

Most people don't think about how early bakers have to wake up. They assume that the early mornings are solely for the energetic business people and morning workout folk, but someone has to have all those breakfast pastries and breads ready for the morning rush.

So, it was at 5 AM, with the town still completely dark aside from the luminescent streetlights, with only the occasional sound of a very early jogger or night shift employee just arriving home to break up the peaceful night air, the lock on the Plum Street Bakery clicked open, the main baker himself shuffling into the building to turn on all the lights. Patrick was an older gentleman - he wasn't one to go throwing his exact age around, but he had obviously been around for a while, even if he was far from elderly yet. The iguana had an immense presence, even in the solitude of the bakery - a towering man well over 6 feet, he was incredibly broad and well built, his shoulders practically wider than the door he had just squeezed through. His arms were thicker than some men's waists, powerful, practical bulk built up from years of hard labor and exercise. At the same time, they say never to trust a skinny chef, and Patrick fit that in the more traditional way as well. His glossy green scales were stretched out by some considerable margin, particularly in his gut, with the apron he now found himself throwing on doing its best to cover up all of that gargantuan belly, a huge round exercise ball that wobbled and jiggled with every step despite the immense strength he had to hold it up. Patrick was a big tank of a man, but he handled himself with an efficient grace as he got himself ready to start the day.

Patrick had been doing this for years and years at this point, so everything was so routine it was practically thoughtless for him. He scrubbed down every surface to make sure everything was nice and sanitary for the day's work, then got to work pulling out the inventory. Bins of ingredients and pre-prepared pastries soon littered the stainless steel countertops; a more 'professional' kitchen might not be quite this haphazard about it, but not many people ever worked back here except for Patrick, and he was much more comfortable doing things his way. Still, it wasn't as if he was being sloppy about it - the iguana had a clipboard in hand as he sorted through all the various baking materials in front of him, noting down how much he had and how much more he might have to buy or prepare.

But once that boring, business-y stuff was out of the way, it was time to get to work. It wasn't long before Patrick was elbow-deep in dough, his powerful arms tensing and rippling as he kneaded and rolled the dough into perfectly-shaped, compact balls and logs and flat bases and whatever else he had to make for that morning. An onlooker might not have been able to tell what exactly Patrick was creating at any given moment, even as he began to add in more ingredients, but he was certainly working at it with the measured diligence and incredible skill of a master chef; even though the work was routine, there was still joy and vigor in the way he moved.

The iguana worked efficiently, getting goods to be baked into the oven at a good pace, but even he couldn't keep his mind 100% focused. It was past 6:30 AM at this point, and Patrick was well aware of it at this point. He found himself glancing up at the clock every few minutes, his brow only furrowing more and more each time.

“Where is he... he knows the schedule by now...”

Sure enough, it was only a few moments later that the back door into the kitchen swung open and a salamander with a tote bag rushed in. He was a relatively average figure, a bit on the lankier side even if he wasn't particularly tall at 5' 9". He wasn't particularly noteworthy at all, apart from the bright orange salamander scales only occasionally broken up by black markings, though the frazzled expression on his face was rather cute as he shut the door behind himself.

“S-Sorry I'm late sir, they shut down the main street near me due to construction so I had to take a longer walk to work...” the salamander said hurriedly as he hung his tote bag on a hook, exchanging it for an apron to put on and quickly tie around his waist.

Patrick looked over from the oven he was hunched over, his belly escaping his shirt and apron a bit to hang low around his knees. He sighed lightly. “Morgan, what did I tell you about that?”

Morgan tensed up his shoulders instinctively. “Uh... about being late?”

“No, about calling me sir.” Patrick smirked. “You’re gonna make me feel old. And that’s one thing I will not tolerate in my kitchen.” It became harder and harder for him to hide his smile, even as he went back to checking on the croissants that were now rising in the fire of the baking oven.

Morgan’s shoulders lowered back down, and he found himself smiling back, even if he was still a tad flush. “Sorry. Force of habit. Parents made sure I was always proper,” he said as he finished tying his apron.

“I getcha, don’t worry. We’ll just have to work that out of you a bit. Then after that we can work on getting you to stop apologizing so much,” Patrick chuckled, his cheeks puffing up in that very iguana-like way. “Now let’s get going, if we want to get all of this done by opening I’m going to need the extra set of hands.”

Morgan nodded enthusiastically, jumping right in to help Patrick wherever he needed it. He hadn’t been working at the bakery very long, but he still obviously knew the basics of the operations pretty well, even if he wasn’t quite as masterful as Patrick was. He spent some time rolling up dough and making formations for the pastries, but a lot of his job in the early morning was fetching ingredients for Patrick so that he could get items made more efficiently. Patrick was very direct and straightforward with Morgan, but he was never one to yell or even raise his voice all that much - he was understanding of the situation, and it was obvious that his skill in the kitchen was enough to convince others he knew what he was doing.

The opening of the bakery was fast approaching, which meant they were onto the more fun part - the fillings and the frostings and the general dressing up of the pastries, the final step in the transformations to take them from simple baked goods to works of art. They tasted delicious, naturally, but there was something particularly inspiring about just seeing the life and color those finishing touches could bring to something so simple.

As Morgan was setting some powdered donuts up in their display bin, he glanced across the kitchen just in time to see Patrick taking a big bite out of a chocolate éclair. He was experienced

enough not to get too messy with it, though there was still a bit of custard filling that he had to lick off of his lips.

“Didn’t have a big enough breakfast?” Morgan called over with a big, teasing chuckle.

Patrick rolled his eyes. “I’m trying something new with the frosting. Wanted to make sure it mixed well.” The iguana then went ahead and cleanly shoved the rest of the éclair into his mouth, neck bulging as he swallowed. “It does.” The iguana grinned, giving his huge belly a nice, firm double pat. “Now stop gawking, we open in 10!”

Somehow, no matter how early they started or how hard they worked, Morgan felt like they were always just barely getting everything set and ready before they were due to open. Today was no exception - at 8 AM sharp, he was just finishing making sure all the signs were set up and marked correctly before dashing over to unlock the front door, letting waiting customers enter the shop. The Plum Street Bakery wasn’t the biggest hot spot in town, generally losing out to the larger coffee shops that opened earlier and catered to the working crowd, but it certainly had a good amount of customers that had grown to love Patrick’s delicious individually made treats and were willing to line up in the morning to get them.

Morgan had worked food service jobs before, so manning the register wasn’t too big of a deal for him, especially since the menu wasn’t all that large. It was still a bit of a stressful task, mind you, but getting to see the customers walk out with a smile on their faces made it feel worth it. While Morgan was busy serving the customers, Patrick was still in the back, making even more of the pastries for when they ran out. Truth be told, Morgan would have loved to have been back there as well, helping with the baking. He wasn’t just working here by coincidence, after all - Morgan was a lifelong baking enthusiast, and he had a dream of one day opening up his own bakery as well, doing just what Patrick did. Or maybe he could graduate to co-running the Plum Street Bakery with Patrick. That also sounded pretty good to him.

But for now, his job was ringing people up, and he was doing a pretty damn good job of it if he did say so himself. He made sure people weren’t waiting long to get what they came for, and

soon enough the crowds began to thin out. Hours flew by in a flash, and before Morgan knew it, it was lunch time.

By that point, another employee had come in, so Morgan was able to let them take charge of the register while he went into the back to enjoy his break. The kitchen was noticeably messier than it had been in the morning, with multiple hours of productivity taking precedence over cleanliness, though it was hardly disgusting - in fact, the fresh smell in the air and the general atmosphere of baking-in-progress made Morgan just a little bit happier. The salamander went over to where his tote bag was still hanging on the wall, opening it up and pulling out a small brown paper bag. He found himself a nice, relatively clean corner of the stainless steel counter, pulled up a stool, and started pulling out his lunch.

“Got room for one more?”

For such a big guy, Patrick had a way of sneaking up on Morgan that Morgan never really understood. When he had walked in, Patrick had been on the other side of the kitchen mixing up some creams, but without being detected, the huge iguana had made his way over to where Morgan was sitting, pulling up a stool of his own and plopping himself down. Morgan swore he heard a light wooden creaking coming from the stool when Patrick plopped himself down onto it, but he also might have been imagining things. Morgan had always wondered just how much Patrick weighed, but hell if he was actually going to ask him that.

“Yeah, sure,” Morgan responded, though the question was rather moot considering Patrick had already taken a seat, as well as the fact that it was, y’know, his own kitchen. It was more of a formality anyways, since it wasn’t like Morgan was going to turn down the company. “As long as I’m not distracting you from your work.”

“Pssh, you know how it is. Things always die down around this time,” Patrick responded. Indeed, a lot of the rush for a bakery came in the morning - they would still get the occasional person coming in during the afternoon to pick up a treat, but most of their business was already

done for the day. “I should be relaxing more anyways. I’ve been at this for too long,” he added with a cheeky grin.

“C’mon, you’re not *that* old,” Morgan responded back before taking the first bite of his ham sandwich.

“You’ve got no way of knowing that,” Patrick responded, leaning one of his thick arms on the countertop.

Morgan shrugged. “I dunno. I’m pretty sure you just like to play up the ‘old man’ shtick because it makes me more inclined to listen to you.”

Patrick couldn’t help but snort. “Maybe a little bit, I’ll give you that. Somebody’s gotta keep you in line,” he said, reaching over and patting the salamander’s head with his thick, well-worn hand.

“Hey!” Morgan cried out in annoyance that was only a little bit authentic, wiping off the flour residue Patrick had inadvertently deposited onto his head. “I don’t need to be kept in line, you know...”

“Oh, come on, you know I’m kidding,” Patrick said with a chuckle, reaching over and patting Morgan’s hand. “You follow orders well and you’ve got a good head on your shoulders. Won’t find many in a kitchen that have both of those,” he grinned.

Morgan couldn’t help but grin back. Patrick just had one of those infectious smiles that made you feel warm on instinct. “Well... thanks. I’m just trying to learn all that I can, so that maybe I can be doing what you do one day too.”

Patrick grinned even wider. “You’re already doing a lot of what I do. Having you around to help has been like night and day. But I get what you mean. You’ll get there soon enough, don’t worry. Though you’ll have to work on getting some meat on your bones first,” the iguana laughed. “You

bake well, but you don't have the make of a chef, know what I mean?" he said, prodding at Morgan's shoulder playfully. "Speaking of..."

Patrick pushed his stool back, giving himself room to stand up. While Morgan wolfed down the rest of his meager lunch, Patrick went elsewhere in the kitchen, returning back with a small cake on its own little tray. It was small enough that Patrick could palm it rather easily, but it looked excellently made, vanilla frosting evenly and well spread all over the surface, and even with sprinkles placed well enough to give it a picturesque look, like the kind of cakes you'd see in a catalog.

Morgan's eyebrows perked up. "Leftovers?"

"You could call it that," Patrick grinned, setting it down in front of Morgan. "It's on the house. Figured you deserved a little extra treat for all the work you put in. Plus you never bring enough for lunch anyways," he guffawed.

Morgan smiled sweetly. "Aw... thanks, Patrick," he said, pulling the cake in towards him. His instinct was to be shy about being given such a gift, but he knew it was better for him to just accept since Patrick was just going to push it on him anyways. Besides, it wasn't like he wasn't looking forward to it...

Morgan grabbed himself a fork from among the cutlery, scooping out a nice, hearty chunk and giving it a taste. "Mmmm... holy shit, that's amazing," he exclaimed, the bite not even halfway swallowed yet. "So rich..." The look of pure bliss on his face said even more than his words as he started to more fervently devour his newly gifted dessert.

Patrick couldn't do much except grin as he stood there with his hands on his hips, watching with satisfaction as Morgan went at it. "Glad you like it. Take all the time you want eating it... though it doesn't look like you'll need much," he said, exchanging smiles with Morgan as he patted him on the shoulder. "But then it's back to work."

Luckily, the cake was delicious enough that Morgan didn't have any problem finishing it off in a hurry, but both of them knew there wasn't much of a rush. Past the slight uptick due to the lunch rush, the afternoons were fairly quiet, given that most of their potential clientele was working, beyond the occasional elderly person stopping in for their own personal sweet treat. Therefore, manning the front of the store got a lot easier, giving Morgan more time to spend in the back, doing what he actually loved to do the most - baking.

It was definitely a lot more pleasant for him; rather than dealing with ringing up customers, which was relatively mundane but certainly not the most stimulating task, he instead got to spend a ton of 1-on-1 time with Patrick, learning more about baking from the best baker he knew. Morgan was hardly a beginner, so he was capable of doing a lot on his own, but Patrick's expertise gave him a keen perspective Morgan had yet to reach, so his tutelage still helped a lot. Occasionally Patrick would notice the dough Morgan rolled being a little uneven or ingredients not being mixed well enough in a subtle enough way that Morgan didn't know how he would have ever noticed. To an aspiring baker like Morgan, it was awe-inspiring to witness, even if it did make him feel a bit feeble. The best moments, though, were when Patrick put his hands on Morgan's from behind, the salamander feeling the big guy's huge gut and powerful arms pressing into him as Patrick guided his hands just where they needed to go... Morgan tried not to think about exactly how much that excited him and in what ways, but his face was bound to grow hotter every time that it happened.

Unfortunately, time always seemed to fly during those afternoon sessions - unlike many people, Morgan was mostly disappointed when clocking out time rolled around. As dead as the bakery was in the afternoon, it would be even more dead in the early evening before most people had dinner, and considering the long hours Patrick in particular was already pulling, there was no reason to keep things going that long. So Patrick flipped the sign on the door from OPEN to CLOSED, did a bit of preliminary cleaning with Morgan, and they were both locking up the building and going their separate ways before the sun even went down.

Morgan had done the walk back to his apartment so many times it honestly didn't even register to him anymore. It was something of a jerk back into reality once he became conscious of



himself sliding his key into his front door, turning it and pushing himself in. His apartment wasn't anything to be particularly wowed by - it was almost depressingly standard, the same uniform floorplan as every single other living space in his massive apartment complex. Morgan also wasn't one to personalize his confines much - the walls were still the same bare, dull beige that they had been on the day he had moved in after college. He had a few of his personal items laid out on the coffee table and countertop, but that was more incidental and borne of laziness as opposed to an intentional styling choice. The only aspect of his apartment that really stood out was the kitchen; particularly, the fact that it was strewn about with various cooking and baking appliances that appeared of a higher quality and expense than the rest of the apartment would presume.

For now, Morgan simply set his tote bag down on the chair he had subconsciously decided was its mostly permanent resting place and flopped himself down onto the couch. He was enthused to work at the bakery, but that didn't mean his body could always keep up with his enthusiasm. That was fine with him, though - Morgan was hardly the most social butterfly, so he was perfectly fine spending the evening catching up on whatever show he was binging and just relaxing as much as possible. Just a quiet night in, that was all...

A few hours later, night had fallen, and things were still quiet inside Morgan's residence. While TV binging was the most predominant activity, Morgan, figuring he would need to eat at some point, had also spent some time whipping up a small personal pizza for himself to eat. The salamander, unsurprisingly, wasn't one to simply prepare a store bought pizza - he made and rolled the dough himself, spread the sauce, arranged the toppings, everything that was necessary, and now that pizza was tantalizingly baking in the oven as he sat finishing up the last episode of the season he was on. He was just about to get up and check on his food again when suddenly...

KNOCK KNOCK.

The sudden thudding on his apartment door made Morgan jump back in his seat on the couch, his body suddenly very tense as his head whipped to the source of the noise. Who could be at the

door? He wasn't expecting any packages, and even then, his mail got delivered down to the lobby, not directly to his door. Was there something else he had forgotten?

Still, despite his own reservations and questions, Morgan was not one to keep people waiting, so he got up from his seat and crept over to his front door. Carefully unlocking and unlatching it, he swung open the door, finding himself looking up at...

"Patrick?"

The iguana stood there, naturally looming over Morgan as he always did, his broad body and distinctive lizard features further illuminated by the strong lighting in the hallway. He obviously didn't look much different than he had just a few hours ago when Morgan had last seen him, but at the same time, Morgan couldn't recall ever seeing Patrick without an apron on, and certainly not in such casual clothes as a t-shirt and khaki shorts like he was wearing right now, stretched as they were. Hell, it was rare for Morgan to see Patrick without some amount of flour or sugar or something dirtying up his scales, but right now he looked incredibly clean and fresh.

"Hey, sorry if I'm interrupting anything," Patrick greeted with a soft smile. "But I got all the way home before I realized I'd forgotten something, and I figured I'd get it to you as soon as possible."

Patrick held out his hand, and looking down at it, Morgan realized for the first time that the iguana was holding an envelope - a crisp, clean, official white envelope Morgan was used to receiving at regular intervals every two weeks.

"My paycheck!" Morgan cried out in surprise, instinctively reaching out and grabbing it from Patrick's outstretched hand. He turned it over in his hands, shaking his head. "Man, I can't believe I forgot to ask about it."

"Don't worry, it's my fault for not remembering to give it to you," Patrick responded, casually shoving his hands into his pockets.

“Well, I appreciate it, but you didn’t have to come all the way here just to give it to me, you could have just done it tomorrow when I went back into work.”

“Hey, I know lots of people expect to get paid on certain days and it messes everything up when they don’t. I don’t know your situation, but I figured I’d better be safe than sorry. Didn’t have much planned for tonight anyways,” Patrick added with a shrug and a grin.

“Well... thanks, again. It is nice to have the money now,” Morgan said, matching Patrick’s smile.

“Any time.” Patrick grinned just a little bit more... and his nostrils flared a little more. “Mmm... something smells good in there.”

That set the lightbulb off in Morgan’s head. “Oh crap!” The salamander immediately turned around, dashing hurriedly into the kitchen and turning off the oven. He was halfway through removing it, hand gripped tightly to the handle of the pizza peel, when his brain fully caught up with him. Morgan looked back over to the doorway, where Patrick was still standing, only now unable to help himself from peeking in a bit curiously. “Ah, sorry, I just... forgot I had pizza in the oven, wanted to make sure it didn’t burn, you know how it is,” Morgan said with a nervous chuckle.

“Yeah, I do,” Patrick said with a cheeky grin back.

Morgan let out a little sigh of relief as his adrenaline subsided, setting the pizza out on the counter to let it cool before eating. Feeling that swell of relief, he looked back over at Patrick... and with everything coming together, a thought popped into his head.

“You wanna come in? Maybe have a bite?”

The questions left his mouth before he even really had a chance to consider them, but somehow, even for the normally rather awkward and hesitant salamander, it felt right. He enjoyed all the

time he got to spend with Patrick, he had just never had the chance to do so outside of work. Maybe this was an opportunity he shouldn't pass up.

"Oh, don't worry, I don't want to impose-"

"It's fine, don't worry about it," Morgan said with a smile, being so bold as to practically cut Patrick off. "I didn't have much planned tonight either. And I'd be happy to share with you."

Patrick took a moment to consider, but the grin spreading even further on his face spoiled his answer before he even spoke. "Well, suppose I can't say no to that."

Patrick stepped through the doorway, closing the door behind him. For Morgan, seeing the iguana here was so surreal - not only because he never expected his boss to be inside his own apartment, but also because the sheer size of the man made everything in his home look just that tiny bit smaller. It was... exciting, in a way Morgan couldn't quite put into words.

Patrick strolled over to the counter, his iguana tail dragging behind him, leaning his arms onto the kitchen counter the way Morgan had seen him do on the counters at work many times, looking down at the small pizza Morgan had just pulled out of the oven. Patrick suddenly felt very self-conscious about the meal he had made for himself as just a treat, now that it was under the watchful eye of someone with much more culinary experience than him.

"You know, just something small I whipped up for myself," Morgan added nervously, already instinctively and anxiously trying to deflect any criticism. It was a pretty simple pizza, nice and saucy with some extra cheese and mushrooms, olives, and green peppers to top it all off. It didn't quite look to be a shareable size, but it also wasn't quite as small as a personal pan pizza either - Morgan preferred to bake more rather than less and just save the extras for leftovers. Now, he just figured the extras would be going to a better place.

"Hey, it looks great," Patrick said calmly, smiling at Morgan in a way that made him feel even more flustered. "Mind if I grab a slice now?"

“Sure, but it’s still a bit hot,” Morgan mentioned, noting the thin wisps of steam still rising up from the pizza. “I’ll get you a plate.”

“Eh, heat doesn’t bother me too much,” Patrick chuckled as Morgan fetched a plate from his cabinet and handed it over to the iguana. Before Patrick could even think about it, Morgan already had a clean, stainless steel pizza cutter in his hands, deftly and confidently putting three distinct lines through the pizza to make for six slices in total.

“You always look like a champ when you’re cutting,” Patrick chuckled - and before Morgan could even think to ask him what exactly he meant by that, the iguana was already grabbing a slice, thin strands of gooey cheese snapping as he separated it without too much cheese actually sliding off the slice. He brought it up to his mouth, practically chomping half of the slice in one bite, leading Morgan to wait with breath that was far too bated as Patrick chewed and swallowed it.

“Mmm... oh that’s good,” Patrick finally said, wiping a bit of sauce from the corner of his mouth as Morgan did his best to keep his sigh of relief silent. “I’m not surprised though. I’m always telling you you’ve got real skill.”

For as nervous as he still was, Morgan still couldn’t help himself from beaming. “Thank you. It always means a lot for me to hear you say that.” The salamander glanced down at the pizza, really taking in its small size for the first time - and as he looked back up, he could see Patrick was in the middle of a second large bite that had almost completed the entire slice. “Think there will be enough for you?”

“Me?” Patrick responded right after he finished swallowing that second bite. “I’ll be fine. I’ve got extra pounds to rely on,” he said, leaning back just to give his big gut a nice, firm slap and let loose a large, throaty laugh that really filled Morgan’s apartment up. “I’m more worried about YOU. You gonna be able to survive on just this?”

“I’ll be fine, I don’t eat much anyways.”

“And that’s the problem,” Patrick grinned. “You gotta eat more. But I suppose I shouldn’t be telling you that in your own home, huh?”

Morgan chuckled, finding himself leaning on the counter a bit himself. “Well... worst case scenario, I can just make another one. I’ve got the ingredients for it.”

Patrick looked down at him, the big iguana smirking. “You probably should. I’d like to see you work, too.”

Morgan smiled a little wider. He trusted Patrick to know what he was talking about. It would also let him spend more time with the big guy... and hey. Maybe, if he was lucky, he could convince Patrick to stay for just a little bit longer.