

Hazmat Swell

By: IndigoRho

“Is the hazmat suit *really* necessary, Rho?”

On the small bridge of the *Zephyr* Captain Rho was looking at his monitor, a smile on the orange-striped zebra's face. The screen was showing the face of a frustrated gray-and-white lion.

“Safety first, August! The ship's convinced some of the canisters we're transporting sprung a leak, and if you wandered in their unprotected then you might just turn into a big balloon!” There was more amusement in Rho's voice than concern. “Hard for a balloon to fly a ship.”

“Every time the ship thinks something's broken it's wrong!” August insisted. “And this suit barely fits me anyway, it's way too big.”

Rho couldn't deny the slim lion had looked rather comical wearing the hazmat suit, which was tailored towards the ship's heftier crew members.

“Well then maybe you'll get lucky and swell into it while you're down there,” Rho said.

“Though the faster you investigate the faster you'll be free of it.”

August bit his lip, resisting the urge to make a snide remark. “Alright, alright.”

The door to the cargo bay slid open and August hurried in. His movement in the oversized suit was awkward but manageable. Still, the lion felt as if he was going to trip every other step. The cargo bay was fairly cluttered, and August would need to check the entire place to guarantee nothing was leaking. Of course he knew he wouldn't find any issue at all, like always. He really wished Rho would stop being lazy and just update the ship systems so it didn't report so many nonexistent issues.

August was so convinced the ship was at fault he failed to realize the warning indicators on his own hazmat suit were broken—and that there was a small hole on the back.

Unseen, a valve grew from August's navel. The fur around his new valve flattened and gained a sheen, turning into smooth vinyl. To August the changes registered only as an odd itch, which he lazily scratched at and forgot as he wandered the cargo bay.

Once August's legs became puffy vinyl faint creaks began to accompany his steps.

“Uh, are you hearing anything odd on your end?” August asked Rho, looking around in confusion.

Rho hadn't been paying very close attention to the feed, and shook his head. “Does your lack of complaining count as something odd?”

August rolled his eyes. “Yeah, real funny—*creaaaaaaak*—wait there it is again!”

“August that's just your hazmat suit.”

“I guess.”

The creaks, however, were getting louder. Whenever August heard the sound he'd turn to face the direction he thought it'd come from, but it always seemed too close. It didn't make any sense.

“Rho you'd better not be piping creaks in from your end!” August said, having convinced himself that the zebra was just playing a joke on him.

Rho laughed. “I *wish* I was that creative! Again, it's probably just your hazmat suit, they make a lot of—uh...”

As the zebra stared at the feed he swore something looked off about August. His mane seemed a lot...round than usual, as if the fur had clumped together. Actually August's whole face looked rounder, not a point in sight. Then there was the strange shine. Suddenly everything clicked.

“Um, August, you been feeling lighter lately?” Rho asked.

“Huh? Of course not. I'm thin enough as it is.” August was still searching for the creaks, which now matched his every move.

“Well from my point of view you're looking pretty damn light. And shiny. And maybe even squeaky.”

August gave Rho a confused look, then changed his display to reflect his face. The lion almost

jumped once he saw for himself. “W-why am I a pool toy!”

“Just a wild guess on my part, but maybe it has something to do with those leaking canisters of balloon gas the ship's been warning us about,” Rho snickered. Being proven right would be worth what was about to happen to August.

“Of all the times for the ship to be right!” August cursed under his breath. “And of course the dumb hazmat suit didn't help at all!”

A faint hissing sound suddenly joined the creaks, prompting a groan from August. His normally flat middle began to balloon outward, rapidly filling with air. On instinct he pressed against it with his puffy mitt paws, as if the air had anywhere else to go. There wasn't anything the cargo bay that could reverse the effects of the gas beside popping himself, and August wasn't in the mood to be a pile of vinyl scraps. Not that being a helpless balloon would be *too* much better.

Within seconds the inflatable lion was sporting a beach ball pot belly. His limbs and face grew puffier, making the once-slim lion look rather plump. The hazmat suit was suddenly not as loose, almost comfy even.

Meanwhile, Rho as having a good laugh at the expense of his blimping friend. “You've always looked your best when puffy! Though personally I think all lions should be big and round and creaky at all times~”

“Don't make me wobble up there and shove an air tank down your throat!” August squeaked, struggling to sound intimidating as he swelled up.

The lion actually tended to enjoy inflating, at least when it was on his own terms. There was no telling how massive he'd get thanks to the balloon gas, or how long he'd be stuck as a blimp, or if he'd be able to resist the inevitable daze that accompanied the increase in internal pressure. Not to mention the fact Rho would use it as an excuse to gloat nonstop for days.

August's middle had become incredibly round, to the point of being unwieldy. The hazmat suit was now forced to stretch to contain the inflating pool toy within it, only adding to the chorus of creaks and squeaks. August's puffy cheeks pressed against the sides of the helmet, his face up against the plastic display screen. His protests were muffled, turning into incoherent whines and grumbles.

The pool toy flailed his bloated arms and rolled atop his enormous belly, blushing. The pressure was starting to get to him, a persistent nagging sensation that was digging away at his thoughts. He did his best to ignore it, but the effort was nearly impossible.

Rho admired August's smooshed face for a while longer before switching over to a feed from a cargo bay camera. A slowly wobbling yellow blimp now dominated part of the bay. The hazmat suit had held together, though Rho imagined it was a rather tight squeeze for August at the moment. Rho wished he could head down there himself and roll the inflated lion around, maybe bounce him a bit as well. Of course he'd simply turn into a balloon if he entered the bay, and then the ship would be down *two* crew members instead of one.

Eventually the canisters would empty and the balloon gas would be safely filtered out and vented. Until then, though, August would just have to sit tight and deal with being immobile. He'd have plenty of time to settle down, and once he did Rho would happily inform him of his new role as the ship's balloon gas containment canister. After all, they still had to deliver the product intact...