

A Swell Santa:

By: IndigoRho

The interior of the Lucky Yeen Bakery made forgetting the season impossible. A non-stop Christmas station played over the crackling sound system, a haphazard arrangement of snowflake and snowman stickers cluttered the front windows, and garland and lights had been hung along the walls with a bit too much care. A modestly decorated Christmas tree replaced a corner table to top off the whole ensemble. Ken, the bakery's hefty eastern dragon owner, took pride in creating the festive atmosphere of the place, despite the fact he'd not bothered hanging lights on his own house for years. Then again, in Ken's mind decorating his home was a hassle, while decorating the bakery was an investment. He wanted customers to enter in good spirits and spend a little bit extra on tins of Christmas cookies and themed brownies. While the music and decorations and treats all worked nicely, Ken had decided to go one step further and give his bakery the biggest symbol of the holiday: Santa.

Acquiring a proper suit had been easy; convincing his sole employee at the counter to wear it was a whole different challenge. Ken practically beamed as he examined the far less enthusiastic hyena before him, who gritted his teeth and stared daggers back at his boss. The hyena definitely had the girth to play the part of Santa—no padding had been required—but he exuded an almost crushing aura of irritation. His ears poked downwards from beneath his cap, which mostly hid the tan spotted hyenas bright pink mohawk. He hadn't spoken a word since putting the outfit on, merely glared and grumbled under his breath. A slim eastern dragon bearing the vaguest resemblance to Ken, on the other hand, was giggling and smirking uncontrollably.

The giggling finally gave way to outright laughter. “Oh man Raf, you might fit the role a little *too* well! I'm surprised the suit even fit you!”

Raf wanted nothing more than to unload on the smug dragon, but knew cursing out his boss' son wasn't the smartest career choice, even if Ken would likely shrug it off. “An hour alone with me in the back and you'll be too round to wear it yourself Rai!”

“Ha, like you could catch me!” Rai snapped back. “At worst you'd rattle the walls and get wedged in a doorframe!”

As expected, Ken merely watched the back-and-forth with amusement. “Now now boys, that suit's made of good old expandex! Doesn't matter how fat or round you get, you'd tear apart long before it does!”

Raf wasn't interested in the suit's durability. “Yeah, and it's inflatable, too. So why isn't Rai on Santa duty if a quick bloat will make him the right size?”

“Well, Rai needs to be in back baking with me, and I can't have Santa hiding from all the customers now, can I?” Ken answered.

“Pretty sure the whole point of Santa is not being seen,” Raf mumbled.

“Besides, inflating the suit on a scrawny noodle like Rai just doesn't have the same impact as putting it on someone who actually...um, fills it out,” Ken said.

Rai shot a brief glare at his father over being referred to as scrawny, though his reaction was nothing compared to the blushy rage Raf was enduring. While the grumpy Santa quietly fumed, a devious idea crept into Rai's head. He carefully snuck around the hyena, eying over the suit until he spotted his prize: a discreet switch located on the back of the belt. Raf was too busy failing to calm himself to notice his coworker sneaking up behind him. The hard flick of a switch and loud whirring of fans were the first indications something bad was happening, and by then it was far too late.

With alarming speed, Raf's middle appeared to suddenly start swelling up as air rushed to fill in the space between the exterior coat and interior body suit. Raf knew the culprit of the prank right away, but his instinctive need to turn and glare proved costly. While Raf and Rai both knew the suit could inflate, neither were aware of just how swiftly said inflation would occur. The blimping hyena nearly toppled over as the expanding pant legs of his suit swelled into each other. He desperately tried

pressing into the suit with his paws to push out some of the air but was simply unable to overcome the powerful pump, his arms soon forced outwards from the unrelenting inflation. Raf didn't say a word as he struggled against fate, instead shifting wildly between growling, blushing, and cursing. His arms and legs quickly sunk into the out-of-control Santa suit until only his twitching paws remained visible, while his head sat atop the whole spherical mess; he resembled an ornament far more than Santa now.

Raf wanted to hope the suit wasn't as durable as Ken claimed, that he'd hear a wonderful rip and his puffy prison would tear apart, leaving him embarrassed and wearing the tatters but mobile again. Unfortunately, the suit seemed to know its limits very well. Once the hyena had become a wobbling red and white ball the pump shut off and closed its slats, preventing any precious air from escaping. He could move his fingers and toes, even turn his head a tiny bit, but every attempt at a significant movement either proved impossible or threatened to send him rolling across the room. Rai, of course, had already begun laughing up a storm by then.

"Oh man, I just thought it'd puff ya up a little, not turn ya into Santa Blimp!" Rai snickered as he darted over to his round victim, confident he could get as close as he wanted without reprisal.

"If you don't flip that switch to 'deflate' I'm gonna roll right over you!" Raf growled.

Rai simply grinned. "You really overestimate how intimidating a big festive yeen balloon is."

Ken had gotten a good chuckle out of the prank himself, though seeing his spherical employee slowly put an idea in his head. "You know what, this might be a blessing in disguise. Having Santa behind the counter might have put the customers in a cheerful mood, but an inflatable Santa decoration like this could be an attraction!"

Raf's scowl briefly gave way to a concerned frown as he realized what his boss was thinking. "M-maybe we should deflate me now, while you work on that plan!"

"It's a bit short notice to do any advertising for it, but I'm sure word of mouth will handle that for us," Ken said as he circled the nervous Raf, getting a feel for the hyena's size. "You'd probably fit nicely next to the tree if we stored one of the tables. Anyone walking by could see you through the windows, too, maybe get drawn in!"

Rai loved where the conversation was going, and couldn't resist joining in. "I bet customers would love getting their photo taken with him. We could even bake some round Santa cookies to match!"

"Great idea son!" Ken wasn't used to seeing Rai so enthusiastic about the business side of the bakery, completely ignoring the devious dragon's ulterior motives.

"If you use me to decorate the place then who's gonna ring up customers!" Raf said, his voice teetering between anger and desperation.

"We'll just call someone in early," Ken replied, having already thought through the issue. "Now Raf, if the initial test-run is successful I may ask you to stay longer today. There'll be overtime pay if you say yes."

Raf bit his lip and tried to regain his composure, though his obvious irritation was impossible to hide. He was begrudgingly beginning to accept the fact he wasn't going to be deflated anytime soon. "Ugh, fine. I'll be your stupid Santa. But just for today!"

"That's the spirit!" Ken clapped his claws together in triumph. "Rai, move the tables to the side, I need to roll Raf to his new post!"

"On it!" Rai wasted little time complying, just so he could witness Raf humiliated once more.

Raf's attempt at a protest was swiftly ended as Ken casually rolled the helpless hyena onto his back. The shift in position increased the pressure on the body suit Raf was wearing, causing him to squirm and blush as the material tightened. He tried to stand back up on instinct, but all he managed to do in his spherical condition was rock back-and-forth comically. Soon his wobbling was halted by the firm press of Ken's claws against his swollen form, and the dragon began to roll him rather carelessly across the room. The entire ordeal left Raf feeling even less dignified than before. Rai, of course, was diligently recording the entire thing for future tormenting.

After a thankfully brief journey Raf was rolled back onto his paws, though Ken spent a good few minutes fussing over his exact placement near the Christmas tree. The Santa cap—which had fallen to the floor during transit—was lovingly returned to the hyena's head. Raf clenched his teeth and stared straight ahead the entire time in a futile attempt to pretend the whole terrible situation wasn't happening. Once that failed he shifted to plotting his revenge, which predominantly revolved around inflating Rai in every way possible, for as long as possible. The thoughts didn't help much, but they were a welcome distraction on what Raf feared would be a painfully long day.

Ken gave Raf an innocent pat on the bloated curve concealing his shoulder before giving his work one last good look over. “Perfect! Gotta love the happy little accidents life throws at you. Maybe we'll even make the news!”

As the dragon waddled towards the entrance to officially open the bakery, an exasperated sigh and string of curses went unnoticed behind him.