

Swelling with Pride

By: Indi

Long ago two powerful kings vied for dominance, their egos as massive as the kingdoms they ruled. Both were lions, August with fur of gray and Kuya with mane of silver. They had never been able to coexist peacefully, always obsessed with one-upping each other at the expense of their kingdoms. Had it not been for the fact they spent the vast majority of their resources on their own decadent lifestyles there surely would've been war.

There were some who grew weary of the prideful duo, though. Amongst them were the head ministers of both kingdoms. With great effort they were able to convince their respective rulers to finally meet face-to-face at a palace on the border that'd been fought over for ages.

To the surprise of everyone involved, August and Kuya actually got along well from the start. During a week of frequent feasts the gluttonous lions compared and contrasted their personal riches. Each were left convinced they had "won" and that the other was humbly deferring to their superiority.

Then one morning their conversations took a fateful turn.

"You know, King August," Kuya said as he finished off his third plate, "I can't help but realize what an unstoppable force our two kingdoms would be if they were to simply merge into a single, larger kingdom!"

"I was thinking the exact same thing of course! Great minds truly think alike!" August pushed aside his empty plate, also the third of that morning. "Though it would take a lion of great integrity and strong will to manage such an expansive kingdom."

"Why certainly! Only the mightiest, most imposing lion of all could handle it. And meanwhile the other could still enjoy a modest retirement. After our week of tireless eating—I, ahem, mean meetings, I do believe we can agree on who the unified King should be!"

"Most definitely, it's plain as day!"

"It should be me!"

"It should be me!"

A confused frown came upon the faces of August and Kuya. The other couldn't possibly have uttered the line.

August scoffed and shook his head. "My apologies, you must've misheard me. I was talking about who would be the king of this unbeatable kingdom, and the only logical answer is me!"

"Well that's just absurd! I rule over a much larger number of subjects than you—one hundred and three more to be precise! I'm obviously the more qualified king."

"But I rule over a much larger kingdom than you—one hundred and four acres more to be precise! I'm more qualified. You're much better suited for the retired life. A spectacular palace all to yourself with more than enough servants to keep you comfortable. No obligations at all. Hmm."

The idea of retirement abruptly didn't sound so bad to August. Unfortunately for him Kuya had the same thought

"Well when you put it that way perhaps I am better off retiring. All that luxury would be wasted on you." Kuya smirked, idly eying a platter of desserts nearby. "There'd be so much more time to indulge on wonderful food."

"Absurd, you wouldn't know the first thing about relaxing! I once spent a whole year traveling around the kingdom just to sample the cuisine of every city and town!" August gave his belly a triumphant slap. "You can deal with all those boring audiences and meetings, and sitting around as sculptors carve statues in your honor and...name towns after you and...hmm."

"I'm definitely the better lion to grace the coins in the kingdom as well," Kuya mused.

The circular argument continued on for nearly an hour, August and Kuya unable to decide if it were better to be King or retired. The second one accepted a position the other would suddenly desire

it.

Exhausted by the lack of meaningful progress, the head ministers of each kingdom hurried over to their respective rulers. Each offered an ornate golden amulet shaped like a round lion's head. They were presented as gifts from their rival, and though neither king remembered approving of such a thing they were quick to act like it was their idea to begin with.

The ministers weren't bothered by the blatant lying—in fact they encouraged it. They stealthily winked at one another before retreating to the far end of the banquet room, their formerly dour expressions replaced with smiles.

August strolled around the table to Kuya, his gaze obviously shifting between the amulets they now wore. "Impressive, isn't it? Had it crafted to my exact specifications. Truly a reflection of how magnificent my rule is."

As the lion finished speaking his middle swelled some, almost like a balloon being puffed up. However, August didn't notice the change. Neither did Kuya, even though he'd been looking right at his rival as he swelled.

"Yes, yes, it's a fine piece of work," Kuya replied with a hint of disinterest. "Bit unfair to compare it to the beauty of my gift, though. A dozen different ones were made—all masterpieces in their own right—and what you have around your neck is the best of the best. As perfect as my reign."

It was Kuya's turn to inflate, just as August had a moment before. Again it went unacknowledged by either king—but not by their watchful ministers.

Once they had been loyal, but years of dealing with the lions' inflated egos had made them eager to do away with the royal menaces. As long as August and Kuya wore the amulets they'd continue to blimp up with every boast—literally swelling with pride. It'd only be a matter of time before their reigns came to a bombastic end.

Of course the two kings would remain oblivious to their expansion the whole time, magically convinced they'd always been so round and blimpy.

"*Only* a dozen masterpieces? My craftsmen produce that many on a daily basis as thanks for my wonderful leadership," August claimed, his belly ballooning outward further.

"While your craftsmen distract themselves with small trinkets in mass *mine* are busy creating bigger and better works—usually in my grand likeness." Kuya swelled to match his rival, as if he couldn't possibly allow the other lion to remain bigger than him for long.

Back and forth the royals went, each incapable of *not* gloating or boasting a little every time they spoke. The quality of their artisans. The grandioseness of their many palaces. The size of their meals. The width of their thrones. Nothing was too insignificant to compare and contrast.

And of course August and Kuya were steadily inflating all the while. Bellies ballooned and limbs puffed up. Through magic their fancy robes grew with them, only showing the faintest signs of strain. The lions handled their expanding girth impressively, never stumbling or struggling as they waddled around.

A little destruction still occurred, though.

"My people named a whole lake after me, ya know." *FwoooOOMP* went August's middle, knocking over a vase and the pedestal it sat on.

"Oh that's nothing compared to the snow capped peaks of Mount Kuya!" *BwoooOOMP* went Kuya's belly, toppling a whole statue.

"Hmmp, well I'm sure once I've been crowned king of our unified lands a whole mountain range will be renamed in my honor! One worthy of a lion as monumental as myself." August gave his middle a proud pat with both paws even as it swelled out further, hide lightly creaking.

"Personally I'm planning on celebrating *my* coronation with a glorious statue in my likeness put up in every city of the realm! It's important that history not forget an appearance as tremendous as mine." Kuya posed, purposely puffing up his chest as his whole body puffed up in general. Limbs swelled and cheeks rounded out.

Boast after boast, puff after puff, the two lions were rapidly taking on a spherical shape. Gaps appeared between the buttons of their regal attire, exposing taut bellies. Their waddles became a sluggish, wobbling gait. Still they acted as if it were the norm, as if they'd been impossibly round their entire lives.

With limbs swollen to domes even the shuffling slowed to a crawl, neither blimp willing to expend too much energy to move when they could be using it to gloat. Both were creaking some, though far less than would've been expected for ones who'd had their hides stretched so much.

"Did I mention how record-breaking the blueberry harvest was this year thanks to my inspirational presence?" August asked, head and paws sinking slightly into his now perfectly spherical body.

"Probably pales in comparison to the volume of donuts my kingdom has been putting out under my guidance." Kuya swelled to match August's shape and size.

The ministers looked on with anticipation as the two kings chattered away, waiting for their hides to give in and a room-rattling *boom* to echo out. To their shock August and Kuya instead ballooned up even bigger, gaining both width and height with their most recent gloating. The enchanted amulets weren't supposed to make them grow as well!

The sheer curvature of the lions' bodies caused their footpaws to lift off the floor, August and Kuya effectively immobilized yet still swaying faintly. As they inflated more and more their middles pushed each other away and into everything else in the room. Chairs were knocked over, the banquet table gradually enveloped by the feline blimps. Though splinters and silverware littered the area nothing was sharp enough to pierce their robes and hides. The massive kings appeared poised to expand indefinitely.

August and Kuya's paws were slowly sinking deeper and deeper into their round bodies, inevitably pulled in completely. The creaking was getting louder and longer.

The once spacious hall was becoming more cramped by the minute, literally filling with lion. Not wishing to be flattened under royal mass, the ministers and guards made a hasty retreat right before a wall of gray and cream blocked their only exit.

"Not surprised this palace can't handle a king of my astronomical proportions!" August nearly grunted as he felt his sides pushing at the walls and ceiling.

Kuya let out a loud scoff. "You're taking up a third of the room at best—it's *my* majesty it can't handle!"

Of course the walls didn't care who was the largest lion in the room, only that they were far too enormous for them to contain. They all buckled and snapped at once, the ceiling caving in and crumbling around the kings as they swelled out of the room and the hallways and everything else their blimping bodies came in contact with.

The entire palace shook as it was gutted from within one wall at a time. Finally August and Kuya burst out of it. The regal orbs towered above the grounds of the now-ruined palace, their boast-off uninterrupted.

"I can't wait to rebuild this place once I've been crowned—really make it fit for a true king like me!" August's whole body wobbled as he chuckled.

"Oh don't worry August, *I'll* make it more than large enough to match my legacy," Kuya insisted and swelled. "Perhaps I'll even let you visit after you've retired."

The growth of the duo was starting to slow even as their egos remained as big as ever. August and Kuya were nearly unrecognizable at that point, complete spheres dressed in the regalia of royalty. Their puffy heads were too high up and sunk in to see from the ground, their tails barely visible. And despite the absurdity of their condition they remained utterly convinced that being an enormous overinflated blimp was normal.

Their creaking could be heard by all the servants who'd fled the palace's destruction, and it was clear to all that both were close to finally bursting. The ministers grinned as they backed away, their

plot on the verge of success.

Then a voice rose from one of the many guards nearby. “Um, Sires, there’s no law that says there can only be one king, right? So couldn’t you *both* rule the kingdom?”

At once the gloating ceased. It was a simple, yet elegant solution, one both August and Kuya agreed upon and silently vowed to claim had been their idea all along.

“Joint rule?” August mused aloud. “A wild concept, but there’s no reason it couldn’t work!”

“Splitting all the irritating obligations between us while retaining every benefit and luxury? What more could a king ask for!” Kuya agreed. “And with our combined expertise the new kingdom would be unbeatable!” The brief reprieve from swelling was over, the lion inflating a bit more from his boast.

“I can’t think of anyone else worthy enough to rule by my side!” August expanded in kind, hide letting out a long *creaaaaaaaaaak*. “Just think of how magnificent all the portraits and sculptures praising our reign will be! Nothing will compare!”

“Our palaces will be the largest!”

“Our feasts the grandest!”

“Our monuments the most monumental!”

“Our coffers the most overflowing!”

The self-praise was occurring at a more rapid pace than ever before—and just as the two kings were at their limits. Their bursting was an inevitability and, quite fittingly, happened simultaneously. One second August and Kuya were happily boasting about how incredible they and their unified kingdom would be, and the next they were gone.

The twin explosions knocked every onlooker to the ground, the accompanying *Ka-BOOOOM* deafening. Scraps of hide and robe rained down upon the surrounding land. The rubble of the palace was obliterated, leaving behind a pair of perfectly round craters. At the bottom of each lay the magic amulets that’d done in August and Kuya, glowing bright as suns.

In the end the two kingdoms were in fact united in peace, free from the overinflated egos of their bombastic feline kings. Of course their legacy lived on. Everyone knew the tale of King August and King Kuya, the lions who’d boasted til they burst. And on the site of their climactic end two large, spherical statues of the kings were placed as a permanent reminder of their folly to future generations. With the amulets around the statues’ necks and still glowing, it was said one could actually hear the whispers of gloating of long ago, August and Kuya still going on and on and on...