

“MR Nook, er, Mr Nook?”

The irritatingly upbeat voice seemed to be somewhere near his right shoulder.

“Are you OK, sir?”

Isabelle! He must have drifted off ... no, surely not.

“Sorry, Isabelle, I was – just dealing with these papers –”

“Sir, you look terrible.” Only Isabelle could deliver that sentence so cheerfully. “Maybe you should take a quick break.”

Tom Nook suppressed a sigh. “Oh, I really can’t. Lloid’s haranguing me about getting the new bridge done by tomorrow, I’m trying to source these picture hooks for Blathers, and I have to find a cleaner for the airport – Orville says there’s a ‘strong smell of sea bass’ and it’s ‘putting off visitors’. Which is an overreaction, frankly, I was there last night sorting out some customs issues and it’s fine.”

“Mr Nook, how long have you been sitting at that desk?”

One of Isabelle’s best and worst qualities was her persistence.

He looked her in the eye. “To be honest, Isabelle, I don’t know. But please, I’m very busy.”

“OK,” she countered. “Just indulge me here. Five minutes, I promise. You don’t even have to go outside. I bet you’ll feel better afterwards.”

“I feel fine,” he lied.

“Five minutes,” she repeated. “I just want to have a go at something I saw on TV last night,” – of course, he thought.

“Get off that chair, come on!” Her tail beat against the side of his desk enthusiastically.

Of course, Tom Nook was Isabelle’s superior, certainly in more than one sense of the word, and he most definitely had the right to refuse her orders – her suggestions, rather. But although he couldn’t quite admit it even to himself, Isabelle had something about her that meant even the CEO of Nook Inc. was unable to turn her down. That, of course, was what made her the perfect colleague in Resident Services – he’d never have given any other dog the job. Not that he would tell her that.

He slowly clambered off the chair. Standing, he discovered, took considerable effort. He could barely feel his tail, which hung limply behind him, a considerable contrast from Isabelle’s, which was still thrashing from side to side with glee, in, he conceded, a somewhat charming manner. He averted his eyes from it.

“OK,” said Isabelle. “Just put your front paws behind your head, like this, and do what I do.”

He watched as she began to twist her body slowly from side to side, a little distracted by the sight of his own belly poking through from under his Nook Inc. shirt as he raised his front legs to mirror her position. Where had he sourced these shirts from? Could Nook Inc. not even manufacture clothes that were the right fit for its own CEO? No wonder nobody ever bought anything from the Nook Stop. Maybe he’d text Sable about that later.

After some gentle swaying from left to right, though, he began to concede that this was quite a pleasant exercise. He closed his eyes; it was the first time he'd done so intentionally in a long time. Gradually, he became aware of the existence of his abdominal muscles, and admitted to himself that they were in fact fairly useful.

"There!" Isabelle exclaimed after a few minutes of slow gyration. "You look happier already, sir. Are you feeling any better?"

He decided he might as well admit it. "Yes, thank you, Isabelle. Much better. Actually," – he glanced out of the window – "I might take a brief walk after all, if you don't mind?"

"Be my guest, sir. And maybe we can have another little break like that tomorrow."

He smiled inadvertently as he headed for the door. "That might be a good idea."

It was warm outside, but in a refreshing way that was wholly unlike the stuffy Resident Services. A few animals were on the plaza attempting, he presumed, to bring some variety to their stunningly mundane lives. Bianca was standing at the opposite side, holding a net aloft in an effort to pursue a common butterfly. He watched as she stood still, apparently waiting for the butterfly to move, in a bizarre stalemate that could have easily ended if she actually had a go at catching the thing. Even more curiously, when it eventually flew away, she didn't seem at all disappointed.

Tom Nook had come to expect this kind of behaviour. They were well-meaning, the residents, but, God love them, they were simple. And as for the so-called Resident Representative, the less said the better. He'd never known someone to take to a voluntary role with such, er, vigour.

He wandered the island for a few minutes, almost dropping in on Blathers before realising that the owl would almost certainly be asleep at this time and probably wouldn't appreciate being woken up for anything less than a newly discovered fossil. Picking his way through the seemingly random pieces of furniture that the Resident Representative seemed to have scattered around the place, he eventually made his way back to Resident Services.

Isabelle seemed in an even better mood than usual when he walked in.

"Welcome back, sir! You might want to check the Nook Stop."

"Oh? Did someone –"

"A *certain* someone," she replied, "has paid off their home loan!"

He could hardly believe it. Almost running to the terminal and keying in his special administrator code, scrambling for his NookPhone and jabbing his paw at the screen to get past the two-factor authentication – and yes! There it was on the screen, the sum of five hundred and forty-eight thousand Bells!

"Yes!" he exclaimed. Bells, lovely Bells! This was what

island life was about. Bells would always make him feel better than any exercise could. He'd sleep soundly tonight, and dream about adding to his investment portfolio in the morning.