

Part 5

Katal sat on his haunches and patted his stomach, letting out a belch that seemed to echo on forever through the silent square. He was feeling full already; something that he had not expected. His belly was only bulging slightly more than usual and could take a lot more food than this, it had done in the past at least. It had been a long time since he had been able to freely gorge himself and was not sure of his own limits; not that reaching his estimated limit had stopped him before. Food was simply intoxicating; once he began eating, especially if the food was readily available he simply could not stop. There had been times when he was certain he would burst with another bite, but that never bothered him and in the end he never did burst.

The square was still devoid of any activity; where was his meat? After all of this rebellious behaviour towards him he was certainly not going to give any leniency regarding punctuality on the humans behalf. Just as Katal was about to lose his patience though the sure sound of wooden wheels rolling over cobble broke the silence of the square and a convoy of carts pulled by cattle followed. Easily over a dozen carts full of a variety of meat were lined up in front of him. A mouth watering aroma of beef; lamb and pork overwhelmed his senses as he tasted the air with his sensitive tongue.

Almost as soon as the carts had been lined up in front of him the few villagers who had obviously drawn the short straw set about herding away the various animals that pulled the carts. Katal growled deeply giving the witless humans a start. "I think you can leave those with me!"

A frantic discussion ensued among the villages and after a few seconds of squabbling a short balding man was pushed forward. Katal looked at him with a rather bored expression as he cowered in front of him; held up only by his fellows pushing him onwards.

The man took a deep quivering breath and bleated, "We are somewhat short on animals this season due to a recent long lasting drought... I don't suppose that; if it were possible of course, we could keep them for while longer? I mean this of course being in your best interest; it would of course mean more food for you later!"

Just the fact that the man kept repeating the words "of course" was enough to set the dragons teeth on edge; let alone his irritating stuttering. "I think I can make up my own mind what is in my best interest thank you! I'll be having no more chit chat; leave me while I eat!"

The man paused for a second and actually dared to utter, "But..."

All it took was one snap from Katal's mighty jaws in the peasants general direction to sent them fleeing for the safety of their hovels. The triumphant dragon sat back and marvelled at this small victory; eyeing his extra treats, merely a few cows but more than enough for an 'after dinner dinner'.

With the aroma of meat filling his nostrils and the villagers out of the way Katal forced his jaws into the nearest cart without much consideration for what was in it. As it turned out this particular cart was filled with salted pork; one of his favourite meals... So much so in fact that his over vigorous attempts to gorge himself on the pork caused at first a creaking; somewhat splintering sound to emanate from the carts chassis. Moments later while trying to snap up the last morsels from the bottom, the cart finally gave way under the pressure forced upon it and snapped off of its wheels; landing heavily on the ground.

Katal naturally gave this little thought. The gloriously delicious food was all that mattered to him now; not the pathetic wooden transports he was sure would not take much assembling in the first place.

Licking the salt from his chops Katal swept away the remnants of the first cart and Forced his maw

into the next. As he crammed the meat into his mouth the taste of beef filled his mouth... Something he generally preferred to eat fresh, but still being food he quickly downed every last one of the steaks and sat back for a minute to catch his breath.

What he had eaten could hardly be called a feast, yet he was consciously aware of the two carts of food still left beside him, and his already swollen stomach pushing up against his own ribcage; forcing some of the breath out of him as he sat.

“Surely I have eaten more than this in the past?” He thought quietly to himself as he experimentally prodded his bulging paunch with a claw.

“Bah!” He snorted. “I can't seem weak now; not here of all places!” And with that he heaved himself up and forwards towards the next cart; full of fish. Coming to an abrupt halt at the cart; his somewhat heavy stomach, not stopping at the same time as the rest of him lurched forwards on to the bottom of his lungs and forced out a belch of searing orange flames.

“Crap!” Katal scolded himself (though secretly relieved), after looking at the smoking cart he had unintentionally burnt to a smouldering pile of ash. “Well... I was getting tired of eating fish regardless.”

A few peasants were leaning out of windows and around the corners of buildings to see what the commotion was. Feeling somewhat embarrassed he promptly moved on to the next cart (and the biggest one); full to the brim with mutton. Eyeing it somewhat wearily the already overstuffed dragon decided that he had too much to lose by not finishing his dinner; after all he did not want to look weak now in front of the people who had shunned him for the last several years.

Despite a deep desire to flop down on to the floor in to an unconscious stupor; Katal forced his maw forwards once more and began (with somewhat less enthusiasm than earlier) snapping up the awaiting mutton. Regardless of the complaints from his already distended paunch; the fat chewy steaks of mutton still brought and overflowing excess of saliva to his mouth.

What a joy eating truly was. With each greedy mouthful of juicy steaks; his stomach stretched pleurably, his hide becoming as tight as a drum around his spherical belly. With some effort he forced the last of the mutton down his throat and groaned. Katal collapsed to the floor and gave a gasp as his belly slapped prematurely against the cobbled ground. Half aware that he had made something of a spectacle demanding that the cattle was left behind for him; he was more than a little relieved as a quick glance around the square confirmed for him that through their own fruition, the cattle had scarpered well out of reach.

Katal gave one last euphoric groan as his bulging paunch pressed pleurably against his dragonhood. With little effort he closed his eyes and fell into an unconscious slumber.

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Jared had had enough of this town. It was bad enough that he was treat (and paid) like a second class citizen, but now a bad tempered dragon had made residence? No this was it; he was at his wits end with Askolov. The only reason he came to this awful place in the first place was to make some money... And now as it looked like this great creature was going to put all of the local stores out of business, there was no sense in staying a moment longer than he had to.

Raiding his small room above the bakery; Jared packed away the few belongings he had, put enough money in his pocket to purchase a horse and hid the rest in the lining of his coat for safe keeping. Two years of working in the a bakery and some 30lbs later; his travelling clothes were feeling a little on the snug side. His kind were built a little more heavily than humans to begin with, but now as he struggled slightly to button his coat around his waist he had to admit that perhaps this was the fault of the pastries and not of his species. Never the less; on horseback his general fitness would be of small consequence.

As he closed the front door of the bakery for the last time the universal sense of unease that had blanketed the village hit him like a bucket of wall paper paste. He could smell the collective fear emanating from the nervous clusters of peasants; who were hanging around watching the huge dragon's belly rise and fall with every breath as it slept, not that he cared at all for the situation the humans had found themselves in. No longer would he have to hear complaints like "Baker, I found a hair from that creature in my bread again!" Those days were over.

It was good for once to see the people who had made his life unpleasant over the last few years get some comeuppance, and so with no goodbyes that needed saying Jared turned his back on the town square and headed towards the stables.

A few solemn looking locals passed as he headed towards the outskirts of the town; the initial shock of the dragon's arrival appeared to have worn out, and in its place left a deep realization of what they would now have to put up with.

The cobbled street slowly decayed into dirt and gravel as Jared reached his destination. Apparently on his way into the town Katal had somewhat damaged the stables. A wooden pillar from one corner of the structure lay splintered into three pieces on the ground and the roof that it previously supported hung at a precarious angle; creaking ominously in the breeze. The roof support was not the only thing missing though... The horses were gone as well.

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In an abandoned farm building near the edge of Askolov; Fray and his new companion hid after fleeing the stable building had threatened to collapse on them.

The chestnut stallion that Fray had taken shelter with nipped experimentally at his flank.

"Hey!" Fray exclaimed; somewhat startled.

"Sorry I was just curious... You look like an Andalusian breed; only with a draft horse build."

"And what are you implying exactly?" Fray Demanded of his temporary companion.

Tilting his head slightly the other horse merely responded with a question. "Are you an Andalusian?"

"Of course I am damn you!" He was losing his patients somewhat, it had after all been a particularly stressful day.

"Well it's just that the only Andalusian horses I have seen have been fairly slender. Or thinner than

me at least.”

“I'm not fat!” Fray said defensively.

“Calm down; it doesn't really matter. If anything the weight fits you well.”

Fray was taken aback. “You really think so?”

“Sure it does, it would be boring if all horses looked the same. You do indeed have the shape of a draft horse, and even if you are a bit on the heavier side for your breed; it looks handsome.”

The white stallion blushed at this remark. He had been called handsome before; as with his gleaming white coat and well kept mane, handsome he was, but he had never been called this by another stallion. Unsure how to take this he simply responded with. “Thank you.”

“If you don't mind me asking; are you naturally built like this or have you been eating human food?”

“I suppose I am not naturally built like this. I have spent the last few months in my own stables with little exercise, and I suppose that coupled with the same amount of food I would normally eat while travelling at distance is the reason for my weight.” It was strange discussing his eating and exercise habits as if he were a show horse giving beauty tips. “Why would you think I have been eating human food?”

“Oh; my master caught his children giving me some 'Sponge Cake' and he told them off saying that it makes horses fat. He couldn't understand me, but I would have liked him to know that I don't mind really, it tastes very nice after all.”

Fray remember something that Katal had mentioned earlier... Something about all the food he wanted. Perhaps while he was stuck under the dragons compulsion he could at least take advantage of the offer and try out some human food for himself; maybe he could even get some of it taken to this particular horse if he liked it so much. “I am in a bit of a predicament at the minute involving a certain dragon so I can't promise anything, but perhaps I may be able to acquire you some of this 'Sponge Cake' that you like.

“Thank you that would be lovely!” He paused for a moment and a look of surprise crossed his long face. “Did you just say you were involved with a dragon?”

“Yes I did unfortunately... The very one that is in Askolov today. Its a long story, but in short I am stuck with him.” Fray sighed. It was admittedly a situation that required more than a sign, and was somewhat more than unfortunate, though Fray was too exhausted and the whole ordeal came to him like a nightmare rather than reality.

“I... I don't know what I can suggest to help...” The chestnut horse stammered in shock. “Why don't you just run away while he is in the town? I'm sure he would have trouble finding you with such a head start.”

Fray did not know how to respond; why couldn't he run away? Whenever he had considered it; a sort of veil descended, preventing him from moving where he wanted. “I can't... I think Katal... I mean the 'dragon' did something to me. It's almost like I can see him watching me every time I think of running away and any effort I make to move is like pushing in to a wall of water.”

“You don't think he will come after you soon will he? I don't much fancy being eaten by a dragon.” The other horse said nervously.

“I honestly don't know, last I heard he was going to 'make the town fear him' and demand food from them... I'm not sure whether both were the same thing to be honest.”

“Perhaps you have some time then. It sounds like you might be under some sort of 'dragon spell'. I don't know how they work... I count myself fortunate enough to never have met one myself.” He said with almost a sign of relief. “But one thing I do know is this: surely the only thing stronger than an order from the dragon is an order from your rider? I mean I have hardly heard of a horse disobeying a chance to take his master for a ride.”

Why had the idea never struck Fray before? He would never have dared to disobey a direct order from the knight who used to ride him; even if he did absolutely hate the man, it would be against even fibre of his being to do so. All he needed to do was find a new master and he would be free of the dragons spell! “Thank you so much for the idea! All I need to do is find somebody who will ride me and I will be free!”

“You might be in luck now actually.” The other horse stated as the sound of footsteps drew close outside.

The footsteps got closer to the crumbling farmhouse as they echoed off of the bare stone walls, and in the man stepped. As the light swept over him from the broken roof tiles above it turned out that this particular man was not human at all. Though he stood in profile similarly to a man, he had a long thick tale which he leant back on slightly as he surveyed the house; large ears which swivelled to face any apparent noise in much the same way Fray's own ears did, and a long brown furry muzzle with two black streaks near his leathery nose.

“Oh, a Kangaroo!” Exclaimed the chestnut horse.

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Jared jumped in fright at realising he was within feet of two large stallions. He felt appalled at himself for not noticing them; apparently living in Askolov had numbed his senses as well as his figure. “I've found you!” He said ecstatically; after all this finally meant his freedom of this awful place and he would be damned if he was going to walk back home.

As his eyes adjusted to the light the two stallions came in to focus. One was a brown horse with a white splodge towards the end of his nose and the other was a somewhat more well fed white Andalusian. All he needed to do now was pick a horse; leave some money at the dealer's stables and he would be on his way!

While the white horse would certainly be less likely to go hungry on the road; the brown one looked as though he could distance him from the town, and the dragon faster. Plus as a bonus he was already saddled and ready to go.

“Right boy its time to go back to your stable; we have a journey to take!” Jared said.

As Jared reached forwards for the chestnut horse's reins it pulled back and said. “No I am not for sale; I already have a master! Take him instead please.” With this he gestured towards the Andalusian horse with his nose.

“That's fine.” Jared said, “But we need to get back to your stables regardless so I can pay and get you saddled up.”

The white horse gawped in confusion, but the brown one said with some excitement. “I knew you could understand us when we talked to you at the stables! You are the one who works in the bakery aren't you? My friend thought I was imagining things, but I knew better! Can all beast folk understand horses?”

“Yes I did work in the bakery, but I am leaving town now... Hopefully for good. As for us 'beast folk'...” He did not like to put emphasis on a phrase he found offensive, but he needed to be away as quickly as possible, preferably before anybody knew that he was even gone and as such had no time for lectures. “...Most of us can talk to a variety of more intelligent animals.”

“Oh that is a shame that you are leaving, I would have liked to talk to you. The life you lead must be very interesting. Why did you not talk with us at the stables?”

“I can assure you the life I lead is not very interesting; if it was I would stay put here and would have had a reason to talk to you I'm sure.” He said, though in truth he did not want to be persecuted more than he already had been, and being seen conversing with horses would certainly have not helped his situation.

For the first time the white horse; which seemed the less talkative one entered the conversation. “I could not think of anything more ideal!” He said. “You want to leave this town as quickly as possible... So do I. Better yet I have no owner so I will not cost you anything to buy. Take me please!”

Jared was a little taken aback at his eagerness; horses were usually fairly timid with new owners. “Well ideal as that is; I still need to take you to the stables and wait for the master to return to harness you.”

“Oh no need for that.” The chestnut horse piped in. “You can take my saddle free of charge!”

“Really?” Both Jared and Fray said at the same time; dubious as to whether it would even fit.

“Yes just take it; its no problem I can assure you.”

The offer was indeed tempted, a free horse and saddle. “All right come outside then so I can see what I'm doing.”

It did not take long to undo the buckles and remove the saddle from the chestnut horse; the problem was getting it back on to the white one. He was indeed a portly horse; where the brown chestnut horse, most likely an Arabian of some kind was luckily not as trim as the usual riding horse; the difference in girth was still fairly large. The Arabian had a small pot belly which the strap had been adjusted to compensate for, but the Andalusian was at least a third larger around the middle. Lacking in any brushes or fitting equipment Jared did his best to smooth down the fur of the white horse's back and placed the padded fitting; followed by the saddle itself. The strap as he thought was what caused the problem though. Try as he would trying to pull one end of the strap into the buckle while it sunk further into the horse's fleshy stomach; it would not quite reach the holes in the leather required to hold the buckle in place.

With nothing else for it Jared pulled a knife out of his travel bag and punched some more holes into

the leather of the strap; these would have to serve until either he could have a new saddle fitted or the horse lost some weight. Even with the new holes in it was a very tight fit, and as he stood back he saw that the strap was digging in to the fat of the creature's belly.

Despite appearances this would have to do; Jared was not going to endure this town any longer than he had to. With one large push from his powerful legs he leapt in one motion on to the saddle of his new horse in a fashion perhaps acrobatic in human terms, but not so much for his own species.

"All right then, we are off. Onwards!"

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Fray was so ecstatic that his new master's orders could overwrite the dragon's spell that he almost forgot his new friend. "Goodbye and thank you for the help!" He said, "By the way, I never asked your name? Mine is Fray."

"That is no problem; though if we do meet again I will take you up on that offer of human food." He said grinning. "My name is Chess."

'Chess', it seemed a fitting name for a chestnut horse. Wanting to get as far away as he could from Katal, Fray cantered away from Askolov with energy unusual for him. His new saddle was squashing his belly tightly and he did not necessarily want a new master... But this Kangaroo seemed friendly; with the added benefit of being able to actually make conversation with him. The road would be long and uncomfortable, but a safe and sociable one.

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Katal awoke from the slumber that had stolen his consciousness and sat up somewhat groggily onto his haunches; the food from his meal still weighed down in his belly, though the sheer pressure of it had diminished with sleep. It would be hours before the sun would rise and the town was silent and dark; save for a couple of oil street lamps flickering away outside of the town hall, defiant against the blanket of surrounding darkness. Apart from the splintered base of the one that he had broken; the carts had been cleared from the square as he had slept.

With a deep yawn Katal stretched out at full length and rose to all fours. It would be at least a short while before he felt hungry himself, but what about Fray? He had after all made a promise of food to the stallion, and food he intended to deliver. Perhaps he would benefit from some of the local cakes and biscuits; in the end he had decided not to make a meal of the horse, but meal or not Katal would certainly not pass up the chance to fatten up such a fine stallion.

He had told Fray to stay where he was, but likely by now somebody had taken him to the stables. There was nothing for it; somebody would have to bring Fray to him. Katal made his way across the square and up the stone staircase of the town hall. It would serve to make more noise than was strictly necessary; after all he wouldn't want the humans forgetting about him. With an effort, and while holding on to the sturdy stonework of the large building to steady himself, Katal stood up to his full height on his hind legs. His still-bulging paunch brushed up against the high archway of the main entrance as he stretched out a clawed paw and began to thottle the bell in its tower.

“Wake up wake up!” He bellowed at the top of his voice; while the bell in the tower rang piercingly through the darkness. As he pulled back to lower himself down again he caught one of the stone supports of the tower and with a thud; a terrible clattering and an enormous crash, Katal came back down on to all fours bringing half of the bell tower with him.

“Ouch.” He muttered as he shook several pieces of rubble from his back, and removed the large brass bell that had made itself a home on one of his horns.

The commotion had done the trick though as the town came to life. Lights came on in every other window and people burst out of their doors to see what had happened.

“Oh good you are all awake.” Katal said; trying to sound as casual as possible as he shook the last of the dust and debris from his hide. “Somebody fetch the horse that I arrived with. He is a fat white stallion and should be without a saddle.” The villagers stared for a few seconds before a few of them shuffled off out of the square without a word.

Katal wandered back in to the middle of the square; lay down on the cool courtyard once again and clacked his claws impatiently against the stone, ignoring the horrified faces staring at their broken building. Lazily he craned his neck towards the devastation. Half of the tower had completely collapsed and lay broken on the stone steps below; it was as if it had been hit with cannon fire. In truth he had not meant to cause any real damage, but this misfortune would certainly make him seem more dangerous to the townspeople.

After what seemed like an eternity the sound of running footsteps echoed into the square; followed by a rather out of breath burly and grey haired man. He stopped at what he must have considered a safe distance (it was not) and caught his breath. “The horse you have arrived with has gone!”