

The Balloon Bouquet

By: IndigoRho

A loud *pop!* echoed through the backroom of the small party supply store, causing Helium to jump a little in surprise. The pink-haired tiger had gotten distracted while filling up the last orange-and-black striped balloon for a bouquet, and unintentionally overfilled it till it burst. While normally he would've shrugged the mistake off, his unforgiving boss—Leon—happened to also be in the room with him.

The hefty hyena was already scowling at him, and lumbered over while adjusting his frosted-tipped mohawk. “I hope you aren't messing around while you're supposed to be working on that rush order.”

“O-of course not!” Helium was mostly telling the truth. “Just got unlucky with a defective balloon, I'll get the last one inflated right away!”

As the tiger's paw reached for the bag of balloons, though, he found it empty. Leon was far from impressed. “I promised the client—one of our most loyal—they'd get *exactly* twelve tiger-print balloons when they arrived in fifteen minutes. I put my reputation on the line Helium!”

“I-I'm sure there's another bag here somewhere, I'll replace the last balloon, I swear!” Helium insisted.

Leon looked about to go off on the tiger even more when he suddenly stopped himself, a smile growing on his face. “You know, you *will* replace the balloon. Personally.”

With no warning, the hyena grabbed Helium by the arm and poked him with a small needle he'd retrieved from his pocket, causing the tiger to yelp in surprise. Almost immediately he grew lightheaded, stumbling as a tingling sensation spread over his body. Helium felt like he were falling in slow motion, but soon realized he was actually growing shorter, shrinking. The tiger meowed in fear as the entire room appeared to expand around him, shelves becoming skyscrapers and tools monuments. All the while Leon loomed ever taller over him, his menacing grin widening with every foot Helium lost.

Helium was too terrified to move, afraid he'd trip and fall through a crack by the time he landed. At least his clothing was shrinking with him. Three feet, two feet, one foot...the tiger continued dwindling with no idea when he'd stop, and no idea as to what Leon would do with him once he did. The tingling ceased as he reached six inches, fortunately, though Leon's paw plunged down soon after and grabbed the tiny tiger tightly, lifting him into the air. Helium let out a fearful *mew* as he was brought before the giant.

“Ah, looks like I found a tiger balloon you missed!” Leon's voice boomed. “How convenient.”

Helium realized his boss' plan, but was powerless to escape his grasp as he was carried over to the towering helium tank. Squirming was futile, as Leon forced the small tiger's mouth over the nozzle and turned the valve on. The tiger's cheeks swelled, and a burst of helium flooded into his stomach, causing his belly to rapidly balloon outward in an instant. His blue hoodie clung tightly to his new round gut.

Leon quickly turned the tank off and chuckled. “Oops, forgot how fragile balloons can be. Gotta be careful so you don't pop!”

The valve was opened gentler this time, and Helium whimpered as he felt a steady stream of gas entering his miniscule body. His middle continued bloating, arms and legs growing puffy as his whole body rounded out. Above the hissing of the helium he could hear the fabric of his clothes straining and long *creaks* echoing from within him. Helium was a swollen ball with stubby limbs, the seams of his hoodie ripping in places as he approached the spherical point of no return. The internal pressure was intense, and the tiger was convinced his boss was just going to let him burst once creaks and groans became commonplace. Soon his puffy paws were flailing at the blimped up domes that'd been his arms and legs, his body a delightfully round balloon.

The flow of helium finally ceased, and Leon pulled the tiger balloon off the nozzle, quickly tying a small bit of string around his muzzle to prevent any precious gas from escaping. He held onto Helium's tail as the balloon tried to float towards the ceiling, tying a much longer string to it before adding him to the existing bouquet of balloons. Helium wobbled and bounced amidst his fellow balloons, unable to do much else than let out a high-pitched whimper of distress.

“Perfect! You blend in with the others wonderfully, it's like you were always meant to be part of the bouquet!” Leon laughed before checking his watch. “And just in time, too. I do hope you enjoy the party Helium, though try to avoid going...*pop*.” Leon poked the balloon's swollen middle with a claw, causing him to squeak slightly.

Helium's eyes widened, the fragile tiger wondering if he'd still be intact in a few hours...