

It was one of those days where Mother Nature herself seemed to be feeling miserable: the only relief to the steady rain and low cloud being short bouts of hail, the icy stones clattering upon the roofs of the small town and anyone so unwise as to set foot beyond their doorsteps. A lone figure happened to be walking the main street, shoulders hunched and hood pulled up over its head as far as possible, when one of these spells of frozen pain pouring from the heavens hit. As its destination – the grocery store – was still several blocks distant, the shape darted into the first open establishment it came to: the warmly lit and cosily atmosphered candy store.

Now safe from nature's wrath, Paradeox pushed the hood off his head, taking a deep breath of the soothingly sweet air that filled the little confectioner's. Having been immersed in increasingly aquatic surroundings, he had not noticed that his fringe had escaped his hood's protection and was now gently dripping down his muzzle and off the end of his nose; he brushed it away from his eyes, water droplets scattering over the welcome mat which was already more than a little damp from the few seconds of his presence it had been asked to bear.

Glancing around, he saw that he was alone among the displays of candy but for the portly otter who ran the store, and no doubt made many of the treats on offer. The fox had always possessed a significant sweet tooth and it often required a great deal of self-control not to set foot inside this place whenever he passed. With the clattering on the windows and roof showing no signs of abating, he moved away from the door to tempt himself with the nearby selection of gummies.

"Anything I can help you with, young fella?" the otter called, his sizeable apron-clad belly leading the way towards Paradeox from behind the counter.

The fox looked up from the cola bottles he had his eyes on. "I'm just looking for now, thanks," he said, his water-logged tail swaying slowly behind him; then, realising it might sound as though he was just using the otter's store as nothing more than a rain shelter, he smiled and added, "I won't be leaving here empty handed, though."

The otter chuckled, his aproned front shaking jovially. "That's what I like to hear. Just ring the bell on the counter if you need me: I'll be in the basement."

Paradeox nodded, watching the rotund figure heading towards a door behind the counter for a moment before his attention returned to the candy containers already so taking his fancy. However, something he noticed out of the corner of his eye made the fox look round again.

In a far corner, barely visible behind all the shelves and displays, was a second door; a faint glow around its edge suggested that it was ever so slightly ajar. This, Paradeox surmised, must surely be where the otter made his comestibles. A years-long curiosity about the ways and means of making candy, chocolates, and cakes en masse tugged at his paws; one tentative step, then another, and another... Before the fox knew what had happened, he was right in front of that door, one hand slowly rising to push it open.

Machinery, conveyors, industrial-sized ovens: they were the kinds of things Paradeox was expecting, not a...grassy field? Bemused, the fox's first explanation was that this was the back door and he was simply looking out on the farmland that bordered the town; but that couldn't be right: the sun was shining brightly overhead here and...yes, the roof of the shop was still being pelted with rain.

The moment he'd stepped beyond the arc of the door it swung shut behind him, blending imperfectly with the reddish-pink hue of the hill into which it was built; after all, what use was a door you couldn't see? The colour of the steep slope behind him was the first of a number of things that struck the fox as odd about the land in which he now found himself. The sky was pinkish, like

the hillside, only paler and a purer shade, with clouds the colour of bubble-gum cruising idly by overhead. The ground on which he stood now was relatively barren but for the lush grass whispering in a gentle breeze, yet ahead he could see a sparse wood of technicolour trees, each looking to bear leaves of multiple colours. Somehow, however, despite the strange surroundings, Paradeox felt compelled to explore further.

There were only two landmarks of note in sight: the forest and another hill, taller than that which bore the door, tall enough for clouds to be congregating about its summit. They were both in the same general direction but, as it was by far the easier target, the fox allowed himself to stroll in the direction of forest, curiosity ever the driving force. After about a dozen paces a scent reached his nose: a familiar scent, one which was growing stronger every time he put a paw forward...spearmint! He cast his eyes about, expecting for his eyes to settle on the distinctly shaped leaves he'd seen people use in cooking shows but there was no sign, and yet the smell continued to build as if he was surrounded by mint plants.

*Perhaps they're hidden by the grass?* Paradeox knelt down and scanned the ground, but still he saw nothing. Delicately, he plucked at a blade; it didn't snap off as he would have expected, instead it tore gradually, its texture more like gelatine than anything else he could place.

Raising the fragment of vegetation to his nose, he sniffed. Definitely spearmint! Then another thought occurred to him: grass doesn't normally taste good, but what if...?

With a hint of trepidation, he popped the strange, minty something into his mouth and chewed; there was no doubt about it now, this was a spearmint-flavour gummy!

His feelings quickly turning to wonderment, he gazed around at the landscape; what could everything else be? He seized two handfuls of the gummy-grass and tore as much from the ground as he could, stuffing several more strands of delicious minty goodness into his mouth as he resumed his march towards the forest in earnest.

The more he explored of this fabulous new world, the more there seemed to be to investigate. A mere couple of minutes on from his first discovery the fox noticed something sprouting up amongst the grass like a weed, a weed with red and white stripes which curved back on itself like the handle of an umbrella...

The candy cane was easily persuaded to part company with the ground, and Paradeox had the luxury of alternating between spear and peppermint on remained of his journey to the forest, stopping every so often to replenish his supply of gummies.

But then his eyes fell upon the hill again and, more specifically, the clouds still gathered about its top. If they were what he thought they could be... He immediately changed course, his desire to test his hypothesis far stronger than the deterrent of a little bit of hiking.

Constant ingestion of sugar powered Paradeox up the long but thankfully gently sloping path that wound up and around the hillside, taking him higher and higher, closer and closer to the clumps of pink fluff floating across the sky. Eventually the terrain levelled off for the most part, bringing him to a small plateau with a ceiling of cloud mere inches above the fox's head. He perched upon what appeared to be a large flat rock and, at long last, reached up to inspect the oddly dense cloud.

As he'd hoped, his fingers found something so much better than mere water vapour: he closed his fist and pulled down a handful of light, delicious cotton candy. Not wasting a second, he pushed the whole clump into his mouth in one wonderfully sweet go, his eyes closing as he savoured not just

the flavour, but also the knowledge that there was so much still on which for him to feast. He reached out again, this time using both hands and even his arms to haul a veritable boulder of pink fluff; on this too he gorged himself.

The sun was gradually setting on this idyllic fantasy world now, and yet there was no sign of the fox ceasing his consumption of the heavens. Darker and darker it became, night falling so completely that it wasn't long before he was reaching blindly for more strands of spun sugar with which to fill his mouth. He'd lost track of time, he'd lost track of the world; all that mattered to him was that he keep eating this fairground favourite until he could do so no more.

He wasn't aware of falling asleep, for his dreams were barely more than an extension of his waking ecstasy. Yet consciousness did slip from his grasp, his head drooping back to rest upon the rocky surface, his belly distended and oh so gloriously stuffed.

The next morning dawned just as bright as the previous day, the rising sun gently nudging Paradeox back to the land of the living. Everything seemed just as it had been when he opened his eyes: pink clouds of cotton candy above, the solid surface of his makeshift bed beneath him. However, it was when he made to sit up that something felt amiss: the simple action was a lot more difficult than it had been yesterday, as if he was asking more of his muscles and that they weren't quite as up to the task as once they were.

The cause became obvious as he looked down at himself: where once he would have been peering down at his lap, now the fox's eyes fell upon a rounded tummy that rested upon his thighs, extending several inches from his body. He placed a hand upon it, finding it to be soft and malleable: he no longer just had a full stomach, he had a fully fledged paunch. He wasn't at all dismayed by this discovery either, in fact he found himself feeling quite pleased with the turn of events. No, not just pleased...he *loved* it...and he wanted more.

Cotton candy he felt, however, was not where his future lay: he wanted to see what that forest had to offer after all. Swinging his legs over the side of the platform on which he'd been lying, his paws landed on something with a soft crunch. Leaning forward, his small gut getting pressed against his legs, he saw clear evidence that it wasn't a rock he'd slept on but some new kind of treat. Seizing a section of it he broke a piece off; lo and behold, chocolate-coated cookie!

Paradeox grabbed enough cookie to last him until he happened across something new to sample. He snacked on it during his descent from the top of the hill, a trail of crumbs being all that was left behind. His belly bounced cheerfully with each step, seeming to be just as eager as he was to get to the forest at last. His thighs, once slender and independent, now rubbed together as he walked, the swish of fur on fur his constant companion on his trek.

Despite it being downhill all the way to the woods the fox was running short of breath far more quickly than he had once been accustomed. Fortunately, inhabiting what increasingly seemed to be an entirely edible world was the ideal remedy for a lack of energy: several stops for more gummy grass, candy canes, and chocolate truffles – a new discovery, growing like berries on bushes at the foot of the hill – gave him all he needed to continue his journey.

At long last, sweating and panting heavily, Paradeox slumped against the first tree he reached. The moment his shoulder thudded against its trunk, tiny shards scattered from it and settled on the forest floor. Instantly curious about a potential new snack despite his exhaustion, he forewent any pretence of manners and simply bit into the light brown 'wood'. What he found melting on his tongue was extremely brittle chips of creamy milk chocolate.

As he'd been approaching the forest, the fox had been eyeing the trees' variously and brightly coloured tops, wondering just how he was going to get his hands on whatever they were made of in his suddenly unfit state. Now, however, he had the solution. In the manner of a beaver he set about chewing through the tree's chocolatey trunk, taking bite after bite, chewing and swallowing while stray flecks sprayed out in every direction. With every chomp of his jaws the branches shuddered more and more until, with barely an inch of chocolate connecting its two parts, the tree toppled, landing with a surprisingly gentle crash.

Where there should have been leaves, Paradeox found instead large, round, slightly shiny globes of various colours. He placed a hand on the nearest red one, then drew back fingers which were now a tiny bit sticky. Inserting his index finger into his mouth, his tongue was quick to identify the flavour of a strawberry lollypop. He sampled each colour, not wanting to miss out on anything; lemon yellow, lime green, orange orange (of course), cola brown, and blue raspberry. He took the lemon with him as he strolled through the woods, the trees growing far enough apart as not to obscure the sun.

After a short while his ears picked up a sound that wasn't the whisper of gummy grass beneath his paws or that of his thighs rubbing past each other; it wasn't too long before he had a sight to match. A stream was babbling its way along the edge of the forest, though it was like no waterway he had ever seen before: the liquid flowing by was bright orange and seemed to be frothing and bubbling considerably more than one would have expected.

Setting the giant lolly down, Paradeox knelt and scooped up a handful of the liquid, pouring it into his mouth. It was fizzy! It was a very familiar, orange-flavoured drink that covered his tongue in bubbles that burst, sending a crackling all about it, over the insides of his cheeks, and down his throat as he swallowed. He lingered for several minutes, using the endless flow of soda to quench the profound thirst brought on by his day of walking.

Eventually he struggled back to his feet and resumed idly licking at the lemon lolly as he followed the path of the river, he and it skirting the edge of the forest. It was a very pleasant scene indeed, but nothing to what presented itself a few minutes downstream.

With a gasp of delighted surprise, he dropped the lolly and stared ahead of him. Cakes. Every kind of cake one could imagine dotted along the edge of the river and in the shade of the trees nearby. He hurried forward and dropped to his knees amidst a circle of these baked miracles, gazing about deliriously as he tried to decide which one he would try first. Unable to truly make up his mind, he simply flung out his hands and seized a chunk of the nearest and crammed it greedily into his waiting mouth. For a few moments he chewed, a big grin on his crumb-speckled face, then reached for more.

After demolishing the first cake he grabbed wildly for another, only for his fingers to miss and dig into the ground instead. He didn't end up with a handful of dirt or sand, however. Having discovered that, if he failed to find nature's finest baking, he could load up on wads of marshmallow instead, he simply flopped onto his back and began to scoop from his surroundings at random.

The only things stopping him from eating forever were the waves of sleepiness that began to wash over him once the sun had descended below the horizon once again, slowly overwhelming him with their soothing embrace.

His dreams were much more discernible from his waking hours that night. He floated on the backs of clouds through the cosmos, weightless, comfortable, and entirely at peace with the universe. And

then he was a cloud himself, just soft, just as round, just as fluffy as they were. He floated gently back to Earth – or wherever he was – just in time for the first beam of sunlight to slide across his face.

He knew before he even opened his eyes that morning that he was bigger than the day before. He could feel that his arms were being pushed up and away from his body, could feel that he took up more space on the riverbank, could feel something reaching down to meet his thighs.

He looked down at himself and immediately had the sensation of his chin sinking into its flabby twin below. His vision was filled by two slabs of soft, pale-furred flesh that shifted gently from side to side with his smallest movement. Beyond them was his belly, but no longer was it merely a small bump on the landscape of his body: it had grown into a magnificent, majestically curving dome which almost seemed to be as high as the hill he'd climbed so recently. Though he could no longer see them, he knew his thighs were vast and bulky now as they squashed his paunch higher as he bent his knees.

Then, as soon as he knew his fatness, he knew something else: he was *hungry*. With the greatest effort it had ever taken, he worked himself into a kneeling position, his gut sloshing to and fro as he worked to counter all the extra weight which had settled upon his frame overnight. Little by little, he rose from the ground to sitting on a plusher posterior than he had ever experienced, then finally up onto his knees.

Puffing a little already, he glanced about.

*Oooh! Gumdrops!*