“Watterson?  WATTERSON!”

The cat-eared man jerked his head off of his desk.  Almost instantly, he pushed himself out of his chair, away from his red-headed, scowly neko supervisor.  “Sir!” Alex Watterson squeaked as he clumsily forced himself onto his feet.  “What do you need, sir?”

Sir wasn’t pleased.  “Firstly, I need you to stay awake!  Secondly, I need you to actually go to lunch and stop costing my paycheck union fees!  Thirdly, I need you to tell me about this new tech you’ve been developing without my approval!  Fourthly, stop running your fingers through your hair!”

Alex pulled his fingers out of his orange hair.  “Right, sir!  Uh, well, I was reading this article about Zeul radation-”

“Don’t try to technobabble me,” Sir snapped at him, “just show me what you’ve been doing with all that scrap you’ve brought in.”

Alex blushed.  “Right, sir.  Uh, this way.”

Alex and Sir wove their way between the desks into another room.  This small room was clean and bright white, and a white energy field dropped over them as they crossed the threshold.  “Well, sir,” Alex went on, “I was reading this interesting article about Rontsford accelerators and how they can be modified-“

“Do you have a point, Watterson?”

Alex winced.  “Sir, I’m working on a way to make more of our cheese, faster.”

The two entered another room.  Inside was a maze of smaller chambers, each containing a table and varying pieces of equipment, some containing other nekos.  Alex and Sir proceeded to one end, where there was a room containing several vials, a Macgyvered laser, and a brick-sized block of dark yellow cheese flecked with peppers.  “This is my work,” Alex said.

Sir sneered at the cheese.  “Care to explain?” he growled.

Alex swallowed.  “Well, I’ve been working on a formula that, when added to the cheese-“

“No!  No additives.”

“It still tastes the same and it’s not toxic!” Alex pleaded.  “Anyways, this formula, when combined with the radiation emitted from this laser,” he motioned to it, “can make a block of our cheese actually grow, with the same uniform taste throughout.”

Sir glared at him.  “Show me.”

Alex felt himself start sweating.  “Sir, I’m not quite finished with-“

“Show me how far you’ve gotten.”

“…alright.”

With a silent prayer, Alex walked over to the laser and opened a program on his computer.  “OK,” Alex said, “you might want to step back.”  Sir didn’t move.  Thus, Alex switched on the laser and pressed a few buttons on the keyboard.  “Alright,” he said, “everything’s running smoothly.  Here we go.”

As soon as Alex activated the laser, a sky blue beam shot out of the emitter.  Then the cheese started to glow blue.  “Well,” Sir said, “you seem to be doing something.”

“Give it a moment,” Alex said.

The best description for what happened next was that the cheese collapsed in on itself.  Alex yelped and turned the laser off.  The cheese stopped shrinking as soon as the laser stopped, at about one sixteenth of its original size.  Sir stared at the eraser of cheese, then gingerly picked it up.  “Your idea,” he said, holding it for Alex to see.

Alex forced his hand down.  “Well, like I said, s-“

“Get rid of it.”  Sir threw the cheese at Alex, who fumbled with it, but managed to grab it.  “We’re a creamery, not a physics lab.  Get that through your skull.”  Sir then stormed out of the enclosure.

Alex swallowed, then looked down at the piece of cheese.  He sighed, then slipped the piece of cheese into his pocket.  “You’re only a year older than me,” he mumbled to himself.  He walked out of the lab, slouched over.  As he crossed the final threshold, he stopped, then walked back in.  Instead of the flash that indicated the safety field had switched off, there was nothing.  ‘Great,’ he thought, ‘there goes my evening.’

He walked over to his desk.  Now its emptiness cut at him.  His phone rang, but he noticed the number and left it alone.  Instead, he wandered down the hallway into the kitchenette and opened the fridge.  Inside was a box with his name on it.  ‘Well, at least I have this,’ he thought to himself as he pulled it out of the fridge.  Then he sat down and opened the box.

“OW!”

A carrot hit him in the eye.  Alex quickly recovered, but then noticed a little mouse-eared man, a neera, running off.  “Hey!  Come back!”  Alex ran after him.  “I paid my last twenty bucks for you!”  The neera dove under the fridge.  Alex slammed into it.  Quickly shaking himself, he ducked onto the floor and tried to reach under the fridge.  That didn’t work; his hand was too wide.  Thus, he growled and threw the box and the rest of the vegetables into the trash.  Then he collapsed into the easy chair, wishing it would eat him.

Then he got sat on.  Alex quickly yelped and the woman got up.  She apologized, but Alex just lay in the chair for a moment.  Then he got up.  There was at least one place in the factory that he could get out of the way.  He walked down the hall, down a flight of stairs, and through a large roll-up door that enveloped him in a white light that faded into his skin.

At this point of the day, the warehouse floor was mostly deserted.  All around him were large blocks of cheese, themselves protected by anti-contaminant fields, and shipped whole in crates on the far side of the warehouse to distributors who would cut and package them later.  Occasionally a forklift would come by and Alex would give it an extra-wide berth, but he was mostly unimpeded in his journey to the far side of the warehouse.

“Careful, Platty,” a male neko sneered.  “The forklifts only give you a fifty-yard warning!”

Alex ignored him.  Finally, he found a small crevice between the crates and slumped down.  He pulled the small block of cheese out of his pocket.  He raised it to his lips, but he sighed and let it fall onto the floor.  Then he climbed up onto a crate, laid down, and fell asleep.

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The little, brown-haired neera stared up at the gates.  When she came to this city, she had no idea what was there: she’d just gotten some vacation time and picked a city.  So, Jess just started wandering around taking in the sights as she found them.  A little ways into her tour, she smelled something delicious, and she followed it.  Now she stood at a pair of fancy iron gates, above which was a sign.  Kreme de le Käse Creamery.  Jess didn’t know what the first four words meant, but she knew she hadn’t eaten since lunch, and that the last word could remedy that situation.

“Hey, get moving!”

Jess jumped.  Walking up to her was a large female neko with black hair and a shield-shaped badge pinned to her shirt.  “You deaf or something?” she snapped.

Jess looked up at her.  “What’s the problem?” she asked.  “I was just walking by.”

“Well keep walking!” the guard told her.  “We don’t want any vermin here.”

Jess glared at her.  “Vermin?!” she snapped.  “I’m a neera!”

“Keep arguing with me and you’re going to be dinner.  Now beat it!”

The guard brought her boot up, and Jess took off down the street.  What felt like a mile later, she turned the corner and stopped.  The guard wasn’t following her.  Jess groaned and slumped onto the sidewalk.  Soon, however, the tantalizing smell of cheese brought her back to her feet.  “I will get in there,” Jess vowed to herself.  “This will be a good vacation.”

Jess noticed a truck pulling up to the gate, and she smiled.  “Perfect.”

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Jess dropped out of the truck’s suspension as soon as it stopped moving, hiding behind a wheel until the guards stepped away.  Then she darted towards a forklift, hopping onto the arm and squishing herself behind the crate it was carrying.  As soon as it got close enough, Jess darted into a gap between the crates.

Then she could focus on all the smells around her.  Rich, savory, salty cheeses of all kinds released their scents into the air.  Jess looked through the other side of the crate and saw the large blocks of yellow and white cheeses, some flecked with blue mold or dotted with red fruit preserves.  Jess drooled and her stomach rumbled as she stared.  Which one first?

Then Jess noticed another smell.  Among all the other scents, there hummed the tang of hot pepper.  Jess followed her nose through the various gaps in the crates.  Finally, Jess came to a crate-sized gap.  Right next to the crate was large hunk of white cheese, speckled with little red peppers.  Jess’ tongue emerged from her mouth to slide across her lips.  After a quick glance into the gap, she dove out of her hidey-hole and sprinted towards the cheese.  As soon as she pounced on it, she bit into it.  Jess murred; it tasted just as good as it smelled.  She swallowed, and sunk her teeth in again.

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The first bite travelled downward until it fell into her stomach with a splash.  It immediately lost all integrity and dissolved into goo.  Then it was followed by a several more bites splashing down next to it.  Eventually, far too soon, the cheese stopped coming, just floating on the surface of the stomach acid.  Then it began to glow, softly...

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“Ah.”  Jess licked her fingers.  That hadn’t filled her at all, but it had tasted wonderful.  ‘Oh well,’ she thought.  ‘There’s plenty more kinds of’

BOP!

Jess came to in a clenched fist.  Glaring at her was a half-awake neko with orange hair and ears.  “What’re you doing here?” he asked her.

Jess tried to pull herself free, but the neko’s grip was too strong.  “Hey, let go!” she squeaked up at him.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” the neko told her.  “But as long as you’re here…”

The neko’s stomach gurgled.  The neko patted it.  “Couldn’t have said it better myself.”  He looked at the Jess.  “I hope you taste good.”  Despite Jess’ struggles, his hand moved towards his mouth.  Jess tried to bite, but the neko shifted his grip so that she was dangling from his fingers.  His mouth opened wider, and Jess could see down his throat.

And then she started to grow.  The neko faltered for a moment, then threw her into the side of a crate.  “HOW’RE YOU DOING THAT?”

When Jess got up, rubbing her head, she was a little taller than he was.  Then she kept growing.  As she grew, the other workers took notice, and most of them bolted, her would be devourer included.  Some simply stood stock still in terror as Jess’ head bumped the ceiling.

Finally, the growth stopped.  Jess looked down at the nekos all around her.  She’d been through weirder, but it looked like several of them had led very sheltered lives compared to her.  “Uh…”  She smiled at them.  “Hi.”

The rest of them spun on their heels and ran screaming for the exit.  “No,” Jess said, “no, I’m not going to hurt you!”  Too late, they were gone.  Jess frowned and sat on the floor.  “Sticks.”

Then something tickled her nose.  Mouth starting to water, Jess noticed the large blocks of cheese, how delicious they smelled, and how loudly they made her stomach rumble.  She reached out for one and easily picked it up in one hand.  Then she brought it up to her lips and took a large chomp out of it.  It tasted heavenly, but no sooner was it on her tongue then it was sent down her throat.  This continued until the entire block had vanished.  Jess licked her lips, then noticed another block of cheese, which she picked up.

A small squeak distracted her.  Jess turned around.  On top of a vat of nacho cheese was a black neko holding a large stirring spoon and quaking with fear.  “Hi,” Jess said.

No answer.

Jess frowned slightly.  “So, there’s a lot of nekos around here,” Jess said.

Still nothing.

“You enjoy working here?” she asked.

The neko blinked.

Jess shrugged sadly.  “OK.”

The doors at the far end of the factory burst open.  In stomped a scarlett-haired neko, who looked ready to burst with his face so red.  “I am the manager,” he shouted, “and I am ordering you to leave!”

Jess glared at him.  “Well I just got here and I’m not leaving until I’ve finished eating.  Stupid little neko.”  She took a big, spiteful bite out of the block of cheese.  Then her glare softened.  “Come to think of it, there are a lot of you around.”

The neko sputtered.  “I-are you-this is the world-famous Kreme de la Käse cheese factory!  It is owned by the Kaasboer neko family!  It is the four-year winner of the Kailure prize, in part because-“

“Yeah, this stuff’s delicious,” Jess interrupted between mouthfuls of cheese.  “I can think of a whole lot of neera who’d love to be here.”

”NO!” the boss yelled.  “This establishment is designed to cater to respectable people, like nekos!  We don’t allow mice of any size in here!  Now get out of the factory, pest!”

Jess’ eyebrow rose.  “But why would nekos need to run a cheese factory in the first place?  I thought y’all just liked tuna and stuff like that.”  She frowned at him again.  “Also, I promise I was gonna pay for the cheese.”

The neko’s scowl could curdle milk.  “How?”

Jess kept eating.  “Money.”

“So you’re telling me that you have $4,000 dollars on you?”

Jess gulped nervously.  “Uhh…”  Holding the last mouthful of cheese in her hand, she reached into her pocket and pulled out her wallet.  “Let me see, uh, two, three, twenty, forty, fifty, five, six, seven…”  She looked up at the neko and sheepishly smiled.  “Do you take checks?”

The supervisor jammed his finger at the door.  “JUST GET OUT OF HERE, PLAGUE-BEARER!”

Jess scowled.  “Fine.”

Jess threw the last mouthful of cheese in her mouth and crammed her wallet back into her pocket.  Despite the supervisor’s raving, she grabbed two more blocks of cheese and crawled to the loading bay door.  Despite her large size, she easily managed to crawl through it.  Finally, she got outside and stood up.  “Jerks.”  As she walked off, she turned back to the pieces of cheese in her hands.  “Well, I still have you two.”  She lifted one of them to her lips.  “Get in mah belleh!”  Her lips parted.

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Alex was about to get out from behind the block of cheddar, but he was pushed into it face-first by a group of fingers.  The block of cheese moved forward yard by yard.  Alex desperately tried to wriggle out of the cheese, but the fingers held him too tight.  Then he exited the factory and his eyes burned in the daylight.  He could feel himself being lifted into the air, and he struggled with new vigor.  Finally, he pulled his head out.

Then everything went dark.  Alex briefly felt something damp, and then he was forced to move again.  He tried to extract himself from the morsel of cheese, but the two kept being forced together as they were squeezed downwards.  Then, with a bump, the squeezing stopped.  After a fair amount of thrashing, Alex managed to free himself and stand.

An uneasy feeling came over Alex as he realized where he was.  The neera’s stomach was dark and warm, and almost completely full.  Before Alex could think of anything to do, something large bopped him on the head.  Alex fell over, and landed in the crevice between individual pieces of cheese.  He tried to get up again, but slipped between crevices and sank even deeper into the cheese.  He could hear larger thumps above him as more cheese landed on top of him, but then the thumps were silent.  Alex tried to thrash his way through to a stomach wall, but he only fell deeper into the pit of cheese.

Then one of the pieces of cheese started glowing, though only partially.  As Alex turned to look at it, he noticed that several of the other pieces were glowing too.  He stared at it, then tried to grab it.  Despite his best efforts, he could only skim it with his fingertips.  Then those started glowing.  Alex looked at it, then back at the cheese the glow had come from.  It had several lines in it that weren’t glowing anymore.  Then an idea hit Alex and he smelled the cheese.

As he suspected, it was the same kind that he had tested his formula on.  He groaned.  ‘Great,’ he thought, ‘my big gamble, and it just makes vermin bigger.’  His frown faded a little.  ‘Still, I know something in here makes it work.  If I were to figure out what…’

Before he could continue, he felt something pressing on him from all around.  Alex tried to look up at the esophagus, but he was buried too deeply.  Then he noticed that he was glowing all over, too.  ‘Oh, boy,’ he thought.

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It was right after Jess swallowed the last bite of cheese that she noticed something was amiss.  She felt full, and the feeling was only growing.  “That shouldn’t be happening,” she said to herself.  “I didn’t eat some bad cheese, did I?”

She heard a loud gurgle come from her stomach.  “Hey, easy, OK?” she told it, giving it a little pat.  “Just one block left to go.  You can fit it in there.”

She opened her mouth and swallowed a bite of cheese.  Beneath her hand, she could feel her stomach starting to swell.  Jess powered on, taking another bite.  She chewed it a little more than the last bite, since her stomach was starting to really hurt.  She swallowed, then winced as a brief tinge of pain hit her stomach.  She took another, smaller bite, feeling the bulge in her belly spread beyond her hand.  After another two smaller bites and plenty of chewing, though, her stomach finally stopped growing, but then continued to ache.  Jess took a few short breaths and brought the cheese up to her lips.

Then she put it down with a moan.  “Ooh, too much cheese.”  She lifted her shirt a little, to rub her aching belly directly.  “But I’m on vacation, so overindulging is OK… maybe?”  She let out a breath.  “Daaaang.  I wish those nekos didn’t make such good cheese.  Those jerks.”

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‘We’re the jerks?’ Alex thought to himself.  ‘This lady is freaking crazy!’

The glowing had stopped, and Alex was once again in the dark.  ‘OK, Alex,’ he thought to himself.  ‘You’re trapped in a giant neera’s stomach and you’re buried in cheese.   On the plus side, not like your life could go downhill any further.  AHH!’

Alex slipped through the cheese even more.  He could hear and feel a plop, then all of the sound was muffled.  Alex barely stopped himself from gasping.  ‘Her stomach acid!’  He tried to thrash himself upwards, but he only succeeded in sinking even more.  Holding his breath, Alex whipped his head around in the darkness, hoping to find anything sturdy he could grab onto, however improbable.  But there was nothing.  Alex’s chest began to hurt.  He thrashed some more, but he slipped again.  He could feel his vision dim.  Desperate, he reached through the cheese, but he could find nothing.  His lungs felt like they would implode.  Then, he sucked in a breath.

It felt like air.  Alex brought one of his arms in and felt his shirt.  It was completely dry.  He put his arm out again.  ‘The field?’  Alex reached over to one of the pieces of cheese and broke off a piece.  Then he shoved it into his mouth.  Apart from the sour taste of stomach juices, it felt and tasted like cheese.

‘So, I’m safe,’ he thought to himself.  ‘I’ve got air, and if I need them I’ve got food and water.  Now I’ve just got to get out of here.’  He looked up.  ‘OK, I can’t climb back up, and I’m fairly certain that I couldn’t get up the esophagus anyways.  Maybe if I got down to the bottom of the stomach, I could thump on it.  I’ll bet she’s not used to having live prey inside her.  That might freak her out into throwing up, or at least going to a doctor.  Then I just have to wait and I’ll be…’

Alex stopped himself.  Outside were his awful job, his empty bank account, and the debt collectors on the phone.  He had a shrinking machine, but he couldn’t think of a single person who’d want to buy something so unfinished quickly enough to pay off his debts.  The neera said she was on vacation just a moment ago.

“HELLOOOOOO!” he shouted.

No answer.  “HELLOOOOOOO!”

He waited a whole minute, but nothing happened.  ‘Maybe she’s sleeping off her meal,’ Alex thought.  ‘I’ll try again later.’  Alex squirmed a little, but gave up when he only sank.  ‘Well,’ Alex thought before he settled into a nap, ‘I’ve always wanted a free vacation.  Even if this is how I get it.’