I exit. But this will have to do.

(Pettigrew snorts, then exits.)

RATBERT

"Et tu"...

(Ratbert rolls over, dead. Kylie and Remy rush in.)

REMY

I think we're too late.

KYLIE

How could they be so **stupid**? You're not supposed to eat the art!

REMY

Who's the one who ran off with a piece of Macaroni's studio work last week?

KYLIE

That's different.

(blackout)

The break room at the mall

Angie is alone at a table, perusing a magazine. Cleo enters.

CLEO

Hi Angie.

ANGIE

Hi Cleo.

CLEO

What brings **you** here? I thought you'd be... you know – at the steakhouse or somethin'.

ANGIE

Cleo, my life isn't the steakhouse.

CLEO

It ain't here either, I hope.

ANGIE

C'mere Cleo. Sit.

(Cleo tentatively approaches, and sits down.)

I've been thinkin'. About art.

CLEO

Really?

ANGIE

Yeah. And I think you'd really appreciate it too, if you got into it.

Ever thought much about it?

CLEO

(not knowing where this is going)

Uh... some? I used to finger paint when I was a kid.

ANGIE

No shit!

CLEO

Well, everybody did in kindergarten. I found it sort of... you know, soothing.

ANGIE

Whatever happened to those paintings?

CLEO

My mom threw them out... But I think she was wrong. Art has meaning. It's like a secret code.

ANGIE

Yeah. A secret code. That's a good way of putting it. Ever seen this?

(Angie slides the magazine over to Cleo, who picks it up tentatively)

It's a set of paintings by... well never mind who it's by. What do you think?

CLEO

(after looking for a bit)

It's nice. It makes me feel like... I dunno, like... like I could just put myself there. Just looking at it. And then, when I'm there, I'd know what to do. It's hard to describe. I know nothing about sheep, but I'd be a good farmer. And now I want to move to the hillsides.

ANGIE

You know what it means to me?

CLEO

No.

ANGIE

Fifty sheep, all the same. One shepherd. One prairie dog. Which way do the sheep go?

CLEO

Deep.

ANGIE

And the article says that there's a tension between the shepherd and the prairie dog. But I think it's between the sheep.

CLEO

So... if it says different things to you and me, how can it be a language?

ANGIE

I dunno. Why don't you take it home, read it, and let me know what you think next time?

CLEO

Ok. I'll do that.

ANGIE

I look forward to hearing your thoughts.

(Angie gets up and leaves. Cleo picks up the magazine as Ryan and Quinn enter.)

RYAN

Cleo! Whatcha reading?

QUINN

Cleo's reading?

CLEO

Yeah, I read.

QUINN

(Quinn picks up the magazine and reads a headline.)

“Farm Animals – The Art Form”?

RYAN

I guess everyone has their kink.

CLEO

I read it for the articles!

QUINN

Oh yeah? What do they say?

CLEO

I haven't read them yet. Angie gave it to me.

QUINN

Kill me now.

CLEO

It's **art**.

QUINN

What do you know about art?

RYAN

Well, we've all been studying art for the last few months, haven't we?

CLEO

(Cleo snatches the magazine back.)

Yeah.

QUINN

Something's not right, but I don't quite know what it is.

CLEO

I'll let you read the articles when I'm done with them.

RYAN

Yeah. But we got a bigger problem. Dweezel wants in.

(Dweezel walks in.)

DWEEZEL

So, this is where you guys do all your secret plotting, huh?

RYAN

Dweezel! What timing!

CLEO

This the guy you were talking about?

DWEEZEL

Hey Ryan – loose lips...

QUINN

I understand that you... have similar interests as Ryan.

DWEEZEL

I've been helping him with some of his... research. Let's say I'm intrigued by what you all are doing.

QUINN

And what exactly do you think we're doing?

DWEEZEL

I'm not sure exactly. But it's probably on a need-to-know basis, right? Well, I need to know. I've been supplying some crucial technology and expertise to your escapades, which is putting me at risk. I can't keep doing this blind.

RYAN

It's the only way you can keep doing this, Dweezel. As long as you're blind, you're clean.

CLEO

It's like being a secret agent. Once you know, it's not a secret.

DWEEZEL

That's not how these things work. It's **other people** that have to be kept in the dark. Not me.

RYAN

Suppose you knew. Then what?

DWEEZEL

Then I'd know. I could give you better equipment, better advice.

RYAN

Right. And every time you see us, you'd know what we were up to. You'd be able to make connections. You'd see how it relates to... I don't know... the clothing store across the way, or maybe the pizza shop.

DWEEZEL

The big picture. I'd know what I was into, and could help you out.

RYAN

Yeah, but every time you to go get a pizza, you'd **know** you know the big picture. You'd act differently around there. Subtle, but visible.

QUINN

...and that would paint a big target on your back. Because **they'd** know you knew... something.

RYAN

One day you'd order a pepperoni pizza instead of your usual mushroom and olives, and they'd think you're sending a secret message.

CLEO

Or they might try sending **you** a secret message in the number of pepperonis the put on.

QUINN AND RYAN

Shut up, Cleo.

DWEEZEL

But I might order a pepperoni pizza anyway.

QUINN

But if they don't know you know, because you don't know, then they can't suspect anything.

RYAN

What was it that Groucho Marx used to say? "Sometimes a pepperoni is just a pepperoni."

CLEO

I don't think anybody ever said that.

QUINN

Besides, it was Freud.

CLEO

Freud didn't say it either.

QUINN AND RYAN

Shut up, Cleo.

QUINN

Point is, you can't be a suspect. Once you're a suspect, you can't be a spy.

DWEEZEL

Look guys, I'm just trying to be useful, but it's really hard to do if I don't know the score.

CLEO

What do you know about art?

QUINN AND RYAN

Shut up, Cleo

RYAN

No, wait. Go ahead, Cleo.

CLEO

(Cleo pulls the magazine out and turns to the sheep page.)

What do you think of this?

DWEEZEL

(Dweezel considers the image.)

Hmmm. Forty-seven sheep in a pasture. Hills in the background. Three hills. Green, with a nice blue sky in the background. Very calming. Shepherd keeping watch, but he has to be alert, because you never know: prairie dogs. And there's one right there. But I don't think he sees it. What would he be doing if he did?

(Dweezel hands the magazine back.)

CLEO

Interesting. Which one is you?

DWEEZEL

Well, I'm not one of the sheep. I'm not the shepherd. Maybe I'm the prairie dog?

CLEO

Or maybe you're the artist. You see, if you're the prairie dog, then whatever action you take is going to change the picture. But if you're the artist, you're invisible. The perfect spy.

DWEEZEL

I never thought about that.

CLEO

And that's the way it's supposed to be. You can't be invisible if you already know the score.

RYAN

You see, Dweezel, we need the painter, not the prairie dog. And in return, you get the painting. But you gotta wait 'till the paint is dry.

DWEEZEL

That's brilliant!

QUINN

So, you're in?

DWEEZEL

Yeah, I'm in.

QUINN

Good. Glad to have you on board. Now remember – this conversation never happened.

RYAN

Not only don't you know the score, you don't even know there's a game on.

DWEEZEL

Got it.

(Dweezel looks at his watch.)

I gotta get back to the shop. Good not talking to you!

QUINN

Likewise.

(Dweezel leaves)

Ryan – is this guy an idiot, or are we brilliant?

RYAN

Are we brilliant?

QUINN

No. Well, maybe.

CLEO

You talk to rats...

QUINN

Yeah, well, I may have a little PTSD from it.

RYAN

But does that make us brilliant?

ANGIE

(Angie enters)

Who's the dweeb that said you weren't here?

RYAN

(aside, to Quinn)

I think I know where your PTSD comes from.

QUINN

I dunno. Are we here?

ANGIE

It sure looks like it.

QUINN

Then he's an idiot. Ignore him or send him to the White House.

Your choice.

CLEO

Angie – about that painting you showed me. Without looking at it, did the shepherd see the prairie dog?

ANGIE

No. If he did, he'd be doing something. Right?

CLEO

Right. And the sheep would run amok. Now suppose that dweeb is the prairie dog. Maybe it's best you didn't see him. From an artistic sense.

ANGIE

I see where you're coming from.

CLEO

The world is full of idiots. It's best not to get them too excited. I think that's the message of the painting. If you don't see it, it can't affect you.

ANGIE

That sounds like a really good philosophy. But if I **did** see it...

CLEO

Well, if it bothers you, then maybe you really **didn't** see it. Because that would have been best. And if it doesn't bother you, then it doesn't matter if you saw it or not.

ANGIE

I like that. Cleo – you're brilliant.

(Angie exits.)

QUINN

(after a beat)

What did I just see?

RYAN

I think it's best you didn't see anything.

QUINN

(after another beat)

I think you're right.

(blackout)

The kitchen of the Steakhouse at the mall

The Boss is there, along with Alfredo and Guiseppi, two chefs we've met before.

ALFREDO

I don't get it. Where I come from, everything is spotless.

BOSS

It's a little more relaxed here.

GUISEPPI

That inspector would disagree.

BOSS

What "inspector"?

ALFREDO

Well, I guess technically he's a deputy inspector. Erich Kohley, I think he said his name was.

GUISEPPI

We got an A+. Even after the chafing dish.

BOSS

Chafing dish?

ALFREDO

Why do you have to go on about the chafing dish?

GUISEPPI

I'm not. But even so, the place was so clean Mr. Kohley said it was top notch. He was gonna tell the boss that.

BOSS

I **am** the boss. Or was, until I opened the steakhouse. And now I'm still the boss, just not the same boss. Funny how that works.

GUISEPPI

...and that's why you hired us, right?

(Angie enters)

BOSS

Hey Angie – what do you know about Erich Kohley?

ANGIE

Who?

BOSS

The inspector – or deputy inspector?

ANGIE

Nothing. Never heard of him.

ALFREDO

He's the guy who gave us such high marks at Pommes and Aubergines.

ANGIE

Well he'd better not show up here!

ALFREDO

Why? If I'm gonna be workin' here, it's gonna be good work.

Clean work. If the inspector comes, you gonna get an A+ too.

BOSS

I like your style. But remember – no overtime.

(the Boss leaves)

ANGIE

Well, let's get to work. We open in a few hours.

GUISEPPI

(Guiseppi sees something on the floor, picks it up, and shows it to Alfredo)

What's this?

ALFREDO

Looks like old pepper. Don't smell like it though.

ANGIE

(Angie comes over and takes a look)

Uh oh.

GUISEPPI

That doesn't sound good.

ANGIE

That's not pepper. It's rat pellets.

ALFREDO

(Alfredo drops the pellet as if it were poison, treats his hands as contaminated, and heads for the sink to wash up.)

Rat pellets? Who uses rat pellets in a kitchen?

ANGIE

(evasively)

Uh... sometimes the mall tosses a few around. You know, just in case.

GUISEPPI

In case what? In case you have rats?

ANGIE

Yeah, something like that.

ALFREDO

Keep the place clean and you'll have no rats.

GUISEPPI

You do know – rat pellets are not good for people either.

ANGIE

Neither is most of the other stuff in the mall. Anyway, you know what to do. If you need me, I'll be out front setting up.

(Angie exits)

GUISEPPI

You sure this was a good move?

ALFREDO

No. But it's good to have options. You know – in case the computer hiccups.

(Guiseppi opens the fridge and starts taking food out to

prepare.)

Maybe wait on that – I'm not sure the counters are so clean anymore.

GUISEPPI

(Guiseppi puts the food back and starts to clean)

Right. But they will be when we leave.

ALFREDO

And before you leave, you need to check the dishwasher.

GUISEPPI

(Guiseppi looks around)

I think we need to check the dishwasher before we arrive!

ALFREDO

It might not be a bad idea to check the fridge. And the cabinets.

GUISEPPI

That's all we need is for the inspector to show up today!

ANGIE (OS)

What are you doing here?

QUINN (OS)

I just wanted to look around.

ANGIE (OS)

Now's not a good time – we're very busy in here.

ALFREDO

Shit!

GUISEPPI

You sure it's him?

RYAN (OS)

It won't take long.

ALFREDO

It's him.

RYAN (OS)

You know what this is?

ANGIE (OS)

Well it's not cocoa-puffs

CLEO (OS)

Yeah, and it's not m&ms either.

ANGIE (OS)

Brilliant. Don't have it for breakfast then.

ALFREDO

(They are both getting panicky and start running around cleaning and sweeping, seemingly randomly)

No! Keep the cabinets closed!

GUISEPPI

How am I going to clean stuff without opening it?

QUINN (OS)

We found it just outside your dining area.

ANGIE (OS)

A bowl of the stuff? Just sitting there?

RYAN (OS)

Yeah. Just like that.

GUISEPPI

I have to find towels, soap, you know...

ANGIE (OS)

We're not responsible for stuff outside our restaurant.

ALFREDO

Be smart about it ok? Close the cabinets after.

QUINN (OS)

I think you are. And I think you know exactly what this is.

ANGIE (OS)

You can't come in!

(Quinn, Ryan, and Cleo come in, followed by Angie. Guiseppi and Alfredo freeze.)

ALFREDO

Mr. Inspector!

ANGIE

Inspector?

RYAN

At ease.

ANGIE

What is this?

CLEO

Fifty sheep, a shepherd, and a prairie dog.

(a beat. Stalemate.)

RYAN

I know these people. They are from Pommes and Aubergines.

You've hired well.

ANGIE

Actually, that company – pots and opticals? They do all the hiring.

ALFREDO

Panopticon.

ANGIE

Yeah – that's the one.

ALFREDO

Didn't even have to interview. They just send me a letter.

RYAN

And well deserved. A+ at Pommes and Aubergines. You're going places.

ANGIE

Somebody's going places. This all sounds fishy.

CLEO

Fish at a steak house. Amusing.

ANGIE

I'm not amused.

QUINN

You never are.

(Angie looks around and sizes up the situation.)

(a beat)

ANGIE

Who's the shepherd, and who's the prairie dog?

(a beat)

CLEO

Well, I guess it's up to us to decide that.

BOSS

(The Boss enters)

I see we're having a party here.

ANGIE

It's not what it looks like.

BOSS

As long as there's no overtime.

ANGIE

Can I talk to you a minute?

BOSS

Does it have to be now?

ANGIE

Your call. But I suggest now.

(Angie and the Boss exit)

RYAN

Excellent work. But I'm not here to inspect right now. I'm here to make you aware of a problem. And once I do that, I know that it will no longer be a problem.

ALFREDO

Of course.

RYAN

These things are showing up in places they shouldn't.

ALFREDO

I found one myself. Here.

RYAN

We need to find the source and eliminate it. Without the source knowing. So keep an eye out. And make sure none of them is ever found in the restaurant.

GUISEPPI

Will do.

RYAN

And so you know, secret inspectors like us go by different names sometimes. To keep restaurants honest.

ALFREDO

I understand fully.

RYAN

An A+ report again! Now we'll just sally off. Who knows where we'll see you next!

(Ryan, Cleo, and Quinn exit.)

ALFREDO

Sheep and a prairie dog?

GUISEPPI

And a shepherd. Probably secret code. Let's get ready for dinner.

(blackout)

Kylie and Remy are in an open area in the food court, in scale to rats. It is daylight, but the sun streaming in from an atrium dome window leaves a side area of the stage in shadow.

KYLIE

Three quarters of them. All dead. I have no idea why.

REMY

Why? Eez obvious. Zey have no taste in food.

KYLIE

Not everything is about food, Remy!

REMY

What else eez there to be about? Zees pellets – zey need a proper marinade. C'est non pas eating raw. Eez bad for ze palate.

KYLIE

Remy! **The pellets are poison!** Don't you see?

REMY

(reflecting to himself)

I like zat. Pellet... palate. Could make a nice slogan.

KYLIE

We're not cooking pellets.

REMY

(Decisive)

Right – Zat’s the problem, n’est-ce pas? Zey need to be sautéed in ze finest olive oil.

KYLIE

You’ll be next.

(Pettigrew rushes in.)

What’s with the tracks?

PETTIGREW

You won’t believe it.

KYLIE

I know. But tell us anyway. We like to be amused.

PETTIGREW

You know those rats that claim to be “dying”? I went outside where those softies were all lying in the grass, to wake them up.

KYLIE

You know, those rats are **actually** dead.

PETTIGREW

Faking it. Trying to get out of doing what needs to be done.

REMY

And just what needs to be done?

PETTIGREW

Stop the mice, you imbecile. Go back to the way it was, when rats were strong, and mice were scared. The way it is now, the rats are trembling in their paws.

REMY

No, they stopped trembling a while ago. Now they are just dead.

PETTIGREW

If they’re dead, we don’t need them. But we do need them. So they are not dead. Logic.

REMY

I see.

KYLIE

You’re right. We don’t believe it.

PETTIGREW

Go outside yourself! Go see what I saw!

KYLIE

I’ve seen dead rats.

PETTIGREW

Have you seen giant birds?

KYLIE

When we were on Main Street.

PETTIGREW

Well, they’ve come here. I was prodding the rats and that black bird attacked me.

REMY

What black bird?

(A big shadow falls across the stage – the rats look up to see what caused it. Pettigrew points up, the shadow is gone.)

PETTIGREW

That black bird!

KYLIE

So... a black bird attacks you, but the mice are the enemy?

REMY

Makes as much sense as anything else you’ve said.

PETTIGREW

Shut up. You don’t know what you’re dealing with.

KYLIE

Do you know what kind of bird that was?

PETTIGREW

No – what do you think I am, an ornithopter?

REMY

It’s a vulture.

KYLIE

It comes for dead things.

REMY

The rats are not sleeping.

PETTIGREW

You lie!

(Pettigrew storms out.)

KYLIE

He's right about one thing.

REMY

What is that?

KYLIE

Ever look at the round pellets with the colors? Closely? Each one has an "m" on it. For "mouse".

(Remy considers this. Meanwhile, lights slowly come up on the shadowed area of the stage, where we can see Andy and Marvin watching.)

REMY

I cannot believe this. First, "m" can mean lots of things. Or nothing. Second, an enemy isn't going to sign their work. And third, rats don't even know the alphabet, so where are you even getting the idea of the letter "m"?

KYLIE

Let's just say a little birdie told me.

(main lights fade out, leaving only Andy and Marvin lit.)

ANDY

He's right, you know.

MARVIN

Who's right?

ANDY

We can get them to do pretty much anything we want.

MARVIN

Can we get them to leave the mall?

ANDY

It's already happening.

(Macaroni enters.)

MACARONI

I thought you were looking for platforms.

MARVIN

We were, but ran into some rats and didn't want to, you know...

MACARONI

I don't see any rats.

ANDY

That's because of our... tactical delay.

MACARONI

Delay's over. Let's see some tactics.

(Andy and Marvin exit across the stage. Macaroni begins pacing as she thinks. Lights slowly come up on the rest of the stage; we are now in Macaroni's art studio. Rough sculptures of Remy, Kylie, and Pettigrew are visible in the background and Macaroni begins to work on one of them.)

This will be the best yet – they won't be able to resist!

(Remy enters.)

REMY

Comment allez-vous, mon cher ami?

MACARONI

Sa va

REMY

Sa what? Whazzat mean?

MACARONI

I thought you spoke French.

REMY

So did I.

MACARONI

And apparently nobody else.

REMY

That's not fair.

MACARONI

Meow.

(Remy jumps, she recovers.)

REMY

Cute.

(Remy notices the sculptures.)

Hey, that looks like Pettigrew.

MACARONI

It *is* Pettigrew. Well, not **actually** him, just a sculpture in flour and sugar.

REMY

Not a bad likeness, though flour and sugar is a bit ironic, no?

MACARONI

They're all like that.

REMY

And this is me! And Kylie too!

(Andy and Marvin enter rolling cookies as big as the mice themselves.)

MARVIN

Got your platforms.

MACARONI

(to Remy)

This is the magic of art and influence.

(to Marvin and Andy)

Over here – help me get Pettigrew on his pedestal.

(They put one of the cookies down on the floor and struggle to set the statue of Pettigrew on top of it)

REMY

It's beautiful, but how does this get us what we want?

MACARONI

They see this, they know we are here. They know who's in charge. The pedestals help with that. And they know to listen. We don't have to hint any more.

REMY

Brilliant! I gotta go tell everyone!

(Remy leaves.)

ANDY

You sure it's ok to give the game away?

MACARONI

It's not something they can't figure out.

MARVIN

Actually, maybe it is. Rats aren't too bright.

MACARONI

If they're not too bright, then we can tell them and they *still* won't figure it out. Let's get the others up.

(They put the other two statues on the other two cookies, not without some effort. At the last minute, Macaroni puts a piece of green vegetable on the head of Remy's statue. Remy, Pettigrew, and Kylie enter.)

KYLIE

I should be the one in front. I'm the one who got all this together in the first place.

REMY

Don't you think we might be getting ahead of ourselves?

PETTIGREW

Don't be daft. It will be me, the fearless leader. And the Mac will have figured that out long ago.

MACARONI

I've figured out more than you think.

REMY

Et voilà. Le pièce de résistance!

KYLIE

Enough with the French already!

REMY

Seems you're the only one that appreciates it.

(They inspect the statues.)

KYLIE

Not bad... not bad at all!

REMY

I especially like the beret. Very stylish.

PETTIGREW

I'm not tall enough.

KYLIE

You're the tallest one.

PETTIGREW

As an image of leadership, mine needs to really stand out. Nothing less is what I'll have.

ANDY

Another cookie will do the trick. You'll be the only one on two pedestals.

MARVIN

We can even find one with those colored, how do you call it, sprinkles.

PETTIGREW

Yes, that will do it. .

MACARONI

Brilliant. Now make sure that no other rats come investigate, or they might eat the art.

KYLIE

(to Pettigrew)

No nibbling on your nose!

PETTIGREW

Right. Out, everyone! Let the Mac do her magic!

(Pettigrew, Kylie, and Remy exit.)

MARVIN

... what they don't know...

(blackout)

The tech store where Cleo bought the minicam.

(Cleo, Ryan, and Dweezel are at the counter, hunched over a laptop.)

RYAN

This was just lying around?

DWEEZEL

Not exactly. Something came in the mail for us. Well, the store "us", not "us" us.. Looked sus, so I fed it to this neural net and asked for a prompt. Then I fed that prompt back to the neural net and this is what came out. Identical-like. But... a tweak here, a tweak there...

(Dweezel pulls a sheet of paper out from behind the counter and hands it to Ryan.)

...this is what came out.

RYAN

Panopticon, Limited... to inform you... business conditions...

closing in two weeks?

DWEEZEL

We're not closing in two weeks.

RYAN

But it says here...

DWEEZEL

Yeah, I wrote that. Sort of.

RYAN

What do you mean "sort of"? This looks pretty official.

DWEEZEL

The original is official. This one is fake.

RYAN

Letterhead, signature – what do you mean "fake"?

CLEO

There are computers that can write letters for you. Panopticon uses them. Dweezel uses them too. Hey Dweezel, which version of Chat GPT did you use?

DWEEZEL

I'm actually on Llama.

RYAN

I don't really care about your sexual kinks.

CLEO

Not "Llama". Llama. You know, "Large Language Model Meta AI". They use the 'a' from the word "Language" to make it into a

good acronym, even though the ‘a’ is not part of the original phrase.
It’s actually –
RYAN
Shut up, Cleo.
DWEEZEL
But the thing is, Panopticon also uses Llama.
(beat)
RYAN
And you know this... how?
CLEO
He probably hacked into it.
DWEEZEL
I hacked into it. It was easy. Know what their password is? It’s got three letters.
RYAN
Don’t tell me it’s “i c u”.
DWEEZEL
It’s not. It’s “i c u 1 2 3”.
CLEO
That’s not a very good password either. You gotta make ’em fish in the sea.
RYAN
What?
CLEO
The sea is big, but if they only use six characters it’s like hiding a battleship in a pond. To really understand this you need to get into the concept of entropy.
RYAN
Never mind. The point is –
DWEEZEL
I can make Panopticon spit out any letters I want, and they will have actually originated from their own neural network. They’ll be official. Even *officially* official, since their neural network will have done all the thinking.

CLEO
So, if you’ve done all this here hush-hush stuff, why are we talking about it right here, in front of the security cameras.
DWEEZEL
It’s fine. I tapped into the feed – it’s getting yesterday’s images.
(beat)
RYAN
I have underestimated you.
DWEEZEL
Yeah, that happens a lot. Don’t worry about it.
CLEO
So, what now?
DWEEZEL
You tell me. What would you like Panopticon to do for you?
RYAN
Could it get rid of Angie?
DWEEZEL
Easy peasy!
CLEO
No! Angie’s nice.
RYAN
Angie? She’s the one with the rat pellets – she’s interfering with our research.
CLEO
We’ll have to find another way. No getting rid of Angie. Or anybody.
RYAN
You’re right, I guess. Maybe we should ask Quinn?
CLEO & RYAN
No.
DWEEZEL
It’s hard being almighty, ain’t it!
RYAN
That’s why I quit my other job.

CLEO

What other job?

RYAN

Long story. Some other time.

DWEEZEL

What would make your... research easier?

RYAN

You know what would be cool? What if there were a health department office, right in the mall? And it was us? Could you do that?

CLEO

There are a lot of ways that could end badly.

RYAN

Worse than what's happening now?

DWEEZEL

If you keep it small, and don't involve the *actual* health department, it could work.

CLEO

Ah, what the hell. Give it a shot.

RYAN

What would we need to do?

DWEEZEL

All I have to do is use a mouse.

(blackout)

Stage left, a hallway near the food court in the mall is lit. It is early morning. Stage right is dark and empty.

Workers have been setting up what appears to be a new store. There is a large sign on the floor, facing away from the audience, waiting to be installed as a marquee. Alfredo and

Giuseppi pass by and notice.

ALFREDO

I wonder what they are putting in now?

GUISEPPI

Do we have time to take a look?

ALFREDO

Not really. We open Pommes in two hours.

GUISEPPI

Five minutes. One peek.

ALFREDO

Ok, make it snappy. I don't want the health department to think we're slacking off.

(They go back, Giuseppi notices the marquee on the floor, goes behind it to see it better.)

GUISEPPI

Your call, but we might want to ask a few questions while we're here.

ALFREDO

(Alfredo goes behind the marquee to read it.)

"Ministry of Health". A bit close for my taste.

GUISEPPI

Maybe stick around? It's good to know the enemy.

ALFREDO

It's better that the enemy does not know you. We'd better get to work.

(They exit hurriedly towards the food court. As they exit, Cleo and Ryan appear, notice the work, and survey the scene)

CLEO

That was fast!

RYAN

Yeah, and to think it all depends on the Post Office.

CLEO

As they say, the pen is mightier than the sword.

RYAN

Only if it has a stamp on it.

CLEO

Speaking of which, did you get a letter?

RYAN

No. Did you?

CLEO

No. Odd, isn't it?

RYAN

Unless we're not included. I'll have to talk to that Dweezel dude.

(As if on cue, Dweezel appears.)

DWEEZEL

What did I tell you? A click of the mouse, letters go out, things happen.

CLEO

Yeah, about those letters...

RYAN

Seems we didn't get any.

DWEEZEL

Just a little technicality. To make this happen quickly, I had to make myself the director of health. I hire you guys, and Bob's your uncle.

RYAN

Bob's my – what?

CLEO

It's a British expression, see? Some say it goes back to 1887 when a certain prime minister...

RYAN

Shut up, Cleo.

DWEEZEL

It means everything's good, copasetic, cool.

RYAN

It does seem mighty convenient, your being the top dog and all.

DWEEZEL

I didn't have all your info, so it had to be me, or we'd have to wait a few weeks for processing. Don't worry, you'll still be doing all the work.

CLEO

Isn't it always like that!

RYAN

So, when does this thing open?

DWEEZEL

You can start right now, if you like. There are badges and such inside, some forms, clipboards, the usual stuff. Check it out; I'll be back later.

(Dweezel exits. Cleo and Ryan enter and look around.)

CLEO

Hmmm – These badges are pretty neat.

(They put the badges on.)

RYAN

Maybe this *will* turn out ok.

(Angie enters.)

CLEO

Angie!

RYAN

Maybe not.

ANGIE

Cleo, what are you doing here?

CLEO

What does it look like?

ANGIE

It looks like you're up to no good again!

RYAN

Angie, how is it that you always show up right when things are happening?

ANGIE

I didn't know anything was happening. What's happening?

CLEO

They're opening up a new ministry of health right here in the mall. And yours truly is the...

(Cleo checks his badge.)

Deputy Assistant Inspector!

ANGIE

(suitably impressed)

Keep an eye out for them prairie dogs, you two!

(Angie exits)

RYAN

Can't you keep your mouth shut for five minutes?

CLEO

Me? You were the one who told her things were happening.

RYAN

Things **are** happening. I just don't know what they are anymore.

CLEO

Well, they are the things you asked for.

RYAN

I guess. How are we going to break it to Quinn?

(A letter carrier enters)

LETTER CARRIER

You the guys running this joint?

CLEO

I don't know about "running"...

RYAN

Yeah. Why? What's up?

LETTER CARRIER

This just came for you.

(The letter carrier hands Ryan an envelope and exits. Ryan opens it and begins to read:)

RYAN

Let's see... mumble mumble courtyard... mumble mumble large number of cats... please address... signed... Wait a minute – that's the boss.

CLEO

What boss?

RYAN

Our boss. Well, not our boss any more. Come to think about it, who **is** our boss?

CLEO

Does it matter? We don't listen anyway.

RYAN

Right. Anyway, there seems to be a large number of cats on the grass in the outside courtyard, and somebody's not happy about it.

CLEO

How can they not be happy about cats?

RYAN

Let's go check it out.

(Cleo and Ryan exit, lights go down stage left, and up stage right, revealing it to be the outside courtyard. Cleo and Ryan enter the courtyard.)

CLEO

So, where are the cats?

RYAN

I don't know. But they were here – look at all the dead rats.

CLEO

Our rats? You think cats did this?

RYAN

They're not "our" rats. We're just studying them.

CLEO

Look at your badge. I think we're more than "studying" them now.
(Cleo starts examining the rat bodies. Quinn enters.)

QUINN

Holy Moley! They must've had that war I was talking about.

RYAN

Quinn! What are **you** doing here?

QUINN

Just like I told you. Every year, the same thing. You think they'd learn.

RYAN

This happens every year?

QUINN

What did I tell you long ago? Your memory's as good as the wind. Like clockwork.

RYAN

Like clockwork they create sculptures out of food?

QUINN

Well, not that.

RYAN

Like clockwork they send messages?

QUINN

Not that either.

CLEO

Listen guys... I don't think there was a war here. There's no battle damage. No injuries. Odd, isn't it?

QUINN

Maybe it's a... I dunno – a new kind of war.

CLEO

And what do you make of these roller skates?

RYAN

And what about the cats?

QUINN

What cats?

RYAN

(Ryan shows Quinn the letter.)

These cats.

QUINN

What the hell is the Ministry of Health?

RYAN

(taken aback by his tactical error.)

Well... uh... didn't you see the office they made near the food court?

QUINN

And what's that badge you have on? Wait – **You're** the ministry of health?

CLEO

It's a long story.

RYAN

Actually, you're the ministry of health too. We all are.

QUINN

And where does it say anything about cats?

RYAN

Right here, near the bottom.

QUINN

(Quinn looks at the letter.)

Put your glasses on Ryan. It says "rats". With an 'r'. College educated my ass.

(Quinn continues to read)

And it's signed by me. Except I didn't sign it.

RYAN

It's signed by the boss. Only he's not our boss. You know.

QUINN

It's signed by me, **as** the boss. Remember when we went to Panopticon?

CLEO

I'm beginning to see the "con" in the name.

QUINN

Only I never signed anything like this. So where did it come from?

CLEO

It came in the mail. Right when we were setting up.

QUINN

(pensively)

Letters go out, people show up, things happen.

(decisively)

Well, might as well gather up the... evidence.

CLEO

We're not even open yet. How are we going to explain this to...

Wait – who do we even explain this to?

RYAN

Dunno. That's the director's problem. Check your badge. We're deputy assistants. Ya know who's the director?

CLEO AND RYAN

Dweezel!

(blackout)

Macaroni's art studio.

Macaroni, Andy, and Marvin are in discussion

ANDY

Well, it seems that the Mall now has its own Ministry of Health.

MACARONI

How ironic.

ANDY

So, I think we should place our sculptures right in the middle of it.

MACARONI

Not the food court? They **are** made of food, you know.

MARVIN

What better way to announce that “**we are here**”.

MACARONI

I see your point. Although to be fair, we’re saying “They are here”.

MARVIN

“We”, “They”... Does it matter?

ANDY

Maybe to them?

MACARONI

I can’t help wondering whether it might be best to sit this one out however. They seem to be doing a great job of running themselves into the ground on their own.

MARVIN

Pettigrew insisted.

MACARONI

Yes, he certainly did. I’m not sure everyone else should fall with him.

ANDY

They fall **in** with him, they **fall** with him.

MACARONI

I guess. Let’s not make the same mistake ourselves though.

PETTIGREW

(Pettigrew enters)

Is all in readiness?

MACARONI

An opportunity has opened up, which may lead to... even greater influence.

PETTIGREW

I’m listening.

ANDY

Instead of leaving our message at the food court, we’ll leave it at the Ministry of Health.

PETTIGREW

I didn’t know there was such a thing.

MACARONI

I know. Things move fast.

PETTIGREW

How did you find out?

MARVIN

We... have interests other than food.

PETTIGREW

There **are** no interests other than food.

MARVIN

Actually, there are lots of –

PETTIGREW

I won’t have it. Anything that doesn’t relate to food is sissy stuff.

MARVIN

That’s just... stupid.

PETTIGREW

Don’t call me stupid. I’m not stupid. I’m a rat. Rats have certain standards – the best standards. Standards **you** can barely dream of achieving. That’s why you are scrawny little mice, and I am on three pedestals.

MACARONI

You hired us to do your bidding... why?

PETTIGREW

Not because I couldn't do it myself. I can. And I will. You're all fired.

(Pettigrew exits.)

ANDY

Well... that didn't go well.

MACARONI

He'll be back.

MARVIN

Maybe Watson can talk to him. He's so chipper he can get a spider to dance.

MACARONI

But he doesn't know the plan. He'd hate it – it goes against his grain.

ANDY

It goes against my grain too. But it's what the rats want. Because they're rats.

MACARONI

Be nice, Android.

MARVIN

What we're doing isn't nice.

ANDY

We're doing exactly what they want. It's not our fault that they shouldn't want it.

MACARONI

I'll talk to Watson. But I think he has a thing with Kylie, which might complicate matters.

KYLIE

(Kylie enters, addressing Macaroni)

Pettigrew tells me you've changed the plan.

MARVIN

Maybe Kylie should talk to Watson.

MACARONI

Plans change when it's all improvised.

KYLIE

Wait – talk to Watson about what?

MACARONI

The plans have changed.

KYLIE

I know. I just said that.

MACARONI

But you don't know that.

KYLIE

Pettigrew said so.

MACARONI

And when has Pettigrew been right?

KYLIE

What does 'm' stand for?

MACARONI

What does 'm' have to do with anything?

KYLIE

That's what I'd like to know.

ANDY

Magnitude. Meter. Male. Moles. Million. Mach number.

Medium. Magnetic.

KYLIE

Mouse.

MACARONI

(long beat)

Mouse?

KYLIE

Those colored pellets in the bowl. Each one had an 'm' on it. For "mouse". Your kind are behind it all.

MACARONI.

Actually it meant "Macaroni". Sometimes I sign my artwork. I was particularly pleased with that one.

KYLIE

Really? You sign your artwork?

MACARONI

Don't be silly. Mice can't write. They just came that way. There are conspiracies everywhere, but not everything is a conspiracy.

KYLIE

So how are we supposed to know?

ANDY

I could tell you. But then you'd be part of it.

MACARONI

Look Kylie... when you use a mouse, there's a whole network behind it. You talk to me, but the art that comes out is made by Marvin, and Andy, and Watson, and...

MARVIN

Speaking of which –

MACARONI

...Pettigrew does not comprehend this. It's not clear to me that he comprehends much of anything, but that's another story.

KYLIE

So what's the plan?

ANDY

There's a new Ministry of Health opening near the food court. Not **in** the food court, but near it.

KYLIE

How do you know what's opening in the mall?

MACARONI

This network you've employed... this spider's web of interconnected eyes and ears and fingers and feet... lets me gather information from diverse places.

KYLIE

Kind of like Remy?

ANDY

Exactly like Remy. Remy speaks cat. And French, though don't tell a Frenchman. He also crossdresses...

MACARONI

All the French do that.

ANDY

...and it gives him so much more access to things.

MARVIN

When they get ready to build something new, the first ones to know are the spiders. They wake up one morning, and their web is down.

MACARONI

The second ones to know are the spiders' friends. And so on, through the interconnected web that makes up our social ecosystem. And unless it's food, the last ones to know are the rats.

KYLIE

Thank you for the insult. But why should I care?

MACARONI

The program has changed. An opportunity opened up. So the plan has changed to take advantage of it.

KYLIE

Sounds reasonable to me.

MACARONI

But Pettigrew only understands food. He eats the wrong thing, and doesn't know why. He doesn't understand the web that ultimately serves it to him.

ANDY

And we do. There are no spiders in the new office. New construction - the webs are gone.

MACARONI

Soon the spiders will come back and rebuild the web on this same site. But in the meantime, Pettigrew's precious statues can have a **glorious** opening, and when the spiders return, essentially reprogram their webs.

KYLIE

Do you know how?

MARVIN

To program websites? I'm going to get Watson to help us out. He can make spiders dance.

MACARONI

We think. You take care of Pettigrew, and we'll make the rats great again.

(blackout)

The storefront where Dweezel's shop used to be.

There is a sign saying CLOSED PERMANENTLY on the front door, which is locked. Cleo and Ryan are in front of the store,

CLEO

Closed.

RYAN

I can read, Cleo. Dweezel said it wasn't going to be closed.

CLEO

Maybe Dweezel was... mistaken?

RYAN

He wasn't "mistaken". He was bloody wrong.

CLEO

So now what?

RYAN

Well, either he lied, or he was... misinformed.

CLEO

He was "misinformed" but he wasn't "mistaken"?

RYAN

Shut up, Cleo.

CLEO

Everybody tells me to shut up, but only when I'm right.

RYAN

Are you right?

CLEO

The place **is** closed.

RYAN

Right.

(Dweezel enters)

RYAN

Hey Dweezel... what's this?

DWEEZEL

What's what?

RYAN

Your store.

DWEEZEL

(finding the doors locked)

Closed? What the hell?

RYAN

You tell me.

DWEEZEL

I'd like to.

CLEO

Does it by chance have anything to do with your llama?

RYAN

Cleo, I'm not interested in his sexual –

CLEO

Not his llama, his **llama**. The large language thing.

DWEEZEL

Just for the record, I don't have a llama.

RYAN

Of course you don't.

CLEO

You said it came in the mail.

DWEEZEL

I got a letter. Not a llama.

RYAN

Yes, you showed it to me. You arranged for it to be sent. You told me it didn't matter. You told me the store wasn't being closed down.

DWEEZEL

It wasn't.

CLEO

It is.

DWEEZEL

Yes... that's not supposed to happen.

RYAN

Lots of things aren't supposed to happen, but here we are, and now you're out of a job.

CLEO

But you have another job, don't you?

RYAN

The head hoo-hah of this health thing.

DWEEZEL

It's your health thing. I just did it that way so you guys could get it going.

RYAN

It's going all right. I don't know **where** it's going, but it seems you are our boss. Convenient.

CLEO

So Dweezel, what happens to your customers now?

RYAN

What do we care?

CLEO

No, really. Just closing down like that...

DWEEZEL

I didn't do that.

CLEO

Oh yes you did. You told me you got them to send out fake letters.

DWEEZEL

Yes, **fake** letters. Not real ones.

RYAN

What's the difference?

DWEEZEL

Fake letters are fake. They don't come from the actual place that sends the letters.

RYAN

Where did these letters come from?

DWEEZEL

Well...

RYAN

The same place that sends the real letters. Their computer thinks they're real. That **makes** them real.

DWEEZEL

But when the people behind those letters see that they're not real, they will...

CLEO

Blow the cover off it.

RYAN

So... they have to be real. Even if they're supposed to be fake.

DWEEZEL

Somebody's got to know.

CLEO

Who?

RYAN

And how? This is part of being a secret agent. They can't know. If things blow up, you can't say "oops, my bad!". You can't say anything.

CLEO

It kinda connects you to the blowing-up part.

RYAN

That's bad.

DWEEZEL

So, now what?

RYAN

Well, I don't know. You're the boss.

CLEO

Well, not the **boss** boss, but the boss.

RYAN

Shut up, Cleo.

DWEEZEL

Well, we have another job, right? We do that job. And we get paid for that job. The paychecks keep coming. And Bob's your uncle.

CLEO

You keep saying that.

RYAN

Okay, what's the first step?

DWEEZEL

First? We get my laptop which has all the login info so we can figure out what went wrong.

RYAN

And that laptop is...

(all three of them look into the locked-up shop)

DWEEZEL

Looks like we need a plan B.

RYAN

I said I underestimated you. But maybe you have underestimated Panopticon.

(beat)

CLEO

Tell me, would there be any health issues with your store?

DWEEZEL

What do you mean? None. It's an electronics shop.

CLEO

Yes, but maybe somebody found something that the health ministry needs to know about?

DWEEZEL

There's nothing unhealthy in that shop.

RYAN

Maybe a pizza? With the wrong amount of pepperoni? That might have been left out overnight?

CLEO

... and would require the Ministry of Health to investigate?

(beat)

RYAN

Dweezel, don't be thick!

DWEEZEL

(catching on)

Come to think of it, I do remember seeing somebody with a pizza.

Could attract rats, right?

RYAN

I think it already did. According to the regulations, you'll need to submit form CF-238. In triplicate. Fortunately those forms are right upstairs in the Ministry office. Which is not locked.

(They exit, and as they do, the customer who was watching while Ryan got the Mark 4 arrives with Angie, and sees the store is closed.)

CUSTOMER

Closed. Very suspicious.

ANGIE

Why? Stores close all the time.

CUSTOMER

Sure, but it's odd that it closes just as we're closing in on them.

ANGIE

We're not closing in on them. Somebody bought a tech thing. Big deal.

CUSTOMER

What does "Six old men sat at a table" mean to you?

ANGIE

Nothing.

CUSTOMER

Exactly. So why did he say that?

ANGIE

Who?

CUSTOMER

The customer.

ANGIE

I have no idea.

CUSTOMER

The customer said that, the salesperson does this “look around” thing, and hands him something from under the counter. It’s like double oh seven. Or maybe Get Smart. Dunno which.

ANGIE

So when you followed him, what did you find out?

CUSTOMER

Nothing. I started chickening out because what if they noticed me?

ANGIE

(pensively)

Prairie dogs.

CUSTOMER

What?

ANGIE

Nothing. It just made me think of something.

CUSTOMER

So, what do we do now?

ANGIE

What we? You’re the one with the crazy theory.

CUSTOMER

I saw what I saw.

ANGIE

Look, I appreciate your concern, but I’m not even the one to talk to. I’m at the steakhouse. It’s actually a pretty nice place – drop in some time.

CUSTOMER

I’m tellin’ you – something’s going down.

ANGIE

I tell you what. I’ll make some... discreet inquiries. No promises. But if I come up with something interesting, I’ll let you know.

CUSTOMER

That’s all I can ask.

(The customer exits, Angie remains, pondering. She looks

again at the locked door and the CLOSED PERMANENTLY sign.)

(blackout)

Prompts used:

- Main Street vs. the shopping mall
- It makes me sound smarter than I am
- I guess I just don’t hang around with the crowd that knows all the rats
- You have to be on top of it
- I can’t believe I actually made the effort
- Somebody knows something
- That explains their bad teeth

- Look over me, Lord
- That's probably happened to me 20 times
- Probably at the airport on the way back, but who knows?
- Corgi & Bess
- What other kinds of crooks are there?
- She's a sight for sore eyes
- Let me know if anything's moved.
- Are you sure you don't have Final Draft?
- The Ides of March
- It just fell into our laps
- Absinthe makes the heart grow fonder
- Maybe she's a drunk
- Give me one
- That girl needs a potato
- Get a freaking chafing dish
- You know you're dwindling when
- Sometimes he does a little grave digging
- How do you like...write?
- I don't think it went up that much
- He ate a what?

- You're supposed to take something that just pops up
- It kinda greases the wheels
- Three people dropped out today
- Six old men sat at a table
- The cauldron lights up
- I read it for the articles
- I may have a little PTSD from it
- Before you leave, you need to check the dishwasher
- That black bird attacked me
- I'll have another cookie
- Ah, what the hell. Give it a shot
- That's the director's problem
- Do you know how to program websites
- I started chickening out