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The Core

Darn it, where was that walnut half? Beanie had been digging through the wood shavings in his cage for at least an hour. Or maybe it had been two days, or four months, he'd never really got the hang of that time thing.

At any rate, he hadn't found the nut yet. He was certain he had hidden it, and nobody except him lived in his cage. So it had to be somewhere.

This was the last time he would be searching for anything, that was for sure. Beanie had decided that from now on, he was only going to have one single storage space for his entire stockpile.

And he had already dug it, too. So far, it contained two hazelnuts and a small pile of sunflower seeds. Now all he had to do was gather the rest of the provisions that he had hidden everywhere in his cage and take them there.

Beanie squeaked with joy when he hit upon an underground cavity. This had to be where the nut was! He sniffed excitedly around the floor and found a small pile of sunflower seeds and two hazelnuts. Ah well, he would just start with those then.

He had already stuffed everything into his cheek pouches and was about to go back to the surface when he suddenly remembered which cavity this was.

It was the storage space he had dug for his stockpile.

Beanie emptied his cheek pouches again. It was truly unfortunate that he always forgot everything.

A hamster's life was hard enough as it was, and if you couldn't remember anything, it only made things more complicated.

For example, he had just been madly looking for something and now he couldn't remember what it was.

Beanie sat down on his hind legs and rubbed his front paws over the dark spot on his head that had inspired his name. That always gave him the best ideas. Unfortunately, this time it didn't do anything.

Then he heard a soft thump. Someone was knocking on his cage. That must be Theo, his human, bringing him something to eat.

Beanie burrowed up to the surface and raced past his little house to the other side of the cage, where he realized that it wasn't Theo who had been knocking. Of course not, it was the middle of the night and Theo and the other humans were always asleep at this hour.

On the other side of his cage were Ophelia, the white rat, and the guinea pigs Mobble and Wobble. They were all looking in at him.

Beanie was always happy when Ophelia visited him. The rat was incredibly clever and knew the answer to any question.

Ophelia lived in the apartment below Theo's and her human's name was Christian.

Beanie had never seen him and he wasn't keen on meeting him either. Christian constantly left Ophelia alone and often even forgot to feed her.

Ophelia herself didn't really care. She had gnawed a hole into the bottom of her cage so she could come and go as she pleased. Then she would stroll through the ventilation shaft into the pantry or visit Beanie or Mobble and Wobble.

The two guinea pigs came by much more rarely. Unlike Ophelia, they were real sleepyheads. They not only slept all night but snoozed a lot during the day as well.

Their human was Mara. The girl and her Mum lived in the apartment next to Beanie's. Mara's Dad also lived there but he was always travelling. Beanie had never seen him.

Mara and Theo were friends. Whenever Beanie thought of her, he immediately got a warm feeling around his heart. Mara had a bubbling laugh and her brown curly hair was thick and unruly. Beanie would have loved to burrow into it.

When Mara visited Theo, she always brought something for Beanie to eat – a raisin or an apple slice or a pumpkin seed. Sometimes she also brought Mobble or Wobble or even both of them. That's how Beanie knew the guinea pigs.

The two of them were brothers. Mobble was white with brown spots and Wobble white with black spots. Or maybe it was the other way around – Beanie could never remember.

"Heya, Beanie," Ophelia said. "What are you doing?"

"I'm talking to you guys," Beanie said. "And before that, I was looking for a nut." Ha! There it was! His memory wasn't so bad after all! "I'm planning to take it to my new storage space."

"You mean that nut up there?" Ophelia pointed a forepaw at Beanie's little house.

Beanie quickly turned around to have a look.

And sure enough. The walnut half was on the roof of the little wooden house where he slept during the day.

"There it is!" He quickly darted up there and stuffed the nut into his cheek pouch.

Now all he had to do was take it to his storage space. Unfortunately, try as he might, he couldn't remember where it was.

"Give it to me for a sec," Ophelia said. "I'd like to see it up close."

But Beanie wasn't that stupid. Ophelia would eat the walnut in an instant. Unlike Beanie, the rat had a very low opinion of stockpiling.

"Can you guys stop talking about the nut already?" Mobble squeaked. "That's not why we're here."

"Why are you here?" Beanie asked.

"Because of Mara," said Wobble.

Beanie felt that warm feeling spreading around his heart.

"What about her?" he asked.

"She has a tummy ache," Mobble squeaked.

"Did she eat too much?" Beanie asked. His tummy always hurt when he ate too much.

Ophelia, on the other hand, never had a tummy ache. She could eat a whole bag of nuts and two slices of suspiciously old bread with butter and a whole jar of Nutella without feeling the tiniest bit sick.

"Mara isn't eating anything at all," Wobble said. "All she does is lie in bed and stare at the ceiling."

"That's why we're here," Ophelia said. "We need to help Mara."

"I see." Beanie struggled with himself for a moment, then said reluctantly: "She can have my walnut if she wants it."

"Forget it," Wobble said. "We've already offered her hay."

"And carrot peel," Mobble added. "She didn't want any of it."

"The nut might be different," Ophelia said. "Just give it to me."

Beanie ignored her remark. He didn't trust Ophelia one bit where food was concerned. She would eat the nut herself and then claim it was an accident. Or something like that.

"The nut isn't important right now." Wobble wheeked loudly. "Mara has a tummy ache. Maybe someone poisoned her."

"But who?" Beanie asked, horrified. "Not her Mum?"

"Of course not," Wobble said. "Wobble and I think it happened at school."

Wobble and I. The words echoed around Beanie's head. So he'd gotten it wrong again and Wobble wasn't Wobble, he was Mobble.

"But who would do something like that?" he enquired.

"That," Ophelia skewered him with her black rat eyes, "is indeed the core of the matter."

"The *what*?" Beanie hastily looked around to see whether there was an apple core lying around somewhere, but there was nothing.

"That's what we need to find out," Wobble translated.

"Or, more specifically, *you*." Ophelia bumped her pointy nose against the cage wall behind which Beanie was sitting.

"Me?" Beanie asked, horrified. "How on Earth am I going to do that?"

"You're going to tag along to school and have a look around," Ophelia said. "And collect all the information you can find. We obviously can't let the poisoning thing happen again, that goes without saying."

"I don't even know where the school is," Beanie said.

"You don't have to." Ophelia took her long tail into her mouth and licked it clean. "You just hide in Theo's school bag. He'll take you there."

"That's not going to work," Beanie said. "I can't get out of my cage."

Phew, he thought. Good thing the lid is closed so tightly.

"That's an easy one for me," Ophelia assured him. "After all, I managed to do it for Mobble and Wobble."

Oh no! Beanie had no doubt whatsoever that the rat would be able to open his cage. And the first thing she would probably do was pounce on the nut.

"Why don't *you* go check out the school?" he asked. "You're a fifty percent much smarter than I am."

"You mean *a hundred percent*," Ophelia said. "But I'm too large and too white. Theo would spot me in his bag immediately."

"And why aren't Mobble and Wobble going?" Beanie asked.

Both guinea pigs started wheeking in agitation.

Oh dear, that was really loud. Hopefully it wouldn't wake Theo!

Then again, maybe it wouldn't be so bad if he woke up. Then this unfortunate conversation would be over.

"If Mara notices that we're gone, her tummy ache will get even worse," Mobble said.

"Also, we need to eat continuously," Wobble explained. "As soon as we stop, we die. Is that what you want?"

"No," Beanie said quickly.

"Great," Ophelia said. "That's settled then. Let's get started."