

night shift

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night shift

by [concordances](#)

Summary

Twenty years after several missing children forced the shutdown of a popular ice cream parlor, Huang Renjun takes the night shift at its newly-reopened premises. The place is nothing short of creepy, with a glitchy power system and mascots that don't seem to stay put, but things are going fine—until curious journalist Mark Lee shows up in search of a scoop.

Notes

five nights at freddy's inspired! you don't have to know the games to read this fic, though it will probably enhance the experience. at the very least, it will help to know that the animatronics looks like [this](#).

additional warnings: the premise is based on a survival horror series so you can expect it to be a little weird, but there's nothing very graphic (i.e. no gore). again, there are mentions of blood, injury, and (implied) minor character death.

indebted to alicia, who always has my back, and a special thank you to bron for letting me cry into your dms and giving me the confidence to submit this. also to my sister for [this incredible graphic](#) (seriously please check it out), and of course the fest mods for their hard work!!

DAY 1: MONDAY

The keys to the security office jangle as the day guard drops them into Renjun's hand.

"Those are to turn on the power," he explains. Renjun doesn't know his name. This isn't a fancy enough position for either of them to have a name tag, but the day guard is wearing a navy blue cap that mirrors his own and a distinct cat-like smile. "Most things you'll need to worry about in there are powered by electricity, like the security feed and office doors. Thanks for agreeing to do this! The previous guy in your position didn't last two nights, so it's just five nights you're filling in."

Renjun frowns. "What happened to the previous guard?"

The day guard waves a dismissive hand. "He had a bit of an overactive imagination. You can always shut the doors to the office if you feel unsafe. There's a small toilet attached to the office too, but I wouldn't take my eyes off the cameras for too long if I were you."

Renjun nods. Watch the place carefully. Sounds simple enough.

"Oh," the day guard says. "A little warning: the power sometimes goes out before the end of the shift if you use too much of it. If that happens, you'll have to wait for me to show up at six. But hopefully, it won't come to that." He pats Renjun lightly on the back. "Good luck!"

The look the day guard gives him before he turns to leave remains in Renjun's mind as he sits in the dingy office at midnight, monitoring the security feed on the screens in front of him. There are ten cameras in total, each overlooking a different area of *Nana's Ice Cream World*, an establishment modeled after a retro diner that Renjun is sure looks nice in the day with all its neon lights, but appears downright unwelcoming at night. The public area was renovated before the reopening, but the same can't be said for the office. There are two doors separating the office from the rest of the building, one on either side of the room, open by default but with controls on the desk to shut them electronically.

The screens in front of Renjun show barely-lit rooms and flicker occasionally, with the exception of one labeled *scooping room*, which is completely dark. That room is attached to the kitchen—probably a freezer of some sort. Renjun will have to remember to report the broken camera to the day guard when his shift is over.

The parlor's mascots sit in the store room, the furthest location from the security office. Renjun surveys the life-size animal robots via the camera. They're vaguely human-like in their build, metal parts visible behind bulging, glassy eyes, fur dirty and matted with age. From the looks of it, they're the same suits from all those years ago. Renjun suppresses a shudder. He supposes they look better in the daytime too.

The first hour passes in silence. No movement on the cameras, no strange noises.

Gradually, Renjun's eyelids start to grow heavy. There's a newspaper clipping about the initial shutdown of *Nana's Ice Cream World* pinned to the notice board on his desk, but he ignores it in favor of turning to the poster on the wall of the office. *Nana's Ice Cream World: Grand Reopening*, it declares. On the poster are colorful images of the brand's three iconic characters—Sunny Bear, the yellow bear mascot claimed to *love nothing more than laughing with kids!* Birthday Boy, the blue dog mascot known for being a staple at parties held at the parlor. And finally, the titular mascot, Nana, a pink bunny with drooping ears and a gigantic set of teeth.

Something about their smiling faces unsettles Renjun. Back in the day they were well-loved, performing songs on stage and serving ice cream to children, but now—

The distant sound of footsteps snaps Renjun out of his thoughts.

Renjun whips around so quickly that his neck cricks as silence falls over the room. He hadn't expected a break-in on his first night. Hurriedly, he checks the security feed, but nothing seems out of the ordinary. No signs of movement on camera.

Then Renjun notices it: the outline of Birthday Boy standing in the middle of the party room.

Renjun frowns, scanning the feed again for the culprit. It can't have been easy to move one of the mascots out of the store room—they look like they weigh a lot. Surely Renjun would have seen or heard something. But no matter how hard he searches, he finds nothing.

Renjun stares at the outline of Birthday Boy. *How did you get there?*

Slowly, Birthday Boy turns his head and looks directly into the camera.

Renjun freezes. What the *fuck*. Are the mascots supposed to move on their own? Instinctively, he finds himself reaching for the buttons that shut the office doors. Keeping them closed will definitely use up power, but he's not going to take any chances on his first night. At the very least, Birthday Boy doesn't seem to be going anywhere.

Renjun doesn't know how long he spends with his eyes on the figure, tense and waiting, the shallow sound of his own breathing filling the room. At some point, he checks both office doors to make sure they're still firmly shut, and when he looks back to the screens, Birthday Boy is back in his place in the store room.

The rest of the night passes uneventfully.

DAY 2: TUESDAY

"I knew you'd be a natural," the day guard laughs. "You have a kind of determined look to you. Anyway, the animatronics do have some sort of movement mechanism that can activate at night, so don't panic if they're not always where you expect them to be."

"You could've warned me about this earlier," Renjun says drily.

The day guard grins. "I didn't want to overwhelm you on your first night."

As inconvenient as that is, Renjun isn't going to let something like this get to him. He'd jumped at the chance for this stint after seeing the ad amidst piling bills, prepared for—not this, exactly, but he'd been prepared to see it through to the end.

There isn't time to dwell on things, because his second shift kicks off without delay. Barely an hour in, Birthday Boy appears in the party room again, where he remains for half an hour. Renjun keeps his eyes on his hulking figure and leaves both office doors open for the time being, wary of the day guard's advice about preserving power. He's so focused on watching Birthday Boy that he

forgets to check on the other mascots for a while.

When he looks at the store room camera, Sunny Bear is missing.

“Great,” Renjun mutters, tempted to close the office doors, but scanning the security feed first. He checks the hallways nearest to him. Empty. Sunny Bear isn’t in the kitchen, either. The scooping room? According to the day guard, that camera is beyond saving.

A high-pitched burst of laughter rings out from the direction of the West hallway.

Renjun slams the button to close the left door, heart rate picking up. It’s only his second night and things are getting creepy. Is this why the previous night guard only lasted two days? Renjun feels his confidence waver as he turns his attention back to the screens.

Birthday Boy is no longer in the party room.

The party room is empty.

There’s a hand on Renjun’s shoulder.

With a strangled yell, Renjun grabs the nearest object on the desk and spins around to face him. Standing behind him isn’t the imposing figure of Birthday Boy, but someone who looks almost as shocked as Renjun feels.

“Oh, man,” the guy says, taking a step back and raising both hands. “I am *so* sorry for scaring you. I didn’t mean to, I swear. I just didn’t realize there would be anyone in this building this late and I got excited—are you going to put that down?”

Slowly, Renjun lowers the flashlight in his hand. As if that would be any good in defending himself. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Sunny Bear at the end of the West hallway and Birthday Boy outside the restrooms. Renjun presses the button to open the left door before walking over to where the intruder is watching him curiously, grabbing him by the collar.

“You scared the *living shit out of me*,” Renjun hisses, shaking him. The guy is taller than him, but he seems to shrink in the face of Renjun’s anger. “What is wrong with—”

Renjun stops. He recognizes this guy. Boyish good looks, and glasses that somehow make him look smart and personable instead of like a nerd. A difficult face to forget—one that Renjun had spent many a communications lecture stealing glances at back in university.

“Mark?” Renjun says disbelievingly. “Mark Lee?”

Mark blinks at him. “Renjun?” he says eventually. “Oh, wow. It really is you. You look good.”

Renjun flushes despite himself, glancing back at the security feed. Sunny Bear still at the end of the West hallway, Birthday Boy back in the party room, Nana in the store room. “What are you doing here?” Renjun asks, careful to keep his voice low.

Mark brightens. “I’m a journalist with the local paper, and I’m looking for a scoop. Haha, get it? Because it’s ice cream—” he clears his throat at Renjun’s glare. “Yeah. So, this place just reopened after being closed for two decades, right? And there were all sorts of rumors when it got shut down, and no one ever found out what happened to those kids who went missing. I’ve heard some crazy things about this place, like it’s haunted at night, so I came to investigate for myself. You’re working the night shift here?”

“Temporarily,” Renjun answers. Sunny Bear in the kitchen, Birthday Boy in the party room, Nana in the store room. “How did you get in here without me seeing you?”

Mark points to the tiny restroom attached to the office. “I climbed through the window in there. It was a bit of a squeeze—oh, but I wouldn’t have come in if you were in there, of course. I’m not a pervert. And I’m not here to do anything weird, I promise.”

Renjun can’t say that was his immediate concern. If he weren’t so distracted, he would probably have more to say about star student Mark Lee breaking and entering. “You’re not supposed to be here,” he says bluntly. “You should leave.”

“I just want to take a look around,” Mark says, oblivious to the absurdity of that statement. “To see if there’s any truth to the things people are saying about this place. And to see if there’s anything interesting for me to write about—”

Renjun shushes him, straining his ears in the eerie quiet that follows. And then he hears it.

Footsteps. High-pitched laughter.

Renjun slams down both buttons, closing both doors to the office simultaneously.

Mark’s eyes are wide. “What—”

There’s a loud thud from the door on the right, the sound of something slamming bodily into it. Renjun jumps back, nearly tripping over Mark’s feet. Except Mark catches him. His arms are stronger than Renjun expected, but Renjun can’t enjoy that for even a second because there’s a glass panel next to the door on the left and Sunny Bear’s face appears in the square, his huge, empty eyes blinking at them through the glass.

“Holy shit,” Mark whispers. “It’s Sunny Bear. I loved him when I was a kid.”

The thumping on the right door has stopped, at least. It takes Renjun a moment to realize that Sunny Bear is saying something in between bouts of shrill laughter, his cartoonish voice muted behind the closed door.

Come play with me! Come play with me! Come play with me!

Renjun’s breath catches in his throat at the familiar tagline.

“Is he doing that on his own?” Mark asks, bewildered. “Is this normal?”

Renjun doesn’t answer. He doesn’t know. The mascots’ movement mechanism might take them from room to room, but it doesn’t explain how the mascots seem to be seeking them out. It’s almost as if they’re being controlled.

“If we open that door,” Mark says slowly. “What will happen?”

Renjun doesn’t have an answer to that, either. It isn’t a long wait before Sunny Bear retreats, Renjun snapping out of it and checking the cameras to find the mascot back in the main dining area. Birthday Boy, too, has returned to the party room. Nana hasn’t moved. “Like I said,” Renjun turns to Mark once he’s found his voice. “You should leave.”

“And leave you alone here?” Mark looks incredulous. He seems to have caught on pretty quickly. Renjun supposes he should feel touched that Mark is worried about him, though Renjun is sure he’s better equipped to handle this job than Mark could possibly be. “No way, dude. I’m staying.

You seemed kind of scared earlier, and I really want to know what's going on. I won't get in your way. Besides, two of us is better than one, right? If you teach me what to do, I can help you."

Renjun swallows the sour taste in his mouth. He hadn't been *scared*, just a little startled. And did Mark just call him *dude*? Besides, Mark will be a liability. Renjun will have to keep an eye on the cameras *and* on him. He can't risk this opportunity and his safety for some guy he had a crush on back in university. Even if Mark is just as cute as he remembers.

"Also," Mark says sheepishly. "The window is pretty high up. I sort of climbed a tree outside to get in? I can't actually get back out the same way."

It looks like Mark will have to make himself useful. It's hard to deny that it's less terrifying being in this place with someone than it is being here alone, and if Mark turns out to be a burden, Renjun could always find a stepladder and *make* him leave.

In any case, Renjun has less than four nights to go.

"Fine," Renjun says.

DAY 3: WEDNESDAY

"They're not just mascots—they're *animatronics*. With metal endoskeletons beneath all that fur that make them move in a life-like way without needing someone inside the suit. You know, the craziest rumor I heard was that the souls of those missing kids possessed the animatronics, and that's why this place is haunted."

"Possessed?" Renjun's eyes scan the screens. "Seriously?" Apart from a visit by Sunny Bear's to the office earlier during the shift, tonight has been unusually quiet. No excessive movement, no aggressive behavior. "You sound like you know a lot about this place."

"I loved Nana's Ice Cream World," Mark admits. His eyes are on the security feed as he talks, one hand hovering preemptively over the door button. "Maybe you were a bit younger, but I remember coming here when I was kid. I had my eighth birthday in that party room with Birthday Boy. The animatronics were just the coolest, you know? The only thing is I thought there were four of them, not three. I also did some digging recently and found out the company was developing springlock suits, which would function as animatronics *and* actual suits with people in them, but they never took off due to safety reasons. Sorry if I'm talking too much. I think I ate something bad earlier. Indigestion makes me nervous."

Renjun huffs out a breath. Mark *is* talking too much, but Renjun can't be mad at him when he takes the edge off this job. Mark is resourceful, too. Thanks to him, Renjun now knows the day guard's name is Chenle, and that unlike Renjun, he has no predecessor. When Renjun tried to question Chenle earlier about why the previous night guard had quit, all Chenle had offered was a cryptic smile and "I never said he *quit*."

So maybe the previous guard was fired. Renjun sighs, pushing that conversation from his mind. "Feel free to use the toilet," he tells Mark. "But don't bother with the lock. It's broken."

"I've never seen you use the toilet," Mark comments. He pauses. "Um. Not that I'm implying that

you should. Like I said, I'm not a pervert. Actually, forget I said anything—”

The sound of footsteps rings out from the West hallway.

Renjun reaches for the button to close the right door at the same time Mark does, his hand landing on top of Mark's as the door slams shut. There's a moment of awkward silence before a loud thump against the door makes Renjun jump.

They wait until the sounds eventually stop and Birthday Boy is back in the party room to reopen the door.

Mark adjusts his glasses, frazzled. “Remind me why we can only shut the doors when the animatronics are five seconds away from getting their hands on us?”

“Because of the power. If we use it all up, everything will shut off.”

“What happens if everything shuts off?”

“I don't know,” Renjun says, thinking of Chenle's warning. “And I don't intend to find out.”

Another thing about Mark is that he's a fast learner. Within the night, he's gotten so good at picking up on the relevant warning cues from the mascots that he could probably survive in this place alone. He operates the door controls while rambling to Renjun about the puppy he saw on the way over, or what articles he's working on, or what he remembers about their time together at university.

“You always sat alone in that corner seat,” Mark recalls. “But I don't think I saw you at all in my final year. Man, I can't believe it's been so long. What else have you been up to?”

Renjun gives vague responses, dodging any other question Mark asks him about himself. There isn't anything to say—he's barely done anything with his life at all. Odd jobs, a non-existent social life, coming home to an empty apartment. Rinse and repeat. Eventually, Mark stops asking, either taking the hint or figuring Renjun isn't very good at multitasking.

Sunny Bear and Birthday Boy's visits are sparse throughout the night, possibly a midweek lull. Renjun gets up at around four to use the toilet, only to remember that Mark had shut himself in there a while ago. After a quick check of the screens, Renjun goes over to knock.

“Sorry,” Mark groans, voice muffled through the door. “I'll be out in a bit.”

After dealing with murderous mascots at their literal doorstep, this feels like a very different sort of problem. Renjun really needs to use the toilet. His eyes fall on the screen labeled *restrooms*. The public toilets outside are perfectly functional, and not too far from here. Renjun knows which route he can take to get to them.

It's a bad idea.

A look at the security feed tells him Sunny Bear is somewhere in the West hallway. Renjun shuts the left door as a precaution. Nana is in the store room, as usual, and Birthday Boy is in the party room. If Renjun takes the East hallway out, he'll know immediately if Birthday Boy makes a move. The trip should only take a few minutes.

It's not a safe plan by any means, but there's something Renjun has been wanting to check. He grabs the flashlight from the desk and slips out the right door, walking as quickly as he can without making a sound. His heartbeat is deafening to his own ears, but it doesn't seem to draw any

attention, even as he passes the hallway leading to the party room. At the end of the corridor are the restrooms. Renjun didn't think it was possible for this area to look more sinister than it already did on camera, but his flashlight does the place no favors.

The inside of the restroom is quiet, too. There's a bit of light coming in from an open window high up, much like the office restroom. Renjun uses the toilet in record time. He's about to leave, hand on the door, when he hears the sound of footsteps.

Footsteps means Birthday Boy is on the move.

This is bad. Renjun had been hoping this wouldn't happen. It will be difficult to beat Birthday Boy back to the office, but not impossible. Renjun starts formulating an alternate route back to the office in his mind as he wrenches the door open—

—and comes face to face with the towering form of Birthday Boy himself.

Renjun freezes. He'd forgotten that this is an area Birthday Boy sometimes visits.

Birthday Boy blinks at him, the whites of his plastic eyes seeming to glow. Slowly, almost gratefully, he tilts his mechanical head. It sounds like he's breathing, though that must just be his voice box. All Renjun can think about is how watching the mascots from behind a screen has *nothing* on seeing one in the flesh. He can't even find it in himself to yell.

Birthday Boy's mouth is almost as big as Renjun's whole head. Now that he's this close, the stains on his snout look a little like blood.

"Hey, Birthday Boy," Renjun whispers, voice coming out like a gasp for breath. "Good doggy..." If he could just buy himself enough time to squeeze past the mascot and into the hallway, he could probably make a break for it.

Birthday Boy watches him closely. Renjun's throat has gone too dry for him to swallow, heart pounding an erratic rhythm against his ribcage.

You know, the craziest rumor I heard was that the souls of those missing kids somehow possessed the animatronics.

"You must've been a good boy," Renjun finds himself whispering despite himself. Birthday Boy continues to watch him, unblinking. "I knew it," Renjun says, confidence growing. "The kind of boy who wouldn't hurt anyone—"

"Renjun!"

Mark appears from absolutely fucking nowhere, slamming into Birthday Boy and knocking him over. Everything that follows happens far too quickly for Renjun to react. With an inhuman growl, Birthday Boy is back on his feet, gnashing pointed teeth at Mark, missing his face by inches. Mark is less lucky the second time round, yelling as Birthday Boy's teeth close around his arm. With his free hand, Mark manages to push the mascot several steps back in the struggle. Birthday Boy's mouth remains clamped shut as Mark fights to get free, leveraging his legs to kick at Birthday Boy's furry blue body.

"Renjun, *run*," Mark yells, but Renjun intends to do no such thing. He raises his arm with the intention of using his flashlight as a weapon—throwing it, or something—except the light happens to click on at that moment, flashing directly at Birthday Boy's face.

Birthday Boy goes still. A different kind of still from earlier—this time, his body droops, jaw

slackening like a machine shutting down. Gingerly, Mark pulls his arm free. It's bleeding, but at least it's still attached to his body.

"Let's go," Mark says, grabbing Renjun with his uninjured arm and pulling him down the hallway. For someone who'd just been attacked, he seems to be faring a lot better than Renjun. "It looks like you stunned him, but it could be temporary."

Renjun lets himself be dragged along, mind numb, until they're back in the office. After a rudimentary glance at the screens, Mark closes the right door. With both doors shut, he sags against the desk.

Renjun's heart is still pounding fit to burst. "You weren't supposed to leave the office—"

"*You* weren't supposed to leave the office."

Mark sounds angry, but he doesn't say anything more. Renjun bows his head, a slow guilt blooming in his chest as he looks at the blood running down Mark's arm. "I'm sorry," he mumbles. "Your arm—"

"It's fine," Mark tries for a smile. "Not broken, or anything. Just a little battered. And it's my left arm, too, so I probably won't need you to give me a hand with anything. Haha, get it? Because—"

Renjun feels the small *oof* leave Mark's body when Renjun grabs him and pulls him into a hug. Mark is just the right height for Renjun to bury his face in his shoulder. "I'm glad you're okay," Renjun breathes, letting his heartbeat return to normal while Mark holds him. It was beyond stupid of Mark to rush at a mascot like that. Renjun had things under control. But that doesn't change the fact that Mark had risked his life to save him.

There's a hand stroking Renjun's hair, a little awkward but gentle. Most things about Mark are gentle. "No more risks, okay?" Mark murmurs.

In the seconds before Birthday Boy had been bowled over by him outside the restrooms, something about the mascot had looked eerily sad, eerily *human*. But Renjun doesn't tell Mark that. "Yeah," Renjun says instead. "No more risks."

DAY 4: THURSDAY

"You really shouldn't be here," Renjun says.

Mark's usual easygoing smile is set in a stubborn frown today. He's wearing long sleeves to cover his arm, though Renjun had caught a glimpse of bandages earlier, heart squeezing at the reminder that *he* was the cause of Mark's injury.

"I told you, I'm not leaving you alone here. Especially now that we know the animatronics are dangerous. Can't you quit this job? You can't tell me this place doesn't violate all sorts of safety regulations. Look, I'll write an article exposing them—"

Renjun shakes his head, a wry smile making its way onto his face. "No one will believe you. Mascots that come to life at night to attack you? Sounds like something out of a kid's nightmare."

Mark's shoulders slump. "You're right." He leans on the desk with his uninjured arm, eyes roaming the security feed—it's the one thing they can't afford to neglect. After a while, he turns to Renjun. "There's something else. I did some digging through the archives this morning. Some of the earliest articles about the incident two decades ago mentioned four missing children. *Four* of them. I swear there used to be four animatronics, but we've only seen three. So where's the last one?"

Something uneasy unfurls itself in the pit of Renjun's stomach. "I don't know."

What Renjun does know is that Mark is spooked after yesterday's events. He seems extra vigilant, quieter and more focused on monitoring the cameras. When Sunny Bear pays the office a visit in the early hours of the morning, Mark is quick to slam down the button and step bodily between Renjun and the closed door.

"You don't have to worry about me," Renjun raises his voice to be heard over the muffled sounds of Sunny Bear begging them to come play. "I can take care of myself."

Mark waits until Sunny Bear's face has disappeared from the window to reopen the door. His expression is apologetic. "I know, I know. I just can't bear the thought of—pun not intended. Sorry. I respect your autonomy, I promise. And it's not that I think you need my protection. I just don't want anything bad to happen to you."

Renjun lets the words sink in, guilt adding to the unease. He's glad to know that Mark cares—Renjun would do anything to make sure nothing happens to him, too—but he hates being in such a helpless position. He doesn't want anyone to get hurt because of him.

"I never got to ask," Mark says. "How did you end up with this job?"

Renjun feels his heart drop. Kind of like how he dropped out after three semesters and a laundry list of antidepressants and a tanking GPA—haha. Mark's bad puns are really rubbing off on him. "Not everyone ends up with their dream job," Renjun says, the words coming out flatter than he'd intended. It's the truth—some people end up here, working as a night guard at an ice cream parlor overrun by hostile mascots to get by. The pay isn't even any good.

Mark's face falls. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—" He bites his lip, gazing hesitantly at Renjun. "For what it's worth, I think you're incredible."

Renjun snorts. "How would you know that? We barely know each other."

"That's not true," Mark insists. "We knew each other at university. You know, this is gonna sound so stupid, but I—" Approaching footsteps outside. Mark shuts the right door with a wince, waiting to ensure that no one is there before reopening it. "I always liked you. I wanted to—don't laugh, okay, but I wanted to ask you out to lunch or something when we had that communications lecture together, but I kind of chickened out, and then I never got the chance."

Renjun stares so hard that he momentarily forgets about the cameras. "*You* were nervous? To ask *me* out?"

The thought of someone like Mark being interested in someone like him is absurd. Renjun is sure half the cohort was in love with Mark at university. "I mean, it's all in the past now," Mark laughs, a little awkwardly. His face has gone an adorable shade of red. "I hope it doesn't, like, make you uncomfortable or anything? Sorry. You should probably just forget I said—"

"You can still ask me out."

Mark falters. “What?”

His eyes are wide. Renjun almost laughs. After witnessing animatronics come to life—after being *attacked* by one—something like this really shouldn’t faze him. “I said you can still ask me out,” Renjun repeats. “If you want to. I’ll say yes.”

“Really?” Mark says. Renjun turns back to check the cameras while he waits for Mark’s answer. After a short silence, Mark says in a hopeful voice: “Then, do you want to—”

“Mark,” Renjun interrupts, feeling the blood drain from his face. “Nana isn’t in the store room.”

Birthday Boy is outside the restrooms, and Sunny Bear is in the kitchen.

But the store room is empty.

Mark is back in front of the monitors in seconds. “What do you mean Nana isn’t in the store room?” he asks. “He was there a minute ago. Wasn’t he? Oh, man, I don’t really check on him because he’s *always* there. Where did he go?”

Renjun scans the feed frantically, heart racing faster in his chest with every second Nana is unaccounted for. “I don’t know. I don’t know, I don’t see him—”

“Wait,” Mark holds up a hand, face pale. “Listen.”

Renjun shuts his mouth and listens. For a while, all he picks up on is silence. And then he hears it: the faintest sound of music. A children’s jingle, echoing through the empty hallways, gradually growing in volume.

Renjun shares a look with Mark before they each hit the door close button nearest to them—Mark on the left, Renjun on the right. Except only the left door closes. The right door remains open. Renjun pushes the button a few more times to nothing more than a dull clicking noise. It’s as if the mechanism has stopped working, or the door is jammed.

“It won’t shut,” Renjun says, panic growing. “It won’t—this has never happened before.” He turns desperately to Mark. “What do we do?”

“Don’t freak out,” Mark says. He sounds very much like someone who’s freaking out. The jingle is growing louder by the second, floating in from the East hallway. Mark swallows visibly as he looks around. “Uh...”

Renjun’s eyes land on the door in the corner of the office. “We can hide in the toilet.”

Mark shakes his head. “The lock is broken. If he tries to get in, we’ll be trapped.” He glances at the left door. “What if we go out that way? We can hide and find our way back here later—”

“Sunny Bear is in the West hallway,” Renjun whispers, eyes scanning the security feed. “We can’t open that door.” The jingle is so loud now that Nana can’t be more than a few seconds away. It feels like something has a grip on Renjun’s windpipe. “Listen, Mark, I can buy you some time—”

“Here,” Mark hisses, grabbing Renjun’s arm and dragging him under the desk to hide as the jingle reaches the doorway.

The music abruptly cuts out.

The desk wouldn’t have been Renjun’s top choice of hiding place. For one, it doesn’t conceal them

very well. Only sparse cover is offered by the legs of the office chair, and there's barely any space to move with both Renjun and Mark pressed up against each other. But it's better than standing out in the open. Renjun's breath hitches as a pair of furry pink animatronic paws come into view. He can feel the irregular rise and fall of Mark's chest against him.

There's something deeply unsettling about Nana being *here*, in the office. They'd come face-to-face with Birthday Boy outside, but this feels completely different, suffocating. Renjun watches as Nana's feet shuffle agonizingly slowly across the office.

Like Sunny Bear, Nana's voice box seems functional, for the most part. *I missed you!* he calls, his cheery voice distorted with static. The words take on an ominous note at night. It's the first time Renjun has heard Nana speak since landing this job. *I missed you!*

Their one saving grace is that the office is small—Nana won't see them unless he bends over and checks under the desk. An animatronic can't do that, can it? Renjun squeezes his eyes shut, trying not to make a sound. The way Nana searches the room feels strangely methodological. When he reaches the end of the room he stomps both his feet, almost as if he's throwing a tantrum.

Kind of like a child would.

Suddenly, Mark's hand is in his. His palm is a little sweaty, and Renjun would have liked to hold Mark's hand when they aren't being hunted by a potentially murderous mascot, but it brings Renjun down from the brink of panic. It grounds him.

Renjun flinches as Nana rams into the toilet door, as if checking that no one is in there. The door swings open. More silence. After doing a full circle around the office, Nana spins on his heel and exits the way he came. The jingle activates once again, the upbeat tune growing softer as Nana makes his way back down the hallway.

They listen, unmoving, until the jingle fades to silence.

Without getting up, Mark reaches a hand above the desk, pushing the button for the right door. This time, it slides shut. Renjun lets out a breath he didn't know he was holding, exhaustion setting in. But they're both okay. They're safe.

"Oh, wow," Mark says. "I thought we were gonna die." He helps pull Renjun to his feet as Nana appears back in the store room on screen. Gradually, the tension bleeds from the room. Renjun glances at the clock. It's almost six, which means Chenle will arrive for the day shift soon.

Mark runs a hand through sweat-mussed hair. "That was—"

That's as far as he gets before Renjun drags him in for a kiss.

It's brief, but Mark still turns red under his glasses, spluttering when Renjun pulls away. Renjun would apologize, but he isn't sorry. "I'll go out with you," Renjun says, the adrenaline from their close call already fading, leaving him light-headed. For the first time since the shift started, his smile feels genuine watching Mark's flustered expression. "We can do lunch, or whatever you want. As long as it's not ice cream."

DAY 5: FRIDAY

If Renjun thought Mark was jittery yesterday, he's wholly unprepared for his paranoia today. An hour into shift and Mark closes the doors multiple times without the mascots being anywhere near the office, and jumps a mile into the air when Renjun puts a hand on his shoulder to get his attention. If he were anyone else, Renjun would have told him off, but he's *Mark*. Renjun really needs to work on his priorities.

"It's our last night," Renjun reminds him. "We've got this. Stop overthinking. Go back to talking about the article you want to write about this place or your... animatronic huggability ranking, or whatever."

That gets a small chuckle out of Mark. "Sunny Bear is number one, no question. But I wouldn't touch any of them with a ten foot pole after this experience." The distraction must be working, because his nervous expression turns thoughtful. "You know, we've never seen the animatronics interact with each other at night. Do you think they're friends?"

Renjun doesn't know about *friends*. If the mascots are capable of teaming up, that would be bad news. As it is, their movements seem quicker and more erratic today—Sunny Bear and Birthday Boy are showing up at the doors more frequently—but it isn't until Nana leaves the store room that Mark starts to lose his cool.

Both doors slide shut when Mark presses down on the buttons simultaneously. Nana's jingle has started up, faint but growing in volume. The familiar tune sends a chill down Renjun's spine. At least this time, the doors don't malfunction.

"Let's leave the doors shut," Mark turns pleading eyes on him. "It's too risky with all three animatronics moving at the same time. One slip up and they'll be right—" As if to prove his point, the telltale thud of Birthday Boy trying to get into the office sounds suddenly from their right, making them jump.

"You say that like I want to keep the doors open," Renjun turns back to the screens warily. "Look, Birthday Boy already left. He's going back to the party room now."

But instead of agreeing with him like he usually does, Mark steps between Renjun and the desk. "Nana's out there," he says. "Have you forgotten what happened yesterday?"

"Mark," Renjun says sharply. "This is my job, not yours."

He knows Mark has a point. But they've already burned through a lot more power than they usually do by this point in the shift, and Renjun isn't sure how long they'll be able to keep this up with so many hours left. "We know what we need to do, so let's just stay focused—"

"The fourth animatronic," Mark says. "We haven't seen it yet."

Renjun exhales slowly. "Mark, there is no fourth animatronic."

"There has to be." There's an edge of hysteria in Mark's voice. It's made worse by the sound of Nana's jingle against the shrill laughter and footsteps outside. The noises border on overwhelming, messing with Renjun's head. Mark takes a step towards him. "Nana started moving yesterday, and it was only night four. Which means the last animatronic will start moving today."

Renjun shakes his head, stubborn. "You play too many video games. There's no such rule." He flinches as Sunny Bear's face appears suddenly in the left office window, locked out thanks to the closed door. Mark doesn't seem to even notice he's there. When Renjun tries to sidestep Mark to

reach the door buttons, Mark grabs his wrist.

“It’s the only explanation,” Mark insists. “There were originally four animatronics. There were *four* missing children, Renjun. One missing child possessing one animatronic.”

Renjun thinks of Sunny Bear’s childlike laughter. Of Birthday Boy’s sad eyes. Of Nana’s smile full of teeth. All of a sudden, his eyes begin to sting. “You’re wrong,” he says.

“How do you know that?” Mark asks.

Renjun swallows. “Mark—”

“How can you be so sure the fourth missing child isn’t here tonight?”

“Because *I* was the fourth missing child,” Renjun snaps.

Laughter. Footsteps. Nana’s jingle.

“What?” Mark whispers.

Renjun wrenches his hand from Mark’s grip, heartbeat loud in his ears. “Four children snuck into Nana’s Ice Cream World to play on that day twenty years ago, but only I managed to escape. So there were three missing children in the end.”

Mark’s eyes are wide. Renjun turns back to the screens, though he’s not really looking at them anymore.

“I’m sorry,” Mark says. Slowly, he reaches out and takes Renjun’s hand in his. “I had no idea. You should have told—I mean, do you know what happened to your friends? Did you know they were—the animatronics—”

Renjun shakes his head. Mark’s hands are warm, and so are his eyes. Renjun hasn’t told anyone about this, not in twenty years. “No. I didn’t see anything back then. I don’t remember. Someone must have been behind it, but I don’t know who. One of the reasons I took this job was because I thought I might—” He hesitates. “I thought I might be able to finally put it all behind me. I didn’t know anything about the animatronics or the possession.” Renjun manages a smile. “Did you think I was crazy enough to not want to quit when the mascots came to life and attacked us?”

“Dude, no, I just thought you were super brave,” Mark whispers. It’s such a relief to finally have this out in the open that *dude* doesn’t even annoy Renjun. “Is it really your friends controlling the animatronics?” Mark asks.

Renjun feels himself deflate a little. “I don’t know. Yes and no. The animatronics resemble them, but they wouldn’t ever *hurt* anyone, so it’s not really them. Not exactly.”

Mark nods. “I did some research on theories about possession, and people say the soul doesn’t equate to consciousness, so you wouldn’t necessarily be aware of what you’re doing. It’s kind of like a distorted version of yourself. You’d probably just be really confused and scared, which ends up—” He looks stricken. “Sorry. For talking about it so casually, like you didn’t know them.”

It’s an old wound reopened, but Renjun has spent most of his life holding the stitches together. He’s had practice. “It’s okay. I guess it does answer some questions. Sort of. I’m sorry for not telling you the truth earlier. I was—”

He’s cut off by a loud whirring noise, followed by a low electrical hum. Before either of them can

react, both doors in the office slide open and the lights go dim.

One by one, the screens in the room begin to shut off.

“The power,” Renjun says, realizing with a jolt that they’d kept the doors shut all this time.

“Shit,” Mark says, eyes wide with panic. “You were right. I didn’t actually think it would run out ___”

The doors are open. Without any barrier between the office and the rest of the rooms, every noise in the building is magnified, echoing through the hallways. When Renjun had last glimpsed the clock it had been close to three in the morning.

There’s no way they’ll last three more hours without any power.

But then Mark’s hand is on his, his voice in Renjun's ear. “We need to get out of here. Right now.” His determination shakes Renjun out of his daze, propels him towards the desk. They have to try. Renjun feels around for his flashlight, already forming a mental map of the ice cream parlor in his head. They need to find someplace safe to hide.

“I have an idea,” Renjun pulls Mark towards the left door. “But you’ll have to trust me.”

“My life is in your hands,” Mark says with a shaky laugh.

They make it to the end of the West hallway before the figure of Sunny Bear rounds the corner. The fear rises instantaneously, but Renjun pushes it down, just like he pushes Mark back when Mark instinctively tries to get in front of him. As Sunny Bear lunges for them, Renjun beams his flashlight directly into Sunny Bear’s face.

Body droops, jaw slackens. They move past the animatronic and keep going.

Nana’s jingle has finally grown faint enough that Renjun feels like he can breathe again. His flashlight flickers and dies just as he leads Mark into the kitchen.

“You’re taking us to the scooping room,” Mark says.

“It’s the one place in the building where the animatronics never go,” Renjun confirms. “It’s probably some sort of freezer, but we’ll have to take our chances with the cold.” Especially now that his flashlight is out of battery and they won’t be able to defend against animatronics anymore. Renjun tries for a lighthearted laugh. “Either that, or it’s someplace so terrible that even the mascots avoid it, and we’re fucked.”

The look on Mark’s face is apprehensive as Renjun pushes the door to the scooping room open, turning on the lights.

It’s not a freezer.

The room isn’t cold. There’s no ice cream. It looks like a workshop of some sort, tools and parts scattered across the floor, with a piece of machinery protruding from the wall that resembles a giant ice cream scoop, or maybe a mechanical arm. At Renjun’s feet is what appears to be the molted skin of a mascot suit.

But what’s most worrying is the animatronic standing in the corner of the room.

Or what *used* to be an animatronic. It looks more like a grotesque parody of one, metal crossbeams

and twisting wires, with two large eyeballs and a set of teeth the only identifiers of its face. Slowly, it turns to look at them.

“That’s an endoskeleton,” Mark says, in the same voice he uses when he’s trying to distract himself and ends up rambling. “Like, just the inside of an animatronic, without the skin. It looks like the skin is on the floor—oh my god. The fourth animatronic is Starry. I knew I was forgetting someone. I can’t believe I forgot *Starry Mouse*.”

“Right,” Renjun says. “So we’re fucked.”

There isn’t any time to think before Starry’s endoskeleton makes a screeching, electronic noise and charges at them. It moves even faster than Birthday Boy had during their encounter. Where its hand should be is a claw that takes a swipe at Mark, narrowly missing him as he ducks. Renjun scrambles out of the way, catching a glimpse of a navy blue security cap among the discarded parts on the floor as Starry spins around.

“Mark,” Renjun calls, dread threatening to drown out the adrenaline burning in his veins. “I think I know what happened to the previous night guard.”

There’s no time to think about that, either. Starry’s endoskeleton comes at Renjun this time, claw shooting out to snag Renjun’s arm despite Renjun’s best efforts to outmaneuver him. No sooner has Starry touched him than Mark grabs Starry from behind, dragging him backwards. Starry retaliates by spinning around and slamming Mark bodily to the ground.

“*Mark!*”

Renjun starts towards Mark’s crumpled form, but Starry’s endoskeleton looms over him in seconds, forcing him to take several hasty steps back. Renjun’s back hits the wall while Mark groans from the floor. The endoskeleton fixes unblinking eyeballs on Renjun, unhinges its metal jaw. This time, there’s nowhere to run.

The thundering of Renjun’s heartbeat is so loud in his ears that he doesn’t hear the music until he sees Mark raise fearful eyes towards the door.

A familiar jingle plays as Nana rounds the doorway, crossing the threshold into the room.

Oh, Renjun thinks. *We’re super fucked.*

Nana’s jingle ends abruptly. There’s something about him that strikes fear in Renjun’s heart, makes him want to curl up into a tiny ball and stay that way. Out of the corner of his eye, Renjun sees Mark climb to his feet as Nana takes one step forward, two steps, then springs towards them. Renjun braces himself.

But instead of attacking Renjun or Mark, Nana rams into Starry’s endoskeleton, the sound of metal crunching as Starry is pushed into the adjacent wall.

“Jaemin,” Renjun whispers. He doesn’t mean to—it just slips out. Nana’s head swivels towards him. *I missed you!* his cheery voice intones, before Starry’s endoskeleton hits back, headbutting Nana and sending his furry pink body crashing to the floor.

Everything that follows is fragmented. Nana and Starry’s endoskeleton going at each other. Sunny Bear and Birthday Boy showing up in succession to join the fray. Mark’s hand in Renjun’s, pulling him out the door. Renjun runs through darkness, blindly trusting. The next thing he knows, he’s standing at the entrance to the ice cream parlor, moonlight illuminating the front room through the glass doors.

“Renjun?” Mark’s voice is worried. “We made it—we’re safe. Come on.”

“Mark,” Renjun chokes out. “I can’t leave.”

The vent he’d escaped out of twenty years ago had been too high above the ground for a child to reach on his own. Renjun doesn’t remember much about that night, but he remembers crawling through the filthy space, too afraid to look back. Paralyzed with fear as he waited on the other side for his friends to emerge after him.

“They’re still trapped in there,” Renjun says. “Nothing’s changed. I can’t be the only one to leave again—I have to do something.”

“Okay,” Mark looks helplessly back in the direction they’d come. “What can we do?”

We. Renjun had almost forgotten what it’s like not to be completely alone. “It won’t end until everything is gone,” Renjun says. “The ice cream parlor. The animatronics. I have to get rid of this place.”

He must sound insane, but apparently Mark likes Renjun enough to roll with it. He’s probably used to it after braving multiple near-death experiences over several days.

“To free a soul from possession, you have to get rid of the host,” Mark says. “That’s what I read, anyway. There aren’t many ways to destroy an animatronic, but high temperatures is one of them. If we go back to the kitchen, we could light this place up.”

Renjun’s throat feels thick. “You don’t have to do this for me.”

“I’m not leaving you,” Mark reminds him gently. “Remember?”

They go back to the kitchen.

Renjun had misjudged Mark once again; it turns out the star student from his university days knows a thing or two about committing arson. Renjun doesn’t look back into the scooping room when the first spark ignites, nor when the flames grow, engulfing everything around it. The heat sears his face, and Renjun thinks he hears the giggle of a child as he and Mark find their way out of the building for the last time.

Nana’s Ice Cream World burns brilliantly against the night sky. Deep down, there’s a part of Renjun that’s held desperately to the guilt of losing his friends for as long as he can remember. Renjun lets it burn as well.

DAY 6: SATURDAY

“Fiery farewell: Nana’s Ice Cream World bids second goodbye after restaurant destroyed by fire in suspected gas leak,” Renjun reads off the screen of his phone. “Owner under investigation for suspected unsafe workplace practices now linked to two-decade-old missing children case. Full article by Mark Lee.”

There’s a light flush on Mark’s cheeks. Renjun suspects it isn’t because of the beer. They’d chosen

to meet for dinner at a pizzeria on the other side of town, which also happens to be a stone's throw away from Mark's office. The place is fancier than Renjun expected, with a live band and ambient blue-purple lighting, but it's nice.

"You're not allowed to talk about work," Mark says. There's a small whine in his voice, even though he's smiling. Renjun wants to kiss him. "No work," Mark repeats. "This is a date."

Renjun tries to think of something to say that isn't related to the ice cream parlor in any way. He'd let the incident twenty years ago define him for so long that it's hard to imagine existing outside of it. "Oh," he says, suddenly feeling self-conscious. "I was thinking of going back. To finish my degree. I know it's late, but... better late than never, right?"

The way Mark instantly brightens sets Renjun's heart at ease. "That's awesome," Mark says. "I'm so excited for you. Really."

"Thanks," Renjun feels his cheeks warm. "I figured it was about time. I'm not going to forget about them. I could never. But I guess this is where I try to move on, or something."

Mark leans forward in his seat, lowering his voice. "You know it wasn't your fault. You were just a kid. And you know you're never alone in this, right?"

Something about the complete sincerity in his voice makes Renjun wholeheartedly believe in every sappy thing Mark says. But that's exactly what Renjun likes about him.

"And what about you, mister journalist?" Renjun teases. "What's in store for you?"

"I'll find things to write about. There's always something."

"After all that effort, you didn't end up finding that scoop you were looking for."

The soft smile that breaks out on Mark's face suits him perfectly. Mark reaches across the table, takes Renjun's hand in his. "No, but I found something better."

End Notes

let me know what you thought if you've played fnaf...or even if you haven't ♥

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