

Few things can beat a good sleep in. A cool blanket wrapped around me, a cushy pillow below me, and a sunbeam-warmed tail nestled under my head¹. Curled up in my basket, I was a very snug little fox². Unfortunately, even the most comfortable arrangements must give way to the obligations of life. My stomach growled. I didn't want it to growl. I wanted to stay in my comfy bed. It growled louder. With great reluctance I crawled out of my basket.

The workshop, also known as Flynn's entire first floor, was a mess like always. Only my little corner was clear of loose cogs, springs, wiring, and the like. I nosed through the clutter looking for my snackbox. A handy little device Flynn had made once I started waking up earlier than him, the box was meant to work like a personal fridge. Unfortunately he had given it wheels and didn't balance the frame properly. It tended to wander as a result.

I found the snackbox wedged between a chair leg and half of what was supposed to be an airship core. After some finagling³ I freed it and spun the snackbox around to face me. The ice glyph on the lid was still lit up; durability was one of the few things Flynn got consistently right. I pressed the button to open the lid. My ears fell. The snackbox was devoid of sandwiches⁴.

I nosed around inside the box but wasn't really expecting to find any loose crumbs. Were I a dog, I'd be consigned to wait around until Flynn woke up and then gaze piteously until he fed me. Were I a cat, I'd be reduced to scrounging for mice or slipping out and hunting birds⁵. Fortunately, I was a fox; a creature of intellect and cunning. My plan was far more dignified and elegant in execution.

"Flyyyyynnn! Wake uuuuuup!" I called out from beside his bed. The mass of sheets shifted slightly. I hopped onto the bed and climbed to the ruffled section. A head emerged which I eagerly greeted.

"GAH!" Flynn exclaimed when he found my muzzle millimetres from his face. "Coby! You know I hate when you do that!"

"Feed me."

"What time is it?"

"Breakfast time."

One hand rubbed sleep from his eyes while another groped to find the clock.

¹ Yes, I have a tail. What, did you think I was human? How species-centric is *that*?

² A red fox, by the way. Don't confuse me with those blotchy crosses or drama queen grays. I have *class*.

³ Finagling is important when you don't have thumbs.

⁴ And they were nice sandwiches too! Flynn always cuts the crust off!

⁵ This is gross and demeaning on exactly three levels.

"It's 7:15."

"That changes nothing."

"Go back to bed, Coby."

"I can't sleep when I'm hungry."

Flynn scowled. "Part of being a familiar involves obeying orders."

I flicked my tail. "Part of *having* a familiar involves taking care of it. Like by providing food."

"Go to bed, Coby." Flynn repeated. He lay back down, "I'll make you something at an appropriate hour."

Flynn then found himself with a fox sitting on his head.

"You're getting eggs and toast." Flynn yawned as he flicked on the kitchen light. "I'm not making you anything fancy."

"Thanks a bunch!"

Flynn grumbled but got out the bread, butter, and his multitool's knife anyway. A minute into his buttering my nose twitched at an odd scent.

"Flynn, what kind of bread are you using?"

"The loaf I bought yesterday, why?"

"But that has seeds in it⁶!" I growled exasperatedly, "You should use the good bread!"

"It expired."

"But there was half a loaf left!"

Flynn was pressing the knife into the bread harder than he needed. "Then you should've eaten more of it."

"Can you take the seeds out?"

A tired scoff. "That would take far too long."

"I can wait."

My ears shot up as Flynn yelped in pain. His multitool and the piece of bread fell to the floor. The knife blade was streaked with fresh blood and there was a hole punched through the bread.

⁶ I have standards!

Flynn cursed and grabbed a towel from the sink and wrapped it around his left wrist to staunch the injury. Blood was running down his arm. I sniffed at the fallen piece of bread but couldn't bring myself to take a bite.

After a minute he lifted the cloth and checked the wound before quickly replacing the towel. "Blast that's deep. I need to see Rem or it's not going to stop."

My ears fell. "What about breakfast?"

"Really, Coby? I think I hit an artery."

"So tie it off. You can make eggs with one hand⁷."

Flynn didn't respond. He grabbed his multitool from the floor and headed for the door. I followed after and fell in line beside Flynn as he walked quickly through the streets.

Our neighbourhood bordered the city's merchant and craft wards. The constant hum of activity from people running back and forth between the two was subdued in the morning hours, but there were still people about. Those that were only gave Flynn a passing glance before returning to their own business⁸.

The *Torchlight* pub was located two blocks from our house. It was a moderate-sized establishment that had been in business for twelve years despite ample competition from a combination of fancier and cheaper alternatives nearby. The name came from a large ornate torchstone⁹ decorating the sitting area that had been carved into the looping shape of the owner's family crest. Rem, the owner and bartender, was Flynn's go-to man for local news, supply tips, and medical services.

"Did it explode, fall over, or try to attack you?" Rem asked without looking up when Flynn entered the pub.

Flynn gave a wan smile as he sat down at the bar. I hopped onto a stool beside him. "Neither, actually. Buttering accident."

That made Rem look up. "Oh, a new one. Congratulations, I was starting to get bored." His glasses glinted as he smirked. "Let's have a look then."

⁷ It's not a complicated procedure.

⁸ To be clear, these are (mostly) good people. There's just only so many times you can see Flynn running injured through the streets before the urgency dies off.

⁹ Torchstone is a type of elemental ore found near fire-charged ley lines. It generates its own heat and is second only to sunbeams in creating a relaxing and snugable atmosphere.

Flynn held his arm out and lifted the towel. Rem whistled. “Definitely nicked an artery. Looks a little that the gouge you got from the astrolabe incident, actually. Of course that one was bigger and on your—”

“I remember¹⁰.”

My stomach growled. Rem turned and gave me a scritch behind the ear. “Hey, Coby. How’s it foxing?”

I wagged my tail¹¹. “Hungriily! Flynn was getting my breakfast.”

A sympathetic nod. “I’ll whip something up for you. Eggs and toast ok?”

I yipped an affirmative. “That’s what Flynn was making! But he was using the bread with seeds in it!”

“Eww.”

“I know!”

Flynn cleared his throat. “I’d hate to interrupt but—”

“What? Oh, yes. Bleeding to death. One moment.”

Rem’s magicite¹² bracelet emitted a low hum while he touched Flynn’s wrist. My whiskers twitched at the presence of magic in the air while sparks began floating around the injury like snowflakes. They coalesced into the hole and the skin began to pull itself shut. A minute later the magic faded and his arm was stab wound free.

“I’d suggest you learn some curative spells of your own, but then I’d lose one of my best customers¹³.” Rem chimed, repeating the same joke he told Flynn after each healing.

Flynn rubbed his wrist. “How much is it this time?”

“Depends. One of my stoves is acting up; can you take a look at it?”

“Still? Thought the company sent someone.”

¹⁰ Don’t ask.

¹¹ Yes I know wild foxes don’t wag their tails. I do. I’m a tail-wagging fox.

¹² Magicite is a highly malleable metal known for its ability to conduct magic almost as well as a living creature. As refining processes improved, magicite items like jewellery became the preferred receptacle for a magician’s power instead of familiars. Though why someone would want a boring ol’ necklace when they could have someone fun and fluffy like me is a mystery.

¹³ For the record, Flynn can’t use healing magic. His style is less... direct than what healing requires.

A shrug. “They did, but whatever that tech tried stopped working after a day. I’d rather go with someone I know to be effective.” He watched Flynn mull it over before adding, “The warranty is still active.”

Flynn’s eyes lit up. He grinned like a boy on his birthday. He loved voiding warranties¹⁴.

“What about me?” I asked.

“I’ll send out your food when it’s ready. Just make yourself comfortable. So, Flynn, interested?”

Flynn made a giddy squeak and followed into the back kitchens, leaving me alone at the bar. I moved over to the booth closest to the torchstone and curled up. The radiating heat was almost as good as a sunbeam and Rem had great taste in cushions. A waitress came out a few minutes later and placed a plate of buttered toast and hardboiled eggs on the table. It was worth disrupting my comfort to enjoy the fresh, succulent eggs. I murred contently as I swallowed and egg warmed my insides. It was almost enough to make me nod off until I saw a small, brown-scaled hand reaching for my toast.

“Oi!” I barked and leapt up. “Claws off!”

Ferris recoiled. “Ah, apologies, good fox!” he exclaimed in a wheezing, yet smooth voice, “I was under the impression you were not longer in need of this sustenance.”

The two-foot long, sinewy dragon slithered around the table and put his arm and a leathery wing around me¹⁵. I leaned away but he pulled me close in an awkward side-hug. “It was an honest mistake;” he began in typically extravagant fashion, “for you appeared to be enjoying a restful respite after sating yourself with our dear Rem’s remarkable eggs. Surely after such a meal you won’t be troubled by a humble dragon’s need for a bite of bread? A tincture of toast?”

He hiccupped. My nose scrunched at the smell of alcohol. I pushed him off of me.

“Ferris, are you drunk?”

“Ha!” He exclaimed with a haughty flourish, “A dragon does not get drunk! Alcohol is far too vital a resource for our fair breed to indulge in its...” he struggled for a word, “*pedestrian* uses¹⁶. Your inglorious insult is a knife to my pride!”

“Yea, you’re drunk¹⁷. It’s not even noon, either.”

“Barbarous blasphemy! Scurrilous—hic!—slander!”

¹⁴ He needs to get out more.

¹⁵ Don’t let the size fool you. Their egos are *huge*.

¹⁶ Translation: It’s how they breathe fire.

¹⁷ Kinda hard to tell with Ferris, actually; I think he’s even more dramatic when sober.

A loud ***BANG*** from the kitchens made us both jump. Rem's low chuckle carried through the door behind Flynn's cries of "Found it!"

A moment passed before Ferris continued like nothing had happened. "I demand tribute lest the wrath of my ancient kind be invoked!"

Before I could react he had climbed onto the table. "Oho, and I believe I have fortuitously found an acceptable offering." With a smack of his lips, he reached again for the toast.

"MINE!"

I batted Ferris off the table. He tumbled upside-down onto the booth seat.

"Hic! Assault! Egregious assault!" the dragon cried as he righted himself. "Steel yourself, for a good and just thrashing!"

We were both on the floor by the time Flynn and Rem returned from the kitchens. Ferris was unsuccessfully trying to push me off his chest while I occupied myself by gnawing on his leg¹⁸.

"COBY!"

I released Ferris and returned to Flynn's side. A charred, smoldering scent wafted down from his hair.

"Did you catch fire back there?"

"No."

"Your hair—"

"What did you and Ferris get into over this time?" He interrupted.

I yipped defiantly. "He tried to take my toast!"

"Of course he did."

"Good sir Flynn!" Ferris interjected after pulling himself up, "I must critique your control of this fox! Once more he has deeply disregarded the proper protocols of tribute! Such disrespect I have never encountered anywhere else! It could drive a poor soul to drink! In fact, I do believe I shall..."

He unfolded his wings and flew onto the bar. Rem's genial smile never wavered as he followed and filled Ferris's order. "You were saying about the stove..." he prodded.

"Huh? Oh, that the problem was with the vent coil. It's sort of like a grounding wire for heat." Flynn explained off-handed as he wrapped up my toast in a napkin¹⁹. "Yours is frayed—not industrial

¹⁸ Dragon scales taste like alcoholic marble tile. I do not care for it.

class which is what you need for how much it's used—and it looked like the company guy tried rerouting instead of replacing.”

“And that’s bad.”

A shrug. “More stupid than dangerous, but simple enough to fix. I should have the right-sized coil at my place.”

Rem nodded. “Appreciated.”

Flynn returned the nod and tapped the wrist that half an hour ago had been gushing red. “Hey, you keep me alive and I’ll keep me working. C’mon, Coby.”

Once we were out on the street Flynn unwrapped my toast and took a bite.

“Oi!”

He gave an exasperated look. “Seriously? I was in the kitchen when Rem made those eggs. Three is plenty enough for you. Besides, I have to get my blood back. Don’t want me starving, do you?”

I nipped at his leg in protest. Flynn twitched a finger and a puff of air hit me on the nose and made me sneeze²⁰. It was the end of the disagreement.

The piece of seed-bread was still on the floor when we got back to the house. Flynn tossed it in the garbage before grabbing an apple from the fridge. “Ok, I need a vent coil,” he reiterated between bites, “shouldn’t too hard to find one around here. They’re pretty distinct. We’re looking for a thick, spring-shaped tube with a magidite layering.”

“Right,” I said skeptically, thinking about the sheer messiness of the house, “and you’ll find this how?”

My whiskers twitched as Flynn provided the answer. His spell lifted up every spare part in the kitchen and living room and suspended them in mid-air. A sensation of butterflies filled my stomach as I felt my paws leave the floor. A moment later I was floating among the debris. I yipped in alarm and struggled to get back to the ground. My attempts were met with mixed success in that I ended up upside down with my tail falling over my muzzle²¹.

¹⁹ Why the waitress brought the napkins out with the plate is beyond me. My tongue is far more efficient.

²⁰ I hate that spell!

²¹ This does not please me.

"In a sec." Flynn said absently, oblivious to my situation with his back turned to me. I continued to bark but another puff of air struck my nose. As I silently plotted my vengeance²², Flynn searched the hovering components with the air of a curious shopper.

"Ah! Found it!"

From above the coffee table he plucked a thick, curved tube coated in the telltale blue²³ of magicite. "There!" he exclaimed as he turned around, "That wasn't so hard now, was—oh."

He offered a sheepish half-smile that did not change my displeasure as I continued to float upside-down.

"Down. Now."

"Err, right... sorry about that."

"That was far below my dignity." I chided after being returned to the ground.

"Oh come on, you've endured worse."

"I seriously doubt that."

"Aunt Anne's holiday sweaters."

I shuddered²⁴. "Touché."

Flynn rubbed me behind the ears. "I'll cook up some roast beef for you later to make up for it, ok?"

"Mrrr.... Your shoes can live..." I conceded lazily.

"What?"

Whoops. "Nothing. You got the coil, right?"

He held up the tube as an affirmative. "Just lemme put this other stuff back."

Flynn faced the floating array of parts once again. He began the motion to set everything down when an odd look crossed his face.

I nudged his leg. "What is it?"

²² I'll chew his shoe later. REVENGE!

²³ It's not *always* blue, but here there was no reason to dye it.

²⁴ Never has a more unspeakable horror existed.

"I was just thinking²⁵ ..." he muttered. His eyes had a glazed look as they darted from part to part. "When I was checking the stove Rem mentioned that he was planning to add more summer foods to the menu."

"And this has to do with the vent coil how...?" I asked cautiously.

Flynn took out his multitool and extended a pen. He leapt onto the couch and pulled out an old schematic sheet from between the cushions. A quick spell wiped the page and he spread it out over the coffee table. He began sketching.

"The vent coil can transfer and release — can also store if I add a buffer, better make it two," he said to himself as the design unfolded on the paper. As he drew, metal plates, hinges, screws, and other pieces flew from their mid-air positions and collected on the table. I took shelter under the couch.

"The coal's gotta have a place too, won't work without it. But the stove is packed in pretty well, no room to either side so I'll have to build upwards—what if Rem wants to use the stove? Should make it removable—wait! Retractable! Always better!"

His sketching continued in a flurry of mutterings and the odd burst of exclamation. Parts flew onto and off of the table as Flynn discarded and added their uses. By the time he finished the schematic the air was significantly less populated and a mass of components had settled next to him, compacting themselves into an easily-cartable cube. Those still airborne floated back to their original scattered positions on the ground and furniture.

"Done!" Flynn declared proudly. "Take a gander at this, Coby!"

I popped out from beneath the couch.

"Wha? Why were you down there?"

"It was safer²⁶."

"Eh," Flynn waved it aside, too enthused with his latest creation, "anyway, tell me what you think!"

He held the schematic down at my eye level. From what I could make out²⁷ it looked like the design of Rem's stove. The only difference was the addition of what I guessed to be a large grilling basket attached to the top of the appliance and surrounded by notes in Flynn's sprawling shorthand. Fainter sketches surrounding the design showed the basket from different angles, some of which demonstrated how it attached to the stove and could be retracted and put away.

²⁵ Always dangerous.

²⁶ Marginally.

²⁷ Flynn thinks like an engineer but writes like a doctor.

I tilted my head. “It’s a...”

“Barbecue!”

“Ooooh.”

Flynn nodded eagerly. “I know! And it’s perfect for indoors! See here,” he pointed to a funnel that came off the bottom of the basket, “this draws in the smoke and neutralizes it using the torchstone’s own heat! This won’t even modify the existing structure of the stove too much since I can link it through the vent coil when I install it!”

He grabbed the cube of parts. “I can’t wait to show this to Rem!”

Rem, to his credit, only allowed a slight crease in his genial smile while looking over the schematic as Flynn delivered his bombastic explanation. Ferris had left to do whatever it was that let him pay his bar tab²⁸ so I was free to curl up near the torchstone and munch on a new and properly deserved order of toast.

“It is certainly unique,” the pub owner began after adjusting his glasses, “but I’m not sure it’s strictly necessary.”

“Of course not! The fun stuff never is! But you were saying that you wanted to expand the menu—get more summer foods in, right? Well what says summer better than fresh barbeque?”

Rem inclined his head, yielding to the point. “And, ah, how much will this... installation cost me?”

Flynn waved the question aside. “Don’t worry about it! With an idea like this it’s payment enough just to build it!”

I grumbled and took another bite of toast. Flynn was already well aware of my opinion on his business practices²⁹. Rem mulled the proposal over some more but ultimately consented.

“You won’t regret this!”

He zipped off into the kitchen. Then he zipped back to get the schematic Rem was still holding.

“I should probably close for the day.” Rem admitted once Flynn had returned to the kitchen. “Barely anyone comes in on Thursdays anyway. It’ll keep anyone from interrupting him.”

²⁸ So far none of us have figured out what “trading on my generous genealogy” means.

²⁹ This is why we can’t afford nicer food!

I finished my toast while he hung the CLOSED sign and dismissed his staff. He took my plate and hand washed it behind the bar. While rubbing the dish over with a cleaning rag for the fifth time, he glanced towards the kitchen door for the first time.

“Err, Coby, shouldn’t you be in there with him?”

“Nah, I’m close enough for him to get magic if he needs it. Guy likes a solo atmosphere for working anyway³⁰.”

“I see.”

My ear twitched at the tone of Rem’s voice. “You’re not worried, are you?”

His smile was apologetic. “I know better than anyone what can happen when Flynn starts tinkering.”

I waved a paw dismissively. “Pshaw, you only know what can happen to *him*. What he makes is completely different. Besides, nothing really important ever stays broken for long anyway.”

“I see...”

We played cards to pass the time and gambled with cashews. I had a terrible poker tail³¹ but Rem couldn’t hide his scent, so our respective tells balanced each other out. Over the next few hours the sounds of metal clattering, gears whirring, and the odd bit of welding echoed from the kitchen. Rem’s eyes occasionally flickered to the door but he never voiced another reservation.

Eventually Flynn emerged. He was sweaty, had hair that looked like it had been through a windstorm, and had a set of small scratches on his left cheek, but he was beaming with pride.

“It’s done. Come and see.”

The barbeque basket was a nest of layered copper and brass suspended by a riveted arm that looked like it should not have been able to hold the weight. Its control panel was attached haphazardly to the side of the stove’s existing controls. After Flynn instructed Rem on how to use the device and how to change the smoke filter, he demonstrated how it was put away. With the pull of a lever the arm retracted into the back of the stove, leaving the basket resting comfortably on its side between the stove and the wall.

“So,” Flynn asked as he put his arm around Rem³², “you up for breaking her in?”

Rem blinked. “You, err, didn’t test it?”

³⁰ I’m also less likely to be stepped on.

³¹ The downside of being a tail-wagging fox.

³² Flynn loses all sense of personal space when talking about his creations. This has resulted in him getting punched on multiple occasions.

“And spoil the inaugural cooking? Nah; It’s your barbeque, Rem. You should have the first go.”

Rem looked from the erratically designed barbeque to Flynn’s shining, oblivious face.

“Go grab a seat. I’ll whip us up some early dinner.”

We had smoked turkey breast and barbequed corn-on-the-cob. It was delicious.

Jonas Belford, 2012