

Fifteen minutes before opening, *Frylies*’ rehearsed normal.

Joel read the checklist from memory, rather than his clipboard.

“Stations prepped?”

Rosa shifted onto one hip and popped an exaggerated thumbs-up from beneath folded arms.

“Walk-in holding temp?”

Jamal leaned against the counter top.

“Steady as she goes.”

“Bathrooms?”

Mateo coughed to clear his throat, then said, “We good.”

Joel tapped the clipboard against his knuckles.

“Mrs. Alvarez, did you have a chance to walk the front of house?”

“Sí,” Mrs. Alvarez said, franchise black visor with swirly, butter-cream embroidered lettering dangling clasped hands.

“Good, good. Well then, guys, there’s just one more thing before we open.”

Joel laid down his clipboard and opened the box that had been sitting on the counter. He theatrically blew on his fingers and pulled the headset from inside. He held it up so the assembled team could see it better.

It definitely was new - the plastic film hadn’t even been peeled from the AR glasses portion.

“We’ve heard it was coming for a while. But today is the day! *Frylies*’ is rolling out SpudBud AI nationally.”

“So it’s real now?” Rosa said, “No more excuses?”

“Yep,” Joel rotated to give others a better look, moving gingerly as if he were holding a cup

filled to the brim. “I know training was months ago. I’ve been told they’ve applied a lot of the UI feedback since then. They say it is super-intuitive now.”

An anxious and excited twitter sizzled through the crowd.

Jamal raised his hand.

“Yes, Jamal?”

“What is Spud... spud-,” he struggled to recall the name.

“It’s *SpudBud*, our new AI coach.” Joel carefully reseated the headset in the box and glanced upward at the ceiling. “When did field support swing by? Maybe seven months-“

“Eight,” Mrs. Alvarez corrected.

“Eight,” Joel snapped his fingers and pointed at the senior member of the group. “Well, there you go. Corporate was here eight months ago. But, you didn’t miss much, though, Jamal. It was barely more than a couple of slide decks at the time.”

“But it will do the voice smoothing, like they said?” Rosa asked.

“Yepper. It’ll convert whatever you say into ‘General American’.”

By his expression, the explanation only made Jamal more confused.

“General-what-now?”

“It’s a linguistic thing, or something,” Joel offered, unhelpfully.

“It makes us all sound white and from the ‘burbs, over the speaker,” Mateo said. He pinched his nose and made his voice high and nasally, “I want to talk to your manager!”

“All right,” Joel said, cutting Mateo off before he could go on, “Let’s not get ourselves written up before we open.”

He picked up the headset again and handed it to Jamal.

“Here-” he handed the headset to Jamal. “You shouldn’t have to know how to use it; it should tell you. You put that on, and I’ll turn it on from my office.

“I’ll be right back.”

Jamal turned the device over in his hands. It definitely had more *heft* than the version he was used to. That was probably why the supporting straps seemed more substantial.

Mateo leaned in. “You think you can run Doom on that?”

“Dorks,” Rosa said, playfully. Despite the criticism, Rosa seemed equally drawn to the new, shiny plastic.

“Takes one to know one, *mamacita*,” Mateo said.

He punched Jamal on the shoulder.

“Come on, man. Let’s get some ASMR going, already.”

Jamal frowned, trying to pick at the edge of the protective film over the glass. The third try was the charm. He peeled the plastic back with a satisfying squelch and then widened the strap, making sure it fit over his visor. He clipped the battery pack to his pants and adjusted the microphone that extended over his left ear.

He looked around. From the back prep sinks to the brushed-metal soda towers beyond the front counter, *Frylies*’ looked the same as it had before. Remodeled a few years before, it was all clean, Scandinavian lines with modern black panels, vinyl wood accents, and clean lettering, aspiring for something more upscale. Red LED stripes ringed the ceiling, mimicking neon. The tile counters gleamed under red pendent lights. The variously sized logos, with their buttery-yellow, crinkle-cut fries and red swirly lettering, glowed in witness.

The shake machine’s compressor kicked on, rumbling loudly.

As if cued, red text began to flow in the upper corner of his vision. It seemed to be a series of startup diagnostics.

The headset buzzed, and then a cartoon voice was in Jamal’s ear.

“Hi there, Jamal, employee two-two-one! I’m SpudBud, your friendly performance partner, ready to optimize your best voice!”

“Whoa.”

“What’s happening?” Rosa asked.

Joel re-emerged from the back.

“Okay, we should be up and running. Are you seeing it?”

Jamal nodded.

“Great! Okay. Pretend a car has just pulled up. Push the mic button and just talk. You and the customer at the drive-thru will hear the corrected version. You should also see it in the display.”

“Just talk like normal?”

“Go ahead.”

Jamal looked around the group, suddenly very self-conscious. He licked his lips and then pressed the button.

“Um, welcome to *Frylies*’,” Jamal said haltingly, sounding extremely self-conscious as everyone watched him, “Where every day is Fry-day? What can I get you?”

Again, there was a sudden buzz at the back of his head. In his glasses, an ellipsis flashed several times, and text appeared.

“[[WARNING: Non-sanctioned greeting. Correcting. Energy and confidence levels boosted 20%.]] Welcome to *Frylies*’. May I take your order?”

Rosa was impatient. “What did it say?”

Jamal took off the headset and looked at the spot along the elastic band that had vibrated.

“Something about a ‘non-sanctioned’ greeting? And what it said to the customer was completely different than what I said. Is it always going to do that?”

“That’s the point,” Joel said quickly, “It keeps everything consistent. For the customers.”

Joel retrieved his clipboard and flipped some pages.

“Here’s what’s in the press release:”

#

“SpudBud™ is *Frylies*’ next-generation drive-through enhancement platform, designed to ensure every guest interaction reflects our commitment to customer clarity, consistency, and comfort.

At *Frylies*, we believe ‘fast, food, and fun’ should sound the same - no matter who’s listening.

The advanced AI agent works seamlessly in the background, preserving your authentic customer interactions while ensuring they meet *Frylies*’ brand-forward conversational expectations.

By leveraging adaptive tone-balancing and-”

“-*Blah, blah, blah*. It goes on like that for a ways. *Anyway-*,” Joel flipped to the next page.

“There’s some internal notes about ‘guest ease indexing’ and calibration, but that’s mostly metrics.”

He tapped his clipboard.

“Any questions?”

Jamal shot Mateo a look. Mateo just shrugged.

Mrs. Alvarez’s thumbs kneaded the strap on her visor as if she were praying a synthetic fiber rosary. She silently studied Jamal as she did so.

#

“They’re making us into robots, man. Freakin’ robots.”

Mateo unlocked and removed the padlock. With a yank, the painted metal gate shrieked in protest as he forced it open. Beyond was the dumpster, revealed. Sweet wafts of rotting bread and tangs of fermented ketchup bin-juice hit Jamal and Mateo simultaneously.

“I dunno man.” Mateo hefted a bag of garbage over the lip. It landed with a wet slap that echoed inside the metal bin. “You’re sounding kinda crazy right now.”

The transformer on the light pole above sounded like a swarm of disturbed bees.

SpudBud's chipper sing-song cadence coming through the drive-thru speaker could just be heard above the hum.

Jamal heaved his own bag into the dumpster.

"You don't even work drive-through. You don't hear it. And it's not just 'please' and 'thank you' — it's everything."

"You keep vibing like that, SpudBud is gonna flag your negativity even from out here. Mandate a hug or something."

Jamal let out an exasperated sigh.

"I connect with people, bro. When people hear *me*, they like *me*." He pulled at the top of the next bag, only for something sharp inside to puncture the side. A spurt of something liquid and sticky shot out and over his sneaker.

"Oh hell. These are only a *month old!*"

Mateo crouched to cradle the bag from underneath. He gestured with his head for Jamal to do the same on the opposite side.

"Too bad, man. Sacrifices to the fast food gods must be made."

Together, supporting the bottom of the bag, they lifted the punctured bag up and over the dumpster's wall.

Jamal grabbed one of the many napkins littering the inside of the trash corral. He steadied himself against the gate, stood on one foot, and tried to sop up the further indignity on the other.

"I was saying, if they can't hear me, when they only hear the same company thing, day after day, no variation, what do people like? What do they connect with?"

The side door opened, and Rosa pushed a wheeled bin out in front of her.

"Hey, geniuses. You missed one."

"Sorry," Mateo said. He wiped his hands on his black apron. "Jamal needed to vent."

"Rosa will back me up," Jamal said, "She's worn the headset."

Rosa pulled up short.

“What’s the problem?”

“It’s SpudBud. It’s not right.”

“Jamal thinks it’s stealing our voices.”

“Not stealing, erasing!”

Mateo took the bin from Rosa and wheeled it around the oily, iridescent puddle on the ground. “Can it erase fryer grease from my clothes? It could make me a Karen if it could do that.”

Jamal picked up the last remaining bag at his feet. “You aren’t listening to me.”

Rosa stared at the two of them for a moment, sizing them up.

“Yeah, it’s a bummer you can’t crack jokes anymore. Some of it was legit good, for real. But, you get a few greetings ignored, and suddenly the sky is falling?”

“Rosa-“

“I am NOT DONE. Jamal, Have you ever been told to ‘speak English’? Give somebody their food only to be told to ‘go back to your country’?” Rosa’s voice was rising. “Jamal, you ever have to get your manager because the customer didn’t want to deal with ‘an illegal’?”

Mateo and Jamal just stood in disbelief.

Rosa exhaled and pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Listen, with SpudBud, I don’t have to worry about being called out. People order their food. I give them the food. It’s simple. No racist bullshit.”

“Rosa,” Jamal started, picking his words carefully, “I’m sorry that happens to you. That’s messed up. That shouldn’t be on you. But this isn’t fixing it... It’s just hiding it.”

Rosa turned on her heel marched toward the restaurant.

“This is a fast food job, Jamal,” she called over her shoulder, “Get over yourself and get back to work.”

Jamal stood staring at the spot where Rosa used to be until Mateo shoed him to take a step back. The gate closed, its piercing, metal-on-metal lament spooking the rock doves perched overhead.

Somewhere around the corner, someone was just finishing up at the drive-thru. “Thank you for choosing *Frylies*” filled the void left by startled wings.

Jamal couldn’t tell who was behind it.

#

The day Jamal broke SpudBud, it had already spent hours correcting him.

Working the window that day, he got no fewer than *three* reprimands, delivered via text, haptic annoyance, and a side of fry puns.

Jamal liked calling people “boss”. It broke the tension; maybe won a smile. But today his greeting of, “Afternoon, boss! How we livin’ today?” was chastised via text in his glasses. “[GREETING FLAGGED: Overt Intimacy] Hey, partner! Let’s keep our greetings *crisp* and *professional*.”

When certain thresholds were exceeded or the offense was particularly egregious, the headset *buzzed*. The physical “coaching”.

All the guest heard was, “Good afternoon. How can I serve you today?” Said in a flat, neutral, and passively-aggressive Midwestern accent.

Then there was the time he tried confirming an order.

“I gotchu. One double-cheese, no onion. That’ll be twelve-fifty when you pull ‘round and see me at the window, k?”

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he cringed involuntarily.

“[GRAMMAR ALERT: Syllabic Loss] Eyes on the fries, Jamal! Your grammar is looking a little lumpy!”

Buzz.

In his headset, the version the customer heard was replayed, limp and *distant*. “I understand. One Double-Cheese Sandwich, without onions. Your total is twelve dollars and fifty cents. Please proceed to the first window.”

Jamal got the shift’s final slight as they were about to close. The customer was craving a late-night treat. They asked Jamal which of the shakes was his favorite.

“Honestly?” Jamal thought for a moment before continuing, “I prefer a classic strawberry without the whip or sprinkles - it still hits the spot. All the other stuff can be a bit too sweet for me.”

“[[LOGGED FOR PERFORMANCE REVIEW: Sabotage]] Yikes! Every menu item is a ‘Flavor Champ’, Jamal! The drive-thru isn’t the place for *hashing* out our personal opinions!”

The headset buzzed. *Twice*.

“You can’t go wrong with any of our SnowCream Shakers,” the guest heard. “Would you like to make that a meal?”

Before taking off the headset, SpudBud summarized his shift. His glasses flashed the text, “[[PERFORMANCE NOTE: Greeting compliance up 12%. Keep up the improvement, Jamal!]]”.

Jamal hung the headset on his charging hook, on the wall above the register, and slumped against the tiled counter. He rubbed his temples, but the red warning letters were still there, floating in his peripheral vision.

#

The rest of the store was already sheets deep into closing protocol when Joel deviated.

“So it’s commander night at the game store,” Joel said, zipping his jacket. “And if I leave now, I can maybe catch the last hour of Magic.”

He looked at the remaining team.

“You good to finish up here?”

Jamal pursed his lips and looked expectantly at Mateo.

Deedra, a recent teenage hire, looked between those remaining, waiting for a cue.

“*No te preocupes,*” Mrs. Alvarez said, “We’ll finish.”

Joel beamed and headed for the door. “Alright. You guys are great.” He took off his *Frylies*’ branded hat and hurriedly backed his way out. “Any problems, just-”

If there was further instruction, it was left outside as the door closed.

Mrs. Alvarez quickly divvied up what was left, and the remaining four got to work.

Jamal cornered Mateo when they were alone in the kitchen.

“Now’s our chance, man,” Jamal said, “Joel’s gone. Let’s get into the office. Let’s see what SpudBud is about!”

“SpudBud? A gain?” Mateo groaned while pulling away. “Dude, I just want to finish and go home already.”

“You don’t wanna know what it has on you? Or Rosa?”

Mateo crossed his arms, unconvinced.

“Listen. It’s gotta be tonight. Who knows when we’ll get another chance?”

Mateo just stood, looking at Jamal skeptically.

Jamal looked Mateo dead in the eye, pausing for emphasis.

“It flagged me because **I** like my **strawberry shake** without **sprinkles.**”

“*¡Qué pesado!*” Mateo sighed. He waved Jamal back and walked to the door to the narrow hallway leading past the bathrooms. Mateo poked his head out.

Accordion from Mrs. Alvarez’s after-hours mix danced on the air. Her Bluetooth speaker, propped up by the soda fountain, bounced her usual playlist of Nortec and Norteño hits from decades ago. The sung lyrics echoed energetically down the narrow passageway:

-Yo soy la sangre del indo, soy latino, soy mestizo

Somos de todos colores y de todos los oficios

Y si contamos los siglos, aunque le duela al vecino

Somos más americanos que todititos los gringos-

“Hey, Mrs. Alvarez,” Mateo called out, but wasn’t heard over the music.

“HEY!”

The middle-aged woman looked up on the third try from where she and Deedra were mopping the dining area.

“Jamal and I are gonna finish back here, k? Floors and trash?”

She nodded once and made a “shooing” gesture before returning to her work.

Mateo closed the door and got socked on the shoulder.

“Hell, yes!”

“Whatever. Help me get the bags out back, and I’ll take it the rest of the way.”

The two hustled to get the trash cart loaded, but Mateo’s mind was on Jamal.

“You’ll probably have five minutes. Ten tops,” Mateo whispered, despite the fact that there was no chance of being heard from the front above the music. “You sure about this?”

“Come on, man. We’re wasting time. What’s the code?”

Mateo was uncharacteristically solemn. “This is just for SpudBud *only*. You get caught, and they find out I figured out the door code, we’re not just cleaning grease traps. It’s our jobs, man.”

Jamal raised his right hand and tried to make the “Scout honor” salute, but was unsure how many fingers were upright. After a minute of waffling, he shrugged and smiled, blinking rapidly to flutter his eyelashes.

Mateo’s seriousness broke.

“¡Idiota!” he said, melting. He pressed the pushbutton lock buttons in the correct order. The door clicked audibly as it unlocked. “Five minutes. I’m not playin’.”

Jamal slapped Mateo's shoulder and slipped through, flipping the light switch just inside. He stood for a second, his eyes having difficulty as the fluorescents overhead sputtered to life.

Admittedly, there wasn't much to see, the office being barely bigger than the mop closet.

Jamal pulled the door shut and suddenly felt, more than saw, something swing toward him. He jumped to the side, barely strangling a yell before it left his throat.

Two bulbous eyes, the size of saucers, stared at him through a mesh laundry bag. Jamal could just make out the rest of 'Phil the Fry', *Frylies*' life-sized foam and polyester mascot costume. It was hanging from a peg on the back of the door.

The jump scare had his heart racing. Jamal took several deep breaths, trying to calm himself while he studied the anthropomorphized crinkle-cut. It was shedding yellow fibers where it rubbed against the door. It made the whole room smell like dust and Febreze. Its cartoon eyes remained big and wide, as if it were as surprised to see Jamal as he was to see it.

Jamal pushed himself away from his corner. The limited wall space was covered in past advertising campaigns, most sporting the slogan, "**FAST. FOOD. FUN.**" A narrow bookcase held a handful of laminated training binders. Then there was Joel's desk, wedged into the far corner.

There was an open laptop on it.

Jamal moved to the desk. It felt like the costume's eyes were following him. He pulled up a bare-bones, office-store special that had clearly seen better days. The faux leather was cracked. What was left of the foam padding poked through in several places. Its unevenness was apparent when he sat down.

The laptop's screen snapped to life when he jiggled the nearby mouse. The login screen was *Frylie*-themed: a rich, ketchup-colored background behind black-and-yellow boxes.

Joel's username was pre-populated in the form. However, the cursor blinked in the password field, waiting for something to join it.

Jamal rocked back in thought and looked around the room.

He typed “FASTFOODFUN” and hit enter.

Access was denied.

He cleared the field and typed “FASTFOODFUN1”.

The result was the same.

He swore under his breath. Tapping the sides of the computer while he thought, he felt something. Jamal leaned to his right. The edge of a Post-it note peeked out from underneath, a tiny edge creased around the edge of the plastic. He lifted the laptop up to get a better look underneath.

There, beneath the plastic housing, was a pale pink sticky note with Joel’s handwriting.

“Gotcha, Boss.”

Jamal typed the word, “P0wer_Pl@yer97” into the password field and hit enter.

And he was in.

There were a handful of windows already open, with the SpudBud interface on top. Jamal’s own name caught his attention. It was an open report - something about “Employee cohesion ranking” and “Sorted by areas of concern”.

Jamal moved the mouse and double-clicked on his name.

A small modal opened over top of the report:

#

[[SUBJECT: JAMAL TOWNSEND - FRICTION AUDIT]]

- **Primary Linguistic Impediment:** Persistent deviation from brand-forward norms
- **Cultural Friction Coefficient:** **28.4%** above *Frylies*’ median employee grade
- **Statistical Probability Factor:** Probably **92% match** for “Urban” or “Under-resourced” socioeconomic background, with a **76% correlation** with Mid-Atlantic/AAVE influence.
- **Impact:** Data suggests these markers reduce “Guest Purchase Confidence” by **14%** among

suburban demographics.

#

There was a whole section on suggested interventions and manager prompts. However, Jamal was having difficulty continuing to read. The screen seemed to swim.

Jamal felt his jaw clench. He pulled on the sleeve of his uniform polo and wiped his eyes with it.

He breathed deep again and closed his double-click. In doing so, the mouse made more of a bang than a click, despite himself.

Then he spotted it. There, in the program's menu bar, was a gear icon.

He opened it.

SPUDBUD STORE CONFIGURATION

Location: Frylies' #214

Communication Optimization Settings

Employee Tone Normalization (?)

Enabled

Guest Confidence Smoothing (?)

Enabled

Customer Clarity Reinforcement (?)

Disabled (Recommended)

#

Jamal clicked on the “?” symbol after “Customer Clarity Reinforcement”. The resulting dialog box had a cartoon version of SpudBud in the corner, wearing a mortarboard and holding a

pointer.

“Customer Clarity Reinforcement,” it started, “provides helpful real-time coaching to guests who demonstrate ordering confusion, unclear speech, or inefficient menu navigation. Examples include menu navigation guidance, pronunciation assistance, and conversational clarity prompts. This experimental feature is *recommended to be off during peak hours.*”

Jamal blinked several times in rapid succession. He was so lost in contemplation that he didn't even hear the door open.

“¡Deja de comiendo moscas!” Mateo angrily whispered, his head poking in the door, “What the hell? Hurry up!”

“Okay, okay, *okay*,” Jamal said. He quickly toggled the “Customer Clarity Reinforcement” option. He hurriedly confirmed the change, exited the settings window, and returned the previous report to the top of the window stack.

He logged off and pushed the seat back.

The mascot still stared.

Jamal gave Phil a wide berth as he left the office and rejoined Mateo in the kitchen.

“What did you do?”

“I,” Jamal said, pausing dramatically, “restored justice.”

“What?” Mateo sounded tired.

Jamal grinned from ear to ear. “Tomorrow, everybody is going to be treated the same. It's gonna be awesome.”

Mateo looked at Jamal warily. “Whatever, man. Let's just finish and get out of here.”

He handed Jamal a mop.

“You owe me floors. *All* the floors.”

Jamal just grinned.

#

The next morning, Rosa and Kris were tag-teaming the drive-thru.

Ordinarily, mornings were a predictable treadmill of coffee and hash-brown exchanges. Rosa worked with practiced precision. Kris - well, she was new enough to still wear perfume to work.

The first sign that something was wrong came from a gray minivan.

Rosa listened as the smoothed version of her greeting played out over the speaker beneath the menu.

“Good morning, and welcome to *Frylies*’. Would you like to try our *Sunrise Scramble*?”

“Um, yeah, maybe-“

There was something unintelligible, as if the driver had turned away and was asking someone else a question.

“[[GUEST CLARITY ALERT: Incomplete Vocalization]]” flashed in Rosa’s AR headset.

The speaker crackled briefly, as if clearing its throat.

“Goodness, friend!” the synthetic voice said, “At *Frylies*’, a fresh start begins with you doing your part! You trailed off. Let’s try that again with a 20% boost in vocal projection! Clear orders help everyone have a better morning!”

Kris, also wearing a headset, froze on her way from the stockroom. She looked to Rosa, questioning.

“What did you say?” the driver said, with a slow, rising crescendo that was less of a question and more of a challenge.

“Here at *Frylies*’, we’re all for energy, but let’s watch the tone,” SpudBud replied instantly. “How about one of our Caramel Coffee Shakers? It’s guaranteed to sweeten you right up!”

“WHAT. THE. HELL!?”

A new red warning flashed in Rosa's glasses as the voice responded.

"We love enthusiasm! But if you want to be a *Frylie Friend*, please keep your language family-friendly."

The van jerked forward, pulling out of line and then peeled away, its tires screeching.

"Rosa?" Kris whispered, eyes wide. "Is it... is it talking back to them?"

Rosa didn't answer. The next vehicle was already pulling up - a big, black Chevy Tahoe with tinted windows. On the driver's side was a car magnet. It said: **RE-ELECT STATE REP. GARY "GUS" KNUTSON.**

Rosa held the mike away from her face. "Get Joel," she hissed at Kris.

"But- but Joel isn't here."

On the camera feed, Rosa could see the driver of the Tahoe. Presumably, "Gus" was all middle-aged dough propping up wrap-around shades and topped with an undirtied trucker hat. He was gesticulating animatedly to a dash-mounted phone.

"*CALL HIM. GET JOEL HERE, NOW!*"

Kris stood as if she were a deer, contemplating why twin suns were barreling toward her on an otherwise vacant stretch.

"**GO!**"

Kris blinked twice, gulped, then spooked.

Rosa could now hear Gus over the menu's speaker.

"-I'm tellin' ya, my fellow patriots, that's the problem with this country. Nobody respects the working class, the people like you and me. Now hold on, your *man of the house* needs his breakfast."

He leaned out his window, looking down on the metallic speaker grill.

"Uh, yeah, gimme the big breakfast, with extra bacon. Make the coffee an extra-large. And let's make this happen quick, too. I've got a busy morning."

On Rosa's AR display, rows of red text flickered.

"Whoa there, neighbor!" SpudBud replied from the drive-through speaker. "It sounds like we forgot our manners this morning! At *Frylies*, there's no need to rush!"

Gus did a double take, frowning at the speaker.

"Also," SpudBud continued brightly, "your sentence structure was rushed. Please rephrase your request politely. Remember: Kindness is the secret sauce!"

Gus looked to his phone with a quizzical look, then went back to the menu.

"Wha-What did you say to me?"

"I'm sorry, sir. Should I increase the volume for one of our cherished senior guests?"

Rosa tried to interject, "Sir, I'm-"

"Are you kidding me?" Gus said, voice rising, "Do you know who I am, you little *shit*? I'm your State Representative!"

"Status doesn't excuse your tone, Representative!," SpudBud sang out. "As we always say, 'Think twice before not being nice!'. Let's practice our 'Inside Voice' together! Repeat after me: 'May I please have the Big Breakfast?'"

Gus yanked his phone from his dash, thumbed some setting, and then held it at arm's length so that he could get himself and the menu behind his reddening face in the same shot.

"Are you guys getting this?! What is this woke garbage, trying to tone-police me?! Me?" He spoke into the phone, "THIS IS WHAT THEY'RE DOING NOW! Listen, when I was growing up, we had a little saying - *the customer is always right.*"

[[WARNING: Guest is demonstrating escalated hostility levels.]]

"Sir-" Rosa started.

"At *Frylies* '- " SpudBud cut in.

"We didn't go around," Gus shouted, ignoring them, "making fun of people who were just trying to get *breakfast* with their own GOD-DAMN MONEY."

“A burger is a *circle*, a fry is a *line*, please stop *shouting*, and everything will be *fine!*”

“I’ve got more than five thousand people on this live stream, RIGHT NOW. AND WE’RE NOT LEAVING THIS DRIVE-THRU UNTIL WE GET AN APOLOGY, FACE-TO-FACE.”

Gus turned his phone to the menu camera. The ‘LIVE’ icon in the corner was pulsing a frantic red, the view counter zooming upwards as Rosa watched. An inverse waterfall of emojis - laughing faces, fire, angry red circles - scrolled upwards past his grip at a rapid clip.

Rosa began to rub her closed eyes with both hands.

“Christ,” she exclaimed, “What changed?”

By now, the counter staff had figured out something had gone horribly wrong, but were unsure what. They stared at Rosa.

This seemed like an appropriate moment for Kris to interject.

“Joel said he was coming, um, but he won’t be here for another ten minutes.”

Rosa tore off the headset and dropped it in frustration. It buzzed, rumbling so much that it danced on its own across the counter top.

Rosa ignored it.

“Close the drive-thru. Help those in line get back out. If Gus asks, tell him I’ll be right there.”

Kris audibly gulped, and then left.

#

Two weeks later, Joel stood before the assembled team before opening. He tapped the back of his clipboard against his free hand to get the group’s attention.

Jamal slipped in at the last moment and hung toward the back, where he was less likely to be noticed.

“Okay, okay. Let’s get started.”

Joel paused, making sure he had everyone.

“Okay. As of this morning, I can confirm the apology that you’ve probably seen on social media is legit. *Frylies*’ corporate has released a public statement. From here on out, if anyone asks you about it, you’re to refer to it as a ‘regrettable bug’ or ‘rare, one-time’ anomaly,” Joel said, making air quotes.

“If you’re pressed for any further comment, refer the person to *Frylies*’ PR - you should all have the number. Or refer them to me, and I’ll do it. Everyone got it?”

“But what about us?” Rosa asked, arms crossed.

Joel’s air quotes returned.

“Well, for one, it means that I’ve been demoted from manager to ‘*acting manager*’ until they can find and train a replacement.”

The room went quiet. Even the ice cream compressor was silent.

“And while they still don’t know exactly how the configuration settings got changed, it did occur while Mrs. Alvarez was the senior person in charge.”

The group tensed.

“As these things go, it’s important that for the company to show they’re taking this seriously. That’s why, unfortunately, she has been let go.”

Jamal’s eyes went wide.

“What!?” Rosa hissed, “We all know Jamal did it. Why does Mrs. Alvarez have to pay for his screw-up?”

Jamal started to speak before Joel cut him off.

“We’re not going to start pointing fingers,” Joel said, setting his clipboard down. “What’s done is done. This was handed down from above. I can’t say for certain what they took into consideration, but it is now a closed matter.”

Rosa turned to the group to plead her case, but then spotted Jamal.

“I hope you’re happy, *asshole*.”

“Stop,” Joel made sure he caught Rosa’s eye, “Just stop.”

He set down his clipboard.

“I know we all love Ms. Alvarez. She’s been a part of the *Frylies*’ family, it seems like forever. Certainly, since before I started working at this location. And it would be a mistake to expect anyone to just take her place. But we need the help, so I called in a favor.

“Everyone, I’d like to introduce you to Teresa.”

The door to Joel’s office, which had been open a crack, now opened fully. The new employee stood in front of the assembled group, cradling her *Frylies*’ visor in front of her with her hands.

Jamal blinked.

“Mrs. Alvarez?”

Joel didn’t look at him.

“Everyone, this is Teresa,” he said. “She is *starting today*.”

There were murmurs of recognition within the group.

“Now, I know you may have questions. I’m happy to answer those with you privately when we have a moment. But-” Joel paused to check his phone, “-we’ve got a big day ahead of us. Let’s get to it.”

“And Jamal? Teresa?” Joel retrieved his clipboard. “Let’s have a quick word. My office, please.”

Jamal steered clear of Rosa and followed the other two to the office.

“Close the door,” Joel said while he sat in his seat.

Jamal pulled up short. Phil the Fry was there, eyes boring into him.

He coughed, nervously, to clear his throat.

“Mrs. Al-,” Jamal stammered, cutting himself off, “I mean, Teresa. I, I didn’t think it would
-.”

He stopped.

“I’m sorry.”

“You did a stupid thing, because you’re a stupid boy. Your heart is in the right place, but your head is *en el culo*.” Teresa pinched Jamal’s cheek as if she were his abuela, despite nearly being a full head shorter.

“Breaking things might feel good when you did it,” she continued, “but you take your shot and miss? You might end up hitting someone *que sí te importa*.”

“Now Jamal,” Joel said, elbows propped up on his knees, “this only works if Teresa is a new person. That means no ‘Yo, Mrs. Alvarez!’, no ‘Big up, Ms. A’. This is a huge risk; we screw this up, I’m out, Teresa’s out, and who knows who else. We clear?”

Jamal looked at each of them in turn.

“Yes, yes. Absolutely. I got it. But-“ he swallowed. “I should tell Rosa sorry, too. I really didn’t mean for her to get caught up in any of this.”

“*Un momento*, Jamal,” Teresa said, shaking her head. “Let me talk to her. Rosa will come around, but she is going to need some time.”

She turned back to Joel.

“Anything else, boss?”

“No, Teresa, we should be good here. Please do one more pass and make sure we’re set to open. Jamal and I have one more thing. Thank you.”

“*De nana*,” she said, and she saw herself out.

Joel slapped his knees.

“All right. Let’s go for a walk.”

Joel and Jamal stood on the asphalt that looped behind *Frylies*'. Joel was studying the menu that housed the drive-thru speaker. Jamal wasn't sure what they were looking at.

"You know, it's really a shame," Joel began, straightening and looking around their surroundings, "The interference, I mean."

"Interference?"

Joel gestured to the lots surrounding the restaurant. "What do you see?"

Jamal covered his eyes to shield them from the low morning sun. He looked out across the parking lot. "I see a strip mall. There's a Starbucks, a dental place, pet grooming—"

"Cell tower," Joel said. "Right next to the lot."

Jamal followed his gaze.

"Huh."

Joel tilted his head toward the speaker.

"Wouldn't take much for something like that to interfere."

Joel's last statement hung in the air, more of a question than a statement.

Jamal looked at Joel, then to the drive-thru, then back to Joel.

"Yeah," he began, slowly, "All those signals. No telling the interference that might happen."

"Probably intermittent, too. A nightmare to debug."

Jamal's furrowed brow while trying to follow these breadcrumbs suddenly brightened.

"We'd have to pull 'em to the window, go face-to-face."

Joel leaned over, pretending to listen to the speaker. "Do you hear some static? I think I hear some glitchiness this morning. So random."

"I'll make a sign, tell people to pull forward, and order at the window."

"We *apologize for the inconvenience*, and that they should pull forward to the window."

Joel corrected, “And only as long as it is intermittent. Seriously.”

Joel turned to return to the store.

“Let’s get that sign posted. I have a feeling today is going to be a busy day for us.”

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Jamal leaned forward.

“Hey, hey, hey,” he said, “Good morning! Glad you’re here. How ya doing?”

For a brief moment, Jamal felt himself involuntarily tense, waiting for an unwelcome vibration at the back of his head. Or red text to suddenly fill his peripheral vision. Gloriously, there was neither.

He relaxed.

Rosa moved behind him to restock bags.

She didn’t say anything.

But she didn’t stare daggers at him, either. It was a start.

The driver of the older model sedan looked up.

“Oh, you know,” they said while gesturing vaguely toward the road in front of them,
“*work.*”

“Yeah, I hear that,” he said, “How ‘bout we make that better? What can I getcha, Boss?”