

ZEBRA CAKES

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"Bro! *Bro!* Are you keeping the camera on me? Come on, they're *not* going to want to miss this!"

Three amateur bodybuilders were sprawled across the weight benches of their gym, making themselves a general nuisance to the rest of the people exercising. From the smallest, they were Melvin; a meerkat who had only really just started building up brawn, but his long torso favored a lean cut with well-defined, diamond cut abs and toned muscle, complemented by sleek fur. In the middle was Isaac, an impala who had bucked the trends of his species with a dense, broad-shouldered build and a thick, sturdy core, a slab of hard-worked muscle. But then, there was Zack, who put both of his friends to shame.

A zebra with a brilliant fur pattern, dark stripes tinged with bronze framing like he had been lightly toasted and a brilliant blond mane, Zack was the type of bodybuilder that seemed to be born with an extra hundred pounds of muscle packed on to his brawny frame. Putting on hefty slabs of girthy muscle came easily to the striped equine; he had a genuine talent for bulking, but thankfully his friends kept him from going overboard.

A pity they couldn't do anything about his ego. Zack loved to showboat, and his fitness videos were less about giving genuine fitness advice and instruction, than it was about showing off his magnificent self. He planted one hoof on the bench, stopping to pose and pump his arms, dense and hefty biceps swelling as he worked his arm, flashing a toothy grin to the smile and winking. "Alright, fitness bros, let's take a quick look at this, it's ya boi Zack, and I'm ready to tear up this gym in another," He paused for dramatic effect, snapping into a most muscular pose, curling his arms in against his beefy, wide chest, making his biceps roll and dance against the hefty wall of pectoral muscle. "*Zack attack.*"

"Good *Lord.*" Isaac muttered under his breath, rolling his eyes. He crossed his thickly roped limbs over his own wall-like chest; the impala genuinely wanted to just get on with his own workout, but with one snap of his fingers, Zack had him and Mel as his own personal groupies.

"Hell yeah, Zack attack! Woo!" Melvin grinned broadly, pumping his fist in the air.

"Today I'm going to do some weightlifting squared. I'm getting on that bench press there, but we're not benching with bars today, I'm going to take my bud, Melvin— say hi to the folks, Mel—"

"Hey!" The meerkat turned the phone around briefly to wave at the audience.

"And I'm going to bench press all one hundred and ninety pounds of meerkat beef, while *he* is going to do bicep curls with forty pound dumbbells—"

"That... Is *extremely* dumb," Isaac ran his hand over his face.

"It's *extremely awesome*, Isaac!" Zack snapped. "So I'm going to be benching two hundred and seventy pounds— but wait, that's a little weaksauce for a beast like me, isn't it Zack Attack nation? That's why I'm going to be doing it with *one hand*."

"Let's *do it!*" Mel hollered.

Isaac put himself between the meerkat and the zebra. "Alright, now *hold on*, guys—!"

"Dude, you're blocking me! You're not *in* this episode!" Zack pouted, the brawny equine shoving the burly impala back. "Mel, Isaac's being a real buzzkill, get him out of my shot!"

"Mel isn't your attack dog, Zack, he's not going to— Ah! Ah! *Melvin*, my horns don't *come off*, you know!"

"Gentlemen...?"

All three stopped, Zack hunkered down and pressed his rolling boulder shoulders against Isaac's chest, Mel almost clinging to the impala's broad back as he tugged on his horns, and Isaac gripping Zack's mane.

"Play it cool, I got this," Zack muttered quickly as all three snapped to attention. They were faced with a rhinoceros even bigger than Zack; his well-tailored business suit accentuated his vast, mountainous shoulders and the sheer breadth of his chest and arms. He was a massive beast of a rhino, his leathery hide only accentuating the breathtaking piles of brawn coiled around his mountainous frame.

Zack shot him one of his winning smiles, then faltered. "Wait— Oh my god, oh my *god*. Are you... are you Ron, uh, uh..." the zebra was tripping over his words.

The rhino offered a tight grin as he held out his meaty hand. "Ron Hornmann, yes. And you're Zack 'Attack' Mangeur, right?"

"Uh— yeah, yeah!" Zack gripped the rhino's hand with both of his, shaking fervently. "Oh my god, you're like— a *legend*, man! Three time bodybuilding world winner, you're— you're the trainer of *champions*... what're you doing here?"

"I'm looking for you, *champ*." Ron's grin widened as he punched the zebra in the arm. "I've seen some of your videos... I gotta say, my employers are *real* impressed with you."

"Impressed...?" Isaac arched his brow. "With what, how he can eat and breathe while using only the one functioning brain cell?"

"Dude, *shut up!*" Zack elbowed the impala in his practically armor-plated middle. "Ignore him, ignore him— what do you mean, your employers?"

"Well, you know I retired a couple years back..." Ron began.

"Pretty suddenly, if I remember," Isaac muttered. "Wasn't there something about another bodybuilder leaving too...?"

The rhino's grin thinned. "Don't believe everything you hear, son. Anyways, I'm now a marketing director for Big Lou Snacks, and we want *you* to market our new, healthy protein cakes."

"Protein... cakes?" Isaac responded flatly; if his brow arched any higher, it was in danger of hitting his horns. "Isn't Big Lou snacks responsible for like, the most *unhealthy* snacks

available...? Didn't a whole group of people sue you guys when your 'sugar-free' strawberry logs turned out to have *twice* the amount of sugars in them than the regular?"

The rhino turned his full attention to Isaac, snorting softly as he lowered his horn. "You're *awfully* well-informed, young man, I'm surprised I haven't heard about you and *your* successful fitness vlog."

"Isaac, stop being such a buzzkill!" Zack punched his friend in the arm, before turning back to Ron. "Ignore him, he's a dumbass. Anyways, you want me to be a sponsor...?"

Ron's grin loosened as he turned back to the zebra. "Of course! You've been trending great everytime you drop a new video. You're *exactly* who Big Lou is looking for when it comes to promoting a new product. It pays well, and it'd look *great* on your resume." The hulking rhino clamped his hand on Zack's broad shoulder. "This is a real big opportunity, son. I told the higher ups I think you're perfect for this gig."

"What, *me?*" Zack cleared his throat. "I-I mean, yeah— of course I am!"

The rhino chuckled, stepping to Zack's side and grabbing his arm, testing the strength and solid nature of his brawn and then slapping the zebra's burly, sprawling back with his free hand. "I hate to interrupt your workout, but would you like to talk about this over lunch? I was just about to head out myself to this nice little steakhouse with some of the other execs at Big Lou, and it'd be great if we could introduce you to them. I'm just saying, if you're really serious about this, it's best to get you in front of them. We wouldn't want someone else the suits like more to come in and sweep up, after all."

Zack's brows bounced. "Oh, totally, totally! Let's go, like, right now!" He turned back to Mel and Isaac. "Bros, don't wait up for me, I'm off to go get *famous!*"

"Good luck, Zack! You got this, bro!" Mel cheered, pumping his fist in the air.

"No. Wait. Stop. Come back." Isaac muttered in a deadpan tone, already looking at his phone to pull up a new workout playlist.

The meerkat furrowed his brow a bit at the impala. "Dude, why were you being such an ass about this? This could be *huge* for Zack!"

Isaac glanced back to Mel, pulling out his earbud. "First of all, this is *obviously* a grift. He's being rushed out to sign a contract, right this moment, without so much as a mention of an audition. No legit job would look for a spokesman without getting an audition in first."

"Well... if you really think this is a scam, why are you letting him walk off with that guy?" Mel asked.

"Because, Melvin," Isaac sighed heavily, with all the weight of years of ignored advice, "If Zack ever listened to me at all, he'd be sixty pounds beefier with a shot at Mr. Universe by now. But he doesn't, so he isn't, and I'm just going to let him take the fall this time. I can only take 'you're such a buzzkill' so many times before I throw up my hands, tell myself 'I'm sure he knows what he's doing,' and let the pieces fall where they may."

The meerkat's frown deepened as Isaac rolled his broad shoulders and rubbed his hands together. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to blast some death metal until I get tinnitus and

try to beat my one rep best on the bench press. You can either spot me or pine after your himbo crush."

"Wha— dude!" the meerkat sputtered, his ears flattening. "I-I don't have a crush on Zack, I-I... he's just... he's our bro!"

"Mmmhm," Isaac hummed flatly, stretching out his chiselled arms. "Well, while you figure your bromance crush out, I'm going to take care of business." He gave the meerkat a dismissive wave and began to walk away.

"What— Isaac! It's *not* a crush, dude! Come on, don't be a dick!" Mel shouted, jogging after the impala.

The next time Isaac and Melvin heard from Zack, it was about two in the morning. There were over a dozen text messages with more than the zebra's usual number of typos, which was a good sign he had been drinking, but the last text was still coherent enough to catch Mel and Isaac's eye— Zack was inviting them to a genuine film studio for the filming of his first commercial and photoshoot. Mel immediately responded yes, festooned with flexing arm emojis and perhaps one too many hearts. Upon being informed that they would have to be at the studio at seven in the morning, Isaac's only response was a curt "Ugh."

The following morning, Zack was bouncing on his hooves— he wore a jacket over his immense, finely sculpted torso, but after being in make-up and having oil rubbed down on the fluted columns of his legs, he didn't dare put his pants back on, lest he muss his fur. The zebra had never gotten the full celebrity or bodybuilder treatment before— a make-up crew and an oil guy, carefully rubbing down his fur to make it glossy, letting every meaty curl of muscle along his trunk-like thighs and sculpted, nearly spherical calves practically shine.

He swept back his mane as he spotted a groggy looking Isaac and Mel, who looked like he had just chugged four cups of coffee to get up early.

"*Bros!*" Zack held out his thick arms and threw them around the impala and meerkat's shoulders, pulling them in for a fast embrace. "Isn't this *insane*? Big Lou snacks is going to make me a *star*."

"You're a spokesperson for a dodgy protein bar, Zack, don't wait up for your invitation to the Oscars," Isaac muttered.

"I *told* you!" Mel declared triumphantly, punching Isaac in the arm. "I told him that you were the real deal, Zack, that this was your big break, and *he* didn't believe me!"

Zack quirked his eyebrow, turning to Isaac. "Bro?"

Isaac glared at Mel. "Snitch." He turned back to Zack, holding up his hands in defense. "Look, Zack— I'd be... *happy* for you if I thought this was legit, but, c'mon." He leaned in, whispering conspiratorially. "They didn't even have auditions for this. No casting call, not even a classified ad. You don't find any of that a bit... strange? This isn't adding up."

Zack clicked his tongue, giving Isaac a sympathetic, even pitying look. He turned to Mel. "Bro, I got this. Go hit up the breakfast bar, they got the good shit over there."

As the meerkat dutifully jogged off, Zack draped his hefty arm over Isaac's shoulder, pulling the impala in close until his cheek was pressed against the zebra's beefy pec. "Bro, I know *exactly* what this is all about. It's okay— you don't *need* to be jealous."

"*Jealous?!"* Isaac sputtered indignantly, fighting against the zebra's embrace. "Are you *crazy?*"

Zack used his free hand to pat Isaac's side consolingly. "Bro, I know about the juice."

Isaac stared at him through narrowed eyes. "Yes. Of course you do. I *told* you I was taking steroids. I even encouraged you to take them so you could be at competition size for a *real* bodybuilding gig. Hell, even without the steroids, if you *just* tried the diet I recommended—"

"Ah-ah-ah," Zack held up a finger to Isaac's mouth. "Bro. One, tilapia, super gross. It's tuna or nothing. It's sportier."

"Oh my *God.*"

"Bruh, who pried you out of the locker in high school?"

Isaac rolled his eyes. "You did."

"And who started training you when you wanted to start building up muscle?"

"...You did."

"So, like— c'mon, man. I know you've always kinda looked up to me."

"Of *course* I look up at you Zack, you're a head taller than me!"

"Hey, hey, hey. I think someone needs to have the grumps grappled right out of them."

"Do *not*—!"

Zack hoisted Isaac off his feet, bulging arms wrapped tightly around the impala's chiseled waist, his bloated biceps pressed deep against his sides. The zebra held him tight, gently swaying. "There, patented bro hug. You feel better?"

"Zack, I will headbutt you with both horns, I swear to God."

The zebra set him down somewhat hastily, but kept one hand on Isaac's shoulder, gently massaging the impala's delts. "Look bro, I just... I gotta know there's at least some part of you that's happy for me."

Isaac closed his eyes, centering himself as he forced a grin on his face. "Zack. I hope you break a leg."

"Ahh, there he is!" Zack thumped Isaac in the chest. "And hey, when I make it big, I'm not going to forget my bros— I'll totally build you up to Hornman, and hey, maybe he can train you and you can be as big as me someday."

Isaac's grin took a rueful twist. He had plans to be *much* bigger than Zack. "That... would be nice. Thank you."

Zack clicked his tongue, flashing a pair of finger guns at Isaac before he jogged back to the main sound stage. He shed off his jacket, tossing it to a crew hand with a long-suffering look on his face, and sighed with relief, letting the bright lights wash over his striped fur. He held out his arms, the slight roll of his broad shoulders and the stretching of his back making the hefty burls of muscle ripple. His stripes sprawled across the vast landscape of his hefty lats, unfurling

like a flag as he twisted his girthy hips, giving a fond pat to his supple, firm glutes, just to make them bounce, his tail tied so as not to cover the thick curve of his ass.

Mel whistled low. "*Man*, Zack looks so... mmph. I mean, look at him! He's like a *god*," the meerkat gushed.

"You're like, half in love with him, aren't you?" Isaac muttered, folding his tightly roped arms.

Zack lingered, his back half-twisted, allowing the hefty swells of muscle to stack atop one another like the brickwork of a mighty edifice, flashing the camera his best, brightest smile. "Hi," he said with a slight, sultry lilt to his voice, making it deeper. "I'm Zack Mangeur, and when I'm on the attack, I grab Big Lou's Protein Zebra Cakes." He snatched up one of them, a thick pastry roughly as large as his hand and drizzled with chocolate and white chocolate stripes. "They're the perfect before and after workout snacks." He tore into it with relish, causing Isaac to arch his brow. It certainly *looked* like it tasted good, or maybe Zack was a better actor than he had given him credit.

"Zebra Cake— Big on taste," Zack spun on his heel, giving his sculpted glutes a firm smack to make them ripple against his taut posing trunks, and ended by giving the camera a quick wink. "Big on results."

"And... we're clear, cut!"

"*Hah!*" Isaac nearly jumped as he spotted Ron Hornmann, the hulking rhino having emerged practically from the shadows, and clapping his thick, leathery hands with a resonant, booming echo. "Did I say this kid was a natural or what? Zack, that was almost *perfect*. We're going to do another take, try to hold some of the poses a little longer, but you have hit *just* the right mark."

Zack practically beamed hearing such praise from his idol. Isaac rolled his eyes.

"Dude! Did you hear that? A natural, he thinks Zack's a natural!" Mel gasped, shaking Isaac by the shoulders.

"Mel, do you ever think about anything not related to Zack, even for a few minutes?" Isaac muttered as the musclebound zebra jogged up to them.

"So, dudes, what'd you think?"

Isaac opened his mouth, about to say something sarcastic, but his brow furrowed as he caught Ron looming just behind Zack. The rhino was quiet, and his eyes were locked on Zack, almost like he was sizing him up. Then, his eyes tilted to meet the impala's.

"It... was good, honestly." Isaac forced a grin. "You did great, man."

"Oh my God, how were we not recording?" Zack slapped his forehead. "An *actual* compliment from Isaac Van Hofen."

Isaac's grin tightened. "I'm actually curious— the Zebra Cakes, do they *actually* taste good, or was that all for show?"

That caught Ron's interest, and the rhino began lumbering closer to the three.

"Dude, you won't believe it, but *yeah*." Zack grinned wide, snatching up one of the available cakes. "I can eat like, a dozen of these things. They make me feel that I could like, run a marathon!"

"And you're *sure* that's not just a sugar rush?" Isaac asked.

The impala was answered by a firm clap on his shoulder, Ron letting out a rich laugh that made his suit strain under the rolling mass of his chest. "Isaac, was it? Are you *always* such a skeptic? Sometimes good products *do* slip out on the market, you know."

"Well sure," Isaac grunted, gritting his teeth as he felt the rhino's iron grip. He could see Ron's overgrown arm muscles tighten and flex through his sleeve— maybe the impala was asking a few too many questions for Hornmann's liking. "But you know the old chestnut better than any of us; never trust a protein bar that tastes too good."

The rhino snorted, his mouth splitting into a toothy smirk as he proffered one of the zebra cakes. "Well, in the past, maybe— but first of all, I can assure you that there is *no* sugar in the zebra cakes."

"Wait, it's *not*?" to Isaac's surprise, it was Zack who asked the question. The zebra looked between the rhino and the impala. "I mean— it's literally got chocolate stripes and frosting on it. It's also awesome and like, super sweet, so I thought—"

Ron chuckled, draping that huge arm over the zebra's broad shoulders, the taut boulder of a bicep subtly pressing against the small of Zack's neck. "Son, I told you there wasn't, remember? No, the sweetness you're tasting is all natural."

"From *what*?"

Ron shot a cursory glance at Isaac. "That's proprietary. It's a special blend that's been patented by Big Lou's Snack company, that guarantees fast results."

"I see." Isaac muttered.

Zack spotted Mel, waving the meerkat over as he pulled out another of the zebra cakes. "Hey, Mel, settle this for us— what do *you* think about these?"

The zebra tossed his sycophantic friend the pastry, and Mel eagerly tore into it. "*Wow!* That is like, *literally* the best thing I've ever tasted."

"Hah, sounds like a ringing endorsement! You're already paying dividends, son!" Ron chuckled heartily, his heaving pecs nearly popping his shirt buttons. "As a treat for your friends here, the higher ups at Big Lou's wanted *each* of them to walk away with a year's supply of Zebra Cakes— gotta get you boys caught up with Zack here somehow, right?" the rhino chuckled heartily, smacking the zebra on the back.

"Oh! Wow, what?" Zack gasped, throwing his powerful arms around both Isaac and Mel. "This is officially *the* coolest thing that's ever happened to me. Dudes, trust, we're going to get *huge* from this!"

Isaac still couldn't quite shake the strange feeling resting on him as he caught Ron's eye on him again— specifically settling on his middle, but the impala pulled back to Zack and cleared his throat. "Yeah... sounds great, man."

Big Lou's was prepared with a media blitz when the commercials were finished wrapping up; Zack's face was soon plastered on billboards and posters in nutrition stores and gyms everywhere the zebra looked, his broadside back and caked up glutes soon broadcasted for the world to see. His fitness vlog exploded, and Big Lou's had just the connections to get him something he had been chasing for a *long* time— a shot at a bodybuilding championship title.

The company's connections cut through the paperwork, finding a sponsor, and indeed, even overwhelmed the competition's board when they pointed out Zack had missed the sign-up deadline. With enough money, none of that really mattered— not that Zack felt he needed the help The Zebra Cakes were doing exactly as promised; he swore he could feel himself grow bigger and beefier every time he finished one off, and by the time he hit the stage, all eyes were on him— less a zebra at this point and more of a mass monster with stripes. The Zebra Cakes were more than paying dividends; just like Ron had told him, he had one before his workouts, another after his workouts— and, just to put on a few extra inches to his 'ceps and pecs, one around midnight each night.

He certainly couldn't argue with the results in the lead up to the event; before the endorsement, he was already on par with some of the bodybuilders he had always idolized, but now? Now, he felt like an absolute juggernaut. Zack's mountain of a body overfilled the mirrors in the backstage area, and the zebra reveled in how his stripes warped and stretched as his overgrown muscles tensed and bulged at the slightest flex. There was just so *much* of him now, he practically felt drunk off the raw mass and brawn packed on to his frame, from his mammoth arms, triceps thick as anvils and his biceps the awesome hammers striking against them, his vast, sprawling chest made up of a pair of granite slabs grinding together that heaved with the slightest breath. His legs, too— thick and sculpted as fluted columns, and his glutes, plump and round as ripe melons, stretching out the material of his posers. His middle, well— there was a *bit* of bloat, but that was only because he was packed with so much dense muscle, his abs were pressed in on each other and forcing out a bit of a curve. Everyone knew that the trend these days in these shows was towards bigger and bigger, anyways— and Zack was clearly the biggest.

Zack's natural charisma made up for whatever extra weight he was carrying around. He had trained himself on bodybuilding poses for years in his fitness vlog, planning for this day since he was in high school. It helped that he had his two best bros as well, coaching him along the way; when the crowd roared with applause and the gold medal was draped over his pillar of a neck, the medallion nearly slipping and disappearing in the cleft of his chest, Mel and Isaac were cheering him on in the wings.

Mel, as ever, was more enthusiastic. He felt like a groupie for the biggest rock star in the world, and the meerkat was happy to ride some coattails. Isaac, from Zack's point of view, seemed to have finally lightened up; but in truth, the impala had been watching closely.

"Oh my God, oh my God. This is amazing! Isn't this amazing?" Mel punched Isaac's arm. "Our best friend is *the* best bodybuilder in the world!"

"Yeah, I'll give him credit, he won this fair and square." Isaac muttered, stroking his chin, studying Zack's build and poise. He wanted to start winning medals too, after all.

"I can't believe Zebra Cakes did all *that* to him!" Mel gestured to Zack, beaming toothily and striking an archer's pose, his curled arm so overfull of muscle his clenched fist could almost press against his peaked bicep, and the straight line of view from bicep, across his sprawling mountain-like shoulders and bust line, up through his straightened arm a work of art. But where Mel was looking at the big picture, the sheer brawn packed on to a single person's frame, Isaac's gaze drifted towards Zack's middle, and those bloated abs. It *looked* like a roidgut— one not unlike Isaac's own, really— but he knew Zack was, in that realm, entirely clean.

The impala narrowed his eyes. "...Did he cheat on his pre-competition diet? I told him how important it was to not overdo it; he can splurge after."

"Oh no, I watched him. The only thing he had were a few zebra cakes, and water."

Isaac's head snapped back to Mel. "*Mel!* Damn it, I said no big protein boosts! Go ahead and define a *few* for me."

The meerkat spread his hands "Dude, I don't know, like... three? Four?" He gestured back to the hulking zebra. "What does it matter? He *won*, didn't he?"

Isaac furrowed his brow, looking down at the meerkat. In the past few months, the impala had realized that, despite his steady stream of questionably legal supplements, he hadn't just fallen behind Zack— he was skinnier than Mel, too. He hadn't touched those Zebra Cakes since he had gotten them— even for someone who regularly juiced himself, there was something about the protein cakes that he just didn't trust. He looked at Mel again, *really* looking at him— the meerkat's arms had swollen up with thickly layered burls of muscle, and his bull-like neck was in danger of slipping under his increasingly beefy shoulders— but the part of his shirt stretching out the most wasn't around his shoulder line or even his plump and juicy pecs— it was his middle. The meerkat looked like he was smuggling a beachball under his shirt, and he could even see the underhang of that gut sticking out over his waistband.

"Are you *still* on a bulking routine, by the by? On top of the zebra cakes?" Isaac asked, arching his brow.

"Well, how the hell else am I going to catch up with Zack?" Mel asked, holding out his thick arms to gesture to himself. "I gotta keep up with his gains somehow."

"Yeah, but Mel, come on." Isaac massaged his forehead. "You've been at this long enough to know that you gotta cut too if you ever want to be a professional bodybuilder."

"Zack doesn't! He just keeps bulking and I mean— *look* at him!" Mel countered.

The impala rolled his eyes, and began to massage his forehead. "Mel, has it ever occurred to you that you don't *actually* need to do exactly what Zack does? Like, we're all different. What works for him isn't necessarily going to work for you. How do you explain this, after all?" Isaac thumped the meerkat's thick middle; it bounced in response.

"Hey, hey!" Mel slapped Isaac's hand away. "Aren't you the one who's tried three different kinds of steroids? Who're you to judge?"

Isaac held up his hands. "Alright, fine, but if you think you're going to get some extra exercise in by hauling around a spare tire like that, don't come crying to me when you can't fit into *any* regulation-sized posers."

The lights flipped on and off, and music cued Zack to exit stage right. As the hulking zebra stomped off stage, he immediately threw his arms around Mel and Isaac, each one's cheeks wedged between the zebra's pumped biceps and plump, full pecs.

"*Dudes!* My bros, compadres, this is the *best* day of my life!" Zack declared, nearly pulling both the impala and meerkat right off their feet. "I can't believe it. I *won*. And I owe it to Zebra Cakes!"

"Hah, nice read, son, but you're not getting paid for that one when the cameras aren't on you!" Ron shouted, the rhino lumbering into view. "Ah, you were great out there, kid! World champion— how does it feel?"

"Oh, man, my head's still spinning— but I *might* just be hungry," Zack chuckled, still holding his two friends in their headlocks, jostling their heads as he gave a full, belly-full laugh that made his chest bounce.

"Hey! Hey, easy there!" Isaac grumbled.

"Ah, say no more. Go long!" Ron pulled out a zebra cake and unwrapped it. Zack jolted backwards, dragging Isaac and Mel along with him as he leapt up, snatching the supposedly healthy pastry in his mouth.

Ron guffawed, clapping. "Ah, that's great! Great, we're going to put that in the next round of commercials."

"*Zack.*" Isaac growled, tugging against the steel cable-like thickness and hardness of the equine's massive arm. "We're not free weights, you dumbbell! And ease up, Mel hasn't said anything, I'm pretty sure you're cutting off circulation to his head."

"Oop, sorry dude," Zack grunted, loosening his grip. "Mel— Bro, you can let go."

The zebra grunted as he lifted his arm, the burly meerkat practically wrapped around his anvil-sized tricep and ballooning bicep. "Bro?"

"Huh?" Mel shook his head, his cheek pressed against Zack's tensed arm.

"Why don't you let go, man?"

"Oh, right, sorry Zack," Mel chuckled bashfully, slipping off the zebra.

Ron's gaze went down to the meerkat's thick middle and grinned. "Hah! See you've really been making use of the cakes, huh? Everything you hoped for, bud?"

"Oh, yeah, they're great!" Mel said brightly, thumping his beefy chest. "I've put on ten pounds in a week!"

"No kidding..." Isaac muttered, before Ron clapped his back, forcing the impala to stumble forward.

"How about you, champ?" the hulking rhino asked. "How're the zebra cakes working for you?"

"Oh, uh," Isaac cleared his throat before shrugging his broad shoulders. "I'm going to be honest, I've... not really touched them. They're too sweet for my tastes." He grinned crookedly. "Truth be told, I'm pretty sure they might've gone bad..."

"Oh, nonsense!" Ron waved off the impala's comment. "The FDA confirmed that zebra cakes don't expire for two years."

"Oh, well, doesn't that just send a wave of relief..." Isaac muttered.

The burly rhino pat Isaac's shoulder again. "Hey, try it for a week or so, champ and we'll get you on this stage next year. Don't you think so, Zack?"

"Oh, for *sure* man!" the huge zebra curled his arm, patting his boulder bicep. "Imagine carrying around guns like these!"

"That's the spirit!" Ron chuckled, and draped his arm over Zack's. He steered the zebra away from his two friends. "Now, listen Zack— we have to get you ready for a victory party. Big Lou's has a ballroom rented in the hotel next door, and you are the guest of honor. Now, I want you right by me for this, okay champ? I'll be there to show you what to say around all the reporters and stuffed shirts, and," Ron winked, nudging Zack's side. "I'll make sure you get all the best food. You've been without *real* food for too long, and we're going to have you indulge tonight!"

"Oh, music to my ears, Ron!" Zack chuckled. "Man, I couldn't have done this without you. I could eat *anything*."

Ron grinned wide. "Y'know, we'll take a week or two off, but then after that and this next round of commercials, what do you think about a few new events? What do you want to do next, now that you've won?"

Zack opened his mouth, then frowned. "I... Huh. I don't know, man." The zebra stroked his chin; bodybuilding champion was kind of the end goal.

Ron pat his chest. "Well, like I said, I have a few new ideas. We'll see what you think about it— but for now, let's get you something to eat, huh?"

Weeks passed, and Mel was beginning to feel restless. It was probably because Zack hadn't been around for awhile— the zebra was constantly called away to commercial recordings, press events, photo shoots, meals with Ron... the meerkat was almost feeling a little bit jealous, if he was being honest. Without Zack around, working out just wasn't as fun as it used to be. Isaac was still there, sure, but he was so serious and grumpy, it was like working out with a drill sergeant— Mel thought the impala was frustrated that the roids were doing almost nothing for him, but even he wasn't stupid enough to say that to Isaac's face.

He did also glance with a fair bit of guilt down at his own middle; his bulking cycle had never really ended. On the one hand, his arms had *never* been bigger— he almost exclusively wore sleeveless shirts these days, and loved to pump up his arms until his biceps got bigger than his head. He also loved that his chest jutted so far out, he could balance a water bottle on it. But on the other hand, his bloated, round belly was sticking out so far it almost filled his lap when he sat down. He had meant to cut back, or do more cardio, but... the growth just felt so good, and he hated the thought of cutting down his five daily zebra cakes.

"Mel, come on, we doing cardio for a cooldown or what?" Isaac grunted. The impala's weight had plateaued, much to his annoyance. He had given up on the steroids— maybe he couldn't beat genetics after all. He was still working out, and without Zack lumbering around, the title of King of the Gym was between him and Mel; and to be frank, he was still the size and

shape of a competition-ready bodybuilder, and he kept his legs defined and cut like fluted columns, abs like cobblestones, and could bounce quarters off his pecs. Yet some people *still* treated roly-poly Mel like he was cock of the walk; these days there was no accounting for taste, especially ever since they added Zebra Cakes at the smoothie and snack bar. He also swore he saw a lot more bouncing bellies and tight workout shirts around these days.

"Oh, come on dude, we've done enough already today, haven't we?" Mel groaned, slumping in his chair next to the smoothie bar.

Isaac cast Mel a look that could make flowers wilt. "Mel. You jogged on the treadmill for one minute, did two sets on the bench press, said you were going for a smoothie and then didn't come back for thirty minutes."

"Well, I guess I'm just having an off day, dude," the meerkat shrugged.

"You've been on an off day for weeks. Come on." Isaac grabbed Mel, trying to pull him into his feet. "I swear, Zack disappears for a week or two and you go to pieces, and then you *eat your feelings* with those damn zebra cakes." The impala planted his hands on the meerkat's shoulders. "Listen. Zack is *busy*. You need to get a hold of yourself and get back to work—he's not just going to burst through the door any time you miss him— *oh my God*."

"Whoooo's ready for a *Zack Attack*?!"

Isaac slapped his forehead as the gym doors flew open, the beast of a zebra charging in and spreading his huge arms. He was dressed in a muscle shirt emblazoned with the zebra cakes logo that clung tightly to his torso, his engorged limbs roped with even denser layers of muscle.

"Zack!"

The meerkat leapt to his feet as he rushed over to hug Zack. Isaac hadn't seen him move so fast in weeks.

"Brooo!" Zack grinned wide, pulling Mel off his feet. "Dude, you're still bulking! You're going to be as big as me if you keep this up!" He then looked up, shooting finger guns at Isaac. "Buddy, how's it going?"

"Zack! I didn't think you'd be here," Mel felt his grin tighten. "You look... great." How had he gotten even bigger, and *still* had his V-shape torso?

The zebra threw those battering ram arms, yanking Isaac off his feet. "Dude, we *gotta* get you on a real bulking program! You're like a freakin' feather, man. We gotta blow you up into a mass monster!"

"I'm trying," Isaac said ruefully. "Believe me." He frowned, trying not to let his muzzle get buried in the cleft of the zebra's chest. He frowned; something felt off below Zack's chest. In fact, despite Zack clearly not lacking for strength, he felt... softer. He cast a suspicious glance towards the zebra.

Zack clapped his hands together to get the gym's attention—he had a lot more fans these days, so soon, the zebra was being crowded. "Dudes! Bros! Have I got news for you— it's been a while, but the Zack Attack Nation is back in action! Check out my channel at eight, we're starting off a whole new series!" He then turned to Mel and Isaac. "Now, can I count on my two best bros to help spot me? I'm lifting a *lot* these days. You should see my one rep max on squats."

Isaac opened his mouth. "Well, actually, we were just wrapping—"

"Yes. Hell yes!" Mel leapt to meet Zack's offer of a high five. "Let's *do* it!"

The impala barely registered throughout the workout; his eyes were fixed on Zack's middle. He kept watching through the zebra's workout for any tell-tale sign, and when that muscle shirt fluttered up for just a moment, he saw it. Isaac waited until Zack was toweling off in the locker room to confront him.

"So..." the impala began, rummaging through his locker. "New series on the vlog?"

"Oh yeah dude, Ron wants me to start on like, more lifestyle stuff— nutrition, y'know? We're starting tonight with a whole-ass mukbang!" Zack said.

"A muk— gah!" Isaac banged his horns against the top of the locker. Rubbing his head, he turned around to face Zack. "Dude. Are you *sure* that's a good idea?"

"Oh, come on." The zebra waved his concerns off. "One meal isn't the end of the world."

"Dude." Isaac rubbed his forehead. "I'm going to level with you— You drive me *crazy*, like, three out of four days. You're vain, a lughead, and you keep doing all these things that haven't been funny since high school— but I *do* care about you. I *really* think you need to slow your roll on these zebra cakes."

"Ugh, this again? Dude, look at me!" Zack held out his arms again, striking a pose paired with his winning smile.

"Yeah?" Isaac folded his arms. Giving the zebra a cursory look, he nodded curtly. "Lift up your shirt. Let's see those washboard abs you spent three years getting."

"Uh..." Zack suddenly couldn't look Isaac in the eye. "Izzy, it's been a *really* long day, and I gotta get going... *Dude!*"

Isaac cut the space between the two of them, grabbed the neckline of Zack's shirt, and tore it right down the middle, revealing a very tight girdle wrapped around the zebra's thick torso.

"Uh..." Zack cleared his throat. "I-it's not what it looks like, it's just a bit of— *bro!*"

Isaac grabbed the girdle next and yanked the girdle free— he had to leap back, so much extra mass suddenly billowed out. The zebra's brick-like abs were completely gone as a round, shockingly plush gut bounced off Zack's frame. Even some of the shape in his chest was sagging now— the zebra had pushed right past off-season bulk to something he'd expect on an up-and-coming sumo wrestler.

"Oh my *God*." Isaac gasped. "What the hell is this girdle made out of, the same kevlar they use to make space suits?"

"Yes." Zack grunted indignantly, snatching the sides out of Isaac's hands. "I can afford it now. Look man, it's just... a bit of bloat, okay?"

"*Bloat?* Are you kidding me, man?!" Isaac slapped his forehead. "Dude, if you ever want to win another competition, you have *got* to get your diet under control!"

"I know, I know, I just..." Zack huffed, and Isaac swore the zebra's gut jumped out another perilous inch or so. "Food is so *good*, man."

"Oh, for the love of..." the impala sighed, shaking his head. "Look. I would *really* re-think this mukbang, that's only going to make things worse!"

"I know, I know, but look— I promised Ron, so like... I'll cut things back after, okay?" Zack twisted his mouth, then gestured with his girdle. "Now because you *ruined my shirt*, can you at least, like... help me back in this thing?"

"On *one* condition." Isaac held up a finger. "Show this," he grabbed the zebra's gut, giving it a firm shake, "to Mel. Dude worships the ground you walk on. He copies *everything* you do, and you see how big he's getting."

Zack ran a hand down his mane. "Yeah... No, that's fair. I'll tell him."

Isaac nodded. "Good. I'm going to go shower and head home. I'll see you next week for some real cardio." The impala palmed his fist. "I'll whip you into shape."

The zebra chuckled lightly. "Yeah, sure thing, dude."

Later that night, Isaac was in his room, the impala trying to crunch numbers to see if there was anything he could do to break past his weight plateau. He was looking through the stats of his last three steroids, and none of them were adding up. His only choice to get more out of them was to up the dosage... but he didn't much care for potentially losing the family jewels, as it were.

He growled in frustration, leaning back in his seat as he glanced at his second monitor. Zack was about to start, and the impala had a morbid curiosity about what this mukbang was going to look like.

"Hey, hey, hey! Zack Attack Nation, what is up?!" Zack loudly declared as his stream went live. "It's been a hot minute, but I'm back! Tonight we're going to shake things up a bit, and we're doing a protein-filled mukbang, sponsored by Big Lou's Zebra Cakes, the protein snack with crave-worthy taste, 80 grams of *pure* Bro-tein in every bite. You wanna get big? Zebra Cakes will get you to the mass monster you always wanted to be!" Zack said, thumping his oversized chest and pumping his free arm."

"*Fuck, Zack*, do you ever turn off?" Isaac muttered, folding his arms as he watched.

"Joining me tonight is my bro Mel, who's coming in with the *stuff*."

Isaac's brows arched in surprise as the meerkat, grinning broadly, lumbered into view with a tray laden with a staggering amount of food- a pyramid of burgers, plates stacked high with ribs and fried chicken.

"Oh... oh my God." Isaac gasped. "Oh my God. I might just watch my two dumbest friends pop like balloons."

"And in between breaks, we're going to pop some Zebra Cakes, Mel, make it rain!"

"Hell yeah, bro!" The meerkat leapt up, dumping Zebra Cakes in front of the camera.

"Let's not waste any more time, you all are here for the Zack Attack, let's start because I am *starving*."

Isaac watched in utter fascination. Big guys always had an appetite, sure, but Zack was eating like a man possessed. Isaac swore Zack's jaw unhinged like a boa constrictor as he managed three burgers in one go. The impala was gobsmacked; the table hid most of it, but he

could clearly see the way the top-most region of Zack's growing globe of a gut was pressing into the top of the table, and where Mel's chest was only showing on the camera, the impala's sharp eye caught how his shirt was strained just below the sides.

As he watched his two friends stuff themselves like it was their last meal, Isaac found himself musing on something. The Zebra Cakes. They had changed everything— it was turning both Zack and Mel into gluttons. But Isaac remembered the way Zack looked at the bodybuilding competition— there was no girdle then. He had been nearly all muscle, and no matter how much Big Lou moved money around, that medal was fairly won. There was *something* in Zebra Cakes that worked, but odds were that it was outweighed with sugars, artificial fats, and probably appetite stimulants. But he was only a struggling bodybuilder, what could he do about it? Isaac smirked to himself, then glanced over at the framed Master's Degree in Chemistry hanging over his computer. It was about time he cracked this nut.

He kept the mukbang on as he grabbed the mostly untouched box of Zebra Cakes he had been given months ago. While Zack and Mel continued to stuff themselves, Isaac grabbed a few and began breaking out some equipment he had used for preparing his less than legal supplements, as well as some chemistry projects, and began to try and break down the Zebra Cakes. He studied the frosting, the filling, and the cake— to his complete lack of surprise, corn syrup, food coloring, sugar, fats by the fistful— but while Zack was breaking new tears in his shirt from his twentieth burger, Isaac stumbled upon the chemical he needed. There was a four-ring amino acid chain, that linked two chemical compounds that he was *very* familiar with; cyproheptadine and oxandrolone. Cyproheptadine was one of the most common appetite stimulants on the market, but oxandrolone... that was interesting. Oxandrolone was a powerful muscle growth stimulant, but it had been banned by the FDA for over a decade. And it was just here, in the Zebra Cakes.

"Wait a minute..." Isaac sat up, realization striking him in his furrowed brow. He swung past Zack leaning over the table, feebly reaching for a fried chicken breast and Mel presumably asleep in an empty chicken bucket and then looked something up online. Ron Hornmann retired from professional bodybuilding twelve or so years ago, a year before oxandrolone was banned.

Isaac folded his arms, leaning back in his chair. "Hornmann, you son of a bitch... I'm on to you." His eye then floated back towards the results. Oxandrolone was *really* potent. Perhaps he could refine it, just a bit, and really start packing on the pounds. Getting doses of steroids had been such a pain, getting through customs from his contact in Eastern Europe... but thanks to Zack, he could just buy one of the strongest steroids at the gym or at the store. A pang of guilt shot through him, however, as he turned back to his second monitor. Zack was *still* eating. He seemed to be in a trance, his eyes half-lidded. He had stopped talking entirely. With some reluctance, Isaac also looked at the comments.

"What the fuck is this? What happened to Zack, man?"

"OMG, what a pig."

"Fatass, lol."

"Disgusting. Couldn't pay me to do this."

"Unsubscribed."

"Fucking Hell, Zack..." Isaac sighed, running his hand over his face, and started speaking to the screen. "You know, you love rubbing that whole prying me from the locker episode in my face, but you forgot how I covered your ass during prom— I *told* you Abby Baxter was going to stand you up, but no. Then we had to pretend to be boyfriends, and then you kept scuffing my new dress pants with those big, clod-hopping hooves of yours, and..." Isaac threw up his hands. "Well, suit up, fat ass, Isaac Kamara's saving you from another prom disaster."

Zack barely remembered slurring out his last sponsor line for Zebra Cakes before he fumbled the camera and dropped where he sat. As far back as he could remember, Zack had dreams revolving around winning and getting stronger. Ever since his dad sat him down and talked about how real men are strong, real men go out and win, he had dreamt about something like his bodybuilding competition. And while he had been riding that high for months, his dreams had started to change. For now, all of them that he remembered had been about food. Eating every forbidden, fatty, overly sweet thing that he had pushed back for years— one time he dreamt about a giant zebra cake eating *him*, but that was a one-off thing. He was in the middle of dreaming about traveling in a submarine made out of sub sandwiches. He was halfway into a meatball the size of his head until it started yelling at him.

"Zack! *Zack!* Zack, wake up, you idiot!"

"Guh!" the zebra shot up. Blinking bleary-eyed and rolling out the crick in his neck, he realized, much to his embarrassment, that he had fallen asleep at the mukbang table, grease-soaked burger wrappings, barbecue sauce-stained trays, and empty chicken buckets strewn all around him. He looked up to see Isaac glaring down at him. "Dude... Izzy, what're you doing here, man?"

"What're you doing *here* sprawled out on your kitchen table?" He looked over to Mel, who was actually curled up on the countertop, cuddling a chicken carcass that had been picked clean. "Oh my God... Mel! Wake up!"

"Whuh— I'm awake! I'm awake." Mel groaned, clutching his bloated middle. "Oh, God... my stomach... I feel like I'm about to give birth..."

"Yeah. Triplets." Isaac said, thumping the meerkat's bulging gut, making Mel wince. "Okay. This is what we're going to do. Both of you are going to shower, I'm going to make coffee, and then we're going to *talk* about zebra cakes and Ron Hornmann."

"Ugh, dude, you're such a *downer* on this stuff," Zack muttered, lazily waving his hand in dismissal. He began to slump down, resting his head on the table. "Just like... slide me a zebra cake and we'll talk when my head stops hurting."

"Spare me, dude. Come on! Up!" Isaac draped Zack's huge arm over his shoulders and braced himself. As he tugged, he could feel more and more of the zebra's growing heft pressing down on him, his well-muscled arms locked as he wrapped them around Zack's bulk and tried pulling him to his feet.

"Good *Lord*, Zack! What'd you do during the mukbang, eat a baby elephant?" Isaac grunted as he used every ounce of his strength to pull the zebra to his feet.

"God, bro, you're *mean* when you're hungry!" Zack groaned. "Have a zebra cake, or something."

Isaac rolled his eyes. "Shower. *Now*."

"Ugh, fine!" Zack groaned, cradling his inflated globe of a gut, his thickened legs beginning to wobble with the extra weight and his commanding swaggering stride was becoming more and more of a clumsy waddle as he squeezed into his bathroom.

"Isaac..." Mel groaned. "Carry me."

"What are you, *six*?" the impala prodded the meerkat. "Come on, up!"

Mel grunted, slapping Isaac's hand away. When Isaac tried to push him off the table, the meerkat pushed back, and then, faster than the impala thought the meerkat could move in his current state—he leapt onto Isaac instead, grappling the impala, wrapping his enormously thick arms around Isaac's neck. His bloated gut pressed down on the leaner man's broad back. "I said, *carry me*."

"What the Hell is *wrong* with you?!" Isaac snarled, puffing as he struggled to lift the densely heavy meerkat.

"You're being a bit of a dick, and when I stand up the room spins. So carry me to the other bathroom," Mel muttered, his eyes half-lidded as he rested his head atop of Isaac's, wedged between his horns.

Isaac puffed his cheeks; thankfully, he squatted about as much weight as what it felt like Mel carried. "God, *fine*. When did you two meatheads become my damn kids?"

It took about an hour to make coffee, push both Zack and Mel into the showers, and then struggle to pry Zack free of the shower, and then reheat the coffee. Finally, Isaac had both of them sitting down—at this point, none of their clothes fit; Zack's biggest shirt was riding up half his swollen middle, the zebra cakes logo stretched perilously thin, while Mel had to give up entirely, still nursing a belly the size of a prize-winning pumpkin that filled his lap. The definition of Zack's arms and legs were fading away, while his chest had puffed up and was starting to sag, and his thick hand was blindly groping for another zebra cake.

It took Isaac twenty minutes to explain what he had discovered—and another ten to get Zack and Mel to properly say the words "Cyproheptadine" and "Oxandrolone." Finally, he got his message through.

"...And that's the gist of it. Ron has been screwing with you—I don't know how he managed it, but he packed zebra cakes with appetite stimulants and *insanely* illegal steroids." Isaac looked between Zack and Mel. "So... Zack, you gotta quit."

"I can't believe it..." Zack shook his head, huffing heavily. He grunted, pulling himself to his feet.

Isaac placed a hand on the zebra's shoulder. "Dude, I know it's tough, but listen, we can fix this."

To the impala's shock, Zack harshly smacked his hand away. "No! I can't believe *you*, bro!" the zebra swerved, spinning on his heel. His gut slammed into Isaac like a wrecking ball,

forcing the impala back. "I *know* you've been jealous ever since I started this gig, but what the hell is this Cyproheptat or whatever the fuck?"

Isaac narrowed his eyes, grunting from the impact. "What, you... you think I'm making this up? Are you *kidding* me? Why would I do that?"

"Uh, I don't know, because you think I'm a dumbass that'll fall for anything, and then *you* can swoop in and be zebra cakes' new sponsor!" Zack snorted, harshly prodding Isaac in the chest.

"I don't think you're a dumbass, meathead! I think you're a dumb *fatass!*" Isaac snapped back. "Look at yourself! You went from the world champion bodybuilder to this... doughboy parade balloon!" The impala smacked the zebra's growing gut, making it bounce violently. "You're getting so much junk in your trunk, you might as well rent yourself out as a garbage truck!"

"Oh, *screw you*, bro!" Zack growled, angrily huffing as he nearly bowled Isaac over pushing him aside.

"Where are you going, Zack? Get back here!" Isaac demanded.

"First of all," Zack snarled, returning with the only pair of sweatpants that still fit him. "No. Second of all, *fuck you*, no. I'm going out to a buffet Ron told me about, because *I'm hungry*, so sue me! And for that matter, get the fuck out of my place! If you're here when I get back, Isaac, I guess my *fat ass* will just flatten you!"

Isaac winced as Zack stormed out, slamming the door hard enough to crack the door frame. "Fuck..." the impala slipped down on the couch next to Mel. The meerkat had been dead quiet ever since Isaac explained things, and was staring down at his gut. "That's... bad. No bro, dude, or even Izzy... He hasn't called me *Isaac* since I crashed his car in senior year." He glanced at Mel. "Look, man... you know I'm telling the truth, right? I— I wouldn't make this up."

Mel took in a deep breath before he looked up to Isaac. "You *swear* you're telling the truth?"

"Dude, I promise. I've got all the notes back at my place."

Mel let out a low moan, his hands gingerly rubbing his round, bulbous middle. "God... Oh my *God*, what did I do to myself? I'm such an idiot! I... I kept telling myself, Zack knows what he's doing, he's a champion bodybuilder, he's the best, and... oh my *God*, look at me!"

Isaac sighed. "Look, dude, it's not like this is any permanent. You can bounce back from this. It's just... it'll take a *lot* of cardio."

Mel twisted his mouth. "Just... I feel like a moron."

The impala gave the meerkat a look. "Bro... you're not a moron. But like. You gotta be honest with Zack. You know *he's* the dumb one. You're not going to get him to... you know, take an interest in you just by doing whatever he does. You gotta spell it out for him."

Mel sighed heavily. "I'll... probably wait until later." He gave Isaac a half smile. "He's always in a better mood when he's full."

"So how long'll that take, like... three hours?"

Mel giggled, punching Isaac in the arm. "Dude, shut up!"

Meanwhile, Zack was stuck taking the bus. His car's axle had just completely collapsed—stupid, cheap manufacturing— and until he got something big enough for a real man, he was stuck on the bus.

"Fucking Isaac, man..." the zebra grumbled, frowning deeply. "Doesn't know what the hell he's talking about."

"Oh! Man, you a fan of zebra cakes?"

Zack glanced up. There was a raccoon nearly wider than he was tall, his belly leading him by more than a foot and sagging past his knees. When he sat down, his belly smooshed against the back of the seat in front of him, nearly spilling over the top.

"Oh, uh... yeah man, they're pretty great."

"I'll say— I started taking one after each meal, they're *great*."

"And... they're helping you lose weight?" Zack asked cautiously.

"Oh, well..." the raccoon patted his belly, sending ripples across a field of doughy flab. "Not *yet*. I put on two pounds, but that's water weight. Just need to sweat it off, and it's smooth sailing from there, heh."

Zack twisted his mouth as his stop came up. "Oh, uh. Good luck with that, man."

"Heh! You too, bud. There's hope for both of us!"

The zebra winced at that. He was a little off season, but... it wasn't that bad. It did strike him that the raccoon hadn't even recognized him as the sponsor for zebra cakes. He jogged— well, trotted; jogging only made his belly bounce— across the street to the buffet. Ron said it had some of the best prime rib cuts in town, bacon-wrapped steak, and desserts themed after zebra cakes— it sounded like a good deal to him. Zack glanced up and sucked air through his teeth, darting his eyes away. The billboard above the buffet was one of his; showing off his sculpted glutes and defined, sprawling valley of a back, flashing his gold medal. "Zebra Cakes: Champion Bodybuilding Protein for Bodybuilder Champions!" It began to sink into him just how different he looked from winning the competition... but pushing that down and drowning his sorrows in unlimited lasagna and bacon-wrapped steak seemed like the better option.

Zack slipped into the buffet and quietly asked for a table for one, and then made a beeline for the row of fried foods. He stacked his plate high with anything that looked good, and as he turned to go back to his table, he accidentally bumped into someone.

"Sorry dude, I... *woah*."

Zack stopped as he looked up at a large, soft orange blob. He realized, by the small, thin strip of cloth he could see straddling the peak, he was staring at the largest belly he had ever seen.

"Oh, it's... hrrph... no problem, dude," the blob rumbled. Zack had to lean to the side to see past that monstrous gut to see black stripes stretched over bloated, round love handles and piles of fat stacked atop each other like a melting wedding cake. Atop this mountain of fat was a round, chubby cheek-ringed face of a tiger, a mop of hair tipped with slightly faded pink highlights.

Zack was left staring, as not even that doughy, blubbery raccoon was this fat. He shook his head and waved to the tiger as the blubbery beast shuffled around the buffet, loading up multiple plates. The zebra wasn't gawking at the hugely obese tiger just out of exhibitionism; there was something familiar about him. It was the hair— those pink highlights were ringing several bells. Frowning softly, he reached for his smart phone and looked up a name... and then breathed in sharply, gasping in shock. He stood up quickly, his own gut accidentally knocking against the table and making his plate clatter as he moved to the booth the tiger had wedged his enormous girth into.

"Uhm. Hey, dude. So... question. Are you... Ruben Vasquez?"

The tiger looked up, his cheeks stuffed with a small pizza he had rolled up into a makeshift burrito and tried shoving into his mouth in one bite. "Wha—?" He gulped it down, his multiple chins wobbling. His pillowy chest and lard-laden arm wobbled as he thumped his vast middle, forcing a small belch. "Do I know you...?"

"You... you were like, a *really* famous bodybuilder! A *huge* up-and-comer! You were the guy that was going to beat Ron Hornmann's winning streak! What... what're you doing here?" Zack asked.

"Uh... eating lunch?" Ruben shrugged his shoulders. "Ron Hornmann... man, there's a name I haven't heard in a while. Guh... he was a *lot* of fun to hang out with, but man, I think I picked up a lot of bad habits around him... he encouraged me on this like, mega-bulking routine, and man, I just... never stopped." He chuckled deeply, hefting up thick fistfuls of his belly fat before letting it drop and wobble like gelatin. "As you can see!"

"Hah..." Zack tried to hide his stress-stricken frown, laughing weakly as it felt like a lead weight hit his stomach. "Yeah..."

"But, y'know, I think he might've done me a favor... bodybuilding, man. Such a grind. So much stress, work, and effort, so much politics... eating, it's like... just eating, you know? Ah, I can enjoy life as much as I want, eat what I want, when I want, as much as I want..." Ruben rubbed his belly, already picking at a plate of ribs. "I'll tell ya kid, being a huge fat ass isn't uh, *that* easy, but it's liberating. Living life to the fullest, yeah?"

"Haha... yeah..." Zack's ears drooped. He had a bad feeling he owed Isaac a huge apology.

"What'd you say your name was by the way, kid?"

"Oh, uh— I'm Zack. Zack Mangeur."

"Oooh! I've seen you! Zack Attack, right? I heard you were sponsoring Big Lou's... Hey, Ron Hornmann works there now. Heh." The tiger reached out, patting Zack's gut. "Looks like he got a new lunch partner, eh?"

The thought of himself getting as big as the gelatinous blimp of a tiger sitting before him was a shockingly powerful image that made the zebra tremble. "Hahaha, yeah, uh... I've, uh, taken up enough of your time, I better... yeah." He quickly turned away to move back towards his table. Isaac had been right— he had been right about everything. The zebra was almost too upset to eat. Almost being the operative word as he quickly grabbed a few taquitos and a chicken

leg to take with him, as he rushed out of the buffet and began making his way to Isaac's apartment.

When Isaac opened his door to answer the frenzied knocking, he was unprepared to be pulled into one of Zack's massive, increasingly plush hugs. "*Bro*. Oh my God, oh my God— Dude, bro, I— agh! *Bro!*"

"E-easy!" Isaac choked. "Easy, Zack! Remember your words!"

Zack sighed, setting him down. "Bro, you were right. About like, *everything*. Ron's got this weird, like... *thing* with fattening people up, and he's trying to fatten *me* up, and just... bro! I'm so sorry, I shouldn't have said any of that shit— you were right, I was being *such* a dumbass. Please... you gotta help me."

"Dude, relax," Zack held up his hands. "We got this. Look, what Ron and Big Lou's put in zebra cakes is ten times kind of illegal— we can fucking nail him." The impala began to stroke his chin. "Actually... I think I've already got an idea." He looked back up to Zack. "You wouldn't mind bulking up a bit more, would you?"

A few weeks later, Ron Hornmann was walking up the stairwell to Zack's apartment. The rhino was feeling very good about how far Zack had come along— oh, he could only imagine what the zebra would look like with a few extra hundred pounds, when he could *really* start stretching out those stripes. And with all the advertising for zebra cakes he had saved up, he could start the process over and over again when Zack's weight plateaued and he needed to start looking towards greener pastures. That thought made him grin all the way to the door, moving inside when he heard Zack call "It's open, dude!"

Ron pressed in, and the rhino's mouth split into a wide, hungry smile when his eyes fell on Zack's increasingly juicy ass cheeks nearly spilling out of his stretched out boxers. "Oh! Ron, hey, man! Uh... sorry, I think like, my pants all shrunk in the wash..."

Not likely, Ron thought, smirking to himself. "It's all okay, son. Bulking cycle going well?"

"Oh, great!" Zack turned around, and Ron smiled even wider— there was hardly any vestige of the zebra's musculature left unmarred or unburied in soft, heavy layers of fat. He had started to go fairly pear-shaped, his hips widening dramatically as his belly spilled out in a great wave of lard.

"Hah, I can tell. So... Do you want to talk about the new nutrition videos over lunch, champ?"

"Ugh... I, uh, need to find a shirt that fits first, dude..." Zack said, his hand lingering beneath the underhang of his belly.

"No worries, we can order in," Ron said.

Zack grinned in relief. "Oh! Well, that's fine by me, man. Hey... you mind if my two bros join us?"

"Hm? Oh, sure, I don't see why not."

"Cool, cool. Mel?"

Ron had no time to react as a wrecking ball of a meerkat slammed into his back side, thick, girthy arms wrapping tight around his neck. "What—?!"

"You're looking a bit tired there, Ron, dude! Maybe you oughta take a load off..."

"Zack—!"

Ron tried pushing back against Zack as he slammed into him, but those hefty, overly plump ass cheeks weighed him down and tipped him down, the rhino slamming to the ground weighed down by Mel and Zack. Ron's hands scrambled to dislodge the meerkat, but Mel had a vice grip around his neck.

"What— what the *Hell* is this?! Get *off* of me, you stupid oaf!"

"Tsk. Not the right tone for a negotiation, Mr. Hornmann." Ron glanced over, eyes wide as he spotted Isaac—the impala had been bulking up in a serious way. Already nearly as big as a professional bodybuilder, he had exploded into the musclebound, hulking physique that was dangerously close to Ron's in his prime. His muscle shirt clung to hefty, sculpted pecs, plunging down deep enough to see a set of cobblestone abs peeking out from the top. He squatted down on hefty, trunk-like legs, tenting his fingers as his taut biceps pressed against his chest.

"N-negotiation?! What the hell are you talking about?" the rhino growled.

"We know about the Oxandrolone, Ron."

The pachyderm bodybuilder's eyes widened, and he fell silent.

"I didn't suffocate him, did I?" Zack asked, glancing over his broad shoulder.

"Nah, bro, you're doing fine." Isaac patted Zack's thick middle. "Alright, Ronny— here's how things are going to work. First of all, you're going to leave Zack alone. You're going to resign from being his agent, and just walk away from all of this. Before you do, you're going to convince Big Lou's to take out the Oxandrolone and Cyproheptadine— but before you do *that*, you're going to get me a lifetime supply of the old recipe."

"And *why* would I do any of that? Ron snarled, gritting his teeth.

"Because first of all, Oxandrolone is fucking *awesome*. Look at me!" Isaac grinned, flexing his arm and patting a bicep that was swelling up big as a melon. "Man, you can't get results like that from just *anywhere*. Second of all, if you don't do exactly what we want, I'm going to take my findings to the FDA, we're going to release a video from Ruben Vasquez about how you sabotaged his bodybuilding career, and if you somehow wriggle out of jail, your reputation and career will be in tatters."

"Yeah, you're kinda fucked here, gonna be honest," Mel said through gritted teeth, using his full force to keep his hold on Ron tight as possible.

"You think I'm going to let you three threaten *me*?" Ron growled, wriggling to try and free himself under Zack's flabby bulk. "I do *not* take to blackmail well! I—!"

Isaac planted one foot on Ron's chest, adding his own bulk to way the rhino down. "Again, bad attitude for this sort of negotiation. Look, Hornmann- we're not after money or anything like that. But this little scheme? It ends *now*. And if you don't agree, we'll let Ruben sit on you."

Ron glared daggers at Isaac, seething impotently. "...Fine."

"Great!" Isaac stepped off the rhino. "Now... I'll just need you to sign a little contract I've written up. I like to be thorough. And after that, treat yourself to a nice lunch, huh?" He squatted down to pat Ron's cheek. "You're looking a little skinny there, *champ*."

After Ron was forced to sign the contract, and forcibly kicked out of Zack's apartment, Isaac breathed a sigh of relief— now, it was his turn to swing his two thickly muscled arms around his bro's shoulders, pressing their cheeks against his chest. "Alright! Now, we can *finally* get things back to normal."

"Yeah..." Zack cleared his throat. "About that, bro." He slipped out of Isaac's grip. "I was thinking..." His eyes drifted down towards his increasingly huge belly, gripping as much heft as he could lift in his hands. "I kinda... *like* being a fatass."

"Wait, what?"

"Izzy, bro, you are *killing* it as a bodybuilder, but like... I don't wanna go back." Zack shrugged, already rubbing his belly and thinking about what he wanted for lunch— he was thinking burritos. *A lot* of them. "Someone told me being a fat ass is actually kinda liberating. I can eat what I want, when I want, as *much* as I want... and hey. There's a crowd out for that sort of thing. I'm... probably going to lose most of my old fans, but." He shrugged. "I kinda... think I've already lost a lot of them with my latest videos."

Isaac frowned. "Dude... are you sure? You worked so hard, and you *killed* it at the championship."

"Hah..." Zack grinned, leaning in to bump his belly against Isaac's reinforced middle. "Well. I'm gonna work hard to get *you* up there. You earned it, bro."

Isaac grinned at Zack warmly, turning to Mel. "What about you?"

"Oh, yeah dude, I'll totally join you at the gym." The meerkat gave a thumbs up. "But I'm kinda... up for a change, too. It turns out, I'm *really* good at wrestling! And wrestlers, they can have *hella* huge guts." He said, slapping his thick, round middle to make it bounce.

"God, are you serious?" Isaac rolled his eyes, trying not to laugh. "I'm stuck with a pair of fat asses, now?"

Zack exchanged a quick look with Mel, and smirked. "Yeah, dude. 'Fraid so." The two thickly built mammals closed in on the impala, pressing him on either side, their bellies squeezing him on either side.

"What the hell are you two idiots doing *now*?"

"It's a bro sandwich!" Zack said. "You've just been Zack Attacked!"

"Yeah," Mel grunted. "If you're not strong enough to get outta this, then I guess you gotta train more, bro."

"Fuck, you two are *such* dorks."

-One Year Later-

Isaac grinned in anticipation— he had stuck to his diet with almost religious fervor, and finally, it was here— it was cheat day once again. And like always, he let Zack choose— he had

picked Bigley's, the most decadent bakery and ice cream parlor Isaac had ever heard of, and that was to start. The impala's eyes glanced up at a billboard across the street. They were just now plastering over Zack's old promotion, and rolling out the new one— the zebra was now showing off his hugely well-fed, rubenesque proportions for all the world to see, his belly spilled out along the floor in the ad in a thick, shapely mass, plush and plump arm draped lazily over his thick sides, massive hips cocked and chunky thunder thighs sprawled out as a trail of chocolate was drizzled across his warped stripes and fluffed up chest.

"Zebra Cakes— Serious Decadence, Serious Flavor," the billboard read. Isaac grinned, shaking his head. He still didn't really understand it, but if it made Zack happy... besides. He was happy not to have the competition as King of the Gym. His stock of refined oxandrolone was still large enough to last him another year or two, and he wasn't done growing just yet. As far as mass monsters were concerned, the impala was looking to smash every record at his first competition next month— He felt like his earth-shaking, fluted column-like legs could crack the pavement when he lumbered by, his arms reinforced by hefty muscle thick as steel girders. His chest was wide as a brick wall, and his mammoth back was like a sprawling tapestry of brawn. He couldn't quite get his abs under control— they were dense and bloated, bowing out in a thick, hefty muscle gut— but when he took the stage and obliterated the competition by every measure, who could say he was anything less than the best?

As the impala lumbered towards Bigley's, he could hear cheering and chanting. By the sound of it, Zack had already gotten started. He pressed in to see the massively huge blubber beast of a zebra sprawled out on the floor— it saved time, and saved Bigley's money from crushed furniture. The crowd was chanting "Zack Attack! Zack Attack!" as the zebra thrust his huge, blubbery arms into the air, mouth open wide as he waited for Mel to slide in another slice of cake.

On the continental shelf of Zack's belly was a huge, nearly empty platter— Isaac could only imagine the size of cake that used to be there. There was a ripple that rocked through his immense body, from the blubbery pair of flour bags that was his sagging chest, down the thick curve of his belly and hefty, tire-sized love handles, then to his barrel-thick, soft thighs splayed out to the side— and then the jiggling began all over again when Mel gave him an encouraging smack on the pair of sofa cushions that served as his rear end. Finally, Zack gulped down the last slice of cake, puffing up his round, billowy cheeks before he gulped it down.

"Oh, way to *go*, babe!" Mel shouted. The meerkat was burly as ever— a heavyweight of heavyweights. He was squeezed into a wrestling singlet that clung mightily to his girthy frame, and he wrapped mammoth arms nearly thicker than they were long around Zack's thick, tire-like neck and kissed his round cheek.

"Wow, really? You started without me?" Isaac scoffed, holding out his arms.

"*Bro!* There you are!" Zack chuckled, grinning broadly as he pat his middle. "I got hungry waiting for you."

"Yeah, now we get to stuff you on your last night of freedom. Hope you're hungry— if you don't keep up with Zack, I'm going to put you into a headlock." Mel grinned toothily, palming his fist.

"Ah, do your worst," Isaac waved them both off. "I got a month to work off whatever you two pigs throw at me." He fondly pat Zack's side as he settled down in a chair next to the zebra. "We still using you as a table, bro?"

"Heh— where else are we going to put all the food we ordered?"

Isaac smiled softly, then nudged Zack. "Hey, uh... you're doing good though, right man?"

Zack grinned wide, dimpling his cheeks. "Psht, 'course, bro. Got my best bro and my brofriend here and awesome food on the way— what else could I want?"