

“Next please step down.” Fresh called from behind the customer service counter. The fox looked tired and sounded bored; it had been a long day of painful retail. Thankfully, the shift was almost over. A zebra with a small child in tow stepped up to the counter.

“I’d like to return this. It wasn’t working.” She said as she placed a large red canister on the counter. A familiar nozzle and pressure gauge on top; a helium tank.

“All right.” Fresh turned the cylindrical canister around, looking for the barcode. The zebra placed the receipt on the countertop as well. “So, what was wrong with it?” Fresh asked, simply trying to make conversation as he processed the return.

“I had bought it for my kid’s party, but every balloon seemed to get stuck. No matter what we did, we couldn’t pull them off until they popped. And we couldn’t turn it off once it started filling one.”

“That’s annoying. Sorry to hear that. Please insert your card into the chip reader for the refund.” Fresh said, his speech almost rehearsed. The zebra did as he instructed and two receipts were printed out from the computer. Fresh took the top one and taped it to the tank before handing her the customer copy. “There we go. Thank you and have a great day.” The zebra thanked him as well and walked off. Fresh checked the time once again; he’d be able to leave shortly.

Thankfully, there was no line at customer service right now. And there were two others behind the counter, ready to take the next customer. Fresh hoisted the heavy tank into a nearby shopping cart that was almost full of other goods that had been returned; clothing, electronics, and toys lined the bin. The defective tank was balanced precariously on top.

“Hey, can I run this to the back to sort?” Fresh asked his supervisor, an older female toucan. She nodded, letting Fresh pull the cart away. The store itself was rather quiet this time of day, so no customers got in the way as he moved to the back room. The back room itself was fairly cramped, though there was enough room for employees to walk through. Fresh pushed the cart “All right...” Fresh muttered to himself as he started emptying the cart, putting some clothing into designated bins stacked on shelves. Having cleared some of the lighter returns out of the way, he eventually made his way to the defective helium tank and sighed. “Why did they put the large, heavy return bins up top?”

With a grunt, the fox hoisted the box up, needing to place it on the fourth shelf. The tank was both bulky and heavy. Fresh tried to be as careful as possible as he lifted it over his head and tried to slide it back. Unfortunately, the fox’s grip on the box slipped, as did he. Fresh groaned as

he fell backwards onto the floor. Thankfully he was uninjured, but the tank started to slip off the shelf as well. He instinctively flinched as the metal tank made an extremely loud bang as it crashed into the floor. Conveniently, it didn't hit Fresh. Not so conveniently, the tank rolled on its side, causing the nozzle to get stuck in Fresh's mouth.

As soon as the nozzle secured itself inside the fox's mouth, the tank flared to life. A loud hiss echoed throughout the large, yet still cramped warehouse-style back room. Fresh's ears perked up as the helium started flowing into his mouth; a sound and feeling he was all too familiar with. His cheeks puffed outwards as he tried to avoid swallowing the light gas, but the pressure from the tank forced it down his throat. Though constrained by his vest, the fox grunted as his belly started inflating. He stood up and tried to pull the nozzle out of his mouth, but it remained secure.

*Every balloon got stuck. The zebra's words echoed in his mind. We couldn't pull them off until they popped. And we couldn't turn it off once it started filling one.* Fresh started to panic as his belly billowed outwards, starting to peek underneath his shirt and vest. No matter how much he struggled, he couldn't pull the tank out of his mouth. Tighter and tighter his vest felt as his stomach occupied more space. *POP! Zrrriipp!* The button on his jeans flew off and the zipper on his vest was forced open. His white-furred belly blimped outwards even faster now that some of the constraints were gone. The simple blue shirt he had on rose upwards and sat uncomfortably atop the round, two-foot wide, white orb that was his gut.

Beneath his swelling stomach, the helium started to fill out another part of his body. Though unable to see due to the tank getting in the way, his rear started to fill outwards as well. The fox blushed as his jeans grew tighter and tighter against his swelling rump. Small pops and tears rang out as the seams were ripped apart by his inflating behind and thighs. Fresh couldn't help but blush as his pants quickly fell away, leaving his orange rump only constrained by his boxers. He could only imagine just how large his cheeks had already swelled.

Fresh's struggles grew more frantic the larger he grew. He grabbed the tank and continued to try pulling it out of his mouth, which for some reason he couldn't open; likely a 'safety' mechanism on the tank. The fox bore a look of serious concern as his arms started to grow stiffer, the helium filling out his body in any way it could. His arms were quickly forced to the sides, bloating up large enough to completely inhibit movement. Fresh's mind began racing and his tail waved frantically. What was going to run out first: The air in the tank or space in his body?

More loud tears rang out as his shirt gave way. His orange back filled outwards and his body started to take on a much more round shape, though with heavy emphasis on his belly and

ass. And the tank showed no signs of slowing down. Fresh could only hope it would run out shortly. The fox, who much more closely resembled just an orange and white balloon, started floating due to all of the helium inside. He didn't float high, as the heavy metal tank served as a counterweight. Fresh looked down and saw the floor and tank, but most of his view was obscured by two orange and white orbs; his extremely puffed cheeks. If he could open his mouth, the fox would've sighed, resigned to his fate as a balloon for a bit.

Another thought quickly occurred. There wasn't that much space left. Fresh felt his enormous round body squish against the frozen foods locker on one side of the room. And on the other side were the shelves, made of a series of rods to function as grates. His eyes went wide as he continued to balloon outwards, his bloated body pressing against the space. The helium didn't stop, and his body grew more confined by the second. The metal rods pushed into his sides, his blimpy body molding to the indent. This caused a massive bout of pressure inside the balloon fox. Fresh's mind continued to panic as he felt his body press against the shelves, the rods pushing in deeper and deeper; pressure continuing to build. He shut his eyes tightly, waiting for the inevitable...

*BOOOM!*

With a thunderous pop, Fresh's body burst apart. It was instant, almost painless. Scraps of orange, black, and white fur rained upon the storeroom; his vest falling among them. After the massive boom, a loud metal clang echoed through the now unoccupied room. The helium tank finally stopped hissing.