

All these swirling scents and intoxicating aromas... it was no surprise that Smack found himself crawling between and among the plates piled high with food fresh out of the oven and off the stove, huge piles of brined and basted meat, bowls of still bubbling soups and gravy, plates of steaming vegetables and sides. He knew that he would fit perfectly in as well, with his bright yellow fur and diminutive size: he might as well be a fresh yellow bell pepper, or one of the fancy colored carrots that he knew Eve's family liked to get for the holidays.

The tiny foxwolf yipped and sprawled back onto the plate on which he stood when, suddenly, he felt his world lifted up and off the kitchen counter. The lovely perfumed air swirled and rushed around him, and as he gripped onto the bedding of cool greens with one paw for support, he reached over with his other to scoop a miniscule chunk out of one of the fresh-baked rolls that pressed up against his other thigh. Despite his vantage point he couldn't quite see what with his reduced size, barely as tall today as the thumb that clutched this side of the plant back near his tail; he curled that up and into his lap, then grimaced as he realized he must have dragged it through a spill of oil along the counter in his exploration.

At least it was infused oil. The little foxwolf sniffed at his slightly greasy fingerpads: basil and rosemary for sure, with a touch of garlic and peppercorn... he couldn't help but wag a bit at this, fantastic scents coming in so much more powerfully when he was small like this, but the *thump* of the plate being set back down on the dinner table shocked him back to awareness. He stumbled and fell to his rump again, and reached back to rub at his stinging tailbone – but the advancing meal left him no room to catch his breath, though, as right as he managed to pull himself upright again another plate came down first to one side, and then a bowl to the other, the thick juice inside sloshing around.

Sensitive hybrid ears flicked first one way and then the other, then back yet again as all the noises of the dinner began in earnest. Chairs scraping back, tinkling and clicking of silverware on earthenware plates, thumping of paws on the table, clinking of glasses... then, moments later, laughter and conversation peeling up over the meal, while Smack found himself surrounded by richer, more visceral noises. Beside him, one of the rolls tore free from the rest, strands of dough inside pulling, ruffling, and breaking; gravy scooped with a spoon near his head and ladeled onto a plate nearby, dripping and slopping, steam curling up into the air; then the quiet, wet sawing of the carving knife through the rather massive turkey set onto the large plate at the center of the table.

It looked certainly massive to Smack, at least. After spinning around and around in place a few times, watching and listening and following all of the fantastic sounds and scents, the small foxwolf came forward, dropped himself off the elevated edge of the plate he had used as his vehicle, and crossed the tablecloth over towards that center plate. This was one of those fancy, decorative plates, embellished around the edges with raised images of what looked like grapes, and twisting vines, and spreading leaves... him standing here on the table put the raised edge of the plate at about his shoulder level, so after looking up and around to ensure he wasn't in any kind of danger zone for now, Smack hefted himself up and scrambled up and over that edge.

The angled lip of the plate combined with the smooth surface meant that he ended up rolling right down and up against the side of the turkey, though, temporarily wedging him beneath delightfully crispy skin, flecks of cracked peppercorn, big flakes of salt, a small branch of crispy rosemary. He had quite a time wriggling out from beneath the turkey, already coated in thick, sticky drippings and warm, scented grease; Smack looked down over himself, sighed, and shook his arms out, trying to get at least some of

the oil out of his fur. Claws dragged down his chest and belly just left little valleys in the soaked fur, though, and then he had to shake his paws out all over again with the grease, and...

A familiar voice from above him drew his attention ahead and away, and Smack looked up to see his partner sitting right here in the chair before him. Today they wore a black shirt to offset their cool grey fur, tinted slightly violet in some lights; the lower edges of the spots along their shoulders peeked out from beneath their sleeves, hanging comfortably around their shoulders and upper arms.

That was Eve. Smack leaned back for a moment, bare shoulders brushing up against the still-hot surface of the turkey as he watched. The spotted hyena before him watched something up and behind the table, far out of Smack's diminished vantage; mint-green eyes sparkled as they followed what the little foxwolf assumed was another plate. The hyena held their fork in one paw and steak knife, complete with serrated edge, in the other... they watched as that other plate came in and down, and then smoothly leaned forward to portion off a piece for themselves.

Smack smiled to himself and then turned back to the food, wishing to continue his exploration. The other guests at the table certainly wouldn't notice once he had taken his share, so he paid little attention to the routine and formalities – and the sound of conversation and chatter muted and muffled around him once he made his way to the backside of the bird. Savory spice washed up and over him, fingers of steam running smoothly through his fur and along his nose, feeling almost as though they might lift him off the plate like a little cartoon character.

The foxwolf leaned forward and took a deep sniff of the stuffing pouring out from inside, all of the mashed bread and little bits of veggies, done over and over again in broth and juices and spices. He spread his arms, closed his eyes, took a steady breath in through his nose... and then someone reaching to tug the plate over towards themselves knocked him off-balance and plunged the small foxwolf headfirst into that warm, delicious mash, his tiny voice muffled by everything around him.

By the time he had managed to squirm around and poke his head through the surface again, though, he felt himself lifted up and into the air – and saw that it was actually that very same hyena who had done so. Smack squirmed and crawled back towards the edge of the spoon, soft and moist chunks of stuffing rolling off his body and between his legs.

Eve was caught in conversation with whoever sat across the table from them. Smack looked over his shoulder and then back to his partner, saw that they hadn't yet noticed his presence, and squirmed a little more. He tossed his arms up and out, and shouted, and called for them, but they couldn't hear him. Their black-fleshed lips parted and open, strong hyena jaws giving way to broad teeth and dripping lavender flesh inside, strings and strands of saliva hanging down and between.

Up Smack went, hoisted along the spoon. He called and shouted and barked – and Eve paused for a moment but, completely ignorant, only did so to finish what they were saying. That done they continued up and forward, and before long the scent of stuffing and food all around Smack curled and swept away beneath hot, humid hyena breath, sharp yet still muted.

From here, hoisted up from in front and below, the light from the chandelier over the table shone in just right to illuminate Eve's thick, broad tongue settled between dangerously sharp fangs, the back lifting up and pressing forward in preparation. Their throat pulsed and twitched in as well, eager for the meal, hungry. Smack couldn't blame them: it *did* smell fantastic. He just wished he wasn't on the first spoonful

to satiate that hunger, as nothing he did at this point could get the hyena's attention – especially once that lavender tongue folded and pressed up underneath the spoon, and when their lips came down and mashed shut around the handle.

This enclosed the tiny foxwolf in that same humid heat all around, each breath of his coming a bit shallower, a bit tenser, than the one before, as he drew in the stale air inside his partner's mouth. In here the conversation and clatter of the dinner fell away beneath the mashing and slopping of wet flesh. Thick, sticky saliva oozed down from the roof of Eve's mouth and between their teeth, and before Smack could get a grip on things suddenly he found himself pressed up against the roof there, muzzle forced sideways against warm, wet flesh, wrinkled and firm.

The spoon pulled forward, tugging him along as it went. His footpaws pressed in against the hyena's gums, and then those deadly sharp teeth grazed along his legs and lower belly – and he caught just a brief glimpse and feel of the outside world, much cooler and drier, before their mouth closed and again locked him in tepid, swirling darkness.

Eve swallowed first and foremost, yet again mashing Smack up against the roof of their mouth. This time, though, there was no spoon to catch him, and instead the thick, dense folds of their tongue came up to squeeze him into place, soft flesh pressing up underneath his arms, between his legs, underneath his tail – until it came down and dropped him into the pool of gathering saliva at the bottom of their mouth, their jaw still working and churning, grinding that mashed stuffing into a dense paste all around him. It stuck to his fur and caught on his arms and body, and every time he tried to clamber up he had to swipe his paw back away again before it got caught between those thick, sharp fangs.

The more he squirmed and resisted the harder things became for him, especially once his arms and legs ended up soaked and smeared in mashed food as well as dripping, hungry saliva; even from here he could hear the growling of Eve's stomach, rippling and rumbling up from the back of their throat, which itself came every closer to Smack against the shifting and wriggling of their tongue. He scooted himself back along the thick muscle, pawpads pressing and poking in at the rough yet soft surface of raised taste buds – but he just continually slid back into the valley in the center as it lifted up, and back, and squeezed in, and...

Thick, strong muscles wrapped up and around Smack, mashing his face firmly up against the back of their throat. The flesh back here was much softer and more supple, squeezing in and nearly burying his arms and body in its depths until those muscles tensed and tightened again, and tugged him down – and then he felt the breaths squeezed out of his body on his way down, arms digging and pulling, trying to drag himself back up yet unable to through Eve's clenching esophagus and the rolling bits of mashed, moist food, stuffing first with another spoonful of something else soon after.

Rippling, bubbling heat echoed up from beneath as he squeezed down further, arms locked over his head, eyes and mouth scrunched shut. Little sprays and squirts of that heat lanced up and caught along his footpaws, his ankles, his fur, and stung and sizzled. Smack swallowed, tried to grasp at the pulsing ring of muscle at the base of Eve's throat right here above their stomach, just barely managed to hook his fingers around...

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The hyena sat back and sighed at the end of their meal, tail swaying behind them in satisfaction. They could actually *feel* the weight of the food stirring in their stomach, warm and dense and so comfortable – and as they dropped a paw down to rub and massage at their fill, they also felt the rumbling, the gurgling, the wet popping and pulsing of a full meal settling into place.

“God...” they rumbled, and thumped their head back again. “That was fantastic. I think I need to go take a nap...”

From deep down in their chest a heavy, tingling burp welled up, pushed its way through, sizzled out – and they stifled it behind a clenched paw, then swallowed again. Flavor and spice, warm and bright and sharp, delicious and satisfying with a touch of something special underneath... but they just couldn't tell what.

Maybe it was the extra step of slipping freshly peeled garlic cloves under the skin of the turkey prior to cooking it, or maybe it was the simmered gravy... or maybe it was something else entirely; Eve couldn't quite tell. But it was *delicious*.