

1 STRIKE



I SCREWED UP. I GOT TRICKED BY MY PARENTS.

There, I said it. I wrote it down in my book. Are you happy?

Mom just shook her head yes. Dad is laughing.
I think.

That's the trouble with getting tricked in the face.
When the prank is over, you're still in the dark.



MY NAME IS STEVIE Morris. About a month ago I was a normal 11-year-old kid. Yeah, I lived in a mansion. But since when is having billionaire parents a crime? I never asked for my own private guest house. I didn't hire the Michelin-star chef who cooks lunch.

Before I explain about VGL and what happened, I should start by saying there were two Major Things going on in my life.

Major Thing #1: I was entering week four of my strike from elementary school. Yeah, you heard me. I didn't want to go to school anymore, so I made the difficult but also brave choice to stop going.

My reasons were pretty clear cut.

Was H.B.C. Elementary fun and exciting? NO.

Was I being paid a fat salary? NO.

Was a Michelin-star chef cooking lunch? What do you think?

The hilarious part is I learned about going on strike from my teachers. Teachers go on strike all the time. They stand outside school singing songs and waving homemade signs, and all our classes get canceled.

My idea was the same. Except for the singing and waving. If I sang, I'd only do it from home. From my private guest house that sits on 2.5 acres. Or maybe my rooftop Jacuzzi.

BOOM. BOOM. BOOM.

Excuse me. That's the sound of Major Thing #2 trying to ruin my four-week vacatio — er, strike. I meant strike!

I rolled over in bed, clutching my Hungarian goose down pillow.

“Ungh ... Rubes ... make it stop ...”

I rolled like five different times. I *still* didn't fall off my bed. It's that big.

Man, I miss it.

Fwoosh. My bedroom door opened and Rubes, our robot butler, hauled her miserable robot butt in. Instead of legs, she had a large rubber wheel, and instead of a personality, she had a permanent nagging mode.

“Good morning, Master Stevie! And a lovely morning it is!”

CHRRING. CHRRRING. CHRRRING.

Electric drills screamed from the hall. The floors trembled. My eardrums shook worse. The construction crew next to my house must have been digging to Rome or something.

“RUBES!” I cried. “CLOSE. THE. DOOR.”

“Apologies, Master Stevie. I am under strict orders to bring you to breakfast.”

I cupped my ringing ears. “W-What day is it?”

“Friday, sir.”

My heart sank. “Not ... *Family Friday?*”

“Indeed,” Rubes blathered. “However, might I suggest the young master look on the bright side? Dedrick and Pythia Morris – your lovely parents – have yet to inquire as to your, ahem, *student activities.*”

Rubes scanned the mess on my floor.

Pizza boxes. Soda cans. Game controllers.

“In this sense,” she blabbed, “your most crude and irresponsible scheme to abandon your education —”

“It’s called going on strike, Rubes!”

“— may yet survive another day. Regrettably, I am under no orders to deliver you, kicking and screaming, to Principal Hayes at H.B.C. Elementary. My sole command is to —”

BANG. More shockwaves tore through the house. This time, the pegs on my king-sized bed snapped, sending me crunching to the floor on a bag of stale cheese puffs.

“— bring you to breakfast,” Rubes finished lamely. Her metal claw gave an extra pinch as she hauled me onto my feet. The chirp she made next sounded horribly smug.

I hate Rubes.

I quickly threw on some clothes — ratty gym shorts, an adult XL Knicks jersey — and shuffled into the hall.

I paused at the elevator. Rubes didn’t.

“The elevator is out of service!” Rubes chirped.

Of course it is. I flicked a few broken buttons, groaned, and switched to the stairs. Ignoring Rubes, I took the flight leading up.

“Master Stevie, I feel it prudent to warn —”

“Stuff it, Rubes!”

I climbed the stairs two at a time and burst through the door. The greatest place in the world greeted me. My roof. To my left, a Jacuzzi was frothing like soup while a television dropped from the overhang. The movie *The Wizard* was already playing.

One of the arcade scenes. A classic.

I stood and watched until a claw seized my Knicks jersey.

“Hey! Cut it out, Megatron!”

“This is not the way to breakfast,” said Rubes.

“Eh? Sure it is.”

I waved across the patio. Like every building on the Morris Estate, my house was connected to a floating network of pipes reaching every direction.

The Skyway, we called it. The fastest way to get anywhere.

Yeah, I’m basically a Mario brother. One day when Mom buys Nintendo, they’ll make a game of me. You’re going to love it.

“Hem hem,” said Rubes. “The Skyway is undergoing maintenance. Entry is not permitted at this time.”

“Lies,” I said, stalking forward.

Rubes's claw yanked me back. "Entry is not permitted at this time," she repeated.

I craned my neck around her giant rear end. The Skyway is made of glass, so even without entering I could see the lights were on. A maze of escalators rolled in different directions. Including one I didn't recognize.

"T-There's a new tunnel!" I gasped. "I think it connects to the construction site!"

I was still staring as Rubes dragged me back to the stairs.

"But I want to see it!" I cried. "It's *my* house! It's *my* property!"

"Entry is not permitted!" Rubes beeped. "Should Master Stevie attempt passage, he will find such passage ... *obstructed*. I cannot permit entry."

"We'll see about that," I muttered under my breath.

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FAMILY FRIDAY



FIVE MINUTES LATER, I WAS SWEATY AND OUT of breath. My feet had blisters. The morning sun stabbed my eyes. And I still hadn't made it halfway to the Morris Family Breakfast Pavilion.

Beside me, Rubes's all-terrain wheel crunched along, ignoring all obstacles. What a joke.

Why was the Morris Estate so enormous? Great question. Also, great way to start a fight between my parents at the breakfast table. How do I put this? Basically, Mom is a pretty big deal. She's President and CEO of a corporation called Atensoft. Ever heard of it?

Duh.

It's only the biggest video game publisher ever. Think of any game you like. If it's actually good, odds are it was published by Atensoft. So next time

your parents are buying that special edition, gold-foil box with the DLC extras, just remember, like half of that price goes to Mom.

Yeah, it's cool.

Dad does decent as well. He plays sports.

For the Knicks.



FINALLY, AFTER A TRIP that felt more like criminal punishment (“It’s only exercise, Master Stevie!”), I reached the Morris Family Breakfast Pavilion and slumped in my seat.

Mom and Dad rolled their eyes.

“Cheers, RUBY,” said Mom. “And which model do I have the pleasure of speaking with?”

“I am RUBY-3,” Rubes declared. “At present, RUBY-1 and RUBY-2 are weeding the garden, RUBY-4 is attending the pool, and RUBY-5 is on ... *secret assignment.*”

Mom, Dad and Rubes traded looks.

It was weird.

After Rubes rolled away, I scarfed down my food (lobster omelet), slugged my juice and pushed the plate away.

“Good chat,” I said with a burp. “Gotta run. Think I’ll borrow the golf cart and —”

“Not so fast, Chief.” Dad’s giant hand clapped my arm.

“Your father and I pulled a lot of strings to be here this morning,” Mom said. “RUBY rearranged both our schedules. The Atensoft board wasn’t pleased.”

“Nor the Commish,” said Dad. “We were supposed to ball in three hours. But I had RUBY call the league office. Push the game back.”

He gave a booming laugh.

I slumped in my seat. For the next half hour, my parents slowly, slowly sipped coffees. They took the tiniest bites. They tortured me endlessly.

“How was your week, Stevie?”

“Are you enjoying your new bed, Stevie?”

“What are your life goals, Stevie?”

I sat there and mumbled responses. Aren’t Family Fridays the worst? It’s true I don’t see my parents that often. And normally, yeah, I love seeing them. Well, not *love* love. But whatever.

Except Family Fridays were super scary these days.

My heart thumped like crazy. Any second, my parents were going to ask about school.

They knew about the strike, and how I sat at home playing video games and munching cheese puffs instead of going to classes.

So far, they’d let me. They hadn’t said anything.

But now I was entering week four of my stoppage. Almost a month had passed. The lack of nagging was cool, but kind of spooky. And what was up with all our construction? The out-of-service Skyway and elevator?

A thought crossed my mind.

Were my parents trying to smoke me out? Causing loud noises and purposely breaking my stuff? Did they think if they made my life annoying enough, I'd give up and go crawling back to H.B.C. Elementary?

Heh, I thought. Good luck with that.

As I was thinking this, another odd look passed between Mom and Dad. They giggled.

“What’s so funny?” I demanded.

“Nothing,” they said together.

“Just thinking of the future,” Mom said with a grin.

“Big plans in the works,” said Dad, nodding. “And hopefully, even *bigger* reactions.” He waggled an eyebrow.

All right. I'd had about enough of this. I was about to stand up when Mom's cell phone buzzed, and she jerked back to life.

“Yes, the RUBY project belongs to Atensoft,” she said curtly. “No, its source code will not be made public. Nor can I comment on why a video game publisher has launched its own fleet of satellites.

On that, you'll have to remain in the dark. Oh, that's *funny.*"

Mom gave a short laugh and strolled away while Dad and Rubes cleared the plates.

I hopped to my feet. Family Friday had officially ended. I'd won. Er, survived. What's the difference?

"Yo, Chief!" Dad called out to me. "Knicks are hitting the road tonight, and your mom has her meetings. You'll be on your own for the weekend. Keep your nose clean, yeah? And listen to RUBY. She's a smart cookie. Takes after your mom. You two can learn a lot from each other."

"Yeah, fine," I mumbled.

"And most importantly," said Dad, wagging a finger, "do not enter the Skyway!"

He leveled his eyes at me. One second. Two seconds. Then his glare broke apart and he laughed.

I have the weirdest life ever, I thought to myself. But on my walk home, another thought wandered in:

I am so sneaking onto the Skyway.