

"Aaron?"

"Aaron."

"Aaron!"

"Aaron, can you come outside!?"

The sharp command made the lupine ears atop a green-furred head twitch, long tail flicking as the form let out a low grumble, before lifting his head and blearily blinking around. The familiar sight of the barn around him greeted the snolf; only, it was rather more well-lit than he was used to waking up to. Brow furrowing, Aaron huffed as he got to his paws, chest low and rump high while he stretched himself out, serpentine tail curling and flexing behind him, before his head lifted higher as he sniffed at the air, forked tongue flickering and ears twitching with curiosity.

The scent of freshly-tilled earth filled the air, along with cut crops, heart dropping in his chest as the snolf realized how late it was. Hastily pulling on his work harness, the hybrid was still half-tangled in the straps as he scurried out of the barn doors, wondering what had caused his partner to start work without him, when he paused and tilted his head at the sight that greeted him outside.

Chugging away, the machine that gradually crawled across the field gave the hybrid momentary pause, hackles rising for a second as he watched the unfamiliar, noisy contraption seemingly destroy the months' worth of work the two of them had put into caring for the plot. Before Aaron could even think of pouncing atop the alien creature to tackle it, however, he felt a familiar paw against his shoulder, turning his head to see the grinning face of the fluffy fennec.

"Morning, bud," the fox greeted with a smile, having to crane his neck back just to be able to look up into the wolf's eyes, the paw atop his shoulder sensing the tensed muscles underneath and causing the fennec to blink when he realized just what could have caused his companion to get so riled up, "Woah, it's okay, Aaron! It's just some new equipment I bought a few weeks ago! They delivered it today and I couldn't help but set it up."

The explanation seemed to calm the massive beast, and Zach let out a little sigh of relief as he began to stroke up and down Aaron's foreleg comfortingly. "No, it's not messing up the crops, don't worry. It's simply turning up the ground over the crops that are ripe for picking! Can you believe the tech they have these days? This damn thing can recognize a fully grown plant better than Miller ever could with his forty years of experience!"

The snolf's head tilted at the explanation, glancing between Zach and the machine several times. "But... isn't that my job?" Aaron pointed out in a brassy tone full of uncertainty, his ears folding as he looked down at himself, still rather awkwardly pinched around by the hastily donned harness he wore, the skewed straps digging into a lean, toned figure, his gaze travelling back up to meet his companion's, "H-have I not been doing well enough? I can work harder, really! You don't need to—"

"Shh, big guy, you're fine," Zach giggled as he held a finger up to the beast's lips, silencing him instantly; a feat that no doubt greatly amused the fennec that was *literally* dwarfed by the massively overgrown wolf beside him thanks to the former's rather short-natured stature. Big ears flicking when he noticed the sheer panic written across Aaron's features, the fox flashed a warm smile and began to scritch underneath the canine's chin, his expression growing all the fonder when the hybrid leaned his muzzle into the contact, "It's exactly because you've been doing so well that I decided to finally pull the trigger on this purchase. Hell, Aaron, frankly this farm would have gone under a few seasons ago if you hadn't shown up. You can't even recognize the place now from how it looked a few months ago."

Pausing, the fox leaned over a bit in order to reach up with a paw, patting the wolf right between his ears. "You did wonderful, and... I figured you could use a little help and perhaps a break. Things have been going well thanks to you, you know," Zach went on, bidding towards the artificial beast of burden that continued to turn up the ground with the efficiency one would expect from a robot, "We've made a profit on the last dozen of our shipments to the market. And... I know you've been trying to hide it, but..." the fennec's tone and visage adopted a more knowing, bittersweet quality, "Plowing all these fields by yourself is not an easy task and it's putting a lot of strain on you. I... can't bear listening to your whines in the evening when you collapse on your bed after a day's worth of servant work. It just feels... unfair, given how much you've helped already."

The hybrid's serpentine, amber eyes regarded his co-worker with uncertainty, brow still pinched together as he looked back to the harvesting machine. "But I'm supposed to be working for you," Aaron insisted, the end of his long tail coiling around his forepaws as he sat on his haunches, "How am I supposed to earn my keep if there's something else doing my job for me?"

"Well," the fox hummed softly, gesturing with a paw at the plowing machine, "That is only supposed to... you know, take a load off your responsibilities. You can still help around the farm however you see fit, and don't get me wrong, I'll still call for you when we need to move stuff around that's too heavy for me!" chuckling, Zach patted the wolf's neck affectionately as he added, "I've considered this before I made the purchase, bud. You helped me out more than I could repay you in... hell, years, probably. That thing," another nod was thrown towards the chugging machine, "In no way influences our contract, you got that? You can still stay here and you still get fed the same as before! I'd throw *myself* out first before I decided to let go of my best employee."

Zach could see a few more moments of hesitation cross Aaron's face, before his shoulders seemed to ease a bit, head cocking again as he gave a little smile. "I'm your only employee," he pointed out.

The fox gave a toothy smirk. "Still the best out of the two of us!"

Aaron chuckled softly, leaning down to gently nuzzle at the fox's shoulder. "That's a matter of debate," he commented playfully, giving the machine another glance before looking back to Zach with curiosity, "But, um... what do I do now? There's a big, noisy machine taking over my morning chores, so, uh... I guess I should get some breakfast?"

The industrious lupine's features showed he was having trouble considering what to do with his morning, his head cocking this way and that, until he gave another quiet chuckle as he got to his paws. "Ah well, I'll figure something out!"

Grinning, Zach grinned at his companion toothily. "That sounds like an option! Heck, you usually go out to work *before* you even get a chance to have your breakfast, so changing to a healthier routine is definitely something I'd encourage," there was a moment's pause, the fennec's features easing into one of genuine concern, "I really don't want you wrecking yourself on my account, Aaron. You've been working like a slave for weeks, with a haphazard schedule and going to bed in pain, then waking with muscle fatigue. You know you can... just relax a little, right? I'm not going to throw you out, period!"

The serpent's head tilted again, his gaze drifting over to the barn that served as his usual resting spot, a slight frown coming over his muzzle. "Hm... that thing's awful noisy," Aaron hummed, looking back to Zach and wagging his tail hopefully, "Maybe I could have my breakfast in the house today?"

Zach met the inquiry with an exaggeratedly sour expression, as though the idea of the snolf coming inside was insulting, getting an amused scoff from the snolf shortly before he playfully shoved his head against the fox's chest, careful not to be too rough about the affectionate gesture. "Jeez, you'd think I smelled like a wild animal, when you pull a face like that!" Aaron giggled, already starting toward the house as he looked up at the sky thoughtfully, "A free morning, huh? Well... I'll just have to find some way to entertain myself—"

The sentence was cut off into a startled yelp when the snolf was sprayed with a torrent of water, looking back to see Zach holding a hose that he'd failed to notice until that point. "W-what I do?" Aaron whimpered, his tail curling around himself protectively.

Chuckling at the feigned display he knew way too well at this point, the fox simply beckoned his companion over. "You do indeed stink like a wild animal, so if I'm letting you into the house, first you gotta get a little bath."

The proposition was objected to rather vehemently for the first few minutes, though the promise of anthro-made breakfast quickly swayed the massive wolf over, standing beside the fox and obediently letting him get as much of the grime and dust out of his fur as he could, going so far as to even bring out a feral-friendly shampoo from inside and give his pelt a quick wash. The process didn't take too much time, and the pair found themselves inside the living room once the much bigger of the two had been dried.

"So," Zach watched with an amused smile as his companion somewhat hesitantly shuffled around the living room carpet, bumping that big tail of his into the couch and promptly letting out a dismayed yip, simply deciding to plop down onto his haunches afterwards, "I promised a certain someone a delicious anthro dish for being an obedient little servant." The narrowed glare Aaron shot towards the fennec got the usual chuckle out of the puny fennec, a response he'd grown nearly as fond of as the hybrid himself. These little games certainly kept things interesting

between the two, and they provided an endless source of amusement to the smaller of the pair. Those feral features could be rather adorable when mildly annoyed.

"Methinks eggs and bacon with some pancakes on the side should do you well," Zach proposed, still giggling while he moved from the living room into the kitchen through the sizeable, arched opening between the two areas, fluffy tail disappearing behind the counter as he moved to open up the fridge. When all the response he got from his companion was that familiar, approving pant and the thumping of a massive tail, the fox got to work preparing breakfast for them both.

As Zach worked on breakfast, Aaron's gaze wandered around the living room, recalling moments he'd spent after a long day's work, unwinding in the room that was rather undersized for him. He realized after a moment that this was his first time coming into the anthro's home without working in... he couldn't even recall. The snolf's eyes landed on the television that had been mounted on the wall—a precaution after his oversized tail had nearly knocked the screen over in his early days in the home—and he smiled as he remembered evenings spent just watching his companion play games on the TV while they both unwound. A shame the game system's controllers weren't designed for feral paws, otherwise he might have tried one of those games for himself.

While wondering what he might do to pass the time, Aaron steadily noticed that his fur was tugging much less than usual when he turned his head, the minor tangles and knots in his pelt he'd grown so used to having smoothed out by Zach's help with his grooming. Of course, it wasn't like the farmer never groomed his assistant; it was just that usually, the snolf was so tired after a day's work lately that he couldn't really appreciate the feeling. It was... nice, getting that sensation without needing to pull around a plow all day.

Nuzzling at the fluff on his collar, Aaron smiled to himself at the smooth sensation of his silky fur against his snout, before looking down to the coffee table in front of the couch. The remote to the television rested on its surface, the serpent glancing between the fox in the kitchen and the implement with its many buttons on the table, his head lowering as a paw came up and nudged at the device. The anthro had always been the one to operate the television, though now Aaron wished he'd been paying more attention to how exactly the item worked, claws gingerly poking at random buttons on the remote in an attempt to get the screen to come to life.

"Already getting used to easy living, I see," came the snarky, amused comment from right beside the struggling feral, and Aaron didn't even need to glance to his side to know just who was having an absolute blast teasing the ever-loving fluff out of him. What followed the comment was something much more pleasant, however, when a food-laden tray was deposited on the coffee table right before him. On one side, a dish full of bacon and eggs and a wide assortment of veggies, and on the other, a plate that seemed to be almost struggling beneath the weight of the sheer amount of pancakes it held, the sweets topped off with a melted cube of butter and maple syrup to boot.

"Whew," the fox sighed as he straightened back up, giving his arms a little shake as he grinned up to the massive wolf beside him, clearly having struggled bringing the tray of hefty food over,

"I figured I'd surprise you with a more... generous serving as celebration for our new arrangement. You seriously haven't had a proper breakfast in, what, weeks? I don't even know anymore, so I thought you'd deserve it, bud." Zach gave one of those warm smiles that almost melted the hybrid's heart more than the cube of butter atop the pancakes. As snarky and teasing as the farmer could be, he really did have a soft spot for the massive wolf ever since he began to help out so much.

Aaron's eyes lit up at the size of the meal he'd been presented with; normally, such a generous breakfast was saved for special occasions. Though, he supposed this did qualify! "Wow... thank you!" the snolf said as he grinned wide to Zach, though the expression fell slightly a moment later, "You really didn't have to, though. I mean, I'm gonna be working less, but I don't want you to have to work more because of that."

When the anthro tilted his head with a look of bemusement, Aaron's gaze lowered as he poked at the floor. "I mean, don't I need to do something special to earn a meal like this?" he asked, still uncertain about the novelty of the current morning.

Zach blinked. "I mean, no?" There was a moment of silence, before the fox erupted into a fit of giggles, shaking his head as he looked up to the wolf that still towered over him even while sitting on his haunches, practically double the puny fennec's height, "Is that the impression you got? You've been doing like ninety percent of the work ever since you arrived here, I think that constitutes as doing something special. Besides, you do know you can just ask me to... make you something else when you're tired of a specific meal? Or if it's too small of a serving. That's always been the case."

The snolf shuffled his paws with a sheepish grin. "I-I know, I know, it's just... heh, the thought of you making food for me while I'm just lazing around in the morning is just, um, different?" Aaron tried to explain, his tail coiling around his paws and haunches as he spoke. When the anthro nodded, the serpentine wolf continued, "I'm probably just overthinking it, huh?" Another pause, before the ophidian leaned in and gently nuzzled against Zach's chest, purring out, "Thank you for making me breakfast!"

Aaron lingered in that position as a small hand brushed down his neck, the long fur on his scruff parting under those fine claws and slim digits. Once he was sure he'd expressed his gratitude well enough, the snolf gave a soft puff and lowered himself onto his midsection, the low table making it awkward to eat sitting up, simply digging in with the sort of gusto one would expect from a feral with wolves in his bloodline.

After breakfast, Zach excused himself to head up to the second story of the home, having taken a moment to turn on the television for his companion and giving a quick explanation of the buttons on the remote, inviting Aaron to stay and enjoy the TV as long as he wanted. Though obviously still hesitant about spending the morning doing nothing productive, the snolf gave a tentative nod, settling in behind the couch and propping his chin on the back of the seat once he was left to his own devices. It took a while for the serpentine wolf to stop fidgeting; his whole body was primed for a morning filled with activity and exercise, sitting sedentary like this felt off. Eventually, though, after a whole lot of position-changing and trying to find the best spot to

watch the programming on the screen, Aaron slowly settled down, laying in sphinx-pose atop a nest of his own tail coils.

Still, even with all those fidgets out of his system, it didn't take long for the snolf's attention to wander. The program on the television wasn't holding his interest, and changing the channel with his oversized paws was such a hassle that the serpent just let the deadpan newscasters continue their dry delivery of local news; which, in a farming community like where the pair lived, was rather lackluster. Letting out a long yawn, Aaron's eyes started to wander across the shelves beside the television, regarding the cases for games that he'd seen his companion playing with a sense of longing. He couldn't very well ask Zach to take a break from his work just because he was bored, however, and the snolf sighed as he continued looking around for something to occupy himself with.

Those amber orbs lit up a bit when they came to rest on the bowl of fruit that lay on top of the counter that divided the living room from the kitchen. Maybe a snack would keep him occupied for a bit; of course, he knew he wasn't *actually* hungry, especially not after such a filling breakfast. Yet at that moment, he didn't really care; he'd found something to do!

Getting to his paws, the snolf padded over to the counter, sniffing at the sweet fruits that lay in the bowl, only to pause for a moment when their scent wasn't the only one that greeted his snout. Gaze turning to the side, Aaron saw a glass jar on the counter, the even-sweeter smell he'd caught coming from the inside, a fact that a flick of his forked tongue confirmed for him. Shuffling closer to the jar, the feral gingerly nosed at its lid, giving a yip as he nearly knocked the whole thing over and quickly bringing his paws up to catch the container. More carefully, the snolf took ahold of the lid in his muzzle, lifting the top off and curiously turning his head to peek inside.

A whole jar of cookies greeted the ophidian wolf, and immediately he felt guilty just for disturbing the container. Rather hastily, the snolf thunked the lid back down onto the pastries, holding that position as he looked over to the fruits that lay nearby, before slowly lifting the lid again and peeking into the jar once more. He'd never really been told he *couldn't* have any; it was just his own assumption that a working feral like himself should have food with better nutrition than the pastries sitting before him. And yet, Zach had said today was a special occasion, so...

Dithering another moment, Aaron eventually settled the jar lid down beside its container, lifting a paw and making to reach in. Just one wouldn't be a problem, surely? He'd just work hard later to make up for it. He'd just... he'd...

Brow furrowing, the snolf frowned as he encountered an obstacle; designed for the slender hands of his companion, Aaron's massive paws were much too large to reach into the jar, digits coming frustratingly short of meeting their mark no matter how he tried. Ears folding, the feral huffed and grumbled as he worked at the forbidden fruit, tail starting to flick side to side in irritation, until he gave a disgruntled growl and plopped his paws back down on the ground, glaring daggers at the jar that seemed to mock him with its narrow opening. Glancing between his paws at the mouth of the container a few times, the snolf's expression perked up at that very thought; his paws might be too wide, but he might be able to fit his mouth in there instead.

Grinning in a self-congratulatory manner at his flawless logic, Aaron lowered his head as he carefully slid his muzzle into the opening, his tail wagging gleefully when he found he could fit his slim snout into the cookie jar. Still, with the neck of the jar extending a bit, Aaron had to press in a bit firmly before he could finally reach his prize, feeling the jar wedge around his muzzle once he managed to nibble ahold of a cookie. Once he made to lift his head, however, the serpent gave a muffled yip when the jar lifted up with him, his eyes crossing and a foreleg raising up to paw at the container.

Panic started to set in when Aaron realized he was stuck, his lack of thumbs proving to be the downfall of his stealthy mission, not quite able to hook his canine claws around the lip of the jar well enough to slip it off. Heart dropping, the snolf gave a little whimper of defeat when he accepted he needed help, ears folding as he looked toward the stairs. He was in for an earful, he just knew it... well, if he was going to be in trouble anyway, he might as well go all in.

Unwilling to let the embarrassing experience go without at least sampling the pastry he'd been trying to get at, Aaron tilted his head back a bit as he maneuvered the cookie around within the jar. The feral had a bit of trouble getting the treat into his muzzle with how little he could open his jaw, yet with a good deal of wiggling and shaking his head, the snolf managed to half-pull and half-drop the cookie into his maw, munching on the sweet with a victorious expression. That look shifted suddenly into surprise, and then pure pleasure as he chewed; it had been so long since he'd had something this sweet, he'd forgotten just how good the taste was! Purring happily, the snolf savored his pilfered prize for as long as he could, eventually swallowing and humming in satisfaction. That pleasure faded as he realized the jar was still rather firmly attached to his muzzle, yet as Aaron looked from the stairs to the item lodged against his face, he found himself slowly rationalizing... maybe getting into trouble was worth two cookies...

The sound of heavy footsteps coming up the stairs entered the office, making the fennec's oversized ears twitch as he sat at his desk. Those steps came to an abrupt halt right outside the door, replaced by a familiar, bashful whimper and ginger pawing at the frame, muffled mumbling that sounded both urgent and guilty floating in from the other side of the door.

Blinking and tilting his head at the commotion just outside his door, the fennec swiveled in his oversized office chair and hopped down to the floor, quickly padding over and opening the door to reveal...

"The... fuck?" Zach spat as he looked over the rather pathetic display, unable to keep his muzzle from aligning itself into a little smirk when he managed to put two and two together at the sight of a massive wolf who looked like a discount astronaut with the transparent jar stuck around his snout. A jar that looked strangely empty, to boot.

"What on earth did you do now?" the fennec laughed in adoration, and with a demoralizingly swift and easy motion, hooked his dexterous digits around the lid of the jar and promptly pulled it free of the hybrid's muzzle after only a few tugs, staring at the completely emptied container for a second. Recognition came after only a moment, and the fox raised an eyebrow as he looked back up to the wolf that still had his head ducked and ears flat against the back of his scruff. "Had a... little snack, huh? Why didn't you ask me to pour them out for you, doofus?"

Wait. What?

Aaron worked his muzzle for a moment, before ducking his head even more. "I-I... wasn't sure I was supposed to have those..." the snolf admitted, shuffling his paws as he regarded the jar he'd emptied somewhat unintentionally, "I-I mean... I'm supposed to stay fit and work-ready, you know? I always assumed that meant I shouldn't have sweets, but then I, uh... I got bored. And the cookies looked and smelled so good."

Quieting, the snolf's tail tucked slightly between his legs as he stared at the floor, before lifting his gaze to regard the fox with those big, honey-gold eyes. "I-I'm not in trouble?" he asked, his ears veritably hiding behind his big head as he uttered the words.

Just one look at that pleading visage sealed the deal. For someone who had developed a rather substantial fondness towards his only companion, and a rather blaring soft spot along with it, it was almost impossible to say anything besides the words that soon left the fennec's lips. "Aww, of course not, you big dummy," Zach chuckled softly and waved a paw, the other limb reaching out to gently hook behind one of those hiding ears, gingerly scritchng the sensitive member, which pricked forward while the fox gave a warm smile, "It was just a few... er... a jar of cookies," the correction was accompanied by a subtle glance to the emptied jar once more, "It's nothing to worry about, really. You... really could have just asked me to put some out for you, you know. I didn't know you liked sweets that much!"

"Besides," there was a brief pause, during which the fennec's azure eyes momentarily looked the snolf's svelte form over, "I don't see anything wrong with you having sweets if you enjoy them."

The reassurance steadily managed to get the snolf's head to lift, the end of his tail swaying side to side by the time Zach had finished. "O-oh... well, now I just feel silly," Aaron said with an embarrassed chuckle, sitting up and reaching a paw to rub his neck. The glance over his form got the snolf fidgeting self-consciously, the expression seeming to have some sort of veiled insinuation. Leaving that alone for the moment, the serpent's forepaws came together to tap in front of his chest as he smiled bashfully, "S-so, uh... was that all of the cookies?"