

Sid ran as fast as he could through the narrow side streets of the city, staying away from main thoroughfares. Goofy high-pitched giggling and laughing filled the air, along with the screams of people like him trying to flee it. Occasionally, a deceptively-happy sounding marching band melody would start playing, at which point Sid would cover his ears as tightly as possible to avoid the effects of the sound. After that, there were far fewer screams. He could hardly believe any of this was happening; it was all too ridiculous. But it was real. It began a few days ago, when a strange baton-waving monster that looked like an elephant-shaped balloon appeared out of nowhere, calling itself “Inflateaphant”. It sang a rather silly-sounding marching tune about bouncing and floating and giggling, and suddenly people began approaching it as if in a trance. It would stick its trunk in someone’s mouth and blow, causing the person to inflate like a balloon into another monster holding a different instrument, who would then aid Inflateaphant in converting more humans in the same way.

Thankfully, the city’s protectors—the Ultra Force Rangers—appeared and fought the monster. For a moment, it seemed like the crisis would be solved. But one by one, the heroes were converted, and the chaos renewed. The greatest heroes in the world couldn’t defeat these monstrosities; in fact, the balloonimals (as Inflateaphant called them) seemed to be completely immune to any and all forms of damage. The sharpest objects just bounced off of them; bullets went through, only for the material to repair itself instantly and the bullet to bounce around inside them for a while before vanishing, eliciting giggles from the creatures. Fire, electricity, homemade bombs... nothing worked. Cars and trucks ramming into them did more damage to the vehicles and their occupants. In short, it was now obvious that the Rangers had no chance of victory, and neither did anyone else. But the inevitability didn’t stop people from *trying* to escape. Some survivors had found a bunker in the city, soundproofed it, and turned it into an underground settlement; there were still plenty of other survivors in the city outside the bunker, but there simply wasn’t enough room to house everyone, so—as morally awful and ruthless as it was—they were written off as lost causes, with bunker-dwellers given strict orders not to lead any other humans to their shelter and to absolutely refuse entry to any unauthorized human trying to enter, no matter how desperately they pleaded. Heartless, yes, but a necessity for the safety of the bunker.

Sid was one of the lucky few who had made it into the bunker, and had been sent out to look for salvage when a group of balloonimals attacked; to his horror, even Inflateaphant himself had been among them. Forced to abandon his mission, Sid made his way back towards the bunker, doing everything he could to avoid both detection and the music. Finally, he arrived at the entrance. Looking around carefully, he breathed a sigh of relief that no one else—human or otherwise—seemed to be present. Grateful that he made it back in one piece, Sid entered the passcode on the door, watched it slowly open... and then felt his heart drop as he heard nothing but high-pitched giggling from within. Confirming his worst fears was a group of balloonimals bouncing up the stairs towards him; in spite of their altered appearance, he could somehow make out features he recognized beneath their elephantine features, and while they sounded like children on helium, he definitely recognized their voices.

“Hee-hee! Sid, Sid, Sid! You’ll never guess what happened while you were gone!”

“Inflateaphant found out how to link up to the PA system! We got to hear his song!”

“We opened the door and came out!”

“We got happy! We got floaty! We got bouncy!”

“Then we went back in so we could surprise you!”

“That’s right, Sid! Isn’t it a wonderful surprise, too?”

Sid froze in terror. He recognized that voice. Turning around, he saw none other than Inflateaphant himself floating there, an entire legion of balloonimals bouncing off of the pavement, off of the sides of buildings, and off of each other, giggling happily at their own altered state. Even though he knew it was futile, Sid attempted to run, only for Inflateaphant’s trunk to intercept, shoving the nozzle at the end into his mouth. He tried to take it out, but it was stuck! As he grabbed and tugged in vain, the many balloonimals began to play their instruments; some had trumpets or flutes, some had trombones or tubas, some had snare drums or cymbals, and others merely slapped their stomachs to create timpani-like sounds. Then Inflateaphant began to sing, swaying his baton to the music as he did so:

***“Bouncy-bouncy, floating free, don’t you want to be like me?
Floaty-floaty, laugh and fly, listen to your voice go high!***

***Happy-happy, giggle giggle
Let your toes and fingers wiggle
‘til they can’t, and you get big and round, and round you’ll go...***

Until you make the whole world know

***What it’s like to float and fly, smile forever, never die!
Bouncy-bouncy, floaty-floo, don’t you want the world to be like you?”***

Between each verse, Inflateaphant inhaled deeply, then blew; Sid felt himself expand rapidly. The music was so bouncy and so silly and so happy, but he resisted! He had to! He had to not listen to the fun music that was fun and happy! *But why?* Part of him thought. *Why not be happy-bouncy-silly-giggly—NO!* But the tune was so infectious. And it only became more so as the balloonimals who weren’t playing breath instruments began to add their own high-pitched voices to the song, giggling childishly as they sang along. The song looped again and again, driving its melody unavoidably into Sid’s brain as he continued to expand, buttons popping off of his shirt as he grew so fat *and round and bouncy*, followed by the rest of his clothes. He felt a tail poof out behind him as his arms expanded too; eventually, his feet were barely visible, and his arms were only just long enough to grab a trumpet that seemed to magically appear in them. At that point, his fingers and toes merged into elephant-like hooves, his ears grew out, and his nose stretched into a long trunk with a nozzle on the end. All the while, his brain seemed to shrink, leaving no room for any thought other than bouncing, floating, giggling, singing and playing and turning silly humans into more friends to bounce and float and giggle and sing and play with.

Inflateaphant’s trunk popped out of his mouth, and Sid felt himself float up into the air, then slowly float down and bounce off the ground and back into the air, then bounce into Inflateaphant, then into a wall, then into another balloonimal, then into the ground, then back into the air to float around a while until he bounced off of something else. “Heehee! Hahaha! Hoohoo! Happy-floaty-bouncy! Look at me, I’m just like yoooooooouuuuuuu!” Sid shouted, his voice now high and squeaky. The sound of it made him giggle even more.

“Hoo-hoo! I knew you’d like it, Sid! Now, let’s go find more friends to float with...”