

Mushroom Multiplication

By Holo

Houndstooth walked along the bottom of the ravine, picking his way over the rocky ground as his eyes scanned the jagged rock walls for the fungus he needed. The spotted hyena's olive-green fur stuck out against the brown rock, but even with the sun high, the narrow ravine was cast in concealing shadow. A bright orange alchemy formula was on his back, covering most of it with intricate circles, lines and other symbols. He scratched at them briefly, and felt his fear leave him.

As the sun tipped into the afternoon, the shadows in the ravine grew darker, making it harder for Houndstooth to see. He grumbled as he pushed forward despite this, and the ravine suddenly opened up into a flat and dirt-covered area that was closed to the sky by a thick bridge of rock that stretched across the top. He stepped down into the area carefully, and stopped at the edge as he observed the area.

The dirt pit contained several skeletons of various kinds. Some people, some animals, but they all shared a common trait: Their rib cages had been blown out. He licked over his fangs, considering if his fungus was worth risking a trip across this graveyard. Before he finished thinking it over, his eyes caught sight of something inside one of the skeletons. It was a small, bright teal, almost glowing mushroom cap. Houndstooth perked up, ears standing up straight as his tail swished against the rock behind him. "There you are!"

He grinned and walked briskly over the ground, only taking enough care to make sure there were no traps. He slowed and kneeled once he was close enough, and reached into a pouch he was carrying and pulled out some glass bottles with cork stoppers. He opened one and carefully grabbed the base of the mushroom, and pulled it up. He tucked it away into the bottle, and then leaned in closer to the ground, hoping to find more.

Suddenly, dozens popped up out of the skeleton, and the ones nearby, and all across the earthy floor and halfway up along the walls of the ravine. The entire place turned a teal blue, and the air became hazy with spores. The hyena coughed and gagged, and tried to fan the spores away as he ran back the way he came to escape the overgrown grove.

He got away, but he was starting to feel sick. His stomach was queasy, and he felt full despite not having eaten in a couple hours. He staggered forward over the rock a few more feet before finding a somewhat flat patch to sit down on. He leaned back against the wall and placed a hand on his stomach, which was feeling bigger than the slim hyena was accustomed to. He grunted and grit his teeth, and could distinctly feel his skin stretching under his hand. His pale green belly bulged over the hem of his shorts. He pressed a hand in, and his middle squished, in a strange way.

He coughed suddenly, and a burst of teal spores flew from his mouth. Houndstooth went wide-eyed as the cloud settled to the ground, and he pressed into his expanding belly again. That odd squish... was mushrooms. And a lot of them. They were growing in his stomach and bloating him out, and it now became clear why the skeletons in the grove had blown-out ribs. He groaned and fell to his side, clutching his middle as it stretched out, inch by inch with more mushrooms. He tried to keep his stomach from expanding, and tried to squish the mushrooms down by squeezing his stomach, but nothing he did worked.

His shirt pulled tight over his stretching middle, and the button began to pull against the fabric as they were strained by the swell of his middle. Despite his effort to restrain his gut, it began to snap the buttons off of his shirt one by one, sending them clattering out along the stone floor. He winced at each one he lost, and his belly bloated out faster as there was less and less fabric restraining it. Finally the last button snapped, and his globe of green belly rose up before his eyes.

His claws flexed and scratched across the stone ground as the pressure built up. He could hear the creaking of his own hide as it became overtaxed, way past the point of fullness. He had never even eaten this much before, and he was amazed he was still holding together. That wouldn't last though, as the beach ball his belly had ballooned into became taut as a drum and hard like a rock. His skin trembled, surface rumbling and straining. He felt it all at once, a sensation like a thousand pinpricks on his skin. The front of his belly ripped open, and orange blood sprayed out along with a cloud of mushroom spores. The explosion was messy, and the loud *splat* of splitting flesh echoed down the ravine walls as Houndstooth's middle detonated. The area was sprayed with orange blood and chunks of fresh, steaming organ meat. The hyena's entrails laid in a heap between his legs, and his own blood soaked into his clothes and fur.

When the shower of fungus settled, Houndstooth was laying on the ground, groaning with a terrible headache as he discovered that his orange guts were laid out in several directions a few feet away. The alchemy symbols on his back started to glow, and gradually, the hyena closed up his blasted-open body. He was dizzy, and only forced himself to his feet so he could get away from the mushrooms before they infected him a second time in a row. He was happy to have gotten his sample, but he made a note to be very, very careful of the spores from now on.