

High Stakes Highrise

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Chaotic was practically on the far side of the lobby when he saw the elevator open, prompting him to break into a sprint. He'd already been delayed thanks to putting the finishing touches on the wonderful little cylinder in his paws, and missing the highrise's notoriously slow elevators would guarantee he was late to the party. Fortunately the slim black and gray raccoon didn't have much trouble closing the distance, slipping in right before the doors closed but almost bumping into the other two occupants in the process. As he caught his breath he smiled and nodded at his two temporary companions. One was a rather hefty blue cheetah with golden eyes whom he *thought* he might've seen a couple times before, while the other he definitely knew of; after all, it was impossible to go unnoticed when you were a five hundred pound hyena with a pink mohawk.

The raccoon quickly hit the button for his floor, before shifting to daydreams about the delightful prank he was plotting to pull off. A month earlier some coworkers had spiked his coffee with an inflation powder, leaving him bouncing around the break room ceiling as a blushing high-pressure blimp. His embarrassing predicament had been witnessed by the whole office as he was carried off to get deflated, and ever since he'd been enduring the nickname "Balloon". Today he'd finally get revenge.

A manager who coincidentally lived in the same building as him was hosting his annual party for the office employees, making it the perfect target for a prank of his own. The cylinder he carried *looked* like a portable speaker, but was actually a canister filled with a powerful inflation gas. While he wasn't certain who exactly was behind the prank there was no denying everyone had gotten a laugh in at his expense, so he'd simply inflate them all to get back at them. Then *he'd* be the one laughing and poking at his bundle of living balloons.

Lost in his fantasy, Chaotic was unprepared when the elevator abruptly lurched into action. The raccoon's grip on the cylinder failed immediately, his purple eyes widening in horror as he tried in vain to catch it; unfortunately his paws only swiped air. With a loud *clang!* the cylinder bounced off the elevator's floor, landing perfectly upon the release button. The lid flung open and white smoke poured out, rapidly filling the elevator. There was a flurry of coughing, cursing, and confusion as the trio clung to the walls. Thankfully the smoke drifted into the vents relatively quickly, leaving behind a citrus scent.

"What the Hell was that!" the hyena growled, still swatting away wisps of smoke.

"Ugh, it smells like an air freshener," the cheetah whined, covering his nose.

The hyena rolled his eyes. "Air fresheners don't spew smoke everywhere, why would it be one!"

As the two bickered Chaotic simply stared down at himself, knowing what was to inevitably come. Sure enough, his normally flat middle began to round out seemingly without provocation, a small pot-belly forming frighteningly fast. A nervous glance at his companions proved they weren't immune to the changes, their much doughier bellies growing rigid as they swelled. They both noticed at the same time, stopping mid-complaint as their gazes shifted towards each others' middles. Of course more panic ensued.

The cheetah—Indi—stubbornly pressed down on his gut, as if he somehow could force the air out. "W-what's happening, why am I getting all bloated!"

"I don't know, maybe it's from all that mysterious air freshener smoke," the hyena—Raf—replied with raw sarcasm.

"This isn't fair, I was going to finally get revenge!" Chaotic fumed, his belly well on it's way to becoming an unwieldy ball. "My plan was perfect!"

Chaotic's woes weren't shared. With a definite source for the inflation singled out Indi turned his ballooning belly on the smaller raccoon, pinning him against the elevator doors. "Hurry up and give me the antidote, or the inflation suppressant, whatever you've got that'll stop this!" the cheetah demanded.

"I-I-I don't have any, I wasn't supposed to get caught in it!" Chaotic admitted, wincing at the

increased pressure of being pressed in between metal and feline.

“Great, just great,” Raf grumbled, taking up a good third of the space thanks in part due to his initial bulk. “Any chance your perfect little prank is just gonna inflate us a tiny bit?”

The trapped raccoon quickly looked between Indi and Raf before averting his gaze sheepishly. “Well it was meant to fill up a dozen people enough to make them float but considering how much we’re inhaling...”

Frustration suddenly turned into fear as Indi and Raf realized they were now in serious danger of popping. By then the trio had inflated to the point of essentially filling the elevator, their swollen middles all pressing together. They couldn’t move, merely shuffle in place, and their growth showed no signs of slowing. Even their limbs and paws were starting to puff up from the apparent helium. The only thing preventing all of them from rising off the floor was the fact they were squeezed tight against each other, as they were thoroughly lighter-than-air by then.

The pressure amongst the three was immense when a loud *ding* tore them away from their arguing and excuse-making; they’d reached the first stop. Chaotic squirmed as he felt the elevator doors begin to open behind him, his puffy form poking through the growing gap. He was too wide to simply waddle out, as much as he would’ve loved to escape the two furious passengers he’d potentially doomed. Luckily Indi was eager to make more space and help.

“Look, it’s your floor raccoon balloon, time to get off!” the bloated cheetah shouted.

With all his strength Indi leaned into Chaotic, slowly squeezing the raccoon through the exit inch-by-inch. Chaotic demanded he stop, but he was in no position to fight back, clenching his teeth as his hide creaked from the rough treatment. Eventually Indi proved successful and Chaotic shot out, rising immediately to the ceiling. He yelped as he bounced along, catching the occasional glimpse of the propped open doors to a balcony. To his dismay the inflated raccoon had more than enough momentum to wobble through.

The hallway ceiling with its pointy sprinkler heads and light fixtures now seemed comforting in comparison to open sky. He desperately tried to grab a hold of *anything* on his way out, but he simply couldn’t maintain a grip in his blimped up state. At first Chaotic rotated slowly in the air as he rose, eyes darting between the ground far below and the clouds high above, neither looking the least bit inviting for the unlucky balloon. When he finally did stabilize a bit he was just in time to spot his coworkers gathered on the balcony of what must have been his manager’s apartment. Swiftly spotted, the group gawked and laughed at him, shouts of “Balloon” causing him to blush. Some took pictures, many pointed, but none appeared interested in helping the poor raccoon avoid drifting away.

Back in the elevator, the departure of Chaotic provided only minimal relief. Indi and Raf were still swelling, with the bloated cheetah up against the ceiling in a corner while the blimp of a hyena was stuck opposite him. Both could feel their massive forms spreading over the interior of the elevator, pressing into the metal walls, each other, and—worst of all—the uncomfortably sharp edges of the hand rails. Hope was dwindling fast that they’d cease inflating, and the chances of either remaining intact in the tight space was non-existent.

Indi could see the strain on Raf’s face, correctly guessing he was enduring more pressure. “I-I’m not planning on becoming blue confetti, so you’re gonna have to go!”

The inflating cheetah braced his paws against the elevator as best as he could given the situation, and started pushing against Raf. Though he wasn’t able to exert himself much, his efforts were having an obvious effect. Raf whined as his internal pressure built, a slightly jagged edge on the hand rail digging into his fragile hide. He understood clearly what the cheetah was attempting.

“Y-you’re lucky I can’t poke you with a claw you bloated jerk,” Raf growled between clenched teeth. “If I blow I hope the force takes you with me!”

Threats didn’t mean a thing to the desperate cheetah, and Indi increased the force against Raf. He was willing to do anything to avoid popping. The pressure in Raf grew so intense he couldn’t concentrate anymore, his mind solely focused on the imminent failure of his woefully overstretched

hide. His face was buried by his own swelling middle, every inch of the elevator filled by the pair of wobbling balloons.

In the spacious outdoors, Chaotic wasn't faring any better. He wasn't inflating anymore, but his hide was still stretched rather thin, the raccoon's middle simply a massive sphere jutting out in front of him. While Chaotic *had* been wiggling frantically as he ascended, the sounds of faint creaking and the unnerving increases in pressure made him weary of moving at all. Bursting apart was about the only fate worse than floating off as far as he was concerned, though getting stared at by half the building was slowly making him rethink that.

Chaotic was floating *just* slow enough to catch the attention of as many residents as possible, windows opening and balconies filling as he gained a larger and larger audience at every floor. His face was permanently flushed red, the furry balloon having no way to hide from the camera flashes and recordings that would ensure the results of his backfired prank would spread. He could already imagine the headlines about the wide raccoon spotted drifting off into the sunset, complete with plenty of eye witness reports and pictures of his plight.

As the embarrassed blimp tried to ignore the many eyes upon him he noticed the elevator opening on the floor straight ahead, unsurprised by the sight of a spotted tan mass bulging out. Raf was at his absolute limit. He could feel his hide threatening to spring leaks in a dozen different places, and even growling seemed to worsen the immense pressure within him. The bloated hyena was only faintly aware the elevator doors had opened once more when the first hole appeared.

With a rattling *boom!* Raf finally popped, tan hide scraps erupting from the elevator and raining down upon the corridor. The force of the explosion tossed Indi around the elevator's interior, the large cheetah chirping in terror as he bounced around, ever fearful he'd end up ramming something sharp. Though he endured the rough ride he was *still* under the effects of the inflation gas. He wobbled in frustration as he felt his sides on the verge of touching all four walls, experiencing a smidgen of satisfaction when he saw Chaotic outside the building in an even more hopeless situation than he was.

Now alone in the elevator, Indi could only totter and fume as he swelled even larger. His taut hide pressed into every corner of the cramped space, robbing the cheetah of his mobility and pushing his face right against the door. Soon there was simply no more room for him to expand in, pressure being the only sensation he could still clearly feel. He let out a muffled whimper when the elevator came to a jarring stop, having dutifully brought it's last remaining passenger to the very top floor of the highrise.

Indi gasped for breath as the doors opened and his head lurched into the corridor. A black and white goat had been eagerly awaiting the elevator's arrival, but he quickly stumbled back and bleated in surprise. He didn't think the elevator-filling cheetah was real for a moment, nervously poking Indi with a hoof.

"Watch it, you might pop me!" Indi shouted, shocking the goat further.

"S-sorry!" the goat stammered. "Anything I can do to...uh, help?"

Indi was about to roll his eyes and deride the stranger for not calling 911 immediately, until a devious scheme to deflate faster came to mind. "Yeah, I think I know just the thing, though you'll need to be a bit closer.

The unsuspecting goat complied, coming face-to-face with Indi.

"Perfect. Now you can take my place!" Indi said with a grin.

Before the goat could realize Indi's intent the cheetah clamped down on his muzzle and blew. The goat's eyes bulged and his cheeks puffed out, a steady stream of gas forcefully pouring down his throat. As his flat middle started to balloon outward he frantically braced his hooves against the massive cheetah in an attempt to break free, but Indi's grip on him was too strong. Indi didn't let his temporary advantage go to waste, aggressively blowing harder and harder and smiling as he felt the pressure inside him dwindling slightly.

Every puff shrunk Indi and inflated the goat. Indi's massive body started to retreat from the

walls, regaining a spherical shape. Meanwhile the goat was now sporting a sizable belly filled with more than enough helium to disrupt his balance. He flailed wildly as his hooves left the floor, his back angling upwards towards the ceiling as he was turned into a blimp against his will. There was no hope of him turning the tide on the blue cheetah, limbs puffy and useless, unable to effectively struggle.

Half-way through the exchange of air the bloated duo both hovered across from one another, until a few more puffs left Indi heavy enough to touch solid ground again. In celebration he began puffing faster, eager to return to his much more manageable—albeit girthy—normal size. He delighted in watching the goat swiftly expand, turned into a huge helium-filled sphere just because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Then again that was exactly how Indi had ended up as a balloon himself, so it only seemed fair to pass along the experience to another.

The goat was creaking ominously when Indi finally decided he was deflated enough to be content. He released his grip on the goat and let him wobble up to the ceiling, his victim bleating with every bounce as he winced from the immense pressure. Indi was honestly surprised the small goat had been able to handle so much helium, not that he particularly *wanted* to get showered in hide scraps a second time that day. With a snicker and a wave Indi turned to continue on his way, until a familiar tingling sensation in his stomach made him stop in his tracks.

To Indi's dismay his middle was noticeably rounder once more, a quick prod proving there was still gas within him; the inflation hadn't actually ceased. The cheetah let out a furious sigh as he cursed his poor luck, but wasn't about to give up and become a bouncing blimp again that easily. There were plenty of others in the highrise for him to “donate” helium to, and he was more than willing to inflate everyone in the building if that's what was required to put an end to his own swelling. He quickly waddled off to find the next balloon...

Above the highrise's roof Chaotic watched Indi's escape from the elevator with jealousy more than anything else. The cheetah was free and no longer a ball, while he remained a doomed puffball. Even the random goat who'd gotten stuck with Indi's helium was at least safely indoors and bound to get rescued inevitably. Chaotic couldn't believe such a masterful prank had gone so, so wrong. He should've been strolling around an apartment far below, chuckling at his swollen coworkers as they wobbled about, his vengeance complete. Instead they were probably still getting a good laugh at his expense, maybe even toasting the ascension of the Raccoon Balloon.

With nothing but the wide open sky above him there was nothing to impede Chaotic's continued rise. Fortunately the constant pressure he was enduring soon dominated his thoughts, sparing the raccoon from endless worry about how he'd get out of his predicament. All his mind could focus on was the helium gas inside him, pressing against his hide in all directions, as trapped as he was...