

“Urf-urghh,” Callum slowly cracked one eye open as the faintest glimmers of the sun reached through the window. Being employed in a place whose operation extended through all hours of the day meant that the dragon was particularly sensitive to the sun which acted as a rudimentary alarm clock. That didn’t mean he enjoyed it though.

Slowly propping himself up from his sleeping position, the drake yawned and stretched before truly opening his eyes. The first thing that greeted him was his belly, which still stuck proudly in the air. Though it was nowhere near as tight as the night before, the dragon’s soft paunch was certainly larger and considerably more plush than in previous memory.

Lifting an arm to poke it, Callum realized that his appendage also wobbled with a noticeably thicker layer of lard encasing it. The drake sighed contentedly as he realized the nutrient-boost had worked its magic once again and dispersed the monolithic meal liberally throughout his body although the lion’s share seemed to have been transferred to his bulbous gut.

Running a claw over the quivering mass, Callum indulgently sank his paws into the soft flab and reveled in the fact that his claws sank almost six inches in. He was definitely beginning to see the positive side of additional padding.

Relaxing for a couple more minutes, the dragon decided it was time to get going when he heard the bustling of numerous furs moving down the street toward their own areas of employment. Callum went to gather some fresh clothes from his small wardrobe. Unfortunately for the drake, none of his clothes seemed to relish in the sentiment of covering his hefty body.

First his pants adamantly refused to lace around his impressive girth, and the dragon had to opt for a more forgiving, malleable alternative usually reserved for relaxation and lounging. Once he donned the appropriate pants though, his belly formed a sizable overhang. Then a growl emanated from the drake’s pudgy muzzle as he attempted to squeeze into one of his favorite cotton shirts. While he managed to pop his arms and head through their respective openings, the shirt was exceptionally tight and squeezed against his neck and arms. The front of the shirt also compressed the dragon’s gut mercilessly and caused a bulging muffin top to form. Looking in the mirror, the dragon sighed with an exasperated, but lightly amused relent and opted for a button down shirt and vest. At least these would

allow the dragon to breath and alter his appearance.

Finishing the arduous process, the drake cursed to himself when he realized that he was most likely going to be late, and he wasn't up to the embarrassment of explaining why. Sighing once more, Callum took one last look in the mirror and then trudged out the door.

Arriving at the bakery fifteen minutes later, Callum was entirely preoccupied with his wardrobe malfunction so the possibility of a certain mischievous serpent entirely slipped his mind.

Closing the side entrance while still deep in thought, Callum only noticed something was off when he saw a sliver of purple disappear quickly around the main preparation table. Grinning, the drake called out to the seemingly discovered serpent, "Nice try, but that was a pitiful effort. Especially for someone as sneaky as-.."

"Me?!?" Suddenly a set of inverted neon purple eyes popped into the the dragon's field of view.

"Wha-whaaa ahhhh!" The dragon windmilled his arms when Aaron grinned at him from over the top of his head. Callum was caught entirely off balance and ended up tripping over the serpent's real tail and landing on his well-padded rear which sent his belly rocking voluminously.

Gasping for breath, the stupefied drake tried to form words, but his heaving gut and blitzed senses had temporarily rendered him incapable of anything save for emulating a perfect 'fish-out-of-water' expression from the surprise.

Eventually the dragon calmed down enough to speak, "Wha-what was that?" He panted, pointing at the corner of the main baking counter. "I saw..a tail disappear. But now your here."

Gazing up questioningly at the serpent, Aaron folded his arms amusedly and offered an explanation. "What you saw was indeed my tail, but only a projection of it. You were seeing something similar in concept to a mirage. I simply willed a copy of my tail to slip around the corner, and your mind assumed the rest." A hint of satisfaction glinted in the serpent's eyes, as Aaron finished his explanation.

Pondering the sentiment, Callum then asked, "But you've never done that before. Does...does this have anything to do with the fact that you're a spirit?"

Nodding, Aaron answered, "It is all about that. Now that you are aware of my state of being, I thought perhaps you wouldn't mind an introduction to my world."

The drake's face contorted from a look of curiosity to one of disdain, "And you just had to do it by way of cheap prank?"

Aaron adopted an expression of mock offense, "I'll have you know that my gimmicks are of the highest quality." He turned his nose in exaggerated arrogance which brought a smile back to the drake's face.

"Uh-huh, whatever you say," Callum assented. Slowly he rose to his feet before leaning over to ensure he had caught his breath. The motion caused his belly to compress against his thighs and slowly swelled in and out with each breath.

Taking note of this, Aaron gently poked the drake's stomach and said, "I see you've made considerable progress in increasing your weight."

Looking up at the serpent, Callum nodded and said, "I ended up eating all the confections you gave me last night, and they worked like a charm. I only wish," he gestured to his shirt whose buttons strained from the pressure, "That my clothes kept up with me."

Aaron smiled, "And why shouldn't they? There's no reason for you to have to pay for your expansion." Muttering an incantation, a faint purple haze settled into the dragon's clothes and the fabric suddenly relaxed.

The drake's belly surged forward slightly after being held back from the tightened pressure of the buttons, and his pants sighed as they slowly eased with the dragon's chubby rear and legs.

Callum let out his own sigh of relief and visibly relaxed as he felt a large pressure steadily lift from his body. "That was heavenly," he sighed, "How did you do that?"

Aaron grinned and said, "Fabrication spells are among the easiest to cast.

I simply infused your clothes, all of them,” his grin widened indicating the ones also residing in Callum’s closet, “With a harmless mist that, on a molecular level, is quite elastic.”

Callum smiled at the news as he realized he wouldn’t have to worry about spending money on increasingly larger cloth sizes. “Thank you Aaron,” the drake said simply, “I appreciate the kindness.”

Waving it off, Aaron said, “It was nothing. Think of it as a perk for following the expansive process.”

Callum nodded thoughtfully, still grinning as he embraced the serpent once more, though this time Aaron wasn’t as surprised and effortlessly returned the hug.

The drake knew that Aaron would probably take the gesture as another opportunity to measure his progress and wasn’t disappointed when he felt the familiar sensation of small sensory muscles rippling under the serpent’s scales to take a read.

“Hmmm...you’ve made excellent progress in such a short time,” the serpent mused. “Seems like the nutrient-boost was dispersed quite well throughout your body.” Callum felt the coil constrict slightly around his middle, causing it to bulge above and below the snake’s tail. “And your stomach appears to be the primary target, which is perfectly fine.” Aaron gently set the dragon down and said, “You’ve also increased your musculature considerably, which is a result from both the ingredient and the fact that you’re moving around with the extra weight all day.”

Callum nodded, absentmindedly drawing a soft hand over his portly paunch. “I’m certainly happy to hear that. Are your readings stemmed from physical observations or magical ones?” He asked, realizing that he was much more curious about that topic than his weight at the moment.

“I utilize both,” Aaron explained. “My muscles are tuned to register small movements in an animal’s body, but I also incorporate some magic to gather more specific details. Like weight, exact body functions, and the dispersal of food in your body.”

Callum affirmed his understanding with a nod of his head, causing his chin and neck to bunch slightly. “Makes sense,” he said, “I’m guessing your

abilities aren't only limited to measurements and projection pranks though."

Aaron smiled and shook his head that this was certainly not the case. "I possess a great deal of capabilities and may take many forms, but I prefer to restrict myself to only the most basic elements for utilities and everyday uses."

Callum raised an eyebrow, "Like what?" He asked in a curious, almost challenging manner.

Suddenly the dragon found himself floating slightly off the floor. Several cooking utensils and confections swirled around him as if caught in a stream of water. Gasping from the experience, Callum broke into a wide grin and said, "Telekinesis, very impressive."

*'Why thank you,'* Aaron seemed to say. Only when Callum looked at him he realized that the serpent's mouth remained closed. He was hearing the serpent speak inside his head. *'And telepathic abilities, wonderful.'* Callum unleashed a slight groan when he realized this meant that Aaron could confer with the dragon any time he wished. *'Don't worry,'* Aaron's voice reverberated inside his mind, *'I will only converse with you in this manner on appropriate occasions.'*

Callum nodded, and the serpent slowly lowered him to the floor before returning all the utensils to their proper place. Unthinkingly, the drake snatched a stray croissant from the air and munched on it as the others were returned to their respective resting places.

"You know," Callum said with a full mouth, "You should use the levitation thing for baking."

Aaron smiled at the suggestion, "I've considered it before, but I didn't want scare you at the time." He spread his arms, "But I suppose now you've seen what I'm capable of, so I see no harm in it now." He knit his five eyes in a concerned expression, "I would have to be careful not to let any customers see though, so I will use them back here."

Callum smiled and nodded, thinking about how much easier this would make things in the future.

Well I suppose we'd better get along with the day's business," Aaron

stated, before mentally kicking the kitchen into gear. Callum was still hypnotized by the fluid streams of items passing through the kitchen...until a large loaf of bread whapped him in the head. Yelping in surprise, he heard a chuckle issue from a humming Aaron who was busying himself with a large dollop of dough.

“Stinking, sneaky reptile,” he grumbled, before making his way to the door. A stray pan batted the hapless dragon in the rear and caused him to stumble out of the kitchen with his entire form jiggling from the impact. “You’re going to pay for that!” The dragon called over his shoulder, before a hearty laugh was heard in response. Grumbling, the dragon suddenly heard a ding from the bell indicating a customer who entered.

Looking over his shoulder he was greeted with a giant black bear dressed in the leathers of a blacksmith. The ursine was another regular, though his figure showed this more than most. The anthro defined the phrase ‘pear-shaped,’ with a large, smooth belly that bulged out from the bears torso and two sturdy, wide-spread legs supporting him. The bear padded up to the counter with a familiar glint in his eye and a knowing smile compressed between two puffy cheeks.

“Hey there Tay,” Callum grinned. “How are you?”

Tay slapped his belly heartily, before unleashing a booming laugh that sounded as deep as his stomach. “I’m doing mighty well Callum.” The bear’s voice held a deep brass quality reminiscent of the metals he forged in his shop. “My belly on the other hand needs a little loving.”

“So the usual?” Callum asked.

“Please,” the ursine affirmed.

The “usual” for the industrially built bear consisted of half a dozen loaves of bread and a liberal portion of glazed danishes for “dessert.” Due to the bear’s loyal service and friendly mannerisms, he received a bulk discount with an emphasis on the “bulk” part as demonstrated by the ursine’s luminous, swaying gut.

Calling back to Aaron, all Callum had to say was “Tay’s Special,” and a muffled, “You got it,” responded.

While the two waited for the order to be filled, Callum engaged in the customary small talk with the large ursine, who leaned forward amicably on the counter. Despite the bear's plush appearance, his furry arms were actually well-muscled from constant work in the forge. Hammering out twisted pieces of metal and operating large amounts of materials bred an impressive appetite that steadily added onto the ursine's prodigious gut.

"So," Tay said, "How're things with you and the boss?" He always inquired to the relationship of the worker and coworker, it seemed the bear had a history with Aaron that stretched back quite far; even before Callum began working there.

"Everything is great," the dragon said with a wide smile.

"Anything new?"

The question was innocent enough, but given the recent events, Callum was more notably affected by it than usual. "Er, well yes. I suppose you could say that," the drake stuttered nervously. His mind immediately envisioned the nuances of magic that Aaron was capable of; the weight sensory, the telepathic ability...and even now, Aaron's telekinetic powers swirled around the kitchen, creating a tornado of appliances.

In his nervous state, Callum had unintentionally brought his claws up to his belly to knead it in concern. The action seemed to happen more and more frequently in bouts of anxiety, but the bear took this as an indication of what was new.

"Ah so you've finally put on a bit of weight. Good for you!" Tay said in a bolstered laugh, which broke Callum out of his apprehension.

Looking up and smiling, Callum seized the opportunity to divert the subject and said, "Exactly! I'm glad you approve." He puffed his chest and belly out a little more to emphasize his pride in the weighty appendage. The drake's ventral plates yawned from the sudden pressure and Tay let loose another bellowing laugh before patting the protruding belly affectionately.

"Feels good, doesn't it?" The ursine placed his hands on his own globular stomach for emphasis and gently shook it to produce a faint wobbling, before it let out a low growl to indicate the main reason the bear had come.

“Perfect timing,” Aaron said with a light laugh as he slithered out of the kitchen with a large bag of the bear’s food in it. “How are you Tay?” He then handed the ursine his bag.

“I’m very well, thank you,” Tay nodded respectfully, “Though I can assure you I will be considerably better having eaten these.” He gestured to the large bag before producing a small cloth purse and made to pay for his food. After giving the pair six silver pieces, the ursine heaved the bag over his shoulder, bid the snake and dragon farewell, and marched through the doors.

Aaron turned to Callum and smiled, “I appreciate your efforts to keep my magical abilities quiet, I could sense the tension in your mind when Tay asked if anything new was transpiring.”

Callum nodded and assured Aaron, “I would never truly reveal your secrets unless you wished me too. I was simply caught off guard, but I will certainly be more prepared in the future.” The dragon stated the promise with obvious sincerity and Aaron felt confident that his friend would keep the promise with complete conviction.

Having resolved the tense moment, the two continued to work. Busying themselves with the daily stream of customers and Callum marveling at the different characteristics of the floating kitchen implements. All he needed to do was think of a certain utility and it would appear with in seconds, hovering in easy reach. Once the drake was done with it, he simply tossed it gently into the air and it flew off like a shell caught in an ocean current.

Towards the end of the day, when a lull in the amount of customers entering the bakery took place, Callum sighed and leaned forward on the counter where his belly pressed against the lip of the table and formed faint love handles on its surface. He was exhilarated from the bustling nature of the kitchen, but found it easier to retain a degree of calmness beyond the magical realm.

Leaning forward, the dragon heard a ding to signify another customer. Looking up he saw a leopard enter in a rather tentative manner. Gazing at the feline curiously, Callum tried to recall the leopard’s presence and realized that he had no recollection of him.

Walking quietly up to the counter, the leopard stopped short when he saw

the dragon's supple form. A glint of familiarity, or perhaps passion flickered in the leopard's eyes before Callum politely broke the tense silence.

"Good afternoon, sir. My name is Callum and I would be happy to be of service to you." The dragon stated the line with a light discord in hopes of defusing the tension radiating between them.

The leopard flinched from the dragon's words before composing himself and saying in a light, but direct voice, "Yes, hello. I was wondering if I could get a few of your pastries."

Callum nodded and smiled, "Of course. We would be happy too," the dragon said amicably. "Just select what you want from our display along with the amount and we will be happy to fulfill your order."

The leopard shifted nervously from foot to foot, he carried a mid-sized satchel over his shoulder and it too shifted with the movement. "Alright," he said, "Could I perhaps get a dozen eclairs, a dozen croissants, half a dozen loaves of pumpernickel, a dozen small cakes, and half a dozen muffins?" The leopard rattled off the large order in steady succession while the dragon tallied the goods on a scrap of paper.

Finishing the order, Callum disappeared and reappeared from the kitchen in quick fashion. Coming back out of the kitchen, he looked at the leopard with a curious expression. "That's quite a large order," the drake noted. "Planning on having a festive night?"

A small grin appeared on the leopard's muzzle. "You could say that," he said, with a knowing look. "My...companion, and I are celebrating and we thought this would be a nice way to go about it. He certainly has a fondness for confections, and your bakery came highly recommended from some locals."

Callum's smile turned from polite to genuine upon hearing the praise for the bakery and the fact that he had managed to get the leopard talking. "We appreciate the compliments, and I hope our goods live up to your friend's desires." Sticking out a clawed hand, the drake introduced himself. "My name is Callum by the way. And my boss, Aaron, is currently in the back fulfilling the order."

Hesitating for a second, the leopard shyly took the dragon's paw and

shook it. "Nice to meet you, I'm Zach."

"Are you new to the area?" Callum asked, in an attempt to make small talk.

The feline nodded, "Yes, I'm just traveling through." He left it at that, seeming to intentionally leave his background vague.

"That's nice," Callum said, picking up on the leopard's intentions for discretion. "Well I think your order will be another couple moments, but I can settle your tab now if you want."

Zach nodded and slowly slipped his satchel from his shoulder. "Do you only take money?" Callum tilted his head slightly before pondering the question. After several moments he shook his head, causing his cheeks to wobble slightly, "No we also barter for certain goods."

The leopard's face lit up at the fact, and he withdrew two pelts from his satchel. "Would these suffice?" The feline inquired, slowly draping them over the counter.

Callum inspected the pelts and noted the obvious quality. "These are certainly enough, though I think only one deer pelt is all you need."

Smiling, Zach left a small hare pelt on the table too, "Don't worry, I come across plenty of them. And your confections are certainly worth it."

Grinning in turn, the drake gathered up the pelts carefully and returned to the kitchen to drape them on the hangers near the side entrance. As he turned to leave, he felt a hand on his pudgy shoulder. "The order is ready," Aaron said warmly. "Judging by the quality of those pelts, I would say it was well worth it as well."

The two exited the kitchen and into the front room together where Zach waited idly noting the clean, well-lit area. Upon seeing Aaron, the leopard arched an eyebrow at the snake's unusual coloration and appearance. The serpent grinned back at the feline kindly, and said, "Your order is ready. I am Aaron by the way."

Shaking the snake's scaly hand, the leopard introduced himself, "I'm Zach." He hefted the cloth bag over his shoulder with a grunt, "I appreciate

the confections.”

“I certainly hope you enjoy them,” Aaron replied, a knowing smile adorning his visage.

“Well,” the leopard sighed, “I suppose I should be going. It was nice meeting you both, I hope to come here again.” He backed out into the dwindling light of the late autumn sun and padded into the dusk.

“He was an interesting character,” Callum said, rubbing his belly thoughtfully. “I’ve never seen him before, but he was quite nice.”

Aaron smiled at the comment, “Yes I quite enjoyed meeting him myself.” The snake noted the darkening light and glanced at the dragon. “I suppose now is as good a time as any to begin closing down.” He poked the dragon’s soft middle, causing it to quiver gently, “And that would mean more time for you to work on your figure.”

Gripping a paw-full of the soft flesh, Callum nodded and thought about the how much his life had changed recently/ The new development with Aaron’s exceptional levitation skills and his own widening waistline were definitely attributes the dragon looked forward too, and he smiled knowingly at the days to come.