

A Merry Blimpmas

By: IndigoRho

Aboard the small pleasure cruiser *Columbia*, the crew of four had gathered together in the lounge to celebrate a modest Christmas. Rho—the doughy orange-striped zebra who owned the ship—was enjoying a cup of warm cider as he tweaked the appearance of the holographic Christmas tree, perpetually dissatisfied with the arrangement of lights or positioning of decorations. Beside him was a slim chimera named Tobias—Rho's boyfriend and the ship's pilot—who tried his best to convince the zebra to simply accept the tree and move on. Unfortunately Rho seemed stubbornly obsessed with making the mood perfect, despite having no idea what his idea of “perfect” was.

“You gonna spend all Christmas playing with the tree?” An obese midnight-blue cheetah asked as he devoured another plate of cookies, more amused than annoyed at the situation. Indi's role on the ship was excessively vague and questionable, referred to at times as either an errand boy or a quartermaster—not that a ship so small needed such a thing. Of course he preferred eating to actually working.

An even fatter hyena nearby joined in. “What he said. The sooner this is done the better.” Raf was often in a foul mood, never smiling and always finding something to grumble about. The engineer was already looking forward to cursing up a storm as he inevitably ended up wedged in a crawlspace fixing something.

Rho finally relented, much to the joy of everyone else. “Ok, ok. I'll start passing out the presents now.” The zebra picked the first one at random, a small box wrapped in paper depicting balloons in flight, meant for Raf.

Raf initially looked over the gift with apathy, but as soon as he read the tag he growled. “Like Hell I'd open this!” He tossed it right back at Rho.

Confused by the aggressiveness of Raf's reaction, Rho read the tag aloud himself. “To Raf, From Leon. Merry Blimpmas. Isn't that your twin brother?”

“Yeah, and it's best to just eject any gift he gives right into space,” Raf grumbled. “They're just pranks. Or worse.”

“Oh c'mon, you're getting worked up over a little prank gift?” Rho chuckled. “How bad can it be?” The zebra quickly tore away the paper covering it.

“S-stop! Leon's pranks are always—”

A loud *click* and a sharp *hissssssss* silenced the hyena as Rho opened the present, the distinct aroma of latex striking the nostrils of all four in the room at once. Almost immediately the crew grimaced as they felt a slight tingling sensation within their stomachs. Tobias looked down upon his middle, and to his shock realized it was swelling outward, a dome forming. The others were too hefty to notice the changes at first, but they couldn't ignore their soft guts growing taut for long. Whatever had been contained within the gift was causing them to inflate with air.

Raf frowned as he pushed down at his expanding belly, futilely attempting to force out the air accumulating inside him. “Why did you open it!”

“I thought it was just a gonna be a dumb trinket or an embarrassing holo-message!” Rho insisted as his fingers scurried over a display for his bodysuit. The self-diagnostic only reported he'd been exposed to an unknown gas, failing to provide a countermeasure of any sort. His own gut was like a large beach ball now, and he was thankful his bodysuit could stretch to handle it.

“You two can argue continue arguing after we make sure this prank doesn't end with the room covered in hide scraps and empty suits,” Tobias said. His own scan didn't prove any more informative than Rho's though.

The small lounge was gradually growing more and more cramped as the crew members swelled, everyone trying to put as much distance between one another as possible. Their bodies were dominated by their ballooning middles. Raf was constantly cursing under his breath as his chest and hips merged

with his spherical body, the blimping hyena struggling to remain standing. Even his limbs were puffing up, losing their flexibility as they became bloated and useless. He was the first to lose his balance, grunting as he rolled atop his belly, flailing and pouting. For years he'd managed to avoid the more obvious pranks his twin enjoyed inflicting upon him, and he couldn't believe his employer had so gotten him caught up in one again.

Indi had foolishly tried escaping the room, incorrectly assuming the gas would stop affecting him if he distanced himself from it. He'd thoroughly wedged himself in the doorway of course, his tail swatting around frantically as he realized too late the errors of his logic. The massive cheetah could feel the frame digging into his sides as he swelled to plug the exit. Even the assistance of his crew mates wouldn't have been enough to force him through or pull him back in, and he would've undoubtedly popped had his bodysuit not given his thinning hide a degree of protection. Regardless, the internal pressure within him was strong enough to trick Indi into thinking he was on the verge of turning into cheetah confetti, his panicked chirps echoing throughout the room.

With a considerable amount of effort Rho had wobbled his way to the opposite wall of the lounge as he continued working on ways to reverse his out of control inflation. Unfortunately being a living balloon severely hampered his progress. His limbs had become domes atop his massive body, bloated hooves wiggling about, and voice commands were difficult once his head sunk and his cheeks rounded out. Eventually he ended up rolling over onto his back, bouncing slightly and bumping right into a very unhappy Raf.

Tobias alone succeeded in staying on his paws, not that he gained any real benefit from such a feat. Across his bodysuit displays showing his internal volume, pressure, and a percentage representing his predicted bursting point were depicted. His dark red mane helped cushion his head somewhat, while his horns were thankfully not long enough to dig into his overinflated body; self-induced popping wouldn't have been fun. The horns were also the main reason Tobias avoided any unnecessary movements that might send him rolling, fearful he could accidentally pierce the fragile hides of his crew mates.

The danger percentage on Tobias stalled at ninety-five, all four crew members ceasing to expand just short of their maximum limits. A collective sigh of relief was breathed amongst them, though they quickly reverted to a mix of annoyance and concern afterward. Everyone could do little more than wobble and whine. Paws and hooves were too puffy to work a computer display, voice commands were painfully basic on the *Columbia*, and there was no chance any of the blimps could roll their way up the bridge—especially with Indi blocking the only exit. At best they could send an S.O.S., but who knew how long it'd take to get a response, or if their ridiculous predicament would actually be believed. Not to mention the possibility of being taken advantage by an opportunistic pirate.

Tobias watched the others flailing about as they rocked back and forth. “So, uh, Raf. You wouldn't happen to know how long this inflation will last, do you?”

Raf now looked like a grumpy snowball thanks to his bright white bodysuit. “Leon's a fan of me being stuck huge for as long as possible. Might be a day, might be a week.”

“I can't be stuck in this doorway for a week!” Indi whimpered, his voice echoing from the hallway. “How will I get food!”

Rho rolled his eyes at the round cheetah as he gave up trying to roll back onto his hooves, not that Indi could see him. “I'm pretty sure you'll live tubbo!”

“Ugh, if this stuff turns out to be permanent I'd better get a raise!” Raf growled. “I know Leon's been threatening to turn me into a blimp forever lately...”

The new revelation prompted a wave of nervous whines before Rho made a poor attempt to rebuild morale. “I-I'm sure everything will be fine. For now let's just trying to make the best of things and enjoy...enjoy Blimpmas.”

Had anyone been capable of throwing stuff Rho would've been pelted for his comment. Instead he was merely booed and threatened, the four unfortunate balloons left wobbling helplessly for the

foreseeable future.