

Culinary Magic

By: Indi

When the first hint of land could be just barely sighted in the distance, August and Rho were already up on the airship's deck. It was faint, so faint that August had to squint even with his glasses on. Rho didn't even try, the orange-striped zebra trusting in his boyfriend's claim.

"Don't strain your eyes getting a glimpse when you can just relax and see the whole thing soon enough!" Rho gave the slim gray lion a hard slap on the back and laughed. His belly jiggled as he did, and he caught August sneaking a peek. "So, excited to finally reach Zymalos? Sorry, I mean: the *Most Serene Grand Duchy of Zymalos*."

"Don't pretend Rainwood doesn't have an equally silly formal name. But yes, I am. You know I'd never pass up a chance to study a new form of magic, especially something called culinary magic."

Zymalos was across a wide ocean from August and Rho's home of Rainwood, so far away little else was known beside their name. By chance letters had been exchanged between the archmages of their respective mage colleges, and Rainwood had sent an envoy to initiate official ties.

"Yet you still recommended Raf be the initial envoy rather than yourself."

"Despite his grumpy exterior, Raf happens to be an excellent practitioner of healing magic, which is apparently a major focus of Zymalos' culinary mages. Also I knew he'd *hate* having to deal with food." August smiled.

"Wasn't he complaining about getting fat if he went? Even though the assignment was for a month. And he's already as fat as I am anyway."

August's smile broadened as he remembered those very protests. "You know how Raf is. Poor guy just can't help but snack on any food in reach. He's probably had to deal with a bunch of official banquets and getting asked to taste-test both magical and mundane food. I could see his robes being a bit tight once we arrive."

"Hopefully you'll follow suit after a month~" Rho teased, nudging the lion's side with his belly. August blushed almost instantly, his face twisting a little in that way it always did when he was embarrassed, but in a good way. His adoration of hefty folk was a poorly kept secret, but Rho had been trying to convince him to plump up as well recently. Each time August had adamantly refused, but the look on his face hinted at less certainty.

August pretended Rho hadn't said a thing, hastily changing the conversation to their itinerary. As they talked Zymalos steadily grew closer. Walls of white shone brightly in the sun, sporadically marked by lines of blue. Even from a distance the rooftop gardens and hanging vines could be seen. The greenery seemed to be everywhere, even encroaching on the seaside docks and fortifications.

It was a beautiful sight—at least to August. He admired the fields surrounding the city, the vineyards in the nearby hills. Plenty of the gardens within the city appeared to be bearing fruit as well. It was no wonder Zymalos had fostered a fusion of cooking and magic.

As soon as the airship had securely docked August and Rho disembarked. A welcoming committee awaited them—just as promised. Due to his own preferences August was quick to notice they were all rather rotund. He guessed most were fatter than Rho, who was already respectfully doughy. What truly surprised him was that even the guards were hefty. The largest amongst them was a horse in plate armor that matched the curve of his massive middle perfectly. Though admittedly the hyena closeby him was immense as well.

August froze in place for a moment, giving his head a shake as he confirmed what his eyes were telling him. The pink mohawk and eyes. The crossed arms. The perpetual scowl. They couldn't possibly be anyone but Raf and yet...and yet they were at least twice as fat as he should've been. Only a month had passed since Raf had been sent out. To get that fat he would have to have been eating non-stop, every day. Or been hooked up to a feeding tube. His casual gluttony couldn't explain the

ridiculous gains.

From the sound of Rho snorting the zebra obviously recognized Raf as well.

Raf glared hard once he caught August staring, prompting him to hastily divert his gaze. Fortunately any potential awkwardness was interrupted by a cheerful deer in the group.

“You must be Professor August of the Rainwood Academy, and Rho Taliesin of the Rainwood Innkeeper Guild! I am Prince Astero, professor of the Zymalos Culinary College.”

The deer’s voice was boisterous, causing his middle, cheeks, and chins to wobble with every word. His garb was like a mixture between the traditional robes of a mage and the uniform of a nobleman’s chef. Silver accents decorated their white tunic and apron, which sported several worn pockets that hinted at actual use in a kitchen. He lacked most of the jewelry August often saw on mages and nobles, though the silver chains around his neck were clearly worth a small fortune.

“It’s an honor to finally see your fine city. We hope this marks the beginning of a long and fruitful relationship between our two lands.” August gave a short bow. Diplomacy wasn’t his forte, and he hoped he would leave a good impression.

“Oh I do believe it will! There’s just so much to discuss, why don’t we head back to the College? Lead the way Clyde!”

The huge horse nodded and turned, marching towards a row of carriages nearby. Everyone followed, and August snuck up beside Raf.

“Raf, um...what happened?” August whispered into the hyena’s ear.

There was a faint growl in return, and August swore he saw Raf blush briefly. “I don’t want to talk about it,” he grumbled, adjusting his robes a little when he realized his belly was peeking out in places.

From experience August knew all it would take to get Raf talking was some pestering, but he didn’t feel it’d be appropriate in front of Prince Astero and the others. He’d just have to get the details later. And try not to ogle Raf’s new heft too much—or at least too obviously. A second growl proved he was already failing at that, so he shuffled away from the grump.

The carriages were open-air and larger than the ones August was used to back home. They were also decorated with elaborate carvings and trimmed with more silver. August was beginning to suspect it was either a color associated with Astero’s family or just the nobles of the city in general, just like gold in Rainwood. The drivers sat patiently at the reigns, dressed in open vests that left their round bellies exposed.

All of the welcoming committee being fat had been a pleasant surprise for August, but the drivers as well? Very suddenly August became aware of how large the dockworkers were, too. So far no Zymalosian he’d seen had been thin, or even merely chubby. The thinnest were plump, and the heaviest almost as big as Raf. It couldn’t have been a coincidence, the odds were astronomically low. And the lean lion couldn’t shake the feeling he was being eyed with curiosity by the locals as well. He felt strangely out of place.

Astero, Clyde, Raf, and August all settled into the lead carriage, while Rho joined the merchant envoys in another. Despite the sheer girth of most of the riders, the carriage didn’t feel the least bit cramped. They were clearly designed with hefty folk in mind, and August had almost too much room in his seat. He was still pondering the mysteries of Zymalos when the carriages set off.

“I can scarcely believe how far things have come along in such a short while!” Prince Astero said with genuine glee. “Visitors from afar have been so rare, yet now we’re exchanging envoys and pleasantries, planning regular voyages across the sea, and even looking into sharing our respective magical knowledge!”

While August made sure to pay attention to his host’s words, he also kept an eye on his surroundings as the carriages traveled the bustling streets. Just like at the dock, everyone they passed was hefty to some degree. From the farmers selling oversized produce in their stalls to the merchants waddling around in fancy robes to the guards in their perfectly-fitted armor, there wasn’t a single lean

individual amongst them.

“It’s indeed been wonderful, Prince Astero. And I’d like to extend my thanks for hosting my colleague Professor Raf these last few weeks. You’ve clearly treated him well.”

Again Raf blushed, knowing full and well what August meant by the remark. He kept his grumbling to a minimum, making sure no one could hear.

“Raf has been such a pleasure! And he has the appetite of a true Zymalosian I might add.” The grumbling ceased from Raf, who’d been silenced by embarrassment. “Everyone at the College has been so eager to share their work with him and he never turns down a dish. Oh if only you’d arrived yesterday when he was our guest judge for our annual pie baking festival. We had twice as many entrees as last year, and Professor Raf didn’t leave a single crumb behind!”

Even August blushed a little at the thought. His belly must’ve been huge by the end, bulging with pie and spread across his lap. Groaning as he forced another slice down in front of a whole audience of portly onlookers. The moment his mental image dipped into fantasy August shook himself back to reality.

“I’m delighted to hear he’s been representing the Academy well. To be honest I was worried he’d eat you out of house and home,” August chuckled.

“That’d be an impossible task, I assure you. Zymalos is a land of plenty! Our fields and ranches produce a near endless supply of food, and our coastline is overflowing with all kinds of fish. And it’s all thanks to our dedication to culinary magic.” August could tell the deer was speaking from his heart. “Magically-infused food is so much cheaper than scrolls and potions, and can be created in bulk with greater ease. Their effects last longer if properly prepared, too! Of course I must admit few things in life are better than enjoying a well-made feast that both fills you up and empowers you.”

The unusual weight of the populace was slowly making sense to August. But was culinary magic alone capable of causing *everyone* in Zymalos to become fat? If it were introduced to Rainwood would waistlines expand overnight? Did he secretly hope it would?

“I’m excited to have a taste myself,” August said, ignoring an obvious *harrumph* from Raf.

For the remainder of the carriage ride August regaled Prince Astero with descriptions of Rainwood. Apparently Raf hadn’t been the most talkative during his stay, mainly on account of how often his mouth was full of food. By the time the carriage rolled up to Culinary College Prince Astero was already planning a trip of his own.

As everyone emptied out of the carriages August spotted Rho laughing with his fellow travelers. He quickly excused himself and caught up with August.

“Should I assume you noticed the entire city is pleasantly plump~” Rho teased.

“As a matter of fact, yes. It’s making me feel emaciated.”

“Amongst other things I suspect.” Rho accepted the sharp elbow to his gut, which was thankfully padded by pudge. “Anyways, apparently with how plentiful both culinary magic and food is here, it’s practically inevitable to naturally put on a lot of weight over time. And since they were joking about how you’d plump up to my size in no time I suspect either the standard Zymalosian meal is extremely hearty or the food in general is just extremely fattening. Probably both.”

“Please don’t plot with our esteemed hosts to fatten me up,” August hissed, trying not to wiggle at the thought. “Though yes, I got the gist of all that while talking with Prince Astero. I’m not sure that Raf ballooning in size so dramatically since arriving is necessarily a unique situation. Then again, we probably won’t get to stuff ourselves silly judging a pie baking competition either.”

“Personally I like the way these Zymalosians think. I wouldn’t mind returning home a hundred pounds heavier, maybe even two~” Rho gave his belly a firm pat with both hooves, guaranteeing it’d jiggle.

August covered his muzzle with his paws to hide the twisted grin beneath. Fortunately for the flustered feline, the merchants returned to nab Rho, taking him away to discuss trade matters over a meal. Rho of course was more than happy to follow, and the last thing August heard was the zebra

asking what was on the menu.

In the meanwhile August was left alone with Raf, Prince Astero, and Clyde. They went deeper and deeper into the Culinary College, passing countless rotund students and professors waddling between classes. All were fat, and some were cradling distended bellies that could only be full of an obscene amount of food. They showed no signs of being exhausted by the weight they carried, keeping up with their empty peers.

For August it was like a dream. Though even his wildest dreams didn't bless him with such a bounty of bouncing bellies.

The journey through the College also revealed to August the full extent to which Zymalos had embraced a life of heft. Hallways and doorways were noticeably wider, and even the largest students didn't end up wedged. He caught glimpses of reinforced chairs in classrooms. Staircases rose gently. Decor was kept high enough to avoid getting knocked over by a misguided belly.

There was also a strong aroma of fresh baked food permeating the halls that made his stomach rumble faintly.

It all fascinated August, who found himself just as intrigued by the society of Zymalos as the waistlines. He had to resist retrieving a journal to jot down notes. There'd be time for that later.

Eventually the group reached a spacious room unlike any August had seen before. One half resembled a kitchen, with a number of covered platters waiting on the counters. There were also plenty of bookshelves. The few titles August saw hinted at tomes and cookbooks—often both. The rest of the room looked like a traditional spellcasting range, complete with targets and barriers to hold back any wild spray of fire or lightning.

"I suppose our practice rooms are a fair bit different from your own back in Rainwood." Prince Astero smiled. "I have plenty of fond memories of my own days as a student, staying up late perfecting recipes until I was too stuffed to move. Nearly immobilized myself a few times with how hard I was working, but as a Prince of Zymalos it was to be expected!"

"I'm jealous," August said while adding, in thought alone, *of many things*. "More often than not I ended up accidentally skipping meals while studying. It's easy for me to get lost in a pile of books in the library, my hunger ignored."

"Well worry not my friend, forgetting a meal is impossible in Zymalos!" August heard Raf sighing nearby, and knew his scowl had likely become a frown if only for a moment. "Speaking of which, why don't you try your first taste of culinary magic?"

Prince Astero approached the smallest of the platters and lifted its cover, revealing thick-cut toast covered in jam and a trio of cooked eggs. A simple meal, but it managed to make August salivate.

"This dish was made with culinary magic?" August asked. He'd expected food that glowed or pulsed or floated—something that looked magical even at a glance. Though he sensed some magic within, it looked mundane.

"Yes! Normally it would be but a small portion of a more potent meal, but I didn't want to overwhelm you. The magic infused in this breakfast will replenish your mana and perk you up a little. You have to eat every last bite for it to take effect, though."

"I'm actually rather hungry so that shouldn't be a problem."

With great anticipation August took his first bite of magic-infused food. The wonderful flavors made him grin. The eggs had been cooked and seasoned perfectly, some of the best he'd ever had. He got so caught up in scarfing them down he nearly forgot the toast. Again his taste buds were rewarded. August did just as he was told and made sure barely a crumb remained on the plate once he was finished.

Mere seconds after the last of the delightful meal had settled into his stomach, August felt a soothing surge of energy flow through him. While he hadn't been tired before he still managed to perk up. There were certainly some passing similarities to potions he'd tried in the past, but the true test would require actual spellcasting.

August concentrated, gesturing with one paw and humming faintly. A ring of text began to glow on the dark metal band around his wrist, thin blue smoke drifting from it. In the air in front of him a spectral copy of his paw came into being, then another, and another. He commanded them to orbit him at various speeds. After a minute of testing he was content, and had them idle behind him.

“Impressive. I don’t feel as drained as I normally would—or at all, for that matter. Even with a mana potion there’d have been *some* loss of energy. Your culinary magic is remarkably efficient!”

“And that’s only a taste of the true potential of culinary magic!” Prince Astero was beaming. “Mana replenishment and healing are good, but infusing boons into food is our real signature dish—if you don’t mind me saying. It can empower spells, make you more durable and stronger, grant temporary abilities like underwater breathing and even flight. A skilled culinary mage can create a meal that means the difference between an adventuring party crushing a fiendish necromancer or being wiped out with ease.”

Raf—who’d done his best to avoid any conversation at all—reluctantly chimed in. “It really does boost magic. My healing abilities were enhanced an obscene amount after every one of those meals.” He growled at the end, obviously frustrated at praising the very thing that’d made him enormous.

“Oh but seeing is believing, and Clyde has graciously volunteered to show off the benefits of a fully course boon feast!”

The horse had maintained a somewhat serious expression ever since August had arrived, but now he was smiling with glee. He removed a large cover on the counter, which had indeed hidden a sizable feast. The amount of food would’ve been excessive for the average adventuring party, yet Clyde clearly intended to indulge on it all by himself.

Without any fanfare Clyde dug in. He ate with the intensity of someone who hadn’t had a bite in days, wiping out dish after dish in record time. Mugs of juice were used to wash it all down, practically a small keg’s worth. He didn’t slow, didn’t stop, simply ate and ate and ate.

Even before August saw the horse’s large belly bulge out he heard the gentle groan of metal plates being stretched. Clyde didn’t wince or show signs of discomfort, though. However his armor was forged, it must have been designed with such gluttony in mind, and stretched to accommodate his expanding middle.

To August it was almost mesmerizing watching Clyde stuff himself silly, his gut growing before his very eyes. There were no wasted movements, a hoof always reaching for something new as he finished chewing and gulping. Raf kept his eyes off the food while Prince Astero looked on with a professional satisfaction, as if the horse’s gorging was another proud accomplishment of Zymalos.

In the time it usually took August to finish one plate, Clyde had finished close to a dozen. The stuffed horse wiped his mouth and gave his bloated belly a triumphant slap. The belch that followed echoed throughout the room. His middle was noticeably rounder, yet his armor wasn’t strained in the least. August also noted that Clyde wasn’t sluggish, either. He might’ve looked like someone who’d gobbled up a feast, but he didn’t act like one.

“Clyde consumed one of our standard boon feasts meant for fighters or anyone expecting to get in a physical brawl,” Prince Astero said. “He’ll be able to shrug off most blows, his strength is exponentially better, and he won’t tire out anytime soon!”

August could sense a good deal of magic flowing around Clyde, centered on his enormous belly. The horse waddled over towards the range half of the room, where a giant block of solid stone stood. He grasped it on both sides, tensed, and then lifted it up with relative ease.

August was shocked.

Clyde proceeded to lug the stone around the range, his belly bouncing side-to-side with every step. He didn’t appear to be struggling with the weight, only the slight awkwardness of wrangling both his belly and the stone. Satisfied with the demonstration, Prince Astero had Clyde drop it. The room shook from the impact, leaving no doubts in August’s mind as to how heavy it had been.

“The effects of this particular boon meal will last about an hour. Depending on the exact boon and the skill of the mage cooking it, there are some that can endure an entire day. Of course larger meals tend to produce stronger effects.” August could hear the professor in Prince Astero coming through. “Time for the finale, Clyde!”

With a chuckle the horse pulled out the sturdy mace that’d hung from his side. He lifted it over his head and brought it down hard on the stone block. It shattered clear in half, shards flying outward and a small dust cloud forming. Despite his show of strength he didn’t seem winded at all.

“I’ve seen traditional boon potions and spells create similar effects, but the ingredients were substantial and often costly.” The awe hadn’t left August’s face. “Is that true for your culinary magic as well?”

“No, no. While there *are* some rare ingredients for the most decadent meals, the vast majority can be made with the normal bounty of Zymalos.” There was always pure joy in Prince Astero’s voice when he had the opportunity to bring it up. “From the humblest farmer and caravan guard to the wealthiest prince, all can afford boon feasts on a frequent basis.”

“Though I take it you have to be willing to gain weight if you want to use them regularly,” August noted.

A laugh from the prince, who gave his soft middle a pat. “I can’t deny that! When culinary magic was first being figured out, most of Zymalos treated it as a joke, not worthy of serious attention. At the old college the mages were mocked by their peers as they grew tubbier and tubbier perfecting their new craft. But then they started to dominate their courses thanks to their culinary creations, and the teasing ceased. They provided their admittedly fattening services to others, and fatter adventurers soon proved better able to handle tasks their fitter counterparts failed. In time there was no denying the overall advantages of culinary magic.”

“Over the course of decades our agriculture was improved to better handle the demands of culinary magic, until food scarcity became a thing of the past. The populace grew fatter and fatter with each passing year, and gradually we came to embrace the weight rather than treat it as a burden.” The deer sighed happily, before his gaze shifted subtly to August’s flat middle. “You know, mine is the first generation to have almost never seen anyone nearly as slim as you. Our eating habits rubbed off a bit on our closest neighbors, so only the most distant traveling visitors are truly thin. And even they tend to plump up rather quickly if they stay for long!”

It was inevitable that August would ponder how he’d feel if the same were to happen to him. Would he merely get as plump as Rho, or would the temptations of Zymalos cause him to blimp up as big as Astero, or even Raf. At the very least he knew staying thin would be impossible while he was there. The reality of the situation made him blush.

“Well then I guess I’ll just have to accept the fact I’m gonna get a bit chubbier for the sake of learning more about culinary magic.” August let out a somewhat nervous laugh, not wanting to seem too eager to get fat.

“That’s the spirit! Personally I believe lions handle heft just as well as us deer.” The smile the Prince gave only made August blush harder. “If you’re up to it, I took the liberty of having a special boon feast prepared just for you!”

The last platter in the kitchen was unveiled, and the food upon it looked just as delicious—and plentiful—as that which Clyde had eaten. For the much smaller August it was almost overwhelming.

“I...well it looks wonderful, but there’s no way I’d be able to eat all of that in one sitting!”

“Don’t underestimate yourself! All of our magical meals are designed to boost your appetite and stomach capacity to ensure they can be consumed by anyone, no matter their size. There’s no need to worry about getting full or passing out into a deep food coma.”

The numerous engorged yet unencumbered students on campus suddenly made sense, as did the fact Clyde was able to strut around after his feast with ease. August had expected to slowly work his way up to a full feast over the course of weeks. Now he had an opportunity to glut relentlessly, and for

a good reason. His acceptance was still sheepish, though.

There were far more options now than before, and August didn't know where to begin. Almost at random he chose a beef plate. It didn't disappoint. The pieces he was cutting off grew bigger and bigger as he savored the taste. When his thirst needed quenching there was ice-cold apple juice waiting, and he had to resist guzzling it all in one go.

"I take it it's to your liking?" Prince Astero asked, standing across the counter from August with Clyde.

August nodded enthusiastically as he finished a swallow. "My compliments to the chef!" He took another couple bites almost instinctively. "I'd eat Zymalosian cuisine every day if I could, it's all been incredible."

"With an attitude like that you really *will* be as big as the rest of us before long!" Astero bellowed, and even Clyde joined in with a chuckle. "And no need to hold back, August. Eat to your heart's content!"

"The feeling of a full belly's even better than the taste of a good meal, so stuff yourself!" Clyde added, giving his own a hearty shake.

The encouragement to gorge had August wiggling, yet it worked. His speed steadily picked up as his once-flat middle started swelling. After two dishes were cleared he should've felt full—stuffed! But just as Prince Astero had promised he always found room for more.

Before long August was caught up in Astero and Clyde's enthusiasm and gorging like he never had before. In a flash of inspiration August directed his three spectral paws to aid him. They brought over plates so nothing was every out of reach, held up mugs so he didn't have to waste time picking them up and putting them down. He didn't glut with the same experienced haste Clyde had, but it was impressive nonetheless.

The lion's tunic clung tightly to his swollen belly, buttons straining as small tears appeared in the seams. August was too busy eating to notice or care. His brand new gut popped off every button in quick succession, the gray mound wobbling free.

There was still so much left to eat.

All feeding had been taken over by the spectral paws. August used the mana provided from the earlier eggs and toast to conjure even more paws. He lost track of his surroundings, focused solely on the food, the wonderful food. Attempts to disguise his joy ended. He smiled wide as he chewed, letting out the occasional moan.

When August's gut became too unwieldy his natural paws swooped in to hold it. The sense of weight was just as delightful as the taste of the food. And the more he ate the bigger it got.

Though at first the meal seemed endless, there came a time when the paws found no scrap of food to bring and the mugs ran dry. August slowly recovered from the euphoric eating frenzy. Before him were piles of empty plates where a feast had been minutes before.

"I..I ate it—*uorrrrrp*—all?" August said in disbelief. The belch caused his gut to wobble, reminding him of its existence. He glanced down, and his face immediately flushed red. His belly was huge, as big as Raf's if not bigger. It looked almost comical on his lean frame.

At a loss of words, the sudden surge of energy from his finished meal proved a welcome distraction. All the mana he'd used during and before his feast was replenished. Not just replenished, *overflowing*. August felt completely rejuvenated, like he could stay up all night working on magic treatises or preparing courses.

"And how is your first full taste of a culinary magic feast?" Prince Astero asked, his eyes locked onto August's round middle.

"It was intimidating to begin with, but once I started I honestly couldn't stop—I didn't want to stop! The flavors, the variety, the...the *weight*." August gave his gut a cautious wobble to prove it wasn't a hallucination. "And I don't even feel stuffed at all, it's incredible."

"Decades of work went into figuring out the right combo of food and magic to accomplish this,

and we're still improving on it every year. Hopefully there'll be a day when culinary mages from Rainwood offer their own insights and suggestions for the art."

Fueled by the feast, August concentrated on his magic, the band on his wrist glowing brighter. He conjured not just a spectral paw, but a whole copy of himself—albeit lacking the gut. The copy was joined by three more. Performing such a feat should've drained the lion of mana, but he still felt plenty was available. Nothing short of an artifact or a pile of potions and scrolls could've replicated that.

August's copies lifted him up, each gently rubbing his belly. Considering the social norms of Zymalos, the lion was feeling more and more comfortable about enjoying his temporary girth.

"Prince Astero, your culinary magic is simply amazing! The benefits are unparalleled, and the gluttony required feels like such a small price to pay for what you get out of it. I can't wait to send word back to my colleagues at the Academy about this!"

"I knew you wouldn't be disappointed! And this is only the beginning. Culinary magic has a wide range of disciplines, and I'd love to introduce you to each and every one of them. Time permitting, of course." The prince and Clyde walked around to get a closer look at August. Both gave the lion's bulging belly approving nods.

"I'm sure I could convince the Academy to give me an extended leave of absence for research and—*braaaap*—diplomatic purposes." August's grin quivered as one of the copies rubbed a particularly sensitive spot on his gut.

Just then the doors to the room opened, a rotund tiger guard entering. Waddling in behind him was Rho, and August had to catch his breath once he saw him. The zebra's belly was even rounder than his own, fully exposed and undoubtedly filled with food. He carried the weight as if it were completely normal.

"Didn't take you long to round out, did it?" Rho teased, grinning deviously at his boyfriend. August tried numerous times to respond, but only managed to blush and bite his lip. "Your meeting obviously went well. I myself had a very fruitful lunch with some of Zymalos' merchants about potential trade opportunities. I expect our upcoming dinner discussions will be even more swell." He drummed on his gut with both hooves and licked his lips.

With August flustered into silence, Raf rolled his eyes and grumbled under his breath. "Maybe they'll finally stop scheduling me for five meals a day, then."

Prince Astero may not have been close enough to hear exactly what Raf said, but he *was* reminded of the enormous hyena's presence again after lavishing so much attention on August. "Oh Professor Raf, the head pastry baker wanted to finish showing you some recipes tonight after dinner. They said something about guaranteeing you won't get stuck in a doorway this time."

Raf immediately waddled off in a huff, ostensibly towards his guest quarters on campus. "If they don't send me home soon these cooks are going to make me immobile!"

Prince Astero appeared confused at the sudden outburst, but August and Rho could only laugh.

"Maybe I'll ask for Raf to be kept here a couple more months—just to see how big he gets." August allowed his copies to return him to the ground before dispersing them. He was still amazed by the ease with which he handled his engorged belly. It was a little awkward, but not debilitating.

"I'm more interested in how big *you're* going to get~" Rho gave his boyfriend a belly bump, turning him into an embarrassed mess in an instant.

"Worry not, you'll all become delightfully doughy while guests of Zymalos!" Prince Astero promised. "Now why don't I show you your quarters—and the dining halls of course! Might even be able to hunt down some snacks along the way."

With an apparently fattening future ahead of them, August and Rho waddled after their jolly round host. Despite their recent gluttony, the pair were already thinking about dinner—and the weight it'd undoubtedly add to their waistlines.