

# **Cluster I**

## A Collaborative Novella

As Authored By:

**Eric Leibold**

**Brandon McCalip**

and

**Josh Sabio**

Oscar giggled as he lit his Zippo and held it under the dirty spoon. His crabby voice echoed throughout the trashcan, "Here I go again." He had just shaved a small patch on his forearm, with a rusty tuna can lid, leaving the underside stripped of his gray fur, which was now scattered on the floor of the metal trash can. Oscar was shaking so badly from the anticipation that he had to jab four times to find a vein. "Come on you son of a... Ahhhh." The heroin-induced euphoria couldn't have been any sweeter to the puppet-like monster. While squirming with a childish delight, Oscar shit himself but barely seemed to notice. As he crept closer to unconsciousness, he somewhat felt like singing. Oscar sat in his can, drunk, stoned, and covered in his own feces. Just before the dizziness overtook him, he pressed his face to the metal side. "Can you tell me how to get..."

...and then he puked all over himself. Apparently he had previously eaten some Sesame seeds. These things happen, but this time it was especially sad. Oscar would put down the needle forever. He had hit rock bottom. The haze quickly fell, and his head hit the ground. He began to cry. Cry, and bawl his little Oscar eyes out, head on the ground, trying to find something to bring up his life. Of course, he didn't realize he was crying with his nose on a line of cocaine someone had carelessly left there previously. Well! Things were looking up already.

He felt the rush immediately; the sour smell of garbage shifted back to the saccharine illusion that had carried him through his life for so long. Rock bottom didn't last long enough, as Oscar surveyed his lair for the source of his next score. Scratching his back, a clump of fur hit the bottom of the trashcan. As he schemed, he heard knocking on the side of the can.

Four hours earlier and eight blocks uptown, a blue hand slowly loaded shells into a bloodstained twelve gauge. His normally googly eyes were bloodshot and filled with anger. Four nervous puppets carefully watched the blue figure pace in the corner. His growling, kooky voice broke the silence, making the crew members jump. "How much was taken?!"

The frightened puppets looked at one another and then collectively answered, "Two... Two kilos, boss."

The blue figure snatched a fist into a cookie-filled dish and then quickly chomped down a handful of Oreos. "Oscar will pay!"

The four followers looked at each other, saying, "We found the inside man responsible." The aqua gangster gave a nod of approval. The four soldiers went into the next room and dragged out the child-like red monster. When they threw the small red body at Cookie's feet, Elmo coughed up some blood and gave a whimper.

Cookie smiled at the boy as he cocked the weapon. The high-pitched voice pleaded, "No, no... Elmo fix. Elmo fiiiiixxxx!" *Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!* Elmo fell, coughing even more blood, his voice draining, almost a whisper, saying "Elmo fix, Elmo...fix..." and his eyes closed, presumably forever.

The Cookie Monster knew that the boss wouldn't like this. He was a stickler for numbers. Cookie recalled the story of the boss, they called him the Count, and how he beat some people for one out of some 135 kilos missing. He counts every single one. Cookie knew he had to make up the missing amount, and fast.

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"Shit!" Bert's voice rebounded through the house as he slammed down the phone. "Elmo just got whacked over that two kilos of snow he let slip to the Grouch." Ernie sprinted to the back closet, slipping a chrome-plated Glock under his sweater and into his waistband. He wasn't sure it would be today, but he knew this beef was bound to blow up soon. To Ernie, the mission was clear: send Cookie to hell. What he had done to Grover was reason enough, but now with Elmo dead it was urgent. Little did Ernie know, Bert's motives were not as clearly-cut.

As Bert sat down and got drunk, he reflected on last week's episode. Ernie stormed out to get drunk at Slutty McNasty's. The letters of the day were T & A.

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It was 9 p.m., and Snuffy was stumbling down MLK Street. His trunk gripped a handle of Everclear, which was now almost empty. Stripped of his inhibitions, Snuffy looked around for some easy tail. As he swigged back the remaining contents from the stolen bottle, Snuffy spotted a gray Nissan Pathfinder parked two blocks up ahead. Snuffy's vision was blurry, and his loins were on fire. "Ohhh my God," he mouthed as his glossy eyes ogled the vehicle. "Baby got back," he mumbled as he trotted up behind it. Baby really didn't have back; she had a tire rack. It wasn't long before the mammoth mounted the SUV. His front legs bent the roof as he drunkenly humped the automobile. His nappy, soiled junk connected to what he thought was pachyderm poon. The grimy muffler was a perfect fit, and it was warm enough to do the trick. After 5 long seconds, Snuff

exploded, and his 11 ton body fell, crushing the front seats, shattering the windows, activating the car alarm, and causing Snuffy to pass out.

At 9:15 p.m., Bert heard a loud crash followed by his car alarm. “What the hell?” He bolted downstairs and saw Snuffy with what used to be his car. After three hours of screaming and profanity, Bert and Snuffy had come to an agreement: Snuffy was now Bert’s chauffer, and he would carry Bert wherever he needed to go. And as they were making a beer-run, they came across an interesting sight.

“Is that Grover up on that construction beam?” inquired Snuffy.

“Yeah... He must be high again,” remarked Bert. He then stood up on Snuffy’s back and took off his shirt, exposing several of his tattoos. Bert screamed, “Hey!” but the blue monster didn’t seem to notice them as he sat with his legs dangling over the side. Bert looked down at Snuffy and chuckled, “Give him a scare. Clear your sinuses.”

The mammoth snorted deeply and then extended his trunk, taking aim. “*Fphaaah!*” He fired a melon-sized ball of snot toward the construction site. The act was meant only to get Grover’s attention; however, the 70 mph projectile slammed right into his face. Grover never even saw it coming. It hit so hard that it not only broke his nose, but it also sent him plummeting thirteen stories and crashing headfirst into a port-a-potty.

“Oh shit!” they said as they rushed over to the scene. The two heard some groans coming from the port-a-potty as they opened the door. The smell was revolting. Their furry blue friend was now drenched in liquid shit. His fur was now a greenish gray. Grover mumbled as he rose to his feet, only to fall right back down. Holding his broken nose as he looked up, “Wha... what happened?”

Bert and Snuffy glanced at one another. It was time to lie. So for the next ten minutes, Bert told Grover that “someone” flung something and then ran off screaming “Cookie! Cookie! Cookie!” This is how rumors start. All of Sesame Street wouldn’t believe it, but Grover — still high on shrooms — believed every word of it.

Grover’s broken nose made his voice wretchedly nasal, “That bastard!”

Snuffy laughed adding in, “You look and sound just like the Grouch.” All three laughed.

“You smell like the bastard too!” Bert added. After the laughter there was an awkward pause. That was just how the episode ended. Bert chuckled to himself: “It’s all falling into place.”

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Things were quiet for several weeks. No one knows why, but everyone on Sesame Street, known affectionately as Don't Mess Wit' Me Street, knows that the lull means a storm is approaching. On the corner of Sesame Street and Poppyseed Avenue, there lay the dead body of Telly, mutilated almost beyond recognition. What he'd done only he and the Count knew, but this day no one was admiring his normally pimpin' fashion sense, or his usually gangsta gait down the street. No, today people were gasping at the giant, hand-sized hole someone had managed to carve out of his posterior.

It's like they used him for a puppet, the murmurs could be heard. Plain disgusting. But why did his ass and back look like the frantic end of a treasure hunt? It all had to do with the Count. Five days ago...

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The Count was seriously pissed off. He had thought Cookie was trustworthy – and maybe he was – but this Elmo shit was completely unbelievable. The Count's underground had complete run of the town, so why was Cookie off choosing business associates who skimmed a little off the top?

It was time to take inventory. Ernie was out to get Cookie; it only took one blood-soaked rubber ducky through a window to be sure of that. Bert could be expected to follow suit. Snuffy was a goon; he would follow the ass and the money, in that order. Grover just talked a bunch of acid-trip shit; hopefully nobody would take him too seriously. And the Grouch was out to take the Count's job.

This was just small stuff, nothing the Count hadn't seen in his 395.41 years as a gangster boss. But, he had to see if his deputy could be trusted. The sting had to be good, he thought, rubbing his sizeable nose. It came to him at once. "Ha, ha, ha." Perfect.

Telly was a screw-up, and the perfect decoy. He did more smack than Grover, but he got violent – not just stupid – when he was tripping. The fool must have thought the Count wasn't aware of his private little "importing" operations and all the tricks he managed himself. He forgot one of the Count's favorite rules: "Give me a cut, or you get cut."

The Count reached into his desk and pulled out a triangle, ringing it rapidly. Hearing the moron's footfalls across the hideout, the Count crumpled a fatal dose of Vicodin into a glass of vodka.

It didn't take long to get the sedated and dying furball propped up into a chair. Letting the toxin do its work, the Count spent some time setting up a fictional meeting with Cookie.

Concealing himself behind a curtain, the Count pushed his arm into the ass-end of the dead little tweaker and practiced his Telly impersonation. The sting

involved a business proposition to run a few shipping crates of pot under the Count's radar.

When Cookie came into the room, the Count began to make his devious pitch. Cookie, after hearing the plan, was incredulous. "Bullshit. No way the Count's going to miss all that weed."

"Come on, man," the Count mimicked. "This deal is golden."

"Telly, you're not just an idiot. You're an asshole. You know I'm not going to screw over the Count."

"Man, you're just a chicken, man. That's what you are. Why don't you take all them cookies and shove 'em up your ass!"

Cookie let out a growl and lodged a switchblade into Telly's jaw, narrowly missing the Count's inserted hand. Telly's remains looked like hamburger meat before the Count could emerge from behind the curtain and reveal the true nature of the meeting.

"Boss," laughed Cookie, "You are one ruthless bastard."

"I like to know who I can trust," beamed the vampire. "I'd shake your hand, but I assume you'll pass on that," glancing down at the bloody tuxedo arm. "Now, help me get rid of this corpse."

There was no doubt now. Despite all prior mistakes, Cookie could be trusted.

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Snuffy stumbled into his home late that night. He only had about five hours before he had to meet Bert and Grover at the septic tank to complete phase two of the plan.

Less than a week ago, the first phase had gone off flawlessly. Grover took a diarrhea bath, making him indistinguishable from the Grouch, and then Grover conned Elmo into letting him use the crack-house bathroom. When he left, he stole two kilos of the Count's Columbian nose candy. As Grover left the place, he smeared shit over everything, clearly leaving "the marks of the Grouch." Elmo took the immediate rap from Cookie. Problems with the Count's crew were handled without mercy.

Phase two was already in motion. The Count would soon send his most trusted under-boss, Cookie Monster, after the Grouch. The Count was smart. He put his most trusted man on the job. It made sense to test Cookie's loyalty, but none of the three foresaw the Telly incident. Nevertheless, none of them really gave a shit because their plan was working.

Bert, Grover and Snuffy all knew the Grouch was going to get more than a bullet for this shit – after all, they framed him – and the plan needed Cookie to do the deed himself.

When Snuffy walked in late again, he prepared himself for the inevitable bitching that would come from his wife Angela.

“Wilhelm Murphy Snuffleupagus, where have you been?” she called from the kitchen. “Ohhh, hell,” he whispered to himself, as he prepared for the worst. As he looked up, he expected to see his wife with a rolling pin in her trunk.

When he saw his wife sitting behind the dinner table, he knew he had screwed up. He had forgotten that today was their anniversary. She looked at him with her big brown eyes, and he was speechless. Snuffy felt terrible.

“I made dinner for us...,” she whimpered, just before she started to weep.

“Oh Angela, I’m so sorry I forgot...” As he trotted over to her side of the table, he noticed she had put on makeup. Her mascara was running and most of it had dripped together in the patches of wool under her eyes. She had curled her wool, and she was wearing that sexy pink bow in her hair that he liked. She had lipstick smears all around her mouth, and the tip of her trunk was covered in red as well. (Delicate work was difficult for Snuffleupagus. It must have been hard for her to grip the tiny lipstick tube between her trunk.) She apparently tried to do her nails, because the fur by her feet was covered in red as well.

Here he was, a bum, coming home to a woman doing her very best to rekindle their dying marriage. Still by her side, his trunk reached to the side and grabbed a towel to dry her eyes.

“You smell of gasoline and car wax... You’ve been having sex with cars again, haven’t you?” As she broke down into hysterics, Snuffy realized something: she was the only one who truly cared for him. Everyone else in this shit-hole neighborhood just used him or ignored him.

“Angela, I’m sorry. I’m going to fix it. I promise. Soon, very soon, we will never have to worry about money again. You and I will get out of this shit-hole neighborhood.”

And as she sobbed in his shoulder, he thought about what he had just said. Of course, he had said the same things to her many times before, but this time he meant it. “Did I ever tell you that you are the prettiest Snuffleupagee in the world?”

With her head still resting in the nook between his holder and neck, she looked up at him, "I'm the only Snuffleupagee." As she answered, her head raised just enough for Snuffy to spot a smirk.

"That's true," he smiled, "but you're still the prettiest."

The words touched her. No one had told her she was pretty in years. "Oh, Snuff." They wrapped their trunks together. "Do you still think I'm sexy, even if I don't have four wheel drive?" They both giggled as they held one another. It was the first time they had laughed together since they were teens. He hoped it wouldn't be the last.

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Five hours later, Snuffy met Bert and Grover by the open septic tank. At first, Grover was hesitant to the idea of jumping into the pool of liquid shit, so Bert gave him a fist-full of Sesame-Ecstasy. As soon as Bert saw Grover rubbing his own nipples, he pushed him in. The sight was nauseating. The G-man was actually enjoying the swim. He even started gulping down pints of the putrid excrement.

What Bert and Snuffy didn't know was that Grover saw something in that pool of old shit. In fact, a lot of somethings. During one of his dives he saw gold among the crap. He thought it was the Sesame-Ecstasy at first, but he knew what he saw when he saw it. Small baggies of cocaine, all in a clump. He imagined someone had to flush their stash when the cops came, and well, it was good times for Grover. But fuck! Bert and Snuffy'd never let him get away from the tank with that. He figured the if the plastic baggies can make it through the tank for however long, they could make it through the Grover intestinal system. So he started eating, with the giant elephant fuck and the banana headed cunt none the wiser.

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Meanwhile, Ernie was fuckin' pissed. He was clearly the hardest motherfuckin' gangsta to ever walk the Sesame Streets. He killed motherfuckas for no reason at all. Hell, just the other day, some old blind guy stepped on his shoes, so he shot him right in the nose, then took a piss on him – all while the cops were rollin' right by. Fuck that, he thought. So he put two into the foreheads of those motherfuckin' pigs as well. Shit, he knew they'd be on him now. He stole a car, went to the local paint shop, and came out with a new car and the authorities were none the wiser. That shit was gangsta. So why the hell was he still living with Bert? Shit, Sesame street was expensive, and he wasn't being paid enough. Fuck that, he thought. I'm gettin' mine, one way or another. With that, he headed off into the direction of the Count's Castle.

Ernie's little self-confidence episode didn't last long before the reality of the streets set in. The truth was, Ernie needed Bert's protection. Bert was connected, and he had the street sense to walk the other way when the bullets were flying. Ernie left the house to take over the town, but by the time he neared the gates of the Castle, he was ready to turn himself over to a new boss. "So maybe I'm not the gangster I thought I was," he thought to himself, "but at least I'll be working for the real kingpin of this town."

If Ernie had been walking just around the corner on Poppyseed, he would have seen the Count's posse – led by Cookie – advancing fast toward the worst-smelling trashcan on the whole street. Even had he made that fateful turn, what he still wouldn't have seen was a tuft of hair on a yellow head, peeking up from behind the rail of a third-floor balcony. As it was, Ernie was walking directly away from the biggest firefight the Street had ever seen. It would be the second biggest by the end of the day.

Bert mumbled to himself, trying to hold his semiautomatic steady as he shook the last bits of filth and blood from his hands. The Grouch was too wasted on heroin to put up much of a fight, and substituting Grover (and a cache of weaponry fit for a small army) in the can was easier than expected. In fact, Bert and Snuffy agreed that it probably smelled even worse with Grover in there.

Phase Three was in some ways the simplest part of the plan: Snuffy was lookout (his particular anatomy not allowing for accurate marksmanship); a few good puffs through that trunk were to tip them off that the kill-squad was close. Grover would shoot his way out of the can, while Bert would provide deadly sniper crossfire sure to overwhelm any number of the Count's henchmen. From that point onward, their cover would be blown, but the Count's main men would be dead.

However, the mind is a mysterious thing. At some point, to one who thirsts everything begins to appear as water. But to one who gets high, things all eventually look like drugs. Even a detailed post-battle autopsy couldn't determine precisely what Grover had eaten in the septic tank, but one could be assured it was not precisely plastic bags of drugs. The seizure resulting from this ill-conceived consumption was violent, and it occurred about the time Snuffy's warning blasts brought Bert to attention above the scene. It was clear that Grover's finger had clamped down on the trigger of his main weapon, causing the Grouch's can to erupt in machine gun fire.

"Shit," Bert breathed. Knowing Grover's consumption habits, Bert got the idea quick. "I'm going to have to lay low to get out of here alive." Cookie and his crew lit up the trashcan, detonating the grenades stacked around its perimeter to form a pea-soup-green cloud. The irony of Grover going down in a mushroom-shaped cloud was not missed by Bert.

Bert was just beginning to relax as the thugs slapped fives, congratulating each other and strutting around like cowboys. "I may just get out of here alive," he thought. But it was all complicated by that damn Boy Scout Big Bird's long-ass neck.

For it was that yellow neck which popped out of the third-floor balcony, right above Bert's head. Then Bert felt a cold barrel pressing against the back of his head. His aggressor whispered to him, "Move veeerrry slowly back into the room." Bert complied. As he closed the window, he noticed that the gun was no longer pressed to his head. He heard footsteps walking away from him. He still didn't want to turn around. He heard the room door shut. "Turn around slowly, and get your hands in the air!" Bert recognized the voice. As he raised his arms and turned around, Bert raised his middle fingers at the Bird.

"How do you like them apples, you mother clucker!"

The bird holstered his gun. "Ha ha! That's what I love about you Bert. Your wit beats all." The two walked toward each other.

"Why you old son of a bitch! I haven't seen you in ages!"

The two hugged and patted each other on the back. "It's good to see you too, Bert!"

"I thought you had flown the coop! How's your woman doing... she still ploppin' out them eggs? Ha ha ha!"

"I'll tell you all about that later. Fill me in on what's goin' on here."

After Bert explained the situation to his long lost best friend, he heard the words that almost made him wish he hadn't seen the bird again... "Ernie's gone rogue."

"What?"

"He's gone totally ape-shit!"

"How so?"

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As Big Bird gave Bert the 4-1-1 in that filthy apartment, Guy Smiley had his ear pressed to the door and his hands nervously loaded a 357. Once it was loaded, he stood there with his head down, thinking about how he had lost his job as an anchorman. "How was I supposed to know she was only 15? She said she was on the pill for Christ's sake," he griped through clenched teeth. "This time, I'll be first at the scene... of a double homicide... t-t-t-then the people will love me again."

Smiley reached into his pocket and took out his bottle of methamphetamines. “Guuh...guh... Gotta t-t-take the edge off.”

After tossing several pills, his jittery movement stopped. He started breathing deeper as the pre-rush gushed throughout his body. His eyes rolled back to white. “Ohh...yeah.” He was breathing out of quivering, chapped-lips. But the pleasure didn’t rise.

“Need more, need more.” Smiley snarfed down another fistful from the bottle. Just then, Guy felt a warm feeling spreading throughout his chest. He knew something was not right. He made his way down another corridor.

Guy Smiley felt a sneeze coming on. Knowing that any loud noise still might alert the men in the room, he locked his jaw and pinched his nose in hopes to contain it.

“Ahhh...” Right when Smiley sneezed, his shirt violently burst open — revealing two melon-sized breasts. “What the hell!” as he felt up his new assets. He took another look at the pill bottle. “BIRTH CONTROL!” He covered his mouth. “Aww man! That little bitch musta switched my speed with her birth control! No wonder she got pregnant!”

He felt another sneeze coming on. “Ohh no! Not again. Ahhh...” He contained the sneeze once more. This time his thighs expanded and he forgot math.

“Shit! I can’t do a story looking like this!” pouted Guy/Girl Smiley as he ran home to do — whatever the hell someone would do in that situation.

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Right after Thing Smiley ran away, Big Bird had just finished explaining.

“To sum it all up, Bert, your boy’s gone nuckin’ futs!”

“Well, Bird, I got some shit to handle first. I gotta finish the final stage of my plan. Come back me up first, then I’ll straighten out Ernie.” Bert then started mumbling to himself, “Cookie should be on his way back to report to the Count. I think the Count lives near where that news reporter/rapist used to live.”

“What the hell’s going on?”

“I’ll explain it all to you on the ride there.”

“Well, where we going and how are we gonna get there?”

“Count’s castle, by mammoth.”

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As Big Bird and Bert headed up to meet up with the Snuffster, another key player was making his way down Sesame Street. The yang to Smiley's yin, he was a reporter of the highest caliber. He could handle a camera, and was a terror on the microphone. He was damn near genocidal with his .45 if he had to be. He had a way with the ladies – he liked 'em big. Kermit knew it wasn't easy being green, especially in this part of town. As he turned on the corner, he saw the hotel he was going to meet his contact at. This was going to be dangerous, and for a moment, he wondered if he should turn back.

The roads in front of him were the perilous lanes of Sesame Street. But, down the block behind him was Mr. Rogers' neighborhood. King Friday ruled there, and he wouldn't make believe that it was any safer. Plus, the story was clearly here. With a renewed resolve, the frog headed to the hotel. He opened the door and the rank smell of weeks-old bacon greeted him. He started salivating as he saw his only woman sitting on a dirty bench, pleasuring herself with the aid of a magazine.

"Darling Piggy," he murmured to himself. As he sauntered over to her, practically salivating, she stopped her diddling and looked up at him.

"Hello, sailor. Take me for a ride, and I'll take you to the story that I know you're looking for."

"I'd love to, but I ain't got time for that. Shit is about to go down, and I need to know where."

"Shit's going down, eh? Well, if you do that same thing, I'll tell you where you need to be to get that story."

Kermit was stuck. Luckily for him, frogs have tongues meant to catch flies. They have other uses as well. It was only three minutes later that he knew where he had to go: Count's Castle. He loaded his weapon, took off the safety, readied his camera, and ran toward the castle. There'd be a lot of shooting this day, and his tools of the trade would be ready.

Bert and Big Bird arrived at the meeting spot to see the shock of a lifetime. Snuffy was lying, tongue hanging out of his mouth, eyes shut, in a pool of blood. Big Bird let out a litany of curses, none of which were very nice. With that, Snuffy rose to his feet.

"Damn, Biggie Birds, what's the problem? Can't an elephant get a nap?"

"Oh shit! You're still alive? What the fuck's with the blood? Are you shot?"

"Blood? What blood? Oh...damn it, I must have fell asleep on top of a hobo again..."

"Oh Snuffy!" Bert and Bird said in unison.

They headed off to the Castle at a breakneck pace. Upon arriving, though, Bert caught something in the corner of his eye. He turned to look, and he saw something that would shock him more than the deaths of a thousand snuffleupagae.

On a street where money replaced love, where money had in fact killed love some long time ago, most short-term romantic relationships could be measured by the minute. However, the four-minute tryst of Ernie and Girl Smiley would go down as the most bizarre union of faux-gangsters in the Street's history. Bert couldn't believe his eyes as he peered through the window of the house in which Smiley was still a squatter.

To Bert, the sight of the two rejects locked in a loving embrace would cauterize the last feelings of friendship he held for his lifetime companion Ernie. Standing in the shadow of the Count's castle, Bert realized that Ernie was in essence a helpless addict of affection and self-aggrandizement: Bert's personal failings led to the addition of the Duckie, whose squeaky muteness brought Ernie to delusions of street credibility, finally delivering him into the arms of a transgendered, disgraced media figure.

"He's helpless," Bert muttered from atop Snuffy's back. "He'll always reach out to the next thing willing to say he's alright, willing to tell him he's the real deal." Steadying his semi's aim through the cracked window, it became clear what he had to do. What must be done to preserve the last of his non-friend's eroding dignity.

Snuffy's voice shook Bert's concentration. "Don't shoot, Bert." The Snuffleupagum was clearly stifling his tears. "Can't you see he's just trying to find a place to belong?"

Moved by the elephant's words, Bert lowered his piece. "You're right, Snuffy," he breathed. "There's enough killing to do today. Let's break though those castle gates." The Bird voiced his assent as all three warriors prepared themselves for death and glory, or perhaps only one of the two.

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While Bert was redefining the most important relationship of his life, Kermit couldn't decide what to film next: first Ernie makes out with his trannie ex-boss, then he sees Cookie readying the Count's defenses for an all-out raid on the battlements. With a portion of pig still on his lips not readily called pork, Kermit was preparing to have the biggest hour of his life.

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“What are we going to do, Bert?” inquired Snuffy. “Cookie knows that we’re going to attack.”

“Let me think a moment.”

As Bert mumbled to himself, trying to think of a way inside the fortress, Snuffy mentioned an idea to Big Bird. “We could use Linda to seduce her way inside.”

“You mean the deaf ho?” Bird replied.

“Yeah, you know, she could like talk sexy to the puppets at the gate and...”

“That is the worst idea I’ve ever heard!” screamed Bert. “I don’t think we can rely on the awkward deaf-talk of the local Latin slut!”

Snuffy looked hurt from the comment. “Sorry, I’m just trying to help. It’s not like we can just burst through the wall and start killing people.”

Bert’s eyes lit up. “Snuffy, you’re a genius!” Big Bird and Snuffy looked at one another as Bert shoved the gun behind his belt and took out his cell phone.

“Who are you calling, Bert?” Big Bird asked.

“An old friend I met during one of the commercial breaks.” Bert pressed the phone to his ear and started talking. “Hey, Big Red! I need a favor... I mean... I need to ask a favor from you.”

Twenty minutes later, an eight foot pitcher of red liquid came stumbling down the block. As he approached, both Snuffy and Big Bird stared in awe.

The glass container was holding a handle of McCormick’s Vodka. Before he spoke, he reached an arm up and dumped the rest of the bottle into himself. “Waz up... \*hic-up\* ...Biz-ert!”

As Bert explained the details to the giant jug of sugar water, Bird whispered to Snuffy, “This drink is drunk.”

“I know.” Snuffy couldn’t contain his excitement any longer. His trunk slowly crept up over the glass rim and sucked up a few gallons of the crimson liquid. Kool-Aid didn’t seem to notice. “Blah!” coughed the mammoth. “That’s the strongest bitch-punch I’ve ever tasted.”

Bert had just finished explaining the situation to the pitcher.

“Alright baby... so which wall ...\*hic-up\*...is it again?”

Bert pointed. “You lead the way, and we’ll be right behind you.”

“Well gimme some space baby...\*hic-up\*... there gonna be bits of wall and shit flying everywhere ...\*hic-up\*... so remember to take cover Biz-ert.”

They were all ready for battle. Bert started rallying the group. After he got their blood flowing, there was an almost unnoticed calm before the storm... a moment of silence.

With a heated look on his face, Bert growled, “Let’s do this shit!”

Snuffy sounded a trumpet blast with his trunk. The pack started running full force toward the castle. Kool-Aid was in the front. Twenty feet behind him, the others formed a flying-V. As they got closer, they ran even faster.

Cookie squinted, looking down from the tall castle walls. He turned and looked back to the 30 puppets behind him. “Get back to your posts!” he screamed. The group scrambled. His googly eyes then locked onto the scene below him.

A green figure hid behind the bushes, filming the scene. “This is going to get me an Emmy.”

As Kool-Aid connected with the wall, everything seemed to move in slow motion. Bert’s spirit sunk as a high-pitched shatter echoed around him. Red water and broken glass exploded all over the ancient stone wall. The three were speechless.

Bert’s anger soon broke the silence. “You gotta be shitting me!”

“We’re sitting ducks!” yelled Bird.

Snuffy made the sign of the cross with his trunk.

They heard laughter from above. Cookie’s troops all had their guns pointed at them from the castles out posts. The blue henchman laughed harder and harder. Between laughing, Cookie tried to regain his composure. “Ha ha ha... You guys are dumb-asses... ha ha ha.” His belly laughing continued. “Ha ha haaa! What the hell did you expect? Ha ha ha. That shit’s solid brick! Ha ha ha!”

Suddenly Bert had an idea. “What’s the one thing everyone in Sesame Street can’t resist?”

Big Bird and Snuffy answered him, “A sing-along?”

“Exactly.” Bert smiled. “Give us a beat, Snuff.”

The Snuffalupagus started trotting in place. "Start us off, Bird."

Big Bird started in with his part:

*"Biggie Birdz and I'm hustlin makin them g's  
Rollin with a rolex and a pocket full of seeds  
All the ladies wantz ta suck me,  
And all the farmers wantz ta pluck me  
Everybody wantz ta be me,  
cause old ladies wantz ta feed me."*

Then Snuffy:

*"Snuffleupagus, when I fart you feel the gust,  
You must know I'm dan-ger-us  
You think you're Iron? I am the rust  
If you wanna fight, your face I'll bust!  
Uhhhh!  
It takes 5 kegs to get me drunk,  
And if it's time to get Crunk, I'll just pop my trunk!"*

Bert lit up a cigarette and then started his song. His rap sounded angry:

*"Ya'll bitches be alert,  
Cause ya know dis here is Bert.  
I'll make ya lady squirt  
And leave ya lying in the dirt  
'Cause you know I'll bring the hurt...sucka.  
Don't let the yellow skin faze-ya,  
I'm more shockin' than poe-lease tazer.  
So what? Big deal. I know I'm an asshole  
But I gotz-a message for the king of this castle  
Bring the guns and the troops outside for this bout  
Cause ya'll betta know I'm not down for the Count!"*

As all the puppets cheered, Bert screamed "Now!"

Snuffy shot a snot directly at Cookie, knocking him unconscious.

Big Bird soared above the walls and started dropping paint-can sized dumps over half of the crew.

Bert flicked his cigarette right at the red drippings on the wall, setting ablaze the old wood and stone, not to mention 15 of Cookie's crew.

Bert smiled and then yelled, "Hey Bird, give me a lift!"

Big Bird and Bert were over the wall and inside the main castle. Snuffy had to wait – Big Bird couldn't lift his fat ass. Quickly, the Bird and the Bert made their way toward the drawbridge. Snuffy'd meet up with them there.

Nobody seemed to notice the shadowy figure with a camera in hand leapfrogging the wall.

Cookie, still groggy from the snot shot that hit him on the side of the head (some went into his mouth), wearily got up on his feet. "*Fuck* that. They are dead," he said, his eyes crossed in anger.

From his elevated position, he saw the Snuffleupagus heading toward the drawbridge. He grinned, took out a revolver, and walked his way to the other part of the castle.

Bert and Big Bird were sneaking (as well as two bright yellow bastards can do in a dark castle) their way up to the drawbridge. The corridors were crawling with henchmen, but with a little luck, Bert and Big Bird stayed clear.

"We're almost there! I can smell Snuffy!" Big Bird whispered.

"Good, let's get him the hell in here so we can..."

And that instant, Bert heard someone sneaking up behind him. He instinctively pulled his piece out, swung around, and fired. In that flash, he saw the face of a big purple, furry thing, grimacing.

Whatever it was, it fell to the ground. Another figure, wearing black and white from what Bert could make out, fled the scene. All that could be heard from him was a comical pattering of his feet and the words "Robble Robble Robble" coming from his mouth. Bert wasn't one to waste bullets, but this guy could be a threat, so he fired another into what could only be categorized as his face.

"OWWW!!!" the bloody purple thing said. "Don't do that!"

"He's still alive?! Fuck!" Big Bird said, as he pulled his piece out. "Let me handle this."

"Nooooo! I'm Grimace. My friend's trying to rob this place. I told him we *shoouuldn't*, but he wouldn't listen."

"So you're not with the Count?" Bert inquired, then he thought for a second. "Screw that, I gotta ice you – you've seen too much." With that, he pumped another one into the furry thing's face.

"OWWW!!! Stop that! It's futile... Nothing can kill The Grimace. But that still hurts, y'knoow!"

Big Bird had an idea. "Nothing can kill you, eh? You're coming with us. We've gotta go – all the time we've wasted, someone had to have heard us."

With that they took off, Bert's gun held to the back of a bloody, faceless, but still very-alive Grimace. Soon, they were at the drawbridge, and Bert holstered his gun, quickly going to work on the mechanism to lower it. As he did, Bert felt the presence of a gun at his temple.

"Die," Cookie said. But before he could pull the trigger, he felt a gun's barrel resting on the back of his head.

"Come on, now, who do you think you are?" replied the voice that Bert couldn't place.

"Ha ha ha! Bless your soul!" said an even more sinister voice from somewhere in the room behind him.

Bert knew exactly who that was: the Count. Bert whipped around, and he saw several things: a gun at his forehead, Cookie, and a frog keeping him alive with his own weapon ready to splatter Cookie's brains. But there was no sign of the Count. He also spied a camera on the frog's shoulder, as well as the obvious reporter getup.

"*Fuck!* A reporter! I can't be on fuckin' camera!" exclaimed Bert as he quickly pulled out his weapon and aimed it precisely at the frog's head.

Angered by the fact that he let Bert get his gun out, Cookie pronounced, "No one move! No one fucking move! Damn, call me *Galleta* because it's getting Mexican in here." Everyone was perfectly still... guns itching to fire. Big Bird was hiding behind the invincible bloody Grimace, with Snuffy on the outside of the massive drawbridge. And somewhere in the room was the Count... laughing, and counting.

Suddenly, a loud *AYANAHGALA KOONAAAANA* was heard, as Linda burst into the room, screaming and signing.

...with that, shit began to start getting really crazy.

• • •

"What in the poly-filled hell is that bitch saying?" Cookie yelled, showing Linda the one piece of sign language he did know.

"Something about tuna," Big Bird ventured, at much risk to his short-term health. Grimace shifted uneasily, not all too happy to be the spongy shield protecting the effeminate birdbrain hiding behind him.

The hysterical deaf woman – clearly painted up by Snuffy to attract maximum puppet-lust – had entered from a back door within the room, gaining entry with an undisclosed negotiation tactic Kermit could write up and sell for a tabloid fortune. She had drawn a hunter’s knife from her belt and was making a beeline for the drawbridge to cut the rope. Everyone in the room could hear Snuffy raising hell outside, stomping around and kicking at the barrier.

The threat of Snuffy charging through an open drawbridge was enough to put Cookie in action, shifting his piece to draw a bead on the slut charging across the room. However, Big Bird suddenly made himself useful by shoving Grimace sharply into a collision course with the enraged blue gangster.

The impact, needless to say, was not pretty. Ripples of glutinous fur absorbed Cookie’s gun just as it exploded with the killing shot intended for the deaf whore. Some of Grimace’s favorite gastric internals, at this point obviously not necessary for his continued survival, exploded from his mouth, blinding Cookie with a stinging gush of orange juice concentrate, half-chewed Egg McMuffins, and sticky bluish tissue.

History enthusiasts might be pleased to note that the Sesame Street McDonald’s serves breakfast all day long to commemorate Grimace’s heroics on that fateful day.

Cookie emitted a helpless yelp of pain and fell to the ground, his blinded googly eyes clearly not lovin’ the explosion of acidic filth from the bowels of the fast food junkie.

• • •

From atop a balcony high in the castle, Statler turned to Waldorf, saying, “Who would have thought? Deaf, blind, and dumb!”

“What, is Helen Keller down there now, too?”

“No, I was talking about Linda, Cookie, and Big Bird!”

“Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!”

• • •

Linda took the knife from her teeth and cut the rope to the drawbridge. Snuffy let out an elephant call, and all the enemies fled the corridor. Cookie scampered down the hallway, knocking over some tables, as he tried to wipe the acid from his eyes.

Kermit was nowhere to be found. Snuffy trotted in and stopped in front of Linda.

He handed her a note. "Please, take this note to Angela." Linda looked at the scribbling. Actually, the word "scribbling" does not quite paint an accurate enough picture. Envision the result, if a drunken Spiro-Graph molested a piece of torn loose-leaf.

The woman gave a nod, and responded with gauche deaf-talk: "Doh Kay Duffy." And although she couldn't hear the urgency in Snuffy's voice, she sure as hell sensed it. She ran to the Suffalupagum residence, note in hand.

• • •

Angela was trotting around the house — and lightly humming to herself — as she packed up a small suitcase. She was gathering all the things that she and Snuffy would need for their first big trip together. She closed the trunk — with her possessions — and dragged the pink suitcase to the door.

Then she remembered... "Oops, I almost forgot to pack for Snuffy." She trotted over to the cabinet to gather Snuffy's things and then happily returned to her purse. She placed two bottles of Everclear on top of the bows and makeup she had just packed. "Done!" she said with a large smile. The Snuffalupagee was feeling very proud of herself at this point. Angela was just about to leave, to meet up with Snuffy, when she realized she had almost forgotten to do something equally important.

"Awww, I almost forgot to say goodbye."

(Snuffalupagums, despite the well-established myth, were often forgetful creatures. They would forget small, everyday things. So, Angela and Snuffy invented a little system for remembering things, which they called "the name game." The game consisted of labeling the items in their home with "new names" that both Snuffy and Angela would remember. The practical application of their little game wasn't very creative from an intellectual's standpoint. The lamp was renamed "Lamp," the table was renamed "Table," and the broom was renamed "Shit-Sweeper." The couple never owned a vacuum, for they were both deathly afraid of the sound it made.)

She turned and looked back at the furniture and appliances that decorated the den. She was feeling especially girly at this point; maybe it was the excitement of moving to a new place with Snuffy, or maybe it was because she was in heat. Whatever the reason, she started going around the room to give everything a goodbye kiss. "Goodbye, Lamp." "Goodbye, Couch."

She soon made her way to the bathroom and was about to kiss the toilet. She hesitated, and then she remembered the purpose of "The Crapper." "Umm... I'll just give you a hand shake." She flushed the toilet and trotted back over to the

pink suitcase. Around that time, she heard a knocking at the door. It was Linda, and she was carrying a note.

• • •

Back at the castle, Bert pointed at a wooden door and nodded. Snuffy kicked it down with no problem. Bert walked through, and the group followed. Bert was now dragging a sack of human life that smelled like McMuffins. They all walked over the remnants of the door into a courtyard. Although it was dark outside, the grass was astonishingly green and almost too picturesque to be real in the pale moonlight.

There were also hundreds of marble statues surrounded them. Some were old and covered with the stains of age. One was very new. Bert approach the figure, "What the...?" he whispered to himself. There in front of him, was a sculpture of Elmo's corpse. The puppet's gruesome end had been carved into white stone. Now, Bert knew what this place was.

Kermit was hiding in the castle courtyard behind a bush. "I shouldn't have gotten involved... but I did what I had to do. The story must go on," he reassured himself. That's when he saw the red flashing light on the camera. "Low battery?" The frog had to go back and get his spare battery at the hotel.

He jumped the wall and made his way back. He quickly went to his room and replaced the battery. He was making his way toward the door, when he heard the call of his wife Piggy.

"You're not going anywhere, frog! We need to talk!"

"Not now, Piggy my dear. I am filming the story of the century! This is going to make me famous!" He hopped toward the door, but Piggy was standing in front of it.

There was an awkward pause. "I saw what you keep on that tape, frog! I know what you've been recording!" Kermit looked at her with a crooked eye.

• • •

As things got interesting at that hotel, Kermit was missing all the action at the castle.

From atop a balcony over looking the courtyard, Waldorf turned to Statler, inquiring, "What's long, green, and smells like pork?"

Statler shrugged.

"Kermit the Frog's finger! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

The two comedians didn't even notice the figure behind them. The Count whispered into their hearing aids, but the courtyard's acoustics allowed everyone to hear his voice: "What's two hundred and six years old, smells like mothballs, and accelerates at 9.81 meters per second squared?" The two old men shrugged. With that, the Count pushed them both over the edge of the balcony.

They landed with a sickening crunch. A few seconds later Snuffy commented, "Ohh... I get it."

The vampire then turned his attention to the group that entered the courtyard below. His sinister voice called down from above, "So... you made it to my trophy room. Ha, ha, ha."

The Count continued, "But you haven't seen my latest statue. Bring it out!" Suddenly, two goons came from a door on the opposite side of the courtyard, toting a large statue.

Bert looked on with a rather inquisitive expression on his face. "Who the fuck is that moron? And why is his asshole so big?" The Count did a double check and yelled down at the two henchmen, "Not that one you idiots, the other one – or, should I say – the other two. Ha, ha, ha!" The thugs apologized and pushed the statue of Telly out of the way. They raced back through the door and brought out a rather large sculpture.

Bert's face tensed as they uncloaked the figures. It was Ernie and Smiley. Their unnatural embrace was carved faultlessly into the polished stone. Snuffy turned his head not wanting to see. Bird stood speechless. Bert embraced his rage. "You twisted vampire fuck! You wanna-be numerologist! You're a slug who gets off by embracing his evil!" Although Bird held Bert back, and tried to calm him down, Bert still screamed, "Mark my words! The Hurt's coming for you!"

Cookie emerged from behind the statue and walked in front of it. He rubbed the statue and smiled.

Cookie looked at them and spoke: "I killed the orange one. But before I killed the other freak, I tortured it." The blue baller chomped down on a white cylindrical bag of Chips Ahoy. "When we killed the Grouch, Smiley listened in on you two talking in the apartment. Now Cookie knows who you really are. The Bird is FBI. And the yellow one stole from the Count."

"The name's Bert, bitch!"

Cookie laughed, "You only wish you could live up to that name."

"You stupid son of a..."

His feathered friend cut off Bert. “Whatever you do Bert, don’t lose your cool... not here... not now. That’s what they want.”

Cookie scoffed, “Everyone knows that ‘The Hurt’ was killed in prison. And what about you?” Cookie pointed at Big Bird. “What’s a Fed doing here? The Count has you boys in his pocket, too, so you can’t be here for us!”

“I came into town when I heard about a triple homicide that occurred right in front of Mr. Hooper's Store. An old man and two officers were killed execution style, and then pissed on; our urinalysis showed the killer had orange skin. I knew that Bert would want to handle this himself. So, I came to watch his back. Even though he is a criminal, he’s my friend. That’s why!”

Cookie broke his attention away from Big Bird and looked up. The sky started to show a faint glow. Cookie called up to the Count, “The sun will be rising soon. You have to get out of here. Let me handle this!”

“Good thinking,” the Count replied.

Cookie called out his remaining troops. There were 20 crewmembers, and they were armed to the teeth. As they filed in behind Cookie, Bert took a good long look at the arsenal they carried: bazookas, grenade launchers, rubber chickens, plastic explosives, and... timed mines.

Just before the vampire retreated to the castle’s main tower, he reminded Cookie, “There shall be no shooting in my trophy room!”

Cookie nodded. His crew then placed all their weapons in an old storage shed and came out with a new arsenal: brass knuckles, bike chains, broken bottles, and swords. The last puppet to leave the shed caught Bert’s attention... not only because of his unique weapon — a very long stick with a piece of dog shit on the end — but also because the moron forgot to lock the shed door as he left.

Bert looked at the figures before him and then back at his comrades asking them, “Are you two ready for this shit?”

Snuffy nodded.

“It’s been awhile,” Big Bird admitted.

Bird had not been involved in an all-out brawl in quite some time. The only thing that calmed his nerves was the fact that a legendary fighter was by his side. Mafia guys, like the Count’s crew, only knew his name from the old days. Bert had been in the shadows ever since he got out of prison. Only now, with the start of his plan, had Bert come back to reclaim an almost forgotten title.

Bert chuckled as he finished his cigarette. “I just hope you didn’t lose your skills when you left for the Academy.”

“Naa. The Bureau never took the thug out of me. But how about you? Did prison make you... or break you?”

Bert took off his sweater. On top of his well-built forearms were several tattoos and scars. “Are you kidding?” Bert laughed. “They named the south wing of Attica after me.” Bert chuckled, reminding himself of the truth in Bert’s statement. Bird knew full well that Bert started the uprising at that correctional facility.

Bert cracked his knuckles, popped his neck, and stretched a bit. The brawl was about to begin.

• • •

Back at the hotel, Kermit was getting frustrated listening to Piggy.

“This is what you’ve been filming instead of spending time with *mu-ah?*”

“It’s all part of my masterpiece, Piggy,” he said angrily.

“Masterpiece?!” she screamed. “Films of a vampire puppet show, an elephant humping a car, some guy falling off of a construction beam, a shootout in an alley, someone killing a geezer and then pissing on him, and liquid shit! Liquid shit, and more LIQUID SHIT! It’s garbage! You even filmed us having sex without telling me!” Kermit’s anger grew, his face twisting as Piggy went on with her rant.

“Listen to me! If I don’t get back there soon, I’ll miss the big fight!”

Piggy approached him and got into a karate stance. “Ohh, if you want a fight, I’ll *give* you a fight. *Hiii-yah!*” She threw her punch. However, she did not expect what happened next: Kermit dodged swiftly, grabbed her underarm and elbow, and launched her fat ass into the television.

“What’s the matter, bitch? You always told me you wanted to be on the big screen!” As she squealed amongst the glass and blood, Kermit approached from behind. “Swine!” He reached over and grabbed the TV remote. Piggy’s squeals became more high pitched and desperate, as her husband came closer. The frog viciously thrashed her with the device. As the bloody remote connected with pork-skull, it sent signals to the TV.

The television — or what remained of it — responded by spraying out a fountain of sparks. The sparks flew into the drapes. Kermit looked down at his former spouse. It looked like a butcher’s bench. In between exhausted breaths, Kermit

screamed at the wet pile of meat, “Don’t ever... come between... a man and his work!”

He looked at the flames dancing on the drapes, saying, “Shit! I *got* to get out of here.” The hotel room went up in a blaze just after Kermit left. He had fled in such a hurry that he did not notice the camera was left running, and it had recorded the entire scene. The wind was blowing the smoke westward, towards the castle... and that’s exactly where Kermit was heading. Unfortunately for him, he would arrive too late.

• • •

As Kermit reached the top of the wall with his camera, he realized that the courtyard battle had just ended. He had missed the whole thing.

The Snuffalupagum lay motionless on the lawn. The grass did little to suck up the red pool that dripped from his mouth.

Cookie was dead... Big Bird’s talons took care of that. The Bird leaned against a statue of Biggie Smalls, clenching his chest. However, he sported a grim smile.

Behind the statute of Tupac, Grimace was enjoying another grand mal seizure. Although he was unconscious, there were two things constantly reminding Grimace that he was still alive: the unspeakable pain screeching within his skull, and the fact that he was pissing blood and shitting McHemorrhage patties every five seconds.

Bert, although badly bloodied, was the only one with enough strength to stand. As he rose, he felt the ground shake a little bit.

Angela approached the shattered courtyard door. When she saw her husband on the ground, her eyes swelled with tears as she let out a heart-wrenching elephant wail. She galloped as fast as she could to the end of the courtyard. She was still carrying the note that Linda had delivered. She breathed heavily as she approached him. When she reached her husband, she didn’t know what to do. As her jaw slowly lowered, her eyes swelled up wider.

Angela shook her head, as if the motion would remove the daunting notion that she was losing the only companion she had in life. She knelt down and nudged his head with her own... hoping that this would get him up.

Big Bird sat watching with sore eyes, but he was still unable to move.

Bert saw that she didn’t understand the situation. It reminded him of an animal documentary he saw on one of his stolen cable channels. He ran up to Angela and his fallen friend. He covered her eyes with his arm, saying, “Don’t look.”

Kermit was still perched on the wall with his camera close to him.

Angela maneuvered around Bert, trying to get closer to her husband. When she stepped closer, Snuffy's eyes bulged. He looked like a gulping fish. He spit up, staining more of the grass as he spoke, "Angelllllaaaaa."

She knelt down next to his head, "Yes, Snuffy. I'm here...\*sniffle\*... I got your letter...\*snuffle\*... I read it all....\*sniffle-snuffle\*...don't leave me," she wept.

Snuffy's eyes started to roll back. The look on Snuffy's face let Angela know that he was in horrifying pain. Yet, his wheezing voice continued, "You're...you're... you're standing on my balls."

"Oh, no!" Angela gasped, looking back at her hind leg. She lifted it up and moved it to the side. Snuffy sighed with relief as he stood up.

Bert was breathing heavy, but he still questioned, "Then what the fuck's with the blood?"

Just before coughing up another pint, Snuffy dry-heaved the answer, "Fucking Kool-Aid!" Angela smiled more and more. She was still crying, though, as women tend to do in these near-death situations.

Bert grabbed Snuffy by the trunk, and made strong eye contact with him, "That's the second time you've done that to us. Never... do that shit again!"

Although Angela was still somewhat emotionally distraught, she agreed fully with Bert's statement, "Never again...\*sniffle\*... Never again."

Snuffy consoled his wife and held her close, but he soon turned back to his friend. "What now, Bert?"

Bert turned around and lit up a cigarette, "I release you from your bond. You are no longer my chauffer."

Snuffy looked confused, "But..."

Bert cut him off. "Bird and I will handle it from here. Leave this place and no matter what happens... don't look back!" Snuffy and Angela nodded. They turned around and trotted to the East.

Bert walked over to his feathered friend. Big Bird's wing covered his mid-section. He coughed up some blood, "I'm sorry buddy, but it looks like I won't be going with you." Bert looked under Bird's wing, and he saw a dagger wedged deeply into his abdomen.

Bert tried to apply pressure to the wound to stop the bleeding, but Bird stopped him. “What’s done is done, Bert.”

Kermit focused in with his camera. “Well, it’s no brawl, but it will do.”

“Fuck that!” Bert screamed. “You can’t stop now; you’ve got to keep fighting! You’ve got a wife and kids to think about...”

Bird shook his head. “They passed away several months ago.”

Bert got down on one knee, “What? How?”

A weak beak answered, “Bird-Flu... I meant to tell you back at the apartment, but it just wasn’t the right time.”

Bert sat next to his friend and comforted him in his final moments. And, for the first time in his adult life, Bert wept.

When Big Bird stopped breathing, Bert removed his shirt and draped it over his friend’s beak.

The sky turned a reddish orange as the sun started to light up the courtyard. Beads of sweat rolled down Bert’s back and the two words tattooed between his shoulder blades. He looked over at Grimace and then to the unlocked shed. After lighting up another smoke, he said, “It looks like it’s time for Plan B.”

Kermit’s camera started malfunctioning a bit. Kermit banged it in fury, and then he spent the next couple of minutes repairing the device. All the while, he was missing everything. When the frog finished fixing his camcorder, he looked down and saw that they were gone. “Shit, they must have gone into the castle.”

Bert dragged Grimace – and a ton of weapons – up the winding stairs of the main tower. When he reached the top, there were guns already pointed at him. A thug clocked Bert on the back of the head, and everything went black.

• • •

Bert woke up chained to a wall next to Grimace. They were in the Count’s office, high in the castle’s main tower. The guns Bert had brought were gone.

The Count emerged from the darkness. “Ahhh, I see that you’re awake... ha, ha ha.”

Bert looked at his watch and smiled. “And just in time, it seems.”

“Yes, my yellow friend... you have no idea how long it’s been since I’ve killed someone of honor. You really are him, aren’t you?”

Bert nodded, "The one and only."

"Yes... you will be a great addition to my collection." The Count then looked over at Grimace, "But this one here, I wouldn't even carve a paperweight to remember him... ha, ha, ha."

Bert laughed along with the corny joke. He looked over at Grimace as he responded to the Vampire, "You know they say it's what's on the inside that counts, Count."

Kermit managed to find an opening at the very top of the tower's roof. He squeezed through the hole and balanced himself on the rafters. The Count's room was very dark, so Kermit set the camera to night mode and started recording once again.

Bert's watch beeped. He hung there on the wall and made strong eye contact with the Count, "You fool... I told you I'd bring the Hurt!"

Bert started counting with a sinister smile, "Ten."

"Nine."

"Eight."

"Seven."

Grimace started convulsing and shaking harder against his chains.

The Count looked at Bert and screamed, "What the fuck are you counting? I'm the Count! I do the counting around here!" With that, the Count punched Bert in the face.

Bert spit out a mouth-full of blood and smiled. He checked his watch again.

"Three."

The Count's hands were shaking as he looked over at Grimace.

"Two."

Grimace was foaming at the mouth. His stomach then began to make a beeping noise.

Bert closed his eyes as he said his final word, "One."

• • •

The sun was rising, as Angela and Snuffy trotted away from the hell that had given them nothing but letters, numbers, and utter despair.

*BOOM!*

They heard the explosion far behind them back at the castle. “Bert!” Snuffy cried. He tried to turn his head, but Angela’s trunk held his face back.

“Remember what he said... ‘Don’t look back.’”

Snuffy nodded as they slowly started up their pace once again. However, the male mammoth still looked glum.

Angela saw his face and tried to cheer him up, “Sunny days, sweeping the clouds away.” She hesitated, “On my way to where the air is sweet...” She lowered her head, trying to hide the melancholy expression of failure that her face clearly showed, “I... I forgot how the rest of the song goes,” she said, bearing a noticeable sadness.

Snuffy smiled, “I’m impressed you know that much of the song. The only person I’ve ever met that knew it all was the Grouch and he...”

A shower of debris interrupted Snuffy.

As the dust and small rocks fell around them, they heard something clang into a garbage can ahead of them. They went to go see what it was.

Snuffy reached into the garbage can and removed a video tape. But something was stuck to it: a severed green hand gripped the black box tightly. Angela yanked the hand off and threw it behind her. “*Eww!* Snuffy, it smelled like pork.”

They both looked at the tape. Their eyes stared with a child-like wonder. As they continued their walk into the sunrise, Angela brought the tape up to her eyes and asked her husband, “What should we name it?”

Snuffy slowed his pace and thought for a moment. He nodded his head and smiled, “We’ll name it Cluster.”