

## **Last Minute Cleaning:**

By: IndigoRho

Rai pulled a crumpled shirt from the cart behind him and flipped it, folding it in half on the counter. The dragon was working the fitting room at Sun Mart, only kind of listening to his boss—a midnight blue cheetah named Ryan—ramble off a list of instructions. “...and that's just what's in the backroom right now,” Ryan said, before finally looking up from his clipboard. “Rai, dude, are you getting all this?”

“Yeah, yeah, nothing I haven't done before,” Rai replied, moving on to the next shirt.

“This isn't a normal open, half the district leadership will be here once the lights go on, everything needs to be perfect!” Ryan said, obvious hints of worry in his voice.

Rai laughed, and shook his head. “Dude, you used to make fun of the managers all the time when they freaked out over visits, now you're literally doing the same thing.”

“I'm not freaking out! I'm just trying to keep on top of everything,” Ryan said, unconvincingly. “This is my first visit as a manager, I need to leave a good impression.”

“Sure, man, sure. Don't worry about me, just keep panicking.” Rai was still focused on his folding. The pair were old friends, and Ryan's recent promotion hadn't stopped him from teasing the cheetah now and then.

Ryan was going to grumble about Rai respecting his superiors when something further in the fitting room seemed to catch his attention: an old, unwieldy steam cleaner. He quickly flipped through the notes on his clipboard and cursed. “Crap, I completely forgot about the manikins!”

“They've all got the right outfits on, checked 'em right when I got in,” Rai said.

“But did you steam clean them?”

Rai looked up. “What? Why?”

“The email I was left with says to, that's reason enough for me,” Ryan said.

“Our steam cleaner's shit, there's no way I'd be able to finish all the manikins before we open,” Rai glared at his friend, hoping he'd overlook the task.

Ryan, though was already beginning to walk away, remembering half-a-dozen other potential issues. “I believe in you!” He said, hurrying off.

Rai rolled his eyes, but dutifully turned to the steam cleaner nearby and dragged it out of the fitting room and down the main aisle of the men's clothing department. Fortunately, the manikins were all part of a centrally-located display, so the dragon wouldn't have to waste time wandering the floor to complete his difficult mission. Of course, he still had to deal with the steam cleaner itself, which was a bulky relic that only worked half of the time. Despite years of complaints, the store's upper management had never made an attempt to replace it. Rai was certain they'd buy a new one in a heartbeat if they ever had to use the damned thing themselves.

After checking the water level of the cleaner's oversized tank, Rai flipped the on switch and unhooked the surprisingly long hose, waiting a few moments for it to warm up before testing it out. An uneven sputter of steam poured from the hose's nozzle attachment. Rai checked the attachment and tried a second time, with the same results. If he actually attempted to use the machine on the clothes they'd just end up soaked. Hell, he'd probably be able to breathe steam on them better! An idea crept into the dragon's mind; if he were to, say, inflate himself with the cleaner, he could simply belch out the steam a little at a time. While he would have welcomed any excuse to abandon the annoying task and get back to more important—and easier—work, he also couldn't turn down an excuse to inflate on the job.

Rai turned the steam cleaner off and yanked the nozzle from the hose, tossing it aside. With great care he eased the hose beneath his tail and pushed, a brief look of pain soon replaced by a shameful grin. He flipped the machine back on and giggled as he felt a delightfully warm gush of steam flow into his stomach. The slim dragon's chest began to round out, quickly giving him an imitation of a

pot belly and straining his small red shirt. Not wanting to tear a perfectly good shirt, Rai pulled it up over his swelling middle, exposing his white scales and jade green fur. Once his gut had ballooned to the size of a beachball he gave his chest a solid couple thumps to force a belch, happy to feel the warmth spreading up his throat and puffing out his cheeks. He walked up to the first manikin and slowly blew out a stream of steam, pelting the clothes with just the right amount.

The dragon couldn't believe his plan had worked. With a triumphant grin on his face he forced another belch, steaming more of the first manikin. He settled into a routine almost right away, and for the first time in years he was actually enjoying the task of steam cleaning the clothes. Sure, his managers probably wouldn't support his approach, but they also wouldn't be able to deny its effectiveness. Soon the clothes on the first manikin were wrinkle-free, and Rai moved on to next in line. While the dragon focused on his task—already convinced it was a rousing success—the continued swelling of his belly went unnoticed. His gradual release of steam was nothing compared to the flow from the steamer itself, and the dragon's beachball belly was now far more comparable to an exercise ball.

A faint creaking sound caught Rai's attention, and he looked around the salesfloor for its source, mouth full of steam. A second, slightly louder creak followed. Confused, Rai spun to face the direction he assumed the strange noise was coming from, accidentally slamming his bloated gut hard into a manikin. He stumbled momentarily but kept his balance, then looked down and gasped, releasing the steam. How had he failed to notice how big he'd grown! Rai turned around, pushing away a clothes rack in the process as he desperately waddled back towards the steam cleaner. The pressure within him was building, and his path to salvation was lined with obstacles. Pointy plastic manikin paws, sharp metal racks, the occasional jagged end of a broken hanger...Rai felt them all as they pressed into his taut, sensitive hide from multiple angles, threatening his doom if he failed to reach the main aisle soon.

Rai's waddle was closer to a wobble by the time he passed the final clothes rack—his expanding middle pushing it along with him—and he had no way of spotting the hose lying in his path. Yelping in surprise, Rai tripped over the hose and toppled onto his large belly, which creaked loudly as what little body weight he had pressed into his overstretched middle. The dragon flailed futilely as he attempted to right himself, only managing to rock back and forth comically. His walkie had fallen off sometime during his panic and when he tried to cry out for help he discovered his voice was raspy and barely carried. Out of sheer desperation he began belching, hoping to somehow purge his stomach of more steam than it was taking in. Unfortunately his efforts were useless.

The dragon continued to swell, his overinflated body growing into a large white and green sphere, topped by the line of teal fur that stretched from his tail to his head. His body had become uncomfortably warm from the build-up of steam. Rai's head followed every creak and groan, convinced each was the herald of his doom, and while he would re-form good as new if he did pop, the humiliation would never go away. A sharp, pricking sensation caused him to wince, and was followed by a hissing sound. Out of the corner of his eye the dragon spotted a tiny geyser of steam spewing from his rounded side. The pain returned again, two more leaks springing elsewhere on his body.

Rai whined, terrified he was beginning to slowly tear apart. He tried to hang onto the hope that the leaks and his pitiful belching could hold back the seemingly endless tide of steam, at least until the machine ran out of water or someone managed to stumble upon him. Hope wasn't enough, though. A string of stings and hisses erupted across the dragon, who yelped a final time before finally exploding. Steam spewed outwards in every direction, blanketing the manikins and most of the clothing department in a short-lived cloud. Wet scraps of white and green hide smacked against the floor, signing, and racks, along with a few larger tufts of thick teal fur. Rai's clothes were shredded as he burst, the remains of his khaki pants draped across a manikin's arm.

Ryan had heard the explosion from the opposite end of the store, the chubby cheetah huffing over to its source as quickly as he could. He was out of breath by the time he arrived, but still found the energy to sigh as he noticed the scattered debris of his friend and subordinate. The cheetah was

absolutely baffled as to why Rai had apparently been inflating when he was supposed to be completing a vital task, not to mention how he'd managed to explode in the process. Now he was suddenly down a person on one of the most important days in his new position! He fumed as he walked towards the epicenter of the incident, kicking a scrap of Rai in frustration along the way. Ryan was about to continue his petty vengeance on some more bits of dragon hide before he chanced a glance at the nearby manikins, and paused.

He walked up to the closest manikin and looked over it thoroughly; there were almost no wrinkles. Ryan moved from manikin to manikin, seeing similar results on each. Further investigation proved that a good deal of the surrounding clothes racks had ended up with the same treatment. His worried frown slowly turned into a grin. Through sheer dumb luck, Rai's bumbling incompetence had not only somehow succeeded in steam cleaning all the manikin clothing, but also some on the most visible racks in the department.

With new-found hope Ryan jogged to a spill station and grabbed a broom and garbage bag. He hastily swept the numerous scraps of Rai—along with his clothes—into a pile and then the bag, checking the time as he went. The flickering on of additional lights and the distant sounds of the Electronics television wall coming to life officially signaled the opening of the store. Ryan finished tossing the steam cleaner and scrap bag in the back of the fitting room just in time, wiping a little sweat from his brow and readjusting his polo. There was still much to do before the visitors arrived, but Ryan reminded himself to recognize Rai later for his creative contribution to the preparations.