

Entering the Berry Business

By: IndigoRho

The mess hall aboard the *Zephyr* had never felt more cramped. Captain Rho had gathered the whole crew there for a meeting, and none were known for being lean.

Raf leaned against a wall, the massive spotted hyena scowling as usual. He'd just come in from a spacewalk to examine the engines, and his pink mohawk was a bit disheveled. Whenever he attempted to fix it his enormous gut would jiggle, so Raf had simply given up.

Squeezed into a chair at the lone table was the pilot, August. Once slim, the gray lion was now second-only in size to Raf, though he didn't mind the weight at all. His gaze frequently drifted to his crewmate's belly, especially when it wobbled.

Beside him was another rotund feline, the midnight-blue cheetah Indi. He did little to hide his boredom, fingers tapping away at the table.

Captain Rho himself was a doughy orange-striped zebra. There was a broad grin on his face as he stood in front of the mess hall's food replicator, punching in an order unseen. When he did turn around he was holding a glass of dark blue liquid.

"Glad you all could make it today!"

"We almost didn't thanks to Raf getting wedged in the doorway again," Indi snorted.

Raf growled at the cheetah. "That's only because I'm wearing a thicker suit for spacewalks!"

Snickers were the only response to his excuse.

"Now now, we've all gotten stuck in a doorway at least once on this ship," Rho said, taking a gulp of the drink. "But Raf's considerable circumference isn't the cause for this meeting. Freight and transport jobs have been a bit scarce lately, so I felt it was imperative to investigate alternative sources of income. Luckily the solution was a simple one!"

Rho took another long drink from the glass before proudly raising it for emphasis.

"Juice?" Indi asked.

"Not just any juice—freshly squeezed organic blueberry juice!" Rho replied. "Apparently it's a new craze in this star system, and since there isn't much farmland here the profit potential is impressive."

August cleared his throat. "Uh, but we don't exactly have the room to grow blueberries here either. A few small bushes aren't going to provide enough juice to make money."

"True, but a few jumbo-sized berries certainly will!"

The zebra tilted his head to finish off the last of his drink, and once he was done the others realized his face had taken on a bluish tint. They stared at Rho in confusion, watching all the white on the hide and mane of his head turn a brilliant shade of blue. His orange stripes were unaffected.

Though Rho's clothing concealed most of his body, the crew soon saw his hooves were similarly changed.

Indi was amused, Raf suspicious, and August just plain unsure. That changed as Rho's middle abruptly—and rapidly—began to swell like a balloon.

"I...I think you're having a bit of a reaction to that juice, Rho." August's eyes were glued to the zebra's belly, which was growing rounder and rounder by the second.

"Well I'd certainly hope so! I had the replicator brew the most volatile berrification mix possible." Rho slapped his belly and giggled as it audibly sloshed. "It's bubbling really good in there, perfect!"

"What, your grand plan is just to become your own juice supply?" Indi snorted. "Can't believe this ship is gonna be captained by a berry!"

Rho was forced to widen his stance as he continued to round out dramatically, his limbs swelling with juice as well. As his backside pressed against the wall he wobbled forwards a few steps

to give himself more room to grow, but doing so put him closer to the table.

“Don’t be ridiculous Indi, I’m just going to be the source of berrification for the *real* berries: you three.”

Now the trio were all worried.

“Rho you can’t turn us into berries, you need us to run the ship!” August insisted, the Captain’s swelling becoming ominous rather than fun.

Cheeks puffy, Rho shook his head. “While traveling, sure, but my plan is to remain docked for the duration of this business venture—which could be quite a long time depending on if this is just a passing trend or a persistent hit!”

“Yeah good luck with that, I’m just gonna bail early berry brains,” Indi said, heading over to the door.

The cheetah walked right into it, much to his surprise.

He stood back, impatiently waiting for the door to automatically slide open like usual, but it didn’t budge. Pressing the manual open button on the wall beside it didn’t work, either.

“Of course I used my security codes to lock the door,” Rho smiled. “I wasn’t just going to hope Raf clogged it again.”

“It’s the suit’s fault!” Raf fumed.

Rho’s limbs had started sinking into his blimping body, the blue and orange zebra almost completely spherical. Spreading in all directions, his taut hide was on the verge of being menaced by the edges of chairs and the table.

“If he doesn’t pop we’ll be fine!” August said, hurrying over to the Captain and shoving away anything that looked even remotely sharp. Raf attempted to help, but maneuvering around the table proved difficult, his face flushed red as he narrowly avoided getting stuck multiple times.

Indi had resorted to pounding on the door, which accomplished little.

“Admirable effort, but that won’t stop the juice from bubbling within me until my hide gives out,” August said with glee. “I’m fairly durable, but even I have limits, and this drink was designed to surpass them twofold!”

August could hear the heavy sloshing coming from inside Rho, along with the faintest of creaks. He dared a nervous prod of the zebra’s side and found it to be terribly taut, with barely any give. Sticking him with a pin would’ve been enough to pop him at that point.

“M-Maybe there’s something we can hide behind,” Raf said, stumbling past a chair.

“Nothing big enough for any of us individually let alone together.” August had given up on clearing Rho’s path of debris, and was backing away from the volatile berry. “And that juice wave is gonna hit everything no matter what, the room’s too small!”

“It’s positively roomy compared to how it’ll be once you’ve all properly ripened and the juicing equipment is in place.” Despite the immense pressure building within him, Rho was just as cheerful as ever.

The creaking was getting louder, the massive zebra berry vibrating slightly, unable to expand further. Rho was a near-perfect orb.

“Damn, he’s gonna blow!” August cursed.

Rho flashed a grin right as he felt the first, tiny leak form in his overstretched hide. A dozen more appeared a split-second later, and then the berry burst. There was no time for the others to prepare.

A solid wave of juice erupted in all directions. August and Raf both took the full brunt of it. Juice soaked their fur and their suits, snuck its way past mouths and down throats.

Indi had foolishly turned around at the sound of the bursting, and was rewarded with a mouthful of juice.

Stained scraps of hide were hurled all over. Rho’s glasses bounced off the ceiling and table, skidding off into a corner. His bodysuit had instantly snapped back into its default shape once it no

longer had to contain the giant zebra berry. It rested in a pile on the floor.

August shook some of the juice from his mane, flicking a scrap of hide off his shoulder after. “Ugh, I feel like I got dunked in a juice box.”

He looked over at Raf, whose mohawk had been flattened, and for a second thought the blast had managed to stain the hyena’s fur blue. Then he realized Raf was rounder than normal. With dismay August looked down at his own paws, and saw they too were blue. His belly was also swelling steadily, and already noticeably larger.

Frantic chirps drew their attention to Indi, who’d become a solid shade lighter and bigger around than even Raf.

“What the heck, why am I transforming so fast!” Indi chirped again, pushing at his bloated belly in distress as if it’d somehow help.

“I guess Rho wasn’t lying when he said the juice was volatile!” August blushed as he felt the juice splashing about inside him, filling him up.

Raf was grumbling under his breath, stumbling around as he tried to waddle into a more open space. “Berry juice is loaded with calories, I’m gonna end up gaining even more weight because of this!”

“Maybe the replicator can make an antidote, or at least a hose to pump the juice out so we can escape before Rho re-forms,” August said, heading towards the replicator as fast as he was able.

Unfortunately he’d already become somewhat spherical, and was awkwardly wobbling to his destination. In his haste he tripped over Rho’s fallen bodysuit, landing on his round middle and weighed down by the gallons of juice he’d produced.

Neither Indi or Raf were in any real position to reach the replicator, both well on their way to becoming immobile berries.

The helpless trio swelled and sloshed and sulked, growing rounder and rounder and rounder. Limbs puffed up and were enveloped by ballooning bodies. Hides stretched thin and taut. Suits creaked as the durability of their materials were tested.

Unlike Rho, though, the new berries ceased swelling once they were ripe.

Indi groaned, the cheetah berry gently pinned between the wall and an edge of the table. “Any chance Rho gets bored and gives up on selling juice after a week?”

“Remember when he kept me as the ship’s keg for a whole year?” Raf growled in response.

“Oh...oh, yeah.” Indi let out a whimper.

August frowned, his vision limited to the floor below since he’d fallen over. “Hopefully we just pop a month in. Otherwise this’ll end up permanent, and I’m not ready to be this round forever!”

There were sighs of agreement, and plenty of muffled sloshing. No one could guess how dedicated Rho would be to his brand new business venture, and the three berries were left to worry and wobble until the Captain returned...