

A Blimpy Dare

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In the cargo bay of a freighter, two arctic foxes lazed around on break, using crates as seats. Twins, they were nearly impossible to tell apart aside from the colors of their bodysuits and collars. Both sported large doughy bellies, round cheeks, and icy blue eyes. Noah—in the green—was just the slightest bit heavier, though Nathan—in the blue—was never far behind.

“Bro, I’m still sore from lugging all this junk into the ship,” Noah said as he stretched. “Wonder if it was even worth the effort?”

“Just looked like weird fruit to me, can’t be *that* valuable.” Nathan looked toward one of the new crates and gave it a judgmental glare. “Bet the job the Captain took fell through and he’s just pretending this stuff was what we came for.”

Noah slid off his seat and waddle over to sudden source of their ire. The cargo wasn’t locked, so a quick string of button presses caused the seal to release and the lid to slide open. A short blast of cool air escaped from within.

Arranged in neat rows were a dozen melon-sized fruits. They were almost as white as the arctic fox’s fur, with the slightest hints of gray. Noah didn’t recognize them, and neither did the scanner built into his suit.

Curiosity got the better of the fox, and he picked one of the strange fruits up. Its surface was smooth and slick. To his surprise the fruit let out the faintest squeak when he squeezed it, and if it hadn’t immediately regained its spherical shape he’d have sworn it was rotten.

“I can’t tell if this is a fruit or a rubber ball, bro!” Noah said, unimpressed. “No way this tastes good.”

“Hey now, it might magically be a delicacy,” Nathan laughed as he joined his twin. He picked up a fruit of his own and toyed with it, prompting a flurry of squeaks.

Noah grinned. “Dare ya to eat one!”

“Pfft, you first!”

“What, worried it’ll give you gas?”

“Hell no! This tank can handle anything!” Nathan slapped his gut. “I just don’t want to ruin my appetite eating something dumb if *you’re* too scared to eat it too!”

“Fine, we’ll both try one. Same time,” Noah insisted.

The twins looked at each other and then down at the fruit in their paws. Neither was eager to have a taste, but backing down simply wasn’t an option. Reluctant jaws bit down on the fruit, failing to tear away even the smallest chunk. Biting down harder had no effect.

In a matter of seconds the twins switched from nervous to annoyed, both furiously attempting to defeat the mystery fruit. When biting, chewing, and pulling failed, Noah resorted to simply swallowing the fruit whole. a triumphant grin on his face. Nathan swiftly followed suit, not wanting to be outdone.

“That was barely edible!” Noah complained. “Fangs didn’t put a dent in it, and I bet a knife wouldn’t have been much better.”

“Barely had a taste at all, too. I’ve had more flavorful tap water!” Nathan added. “Kind of left my throat, I don’t know, refreshed? Like after you eat a breath mint.”

“Yeah! No one’s gonna want to buy this stuff. Captain’s gonna be red in the face when he tries to explain this screw up!” Noah snickered.

Though the Captain generally treated them well, the twins nonetheless enjoyed having ammunition to tease him with.

Distracted by their need to mock the fruit, Nathan and Noah failed to notice their bellies had abruptly begun to swell. Steadily the twins rounded out, until their middles looked taut instead of doughy, the faintest hissing sound coming from their stomachs.

It was Noah who first realized something was amiss once his gaze drifted to his brother's belly. "Ha! Looks like that fruit isn't agreeing with you bro, you're inflating like a balloon!"

"Uh, bro, *you're* the one who's blimping up!" Nathan countered.

Each fox poked the other in the middle to prove their point, and both gave a look of confusion once they felt the pressure. The swelling picked up, Nathan and Noah stumbling a few steps back as they watched their mirror image growing rounder and rounder by the second.

"What the heck was in that fruit!" Noah shouted as he frantically squeezed down on his beach ball of a belly, hoping to deflate or at least quell the swelling. His efforts did nothing.

"Damn it why did I even swallow mine, I could've just let you be a balloon by yourself!" Nathan grumbled, just as unable to thwart the inevitable.

Their bodysuits creaked as the foxes filled with air, but were fortunately more than capable of stretching to contain them.

Nathan and Noah could feel themselves getting puffy all over, limbs and faces beginning to grow as round as their middles. They didn't know what they could possibly do to reverse the inflation, and neither believed they could make it to the ship's med bay before ending up stuck, immobile, or worse. Leaving the cargo bay would guarantee they'd get caught, which would lead to relentless teasing and punishment. It was a lose-lose situation.

All the twins could do was exchange nervous glances as they slowly moved away from both each other and anything with a pointed edge. The once-spacious room was feeling more and more cramped, bloated sides pressing against crates and equipment.

Eventually Nathan and Noah were too round to move anymore, stuck and still inflating.

The collars around their necks weren't as malleable as the suits, straining to hold together as the twins ballooned up. After a series of long, ominous creaks, Noah's collar snapped right off his neck, causing the round fox to wobble wildly. Nathan's snapped a second later.

As the foxes reached a nearly perfect spherical shape the pressure within them built, turning into a persistent nagging sensation that made concentrating a struggle. Noah gave into the pressure a little, blushing.

"B-Bro, I feel like I'm gonna pop!" Nathan whined, wedged between crates, hide creaking. Thanks to his bodysuit he resembled an oversized blueberry, the white fur of his round head like a dollop of whipped cream on top.

"C-Can't handle the pressure?" Noah let out a strained chuckle. He was creaking just as much as his twin was.

Nathan wished he were close enough to give his brother a shove. "You'll totally burst before I do, I bet you'll be coming apart any second now!"

"Bro I've always been bigger than you, being a blimp's a—*mmph*—breeze for me! Once you're a pile of scraps I'll make sure to gather them up as a memento so I don't forget to have you re-formed!"

"If you delay getting me put back together I'll pop ya and leave you as confetti for a whole year!" Nathan threatened—not that a spherical fox could be very threatening to anyone he wasn't rolling over.

The competing taunts and vows grew increasingly overdramatic, even as the two foxes safely ceased swelling. Scattered creaks echoed out from both, though nothing that sounded like the harbinger of a rattling boom.

"Do I really want to know what you two have been up to?"

The new voice abruptly ended the twins' arguing. A rotund gray lion walked into the cargo bay, wearing a slight grin. His gaze shifted from one blimp to the other, neither eager to meet him eye to eye.

"Um, we were just, uh, testing the self-inflation feature of our suits August!" Noah claimed. Nathan nodded aggressively in support, creaking loudly.

“And I’m sure your faces and paws *always* get so puffy whenever your suit inflates itself.” August was the ship’s pilot, and the closest thing to a second-in-command after the Captain. He knew well enough how prone the twins were to goofing off.

“It was a glitch?” Nathan offered with no confidence.

August shook his head. “What *I* think happened is that you both decided to mess with those organic air tanks we picked up.” The lion took a peek in the opened crate and noticed the empty spaces. “And for some reason you seem to have eaten them. I’m sure it was some dumb bet again.”

“Bro you said they were fruit!” Noah scowled, wobbling angrily in the direction of his twin.

“They totally looked like fruit!” Nathan shot back. “And you’re the one who said we should taste one—you even swallowed the first one!”

“To be fair to both of you dummies it might actually be a fruit,” August interrupted. “We were hired to bring the samples to a university so they can run tests and figure out what the heck would cause nature to grow an air tank of all things. And they are *very* valuable samples, by the way, ones we need back.”

The lion’s tone worried the immobile foxes. “If you deflate us we can cough them right up, they’ll just need a quick wash!” Noah said.

“Oh don’t worry, I was planning on deflating you from the beginning. You might not prefer my method, though.” August held up a paw, letting his claws shine in the light. “Glad you volunteered to go first, Noah.”

As August slowly placed his paw on Noah’s taut, fragile side the fox wiggled frantically. “D-Dude a pump will work just as well, and then you won’t have to worry about—*mrrmph*—cleaning up the hide scraps or filling out—*mmmmph*—shifts!”

Noah was blushing hard, feeling with great sensitivity the pressure of the five claws on him, even through his suit. August was steadily pressing down harder and harder, clearly delighting in the creaks his prod was creating. Nathan simply watched, thinking up his own futile excuses to not get popped.

“What if I give you half my meal rations? Or—*mmmmmmmmph*!”

The spike in pressure had sent Noah into a daze, ending his attempts to bargain. When the pinprick tears finally appeared in his hide his eyes shot wide open, right before the fox balloon exploded.

The ensuing blast of air shoved back crates and nearly knocked over August. Even Nathan was shaken by it. White scraps of hide rained down on the entire cargo bay, and Noah’s slightly ripped bodysuit landed in a corner.

August bent down and picked up the “fruit” Noah had swallowed earlier, quickly checking it for damage. “Bit damp but in good shape.” He dropped it back in the crate and turned towards Nathan. “Just one left now.”

“I’ll...um...what if I...ah crap.”

Nathan found himself embraced in a firm hug, two paws digging hard into his sides. He creaked and squeaked as the pressure intensified, experiencing everything his twin had just moments before. The tears formed faster this time, a second boom shaking the cargo bay.

August laughed as he was pelted again with white confetti, brushing a few scraps off his shoulder and belly.

The last organic air tank was gathered and returned. Hide scraps were hastily plucked out before the crate’s lid was shut tight. A vacuum drone would be called in to clean up the mess the twins had left, and August would make sure to keep the scraps for later, teasing use.

“Well guys, thanks for giving me the chance to go on a little popping spree~” August told the scraps. “Maybe once we get you both re-formed at the station we’ll do this again—just to remind you to not eat things that aren’t yours.”

August took the silence as agreement, and left the cargo bay with a wide smile on his face, his

mood better than ever...