

Jackie

The idea of a city wasn't anything new to Nathan Willowpit.

As a Western quadrupedal dragon, there were border issues here and there, but luckily the Intelligence Certifier read his data correctly each time, resolving any queries raised by security.

To Nathan, this, being part of the first few allowed into Ferapoliton, was a big step forward for his kind. The old notion that the more 'feral' dragons had less rights than that of Ferapol citizens had caused much political unrest, and had been finally overturned after the discovery and graphing of the different levels of sentience between generations of genetically modified individuals.

Nathan was excited at finally getting to see the grand city, and, it was said, one of the greatest sights of all time: the Minx Carnival. He had lived most of his life out in the countryside, among other dragons like him, nesting in caves, and occasionally mail-ordering in items like radios and televisions from the local outpost. (Although many electronic appliances hadn't lasted long; they were not well-designed to cope with the strength of medium-sized dragons).

After hearing the news of Ferapoliton allowing access to all species, his family had elected Nathan to be the first from his clan to explore the New United World. They had visited modern cities before, but only behind boundaries set by local law enforcement.

This wasn't like those city trips. This was the heart of the great modern empire. Something newer, bigger and more mind-boggling than anything Nathan had seen before. He had seen the electric cars, heard the buzzing of traffic crossings, smelled the 'delight fumes' – as they were called – in the main city district, and tasted the fascinating food experiments of local artisans before, but this was on a much grander scale.

Everything was shiny, in one way or another. Blinking LEDs, neon lights, metallics, everything that could possibly shine or suddenly reflect light into the eyes of an unsuspecting civilian. The buildings reached so high that Nathan wondered, even if he flew straight up, if he could actually reach the top. He didn't try. In the countryside, where the entire sky was your vast and empty playground, there was no need for flight qualifications. But all modern cities had a no-fly zone a few metres above sea level, unless one carried a licence.

Grounded, the only thing that got to Nathan, as he ambled about, was space. Even though this city seemed so vast compared to himself, it was cramped. Dozens and dozens of Ferapols walked about, minding their own business, leaving little room for someone the size of a large horse to move in.

This city was built for bipedals alright, he thought to himself, as he made his way slowly through the city square. His mind wandered to Minx Carnival. The largest carnival in the world. He had seen footage of it on the television, the festive looks on the crowd's faces delighting him. It was close by, somewhere, in the flesh, submerged in the heaving sea of city-goers.



Winding and squeezing through pedestrian tunnels and crowds, neck craning, Nathan scanned the electronic signs for directions to Minx Carnival – or anywhere useful at all.

“Hungry for a 100% vat-grown burger? VEAT: A new carne for a modern carnivore!”

“Need to get... frixxxxy? Got an itch to scratxxxh? Howlla and Catcall at Floxxxxy's!”

“Lookin' for that perfect gift for your furry and/or scaley friend? Come on over to Jones Brightwalk Arcade! Half price on all fishnet hats and post-cashmere pantulas!”

I'm almost completely sure I don't want any of those things, he thought, blinking, his temples throbbing. The advertising was starting to get to Nathan a little.

He'd never had to deal with such a bombardment of information. He needed a haven, fast.

A life-saver caught his eye. There was an information kiosk ahead, right at the centre of the bustling square. He zig-zagged around busy bipedals and cleaning bots, stepped gingerly over a long trail of soap suds, and clutched at the polished steel counter.

“Excuse me, um, excuse me, hello there!”

The desk had looked deserted, but, at his call, a long, green neck appeared from beneath it, and a python-woman with bright purple lipstick looked straight him. She launched into a wide smile, as a tail-tip snuck up beside her and adjusted her hovering name-tag.

“Hi there, sorry, I was on break and – oh!” She broke off, and swooped in close to his nose, squinting. “Are you lost, dear? Have you lost sight of your owner? Don't fret, let me juusst see if you have an O.I. chip, I'm sure we can scan it and contact them right awa-”

“Oh, no! Nononono, I'm – I'm not that kind of... um, four legged dragon! Er, here!”

Nathan quickly whipped out his intelligence certifier from his hip satchel, and the snake lady flicked her gaze to it, scanning it with an optic unit on the left side of her face.

“See? I'm a, ah, Nathan Willowpit, a citizen of Wimbledoor, the territories just west of here, and I, urm... I would like to ask about Minx Carnival.”

The python lady blinked and wagged her head, looking somewhat embarrassed.

“Ah, my apologies... Nathan. In all my years being here, I've – well, I've only ever come across feral dragons as lost and found pets. Still, ah, catching up with the law changes, ha-ha.” Her voice regained its previous, flute-like tone. “Please give me a moment, sir, and I will find the quickest route to Minx Carnival.”

The long green neck stretched over to his right. A set of robotic arms sprang up next to her, and she linked herself into them and began typing. Hovering digital displays appeared around her, and before Nathan could focus on the words, she was already in front of him again, bright purple snake-lips ablaze.



“Now, sir... Nathan, was it? From here, first take a left at Pillowing Avenue, continue down about 20 metres until you reach The Big Circle, then you take a right and head your way down Gooseleg Street, and keep going until you reach a large red billboard which reads THE MINX CARNIVAL.” Her voice began to speed up. “Here is a pamphlet on accommodation during the event, as well a schedule of performers and acts appearing on the main stage, costs of entry, packages and discounts, terms and conditions, and, of course, the new law changes and accessibility regulations governing quadrupedal draconians and other newly-included ferals. Now I really must be getting back to my break, I haven't had my full 15 minutes yet and this year's carnival committee officials will be arriving here soon to sign off my Pedestrian Directorial Protocols prior to the official Carnival commencement ceremony, so please excuse me and thank you for inquiring at this Ferapoliton Civic Information Kiosk!”

And before Nathan could get another word in, the kiosk shutters had already slid down, and blinked **BACK IN 15 MINUTES** in bold blue letters.

He sighed and looked around the kiosk. He was thankful that most of the rapidly-hissed instructions had stayed in his head. With a direction at last, Nathan picked up his pace and waded purposefully through the city.

After a lot of embarrassingly tight squeezes and annoyed, tiny, almost-trodden-on city-folk, he made it to the vast red sign, pulsing calmly just above head-height. There was a long line below it, but he joined it happily and waited, trotting on the spot. He could barely contain his excitement, though he remained conscious of people around him, and it seemed as though not many of them had a friendly demeanour towards him.

There was a long wait – which involved a lot of fuss and bother he couldn't quite follow, except for the cutting of a ribbon – then all the fluffies, scalies, and miscellaneous or ambiguous folk flooded into the carnival, and the festive music began. As the line ahead thinned, Nathan galloped to the gate, hastily paid the entry fee, squeezed through, and feasted his eyes on the spectacle.

There were very, very big roller-coasters, a variety of rides, the passing smells of all kinds of exotic food, and clusters of multi-coloured tents. People shouted and laughed and ran about, infected with the merry atmosphere. Those who lingered by the gate were beset by colourful robotic minks, who welcomed people to the carnival and passed out balloons and cotton candy.

Nathan stood a while and listened to them explain that Minx Laboratories were the first to perfect the concept of hybridization, and were the reason many anthropomorphic folk came to be, and that the carnival was to belatedly celebrate the culmination of their research and the successful creation of the first 'hybrid' between human and animal, and so forth. Once their paragraphs began to repeat, he moved on.

He bought a little carnival food, a bushel of popcorn and two hot buns (“dogs” had become too old-fashioned) and joined the queue for two roller-coaster rides, but was deemed too big to get on either one. After several failed attempts to fit in any of the seats, he agreed with the showmen's



protestations and settled for just looking at how magical everything was.

When he passed the main stage, a flash caught his eye. He reared up onto his hind legs to overlook the gathered crowd. There was a human man in a glaring white suit standing in the center of the stage, with a dragon next to him several times Nathan's size.

The Western-looking dragon was striped all along its back, had massive spiral horns, and wore a chunky metal collar. He watched as the man made the creature sit, lie, roll over, and had it jump through hoops set on fire by its own flaming breath.

Nathan wasn't sure what to make of it, as people cheered it on, or booed and threw things at the stage. It was only when he briefly caught the striped dragon's eyes that he felt something – there was a chilling emptiness. The creature looked so similar to himself, and yet... something just seemed missing. Something important. He locked stares with the beast, feeling at once both disturbed and empathetic towards it.

The beast let out a low-pitched growl at the crowd, causing a few of them to jump back.

What thin line separates us? he wondered. *There's just something... something void, yet, I can't look away, I can't feel... like I'm something more.*

More than you.

On stage, the man in the suit yelled at the dragon, and it broke its gaze away from Nathan. It hissed and snarled, darting its head threateningly toward the man, but the heavy collar glowed red, the jaws let out a startled yelp, and the dragon calmed down completely, its body relaxing.

Nathan turned away, shaking his head to clear his thoughts. When he held his head still again and the blurred faces of the crowd solidified once more, he was met by a widely smiling pair of jaws.

“Hey there, big boy – you're lookin' a little lost, aren't ya?” The feminine voice was smooth and dark. “Why don't you join your brotha up there?”

He was face to face with a tall Eastern-dragon woman, with a long serpentine tail and a muscular humanoid upper body. Nathan blushed and looked up, down, and around.

“Nononono, ma’am! I'm not... well, I may look it, but I'm not one of the show dragons! I... urm, I am one of a higher intelligence rating than the likely feral dragon and um, well, I... er, just wanted to see how they treated my um, cousins by genetics, you see –”

He had no idea what he said.

The dragon lady cocked her head to one side and gave a single loud laugh, amongst the cries of the crowd as the show went on.



"You're a funny one, then. Certainly from the countryside, I can tell." She chuckled. "So, you one of them graduated four-legged ones, I'm guessing? Well, congratulations on havin' the same smarts as me at last."

Her smile seemed genuine, but her demeanour gave away something much sneakier, something just a little unsettling to Nathan. She looked back towards the stage as the grand finale took place; the striped beast launching vertically into the air, letting itself drop limply through many flaming hoops, and righting its body in just enough time to land on its feet. The audience went bananas.

She snickered. "How's it make you feel, having one of your own bein' treated like a pet? Like the trained circus animal it is?"

He shrugged matter-of-factly. "I feel that... as long as they're not hurting him, it's fine. I mean – it's like an actor on the stage, but... he just doesn't have all the – the brain stuff, like I was given. So... they have to train him to make sure he, well he doesn't hurt anyone."

The dragon lady blinked, and flicked her fringe out of her face.

"Huh. I gotta say, I didn't expect that. Well then, you've certainly proved you're not actually a feral, even with your interesting choice of clothing."

Nathan looked down. He wore a makeshift shirt, made from loose cloth wound around the length of his body, and tight elastic pants with a jagged hole for his tail.

He huffed. "Hey, it's not easy finding suitable attire when your entire race was deemed unnecessary to dress!"

"Hmmm... yeah, understandable." She flicked her hair out of her face again, patted him on the shoulder, and turned away.

"Well, I sure did my security check on you, so I better get back to work assisting that 'brotha' of yours off the stage."

"Oh – well, um, good luck with that," replied Nathan uneasily, rubbing the back of his head with one claw.

She grinned. "Thanks."

Blowing her hair aside and beginning to turn away, she added, "And... hey, if you wanna learn a lil' more about how we work here in the big city, since you're so new... feel free to hit me up." She jerked a clawed thumb in some vague direction over her shoulder. "By the test-your-strength machine. Later, big boy."

He blinked, and she was already lost in the thick of the crowd, pushing and shoving people aside with a distant call of "Security, coming through!"



Nathan wasn't sure what to make of the brief conversation, but felt glad to be invited to learn his way around anything, let alone the gleeful din of the carnival or the brightly-lit maze of Ferapoliton itself. He mentally noted the whereabouts of the test-your-strength machine, whatever that was, and grinned awkwardly.

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After perusing a few more attractions, Nathan found himself looping round the venue towards the test-your-strength machine. There she was, still in her ragged jeans and black tank top, leaning against the machine. The dragoness giggled at a failed attempt of one of the customers, and called “next” to the person behind him.

Nathan stood back among the gathered crowd, as a large wolf-man took a chance at the device, grabbing the hammer and hitting it with all his might.

BAM! DINGDINGDING!

“Aaaaand we have a winner! Well done, mate, ya got it to the top!” she yelled, with artificial enthusiasm. “Have a fishcat toy!” The wolf-man looked a little annoyed and turned away, clutching the toy. He slunk into the crowd and offered it to a jaguar woman, who squealed at the sight.

The dragoness scanned her eyes over the crowd, and stopped as soon as she noticed Nathan, sticking out like a sore thumb amongst the people. She whistled and caught his eye, and, without really thinking, he found himself making a bee-line towards her.

“Yo! Big-butt! There ya are! I was beginning to wonder if you'd just flown da coop,” she yelled, making a nearby platypus woman flinch as she picked up the mallet to try her own strength.

“Oh hello, um... lady? I was just looking at the Large Zorcher and the Bouncy Owl Bowls... you know, looking at everything first before riding,” he replied hurriedly, attempting conversation. “That is, if I can fit, heh-heh!”

He'd realised by now that he still hadn't learnt her name, and decided to try to make a more formal introduction happen when he got the chance.

Also, he wasn't sure if he was comfortable with the idea of being called “big butt” all the time, either.

“Huh, well – I'm sure there must be many things you're unsure you could... fit.” She winked, and laughed raucously. This unnerved Nathan, but he laughed with her, hesitantly, flapping his wings to try and relax himself.

After a few attempts, the platypus woman didn't hit the machine hard enough to set off the winning sound, and disappointedly placed the mallet next to the hitting plate. The dragoness picked up the



mallet and threw it in the air, caught it by the handle, and offered it to Nathan.

"Go on, I'm sure you'd do fine."

"Um... if you're sure about that, ma'am." He hefted the mallet in his left front paw.

"The name's Jackie, big boy," she grinned, flicking out her tongue. "No need to be so formal. Now, go on, these folks don't have all day."

Nathan nodded, glancing back at the line that seemed to have appeared instantly behind him. He gulped, and then had a good go at hitting the plate.

PPPPFFFFRRREEEN!

The machine made a plaintive sound, and the AVERAGE light lit up. Quite a few people laughed behind him, and he felt awfully embarrassed.

"Wow, really? That's all you can muster?" nagged Jackie's sharp-edged voice beside him. Rather stung, he paused and squinted at the machine. After a moment, he dropped the mallet on the ground and threw himself at the machine, his head colliding with the plate with a satisfying WHACK!

DINGDINGDINGDINGDINGDINGDINGdingdingdingiiiiiiiiiiiiingdngdngngnnng!!!

The machine went into a frantic concerto of bell-ringing, the STRONGMAN light fully lit for several seconds before it started to spark around the edges. As the ringing slowed down, the lights flickered on and off and the machine eventually fell dead silent.

The surrounding crowd erupted with both cheering and dismayed booing, with audible cries of "over-the-top", "unnecessary" and "this is why we can't have nice things". Jackie listened with one ear cocked and a polite smile, scrawling a makeshift OUT OF ORDER sign on a cardboard box and hanging it on the contraption.

"A'ight, a'ight! Show's over, ladies and gentlederks," she called over the hubbub, waving the crowd back. "Seems this machine couldn't handle the might of a full-on beastie, am I right?"

Nathan couldn't tell if she was defending him, or joining in on the teasing. He guessed it was most probably a mixture of both. He took a deep breath and sighed, but before he could start apologising, Jackie had already picked up the mallet and placed it against his snout.

"Now THAT was impressive," she laughed. "You sure know how to beat something once you put your mind to it... well, more like, when you put that big bony head to it!" She patted him on the head and then deftly put the mallet-handle in his mouth. *This woman makes no sense at all!* he thought, confused and dazed.



"Hmam anfhaj hsnag-nmm fbfglrgle!" he protested, and spat it out, but Jackie had already wandered away.

"Hey!... Jackie! I thought you were going to... er, help me, or something!" he shouted, chasing after her. "You remember? With the carnival, and the city and all! Not make me an... a-a-attraction!"

The sassy dragoness swayed her long fluffy tail behind her as Nathan caught up, and she placed her clawed hands behind her head.

"Yeah, yeah, dun' worry, I'll help ya out... I mean, you just put me out of my job for this shift, so -"

"Oh! Oh no, I'm, um -"

"Jeez, calm your scales, it's no big deal." She clicked her teeth together and grinned. "Just means I've got a long, long break – so I guess I'm kinda grateful I didn't have to fake anything this time around."

"I... guess that's a good thing, then?" he asked, shrugging, and began to walk alongside her.

"You bet! Now, you said you had trouble fitting in any of the rides, right?" she asked, as they passed by a large, rickety-looking attraction with a sign that read GERBIL STALKER: *On The Velvet Wings Of Night*.

"Yeah, it's been a bit of an issue," he replied calmly, "but understandable, since they weren't designed to have full-sized dragons like me getting on them."

"Well," she snickered, "I think I got a ride in mind that may be compatible with your, heh, dimensions."

"Oh, awesome! Finally, I'd get to feel what it's like to be on one of these amazing machines!" exclaimed Nathan, hopping up and down with glee. There was a dismal squelch nearby as a grapefruit fell off a tall wooden pole, shaken loose by the vibration. The stall holder looked displeased.

"Well then, here we are!"

Jackie placed her hands on her hips and stared proudly up at the attraction before them: a dark tunnel, with a moat, and a few pigeon-shaped boats floating on the water. The big curly golden letters above the tunnel entrance proclaimed: THE TUNNEL OF DOVE.

Nathan blinked and tilted his head.

Jackie grinned. "Come on! Before it starts up again!" She grabbed him by the ear, yanked, and he found himself, wincing, standing shakily on the boat with Jackie. It swayed dramatically under his weight. Jackie turned a key in the bulky mechanism hanging above their heads, a small motor spluttered into life, and away they went.



This isn't so bad actually, never been on water like this before... not too exciting, but not boring either, Nathan thought as he sat and patted the water surface with one of his paws, the boat creaking when he leaned over.

Jackie put her feet up next to him and sighed loudly. “Ahhh. Not much of a thriller, but pretty much the first thing I had in mind. They made the seats pretty wide... for reasons,” she added, her voice trailing off into a harsh whisper. Nathan wasn't paying much attention, as the rocking sensation both delighted and frightened him. She chortled, and swayed in the dark beside him.

After a while, the boat slowed to a halt, and Nathan felt Jackie tug on one of his wings. “Come! We're getting off here!”

Then, with a small splash, her presence had left. Nathan hesitated to follow, but after reaching cautiously out to the side, he felt a flat surface beside the water, and gingerly tried to hop on to it from the boat. He felt the sudden grasp of sharp claws, and yowled in surprise.

“Oh, shush! It's only me, you big dummy,” she teased, as she assisted him onto the platform. “Follow me. And hold on to my tail if you have to.”

Nathan nodded, realizing at last that he couldn't see at all, and gently gripped the end of the dragoness's tail in his teeth, as she hugged the side of the tunnel and scooped purposefully along the darkened steel catwalk.

He could hear the gentle swishing of water not too far away from his feet, and trod cautiously. Ahead, Jackie had found a metal handle, and fiddled with it.

“Aha! There ya go!” Something unlatched itself with a poorly-oiled squawk. “The maintenance room, perfect place to have a moment to myself... thought I'd bring you along, 'cause it's quite a sight to see.”

Nathan let go of her tail and stared blankly ahead. “Could we... have a little light? I can't see anything at all.”

After a few beeps, boops and more metallic unlatching sounds, Jackie murmured “Gotcha!” and a sliver of dim light peeked into the tunnel. The dragoness pulled Nathan into the room quickly, ensuring their entry would remain unnoticed. The door shut with a heavy click behind them.

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It was a room lit by a single fluorescent light, which revealed a litter of machine parts, mascot costumes, and boxes upon boxes of stuff Nathan couldn't identify. He stepped lightly, and tried to choose where all his limbs ended up without accidentally knocking something over. Jackie found her way to the workbench, and began to wipe grease from one of the large iron clamps.



"Heh, seems old Bobski has used this room recently."

"Old Bobski?"

"Yeah, he's the janitor for this part of the park... he lets me sleep in this room when I'm having one of my 'special' breaks."

"Wait... wait, so he could be back at any point in time? I mean, this place doesn't look like one that someone like me is supposed to see —"

And with a nervous flick of his tail, Nathan knocked over a stack of boxes, which hit the floor with a weighty thud and made Jackie yelp.

"OH, FOR — It's fine. Look, Nathan, I brought you in here so you can see the things no-one else sees often," explained Jackie, as she re-stacked the fallen boxes. "All the left-over parts and broken bits, as well as... well, it's kinda my home right now."

"Oh... I'm sorry, I didn't mean to —"

"Shhh — it's fine. Really. Also, Old Bobski won't be bothering us for a while, the door's locked."

"...Why?"

Jackie made an awful grin and went over to one of the broken robot minks. She took one of its arms off and waved it in front of her face.

"Well, that's a good question, isn't it? I mean, why would I bring an exotic feral dragon to the maintenance room?"

She leaned over the broken robot, and gripped the minx's chin as she continued. "When I have nothing to do, I try to repair these out-of-date machines, but nothing I do to them makes them... special. It's like they are missing something. Something important."

These words rang clear to Nathan, who was now pondering the implications of being locked in a room with this suspicious woman. He tried to move backwards, but found himself just bumping into more boxes filled with things that clinked. The room wasn't very big, and he really didn't feel comfortable anymore.

Jackie picked up the mink robot, and then place her hands into the back of it's head, moving the mouth parts like a puppet as she continued.

"I needed something. A real brain, not an artificial one like we can order in. No... I needed a BIG JUICY BRAIN, but something that was adapted to a more... primitive body."

The dragoness came closer to him, wielding the arm of the robot in one hand like a bat, and holding



up the body and head in the other. Her voice was raspy and dark, her eyes stared right into his, and her gaze forced him onto his hind legs against the boxes.

“Something that can be compatible with even those simplest bodies, but can hold the smarts to create the perfect... mascot”.

Jackie began to laugh madly, and Nathan jumped back, right into the midst of the boxes. They tumbled over and revealed their contents to be more broken minx robots, their deactivated eye panels stared right back into him.

“AAAAAAA – okay, I'm done! I'M DONE! I – I – I promise I'll never come to Minx Carnival again! PLEASE – JUST DON'T MAKE ME A ROBOOOOOT –” he wailed, flapping his wings to escape to the ceiling, finding there was no room above head-height, and landing on top of the boxes.

Jackie came over to him and bopped him on the head with the robot arm.

“Dude, chill,” she laughed, light-heartedly. “I was just messin' with ya.”

Nathan stared at her, mind completely blown, and then squinted at her as she giggled.

“Oh, don't give me that look!” Jackie snorted, laying the robot arm and body on the bench. “I was surprised you didn't even try to eat me or anything, to defend yourself – you're one hell of a softie for a feral dragon! Heh heh.”

Nathan shook his head and sat on all fours. “So... you're not gonna make me a robot?”

“No.”

“Phew!”

“...the door is perma-locked for the next hour, though.”

“...Ah.”

And Nathan slumped against the wall, eyes wide with astonishment. *My brain hurts so much with this woman, I can't... I don't even.*

Jackie sighed and patted the helpless creature. “Sorry... guess I got a lil' carried away there. I'll leave ya to collect yourself while I work on this poor bastard.”

The dragoness sat at the workbench and began to tinker away at the robot parts. Nathan watched as she took apart the head and body with various tools, digital holographic panels popping up in front of her face as she poked at the robot's insides. Enthralled, he slowly crept close to her, as she pressed panels, answered yes or no to voice-activated questions and kept prodding at tiny mechanical bits.



Nathan finally mustered the confidence to speak in the awkward lull. "What are those, um, floaty things?"

"Oh – those are A.I.U.I.Ds. They let me keep workin' on the physical alterations of the robot while workin' on the software as well. Sometimes I gotta press buttons, but mostly it's voice-controlled."

"Auuids? Aouids? Ae euouds? I'm sorry – I'm pretty new to the shortened-words thing."

"Artificial Intelligence User Interface Displays." She squinted down at a fiddly part of the robotic minx. "It means I can talk to the robot's brain, but in a very simplified kinda way."

"Ah, right... I see." He blinked a few times.

After a long silence, Jackie looked away from her work and smiled.

"You know, hun, I see this whole robotics thing is just flyin' right over ya head... dun' worry about it, though. I brought you here 'cause I thought a simple guy like you would appreciate gettin' to see behind the scenes of a place like this... and, well, offering ya a spot in my temp-abode to have some respite from the um, well, those buggers who keep giving you the stink eye."

Nathan cocked his head to one side. "Well, thanks, I guess. I mean, this room is interesting, because it reminds me of one of my caves back home. And seeing where all the not-so-shiny things end up makes it more real, in a way... although now, I am very, VERY afraid of those robot minks."

He shuddered as his gaze wandered to the robot she was working on, and then to the robots that had spilled out of the boxes. His mind, trying to distract him from his newfound fear, focused on Jackie's last remark. *I didn't even know anyone was looking at me like that. I know there were many people frustrated with me because I didn't know much about anything. But...* He looked down and tilted his ears back.

"I... didn't know people were thinking badly of me. I mean, I didn't hurt anyone... too badly? I can't help my size at times, you know, and I know people have lots of misconceptions about us less-upright dragons, but I'm not like... the 'feral' dragons. I'm not like that huge striped one on the stage, I'm – well, I think I'm... more. I'm sure I'm something more."

Jackie turned the robot off, placed it gently back on the workbench, and stood up. She approached the downcast lizard and tilted his head up to her face.

"You are more. No matter what those folk think. Back a while, anyone who wasn't at least eighty percent human couldn't make a living. But now, whether you're feline, canine, piscine, alpine...you can get a job, s'long as you got the skills for it." She moved closer, her fringe just tickling the tip of his nose. "Just give it time, sweetie, and then maybe no-one will ever look at you like you're just another dumb beast. 'Cause you're not." She looked down, away from his stare, her fringe mostly hiding her eyes.



"You're... special."

— — —

Nose to nose with the dragoness, Nathan had no idea what to make of her. Terrifying, impulsive, light-hearted and a little crazy, she puzzled him like everything else he had experienced so far in the big city. And now, she seemed to have found that something 'more' in him, that he couldn't quite grasp himself. A lady of this crazy modern world, able to reach into the inner depths of himself in ways he couldn't imagine. *I'm special. She thinks I'm... special. What does it mean, though? Why does she think I'm special?*

And before he knew it, their lips had met. Lost in his head, he lightly kissed her, Jackie holding onto the sides of his face. She smiled widely and kissed him again, this time a little firmer. This was when Nathan finally realised they were exchanging intimate contact.

"Oh, I'm... I'm a —"

"Do you like me?" she interrupted him, stroking down the length of his muzzle.

"Um, well, I was, I do, and it felt — and then I... I don't know if I like — I mean you've been really great, and nice, and showing me all sorts of things, and you're so, er, like, weird... bu-bu-but not, like, in a bad way, I just never met anyone like you before, and it just makes me feel... You make me feel — weird."

"Weird?" she inquired, raising a brow.

"Yes... weird."

"How weird?" she asked, stroking the sides of his face.

"Very, like... in-a-weird-way weird."

"So... you like me in a weird way?"

"Yes! I like you weirdly!... Gosh, you make my brain bend in ways I didn't know were possible, it's agonising — and attractive at the same time! Aaaaaaaa —"

Jackie placed both her hands on his muzzle and softly closed his jaws. "Ssssh... yeah, you do like me, in a weird way." She smiled, and kissed Nathan on the lips again.

This stunned him, but as the dragoness's claws lightly traced down his face to his neck, he began to relax into her kisses. Slowly, she opened her muzzle a little and let her tongue slide out to meet his nose. Nathan blinked as she licked, but she continued, coaxing him to open his mouth. Tentatively, the dragon opened his mouth by a sliver, and let Jackie's tongue dance inside his maw. She let out a



small sigh, which made Nathan's body shiver all over, and he opened his mouth wider.

He closed his eyes, cautiously eased his own tongue into her mouth, and together they engaged their snouts into an interlocked kiss. Jackie pressed herself into his front, stroked down his neck and swished her fringe out of her face. As they released their passionate kiss, Nathan noticed how closely she was pushed against his chest.

"Oh... I, um...that was...nice."

"I'm glad it was, sugar,"she whispered into his ear. "You've got a big set of jaws to smooch with – very satisfying."

"I'm glad you, ah, you liked it too. I haven't really..."

"Oh, don't worry, big boy, I can tell." Jackie hugged around his neck and nuzzled into it, her tail swaying wildly behind her. "But I'll be gentle, trust me... just follow my lead."

"Oh! Um, okay, ah, I, er, mmhmm!!" He floundered as Jackie began to lick behind his ears, her hair swishing against his scaly skin and her breasts pressed against his throat. This was more intense than he had been prepared for, and he felt uncertain but excited.

"Jackie, you're so... warm. For a, dragon that is. I mean, you've got the other bits that make you less reptilian – but, that's not a bad thing! I mean – I... they are nice! And warm. The warm is nice."

"You're very cute, and silly, and talk way too much," she whispered raspily into his ear. She gave it one long lick with her thin tongue, and he gasped involuntarily.

Nathan started to lick her in return, first on the cheek, around the horns and ears, and then down the nape of her neck. She sighed contently, and kissed him tenderly on the cheek. With a light blush spreading across her face, she pressed herself forcefully against him. He reared onto his hind legs and hugged her back, and enjoyed how her body felt against his. Their tails found each other, and intertwined as they interlocked their muzzles again for another long, hard kiss.

Jackie began unravelling the cloth around Nathan's torso, and glided her hands down his chest plates. He purred deeply in response, a soothing rumble from his throat. He held her tightly around her waist, careful his claws didn't hurt her smaller body. Still with their snouts locked, Jackie kept tracing the outline of his form, finally reaching in between his hind legs. She tugged at the elastic band and slipped one of her petite reptile hands in to stroke him lightly.

Nathan twitched, let go of the kiss and found himself in a light-headed, perplexed giggle. "Ah! Ahaha! Wait, it's, ahaha – there is kinda a – ah... ahahaha!"

Jackie realised that his inner thigh was ticklish, and decided to exploit this new found fact. She began to ripple her finger up and down beside his groin, and his hind leg began to thump beside her.



“Wa-waahaha! Jackie! Aahaha – ahaha haha! Stop! It's – ahahahaha! You're making me – pffbbthh, haha! Hehehe! I can't help this – hehehahahaha! Stop using my, gaah, wild heritage, heheh, against ME! NOOOWAHAHAHA! AH-HAHA!”

Even in such a sexually tense moment, Jackie couldn't help herself. Nathan wriggled like an enthusiastic puppy, his tongue lolling out while his leg thumped away. He couldn't help laughing chaotically as her force finally pushed him on to his back, wings splayed out and flapping wildly, with Jackie straddled on top of him, tickling as much as she could.

As tears began to stream down the poor dragon's face while he writhed beneath her, Jackie decided to let him go, her tickling easing to a light touch on his legs.

“Honey... that was the most thrilling thing I ever saw anyone do from my touch, and we're not even doing the fun bit yet,” she smirked, as she straddled his lap, her tail tightening and swaying in sync with his.

“Ahharngk! Ah... ah... okay. No more, of that...” he wheezed, dazed. “Less tickles and... um, ah, more... kisses... if that's okay... I –”

“It's fine. Really.”

Jackie leaned across him and lapped into his mouth again, stirring his deep purr. She continued to explore his larger form, her hands slithering down his legs again and pulling away his elastic pants until she revealed his outer sheath. She petted and stroked it, and Nathan gasped and shuddered in delight.

“Would you like to uncover my body, like I did yours?” whispered Jackie smoothly, breaking lightly away from their kiss and guiding his claws to the back of her top.

“Um...I'll try, I'm not the most – dexterous,” he replied shyly.

She helped him as he removed her clothes in a clumsy but steadfast manner, revealing her lithe form. Straddling him, she rubbed her nude form against his, her smooth breasts gliding over his lower body. Nathan shivered as she gasped and moaned in pleasure, and stared up at her in awe, intrigued and captivated by her motions and appearance.

“Woah... you're stunning! I mean, you have scales like me, but you feel very, very warm. And, your breasts just feel so... satisfying, against me. I, woah, I'm... just... you're very beautiful, Jackie.”

“Aww, you're such a sweetie, ya big lug! I think you deserve something a lil special,” she breathed, as she pushed herself against his sheath, and tried to coax his manhood from within it. “Wanna have a ride unlike any other in this park?”

“I – ah – nnnng... NNNG!... I would love that.”



"Heheheh. Oh, I'll give ya something rockier, harder, and faster than any ride you've ever been on," she hissed as she handled his pouch.

"That wouldn't be – urng – not too difficult, since – ahhn! – the only ride I've been on is that slow water one...arrwwllwn!" He lost himself in his gurgling.

"Honey, I was trying to be dramatic," she remarked snarkily. "Mmm, and I'd love for you to lose yourself inside me..." She flicked her fringe away absently. "I've got no worries, seeing as they made me with no... procreative bits."

"Me too! I mean – urm – you want me to? I'd... I'd really enjoy that!"

"Then you're really gonna enjoy THIS!" she hissed, and she pushed her vulva back and forth against him as her claws teased the top of his sheath.

They growled and moaned in unison, and soon, his member emerged, which excited Jackie further. "Ah, there ya are! And my, what a big 'un you got... I wondered if ya had a surprise like that up your sleeve."

"Aaarrnn!" His voice trailed off into groans of joy.

Abandoning speech, he panted and snarled playfully, leaning over as far as he could to stroke her neck, shoulders and breasts. Jackie placed his phallus at her entrance and played with herself, to relax enough for him to fit. She cried out in pleasure, and rubbed his tip against her clitoris repeatedly.

Breathing heavily, the dragon beneath her writhed at the tantalising feeling at the end of his member, her body rising and dipping in rhythm with him. Jackie roared happily as she steadily slipped him inside, lifting herself off and onto him in quick succession. At the sensation of her sleek labia against his base, and his entire length very tightly inside her, Nathan roared in return and bucked his hips powerfully underneath her.

Together they rode each other into ecstasy, with Jackie screaming in delight as she felt Nathan pound deeply in and out of her.

With their chorus of pants and shouts mingling, Jackie gripped Nathan's middle and thrust against him furiously to reach her climax. She screeched, thrashed hysterically and threw back her head as she orgasmed, her entire body clenched and released on top of him. Beneath her, with one mighty thrust, Nathan's wings flapped furiously and his spine curled back, lifting Jackie off the ground for a moment, as he came enthusiastically into her.

As they both wound down, Nathan collapsed on his back, with Jackie splayed over his stomach, both catching their breath from the excitement.

Collapsed together in the comfort of their naked form, they lay still, in a state of calm, their tails still



intertwined. Nathan stared blankly at the ceiling, slowly realising what just happened. He peered down at the quiet dragoness, and stroked down the small of her back. Jackie sleepily lifted her head and yawned, smiling at Nathan and nipping him on the chin.

“Hey, how'd you like that, sugar?”

“It was... good! Great, even! I mean, wow, phew! I... I never did that like... that.”

“Oh? So you've had such fun before, huh? Well, you did last a lot longer than most fellas I've messed around with.”

“HMRPH! I, er, well,” he exclaimed, startled, and bolted upright. “I'm, er, I'm glad that you found me, urm, pleasant. Just, erm, I have done this at least, once, twice – but not with someone like, I mean, you're all bipedal and person-shaped, so that's new.”

“Oh hush, sugar, I ain't gonna pry. Just happy I could satisfy,” she rhymed, and laid back against him as he sat up.

“And that you certainly did, ahahaha... ha,” he agreed nervously, and rested his head on top of hers.

After a moment of silence, he tilted his head and asked, “So, are we... mated, now? Or like, not? I don't know how this all works, sorry, I just –”

“Oh, my! Just relax, ya big lug! Hey, it's cool, okay?” she reassured, stroking the underside of his neck. “Well, I will say, I'm not the kinda gal that would wanna get tied down, and get out a loan, just for some eggs and such. I'm a free soul, and I wanna just keep drifting on my own terms for a while, y'know what I'm sayin'?”

She swivelled round to meet him face to face, unraveling their tails, smiling warmly.

“Although I'm happy to have met such a wonderful boy like you, and get to sex you up a bit, since it seemed you had quite an eye for me as well.” She licked his snout.

He stared at her, and then licked her snout right back. “Well, I've got to admit, you are very attractive. Like, super, super attractive. And... I guess, even if you don't wanna... be mated, I at least want to – I mean, you've been interesting to be around, and with, so like, I thought it'd be nice if –”

Jackie placed a claw over his lips and shushed him. “You, boy, talk way, way too much! Makes me wonder if you would've made a pretty good mascot after all... haha!”

Nathan gulped and quivered a little, but Jackie gave him a hug around his neck. “Seriously, of course I'm gonna keep my word and help you around. Everyone needs a friend in a city as big as Ferapolitan.”

He hugged around her middle. “Thank you... I'd really appreciate it.”



“Good! Now, let's get going – I think it's been well past my break time,” continued Jackie matter-of-factly, snaking her way out of his grasp.

“Well, we best make sure it isn't locked, though,” he replied, getting up and beginning to dress himself to the best of his ability.

“Heh, it's fine, it was never locked in the first place,” she smirked, slipping back into her clothes.

“Wh-what? Wait... so the door was unlocked?”

“Yup.”

“WHILE WE WERE –”

“Ah-huh.”

“AND SO BOBSKI COULD'VE –”

“Without a sound.”

Nathan stood still in disbelief, slightly twitching at just *what* kind of a woman he was with.

“Honey, I already talked myself into a corner about the lock thing, so I thought it best so you'd feel more comfortable. Now, mind doing me a favour and crouch down.”

“Oh? Why's that?” he wondered, as he stood on all fours next to her.

“It's my turn to have another kind of ride, don't ya think?” She poked her tongue out cheekily.

“Wait, on my back?”

“Yup! That's what friends are for, right?”

“Um... sure. Here, lemme just –” He brought himself lower so she could clamber on. Her weight was quite manageable.

“Atta boy! I've always wanted to have my own mount!... In more ways than one, wouldn't you say?”

The dragon stood frozen and bewildered, while Jackie lightly kicked his sides.

“Just messin' with ya! Onwards, my friend! Let's adventure together to the security parlour across the carnival. Ya!”

Nathan looked over his shoulder, squinted, and then bucked his backside to make her topple



forward against him.

“Oomph!... Okay, Nathan, may I ride you to the place where I start my next shift, please? I may be a little tired... for reasons. I'm sure you'll understand.”

He grinned. “Sure thing, Jackie, anything for a friend!”

And with that, they exited the maintenance room. Nathan forgot about the moat, yelped, remembered, then swam in it.

And they carried on through Minx Carnival, where no-one dared approach them, parting the crowds in their wake.

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SEE YA LATER COWGIRL

