

*Rustle, rustle...CRRRRRRRRRRUNCH! CRUNCH! Crunch...rustle...*

"Come on, Mika," Apollo said gently, arriving in the doorway separating the kitchen and living room, "Put the chips away so I can take you out to that fancy Italian place on the waterfront like we planned."

The hyena pouted, clutching the family-size bag closer. "But I'm *hungry*!"

Apollo rolled his LEDs, moving further into the room and closer to his organic companion. "And we can fix that by going out. Wouldn't you rather have a woodfired pizza than just another handful of ready salted?"

Mika had to concede that he had a point, a very good one at that. There was always a counterargument, though: "But chips are here and pizza's...wherever!"

With a swiftness she could never match, Apollo had snatched the already half-empty bag of chips out of his other half's pudgy clutches. "Not anymore!" he said cheerfully.

Mika's scowl followed him as he returned to the kitchen to put the snacks back where they belonged: in their very own dedicated pantry. He was standing in front of her again in a trice, though, holding out both his hands. "Come on, Mika," he repeated, "time to actually use those legs of yours for once. There's this nifty thing they can do called 'walking'."

The offence she took at the jibe was fleeting, as was the expression of indignation on her chubby features. Soon enough she was giggling grudgingly, her hands settling obligingly in her boyfriend's.

"On three?" he said, already bracing himself.

She nodded. In rough synchronisation, the two of them chanted, "One...two...THREE!"

Mika thrust her weight forward as much as she could from the position sunk deep into the couch cushions which had now conformed to the shape of her weighty frame after all the hours she'd spent with them. The brunt of the burden in getting the hefty hyena vertical fell on Apollo, however. Leaning back slightly, the many motors that powered every joint in his body started to whirr, the sound growing louder and louder as their workload mounted, for Mika hadn't shifted yet. Louder and higher they revved until, finally, the hyena's rump parted company with its matching crater. Her weight surged upwards and straight towards his slighter frame, but he was no ordinary boyfriend to no ordinary girl: he barely had to take a backward step, putting those little motors into reverse for a split second to stop her bowling him over.

Giggling, she grinned up at him, her tummy shuddering to a halt between them a few seconds after the rest of her had. "Carry me, my muscular metal man?" she cooed hopefully, tracing a hand over the deliberately sculpted muscles of his arm, her fingers gliding over his synthetic, leather-like skin.

Apollo shook his head gently, chuckling. "I really think you should give walking a try," he muttered. He stooped, exchanging a brief kiss with the squat hyena, then guided her towards the stairs with a hand on each shoulder.

*CREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEAK!*

"The stairs say hi," Apollo chuckled, starting up the stairs a few steps behind Mika who he knew would be wearing an expression in which embarrassment and enjoyment were vying for screen time. He stayed a few stairs below her as she made her laborious ascent, wide posterior barely squeezing between wall and bannister, every floorboard groaning the song of its people to her as

subjected it to her weight. Though it had never happened yet, Apollo was always braced to catch her if she were to topple backwards; he trusted in all his little motors to arrest any potential tumble despite her heft.

Nearing the summit of their climb, he could already hear her starting to get a little winded: her breathing was becoming deeper, occasionally interrupted by swallowing. “Nearly there!” he encouraged, patting her hip and sending ripples through the surrounding flab he could see even under her shirt, “More speed! More speed!”

Mika mustered up the energy to take the last couple of stairs at something close to a jog, or as close as she could get to one, turning to glare playfully at him in between panting as he sprang up those same steps as if they were no obstacle whatsoever. He smiled innocently, taking hold of her hand once more and leading the way to their bedroom.

“So, what do you think: genuinely pretty and fancy, or pretty and fancy fifty pounds ago and deserves a genuine Mika send-off?” Apollo asked over his shoulder as he threw the doors to Mika’s closet wide.

The hyena, who was feeling as puffed as she looked, had sunk onto the bed – which was becoming ever more lopsided each day – with a cacophony of squeaking bedsprings, creaking slats, and grinding bolts. “I want to look pretty,” she requested, smoothing a crease in her shirt, only to find it to be caused by a crease in her belly.

Apollo turned back towards her. “Proper pretty?”

“Proper pretty.”

Mika’s closet was essentially divided into three sections: her casual clothing occupied roughly half the available space, ill-fitting smart outfits had two-thirds the remainder, leaving Apollo with a fairly limited selection of ‘proper pretty’ garments. Pushing departments A and B aside carefully – he’d taken plenty of care in folding them nicely after all – he extricated the dresses remained, holding each up for the hyena’s inspection in turn.

“Is that all we have?” she asked, a little disappointed.

“Looks like it,” he answered, briefly casting his visual receptors over the closet’s interior to check for any escapees, “I’ll take you shopping some time, all right?”

“Okaaaaaaaaay,” she said, though the prospect of a future trip to her favourite stores did raise her spirits some. She cast a critical eye over what options she had, a low ‘hmm’ accompanying her deliberation. “That one.” Her pudgy finger was pointing at a dress made of a gold material that shimmered slightly in the light shining down on it from the ceiling.

Apollo folded up the rejected candidates and put them back in the closet, then moved over to the hyena on the slowly collapsing bed. “Lazy clothes off!” he instructed briskly, “Can’t go crossing the streams, can we?”

The t-shirt came off easily enough; it lay like a small marquee on the bed as the two of them went through the process of getting her upright once again. After another workout for Apollo’s inner circuitry in getting Mika back to her feet – complete with high-pitched shrieks from his elbow motors in particular – she was holding her belly aloft while he knelt before her, fumbling with the button on her shorts; they were shed with rather more difficulty as her hips seemed loathed to let the waistband past them and her robotic boyfriend didn’t think the relatively thin fabric would stand up

to a full-blooded yank. In the end, though, stage one of Operation Fancification was completed without a single split seam.

Mika was all in favour of sitting down for stage two, having not yet recovered from conquering Mount Staircase, but Apollo insisted that it would make both their lives easier if she stayed upright; his logic was irritatingly impeccable. Huffing, she threw her fists into the air, arm flab wobbling about two pouches of strawberry Jell-O, and waited to be wrapped up in several square feet of glittering gold.

The dress slid over her head with no trouble, her cheeks popping through the top with a violent wobble. It was as Apollo began pulling it down over her chest, which was already putting the integrity of her bra under considerable strain, that he began to suspect that Mika could be squeezing into it at best.

"Hugs your curves," he commented with a small chuckle, earning himself a swat with a chubby hand. The shiny fabric did indeed cling to her more than either of them remembered it doing, the shape of her belly and the locations of her rolls very obvious; yet it fit nonetheless.

Apollo straightened up to perform the final act: zipping up the back. "Deep breath," he advised as the zipper slowly trickled upwards. Higher and higher his hand rose, knitting the metal teeth together and further enhancing the 'second skin' appearance of the dress. Had they been listening closely enough they might have heard the ominous, though tiny, snaps as threads parted company; but on went the zipping.

He had just reached her shoulder blades when...*RIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIP!*

The pair of them froze, both knowing precisely what had just happened but neither wanting to see the proof just yet. She had breathed in sharply, her eyes wide and her expression tense; his LEDs had flickered to red as they always did when startled, focusing intently on the zipper between his fingers without really seeing it.

Apollo was the first to take the plunge. Leaning over the nigh spherical hyena's shoulder, he peered down the length of her dress; it had torn right up the front, almost to her bosom, unequal to the expanse of feliform flab it had been asked to cover.

"Aww, man..."

Mika was looking down at it too now, leaning forwards slightly to get a proper view of the damage. She reached around the swell of her belly to fiddle with one of the holes her clearly expanded girth had brought about; another couple of brave strands gave up the ghost as they were nudged, forming one larger window onto her fur with one of its neighbours.

"Shopping tomorrow?" Apollo suggested gently.

She nodded, letting her breath out and sending several more threads to their doom. "Can we stay in tonight?" she asked, tilting her head back to look up at him so that her cheek squished against his far more solid chest.

"Yeah," he said, smiling a little ruefully, "Yeah, I think that'd be for the best."

Half an hour later, Mika was back on the couch where she felt she belonged. She was still wearing the gold dress; the rip up the front had expanded by an inch or two on the way back downstairs, and

the zipper had busted as she had leaned forward to pick up the remote. Though she now sat there in what were little more than fancy rags, the hyena felt content and oddly accomplished: if she was too much woman for some stupid dress, then that wasn't her problem.

The front door closed with a soft thud and shortly after Apollo appeared by the couch. "Haute cuisine for the princess," he announced with a hint of a smirk, setting a tall stack of pizza boxes on the coffee table, "And they threw in some free garlic bread: apparently that was our hundredth order."

"Nice!" she said with great enthusiasm, grabbing the topmost box.

Apollo dropped onto the couch next to her, unwrapping the foil around the freebie bread, and setting it between them for her to dip into as the mood took her. "Sorry about the dress," he said softly, laying one arm along the back of the couch behind her head.

She shrugged, flicking open the box and picking up a slice at random. "How it goes sometimes."

He leaned down, carefully avoiding the garlic bread, and pressed a kiss to her soft, fuzzy cheek.

She smiled, leaning her head against his shoulder as she bit into the greasy wedge clutched in her hands; it wasn't woodfired or anything fancy, but she was where she was most comfortable and cuddled up with the guy she loved, so she was happy.