

Faulty Packaging

It was the muffled voices and hum of machinery somewhere above him that eventually woke Peanut. Though something burned in his eyes, paranoia kept him from wiping away the budding tears. The words spoken overhead were foreign to him, sounding almost like a cross between a growl and a moan.

It was the creature, no, the *man* standing closest to the Bucket that spoke first. "So, what *are* we going to do with them?"

"Well, they don't belong here, that's for sure," said the second one, his voice so deep it made the walls of the Bucket shudder.

Daring to creak his eyes open ever so slightly, Peanut's eyes flickered back and forth, hoping to catch any sign of where he was or how to escape. He had heard rumors of this place, the Bucket, the chocolate-peanut hell where humanoid demons would sort them out for judgement day. He'd never been a religious nut, but the sights around him were enough to force an unsolicited prayer from his lips. M&Ms were lying in heaps, either asleep or unconscious, Peanut couldn't tell, with their breaths puffing out in muffled groans. The M&Ms around him, smaller, chocolatey blokes, were nothing like him, and Peanut couldn't help the panicked tightening of his throat as he realized that he was, in fact, alone.

Only a single Peanut M&M was there besides him, and it was this M&M that the first man picked up, inspecting it like a butcher might examine a fine pig. With a swift flick of his wrist, the M&M was tossed into the mouth of the beast. Its teeth closed around him with a snap and the crunch of candy against enamel could be heard through the man's smirking mouth.

"God, I love these. But what are we gonna do about the mix up? We can't put peanut M&Ms in with the regular ones in case someone has a peanut allergy, and hell if I'm telling the boss that we ruined a whole batch."

The other man shrugged, pulling a lollipop from his pocket. The lollipop stood frozen in terror as the man pinched its wrapper and began to pull, exposing bits of its red cherry insides. The wrapping peeled off of its candy surface like skin from flesh, crackling like fire as the man crumpled it in his fingers and threw it over his shoulder.

"Send them up to packaging, I guess. There's no way they'll know it was our batch." His gaze resting on Peanut, he frowned, deep in thought.

Peanut, terrified at the eye contact, was trembling with an intensity that he'd never felt before. His body, unable to handle the pressure, was sweating, leaking some of his red coloring onto the M&Ms underneath him. With a start, he realized that it wasn't he who was shaking, but the walls around him. Like an eclipse, a shadow slid over the opening of the Bucket, and the metallic chamber was immediately cast into darkness.

Released from terror's grip, Peanut sat straight, trying to gather his bearings. As his hand brushed over someone, the weight shifted from under him.

"Watch it! Friggin' big ass hazelnut lookin' m-"

Muttering his apologies, Peanut pressed against the wall of the bucket, praying to Hershey that there was a notch, a foothold, *anything* that would grant him freedom. But before any discoveries could be made, the floor seemed to squeal in pain as the floor dropped from under them, sending them tumbling into what felt like a pocket of plastic. The instant he managed to stand the pocket began to constrict, fusing together at the top like some sort of indestructible gelatin.

Peanut had just enough time to process the sound of ragged breathing behind him before a strong hand had gripped his shoulder and swiveled him around.

"Hey! Watcha doin' here, hazelnut?" Though she was much shorter than Peanut, his cheeks quickly flushed with intimidation. Sensing a struggle, the other M&MS approached, looming over his

covered form and sneering down at him. Claustrophobia began to bubble up in his throat as the tallest among them blocked out the little light the packaging had allowed.

"I... I don't want any trouble," Peanut said, stuttered out, raising his shaking hands his head in a futile attempt at safety

"Well, Hazel," she spat. "We don't like your type here. People buy *regular* M&Ms to get M&Ms like *us*. What do you think is going to happen to us if freaks like you keep showing up in our packaging?"

And like that they were on him like wolves; fists thundering against his candy coating and elbows cutting clear cracks across his skull. Chips of coating began to fly off, and as he watched a large chunk fall besides him on the ground, it slowly dawned on him that those pieces would never grow back.

"Stop!" shouted a voice suddenly, cutting clear through the angered shouts and battle cries. Even after the beating stopped, Peanut could not stop whimpering. His throat squeezed out a whine all on its own, and the pain... oh, the pain! As the world shifted back into focus, he found that he was already on his feet and was being dusted off by a small, blue gentleman.

"Hey, are you okay? Can you stand?" As Peanut blinked, the throbbing in his head slowly began to subside until it kept in time with the shuddering of the walls.

"Does it hurt?" the old timer was saying, "Here, sit down. Damn, you sure are big. Don't blame them though, they weren't made right, that's all. They don't see what I see; that we were all made equal in Hershey's image." Peanut slowly nodded, staring dismally at the backs of his former oppressors.

The swaying of the plastic stopped. Methodical pounding could be distantly heard from the other side of the plastic, sounding almost like the footsteps of great beasts. Suddenly, light filtered in from just beyond the bag, illuminating them all in a reddish brown. Something was coming.

"Hey, there," said the stranger, "Big Red, I see the fear in your eyes. Don't worry, I won't let them hurt you again.

"Thanks," Peanut mumbled, "you didn't have to do that!"

"Of-course I did!" His savior beamed. "You know, if we're going to be here awhile, we might as well be friendly to one another. If-"

But the sound of tearing plastic cut him off. The walls around them shredded as long meaty tendrils reached in and began to pluck them out. Surrounded by soft pink, Peanut found himself helplessly pinned as he was hoisted out of the bag and into the Beyond.

The last thing Peanut ever heard was the giggling of children.