

Puff Virus

By: IndigoRho

On a poorly charted world known only by the designation Pisces E, two pool toy explorers were busy loading their haul onto a spaceship. Indi—a rather thick midnight-blue cheetah—was slacking off some, poking around in a container at one of the peculiar specimens his partner and him had collected. The brightly-colored fish flopping within was almost spherical, filled with air like a small beach ball. At first they'd assumed the fish was inflating as a defense mechanism, like the puffers they were familiar with, but none of the samples had deflated at all either before or after capture. Of course soon they'd noticed that *every* life-form on the planet appeared just as round.

“Jac I still think it's a bit weird everything's a balloon here,” Indi said, nudging a fish with his own puffy paw before sealing the lid.

The red-and-white fox wearing a cape nearby shrugged as he pulled out a bright yellow fish. “Just means they're even more delicious probably,” he boldly declared, then tossed the round fish into his mouth and swallowed it whole. “Such a good feeesh!”

Indi shook his head as he watched Jac gleefully pat his middle. “You don't know if that's poisonous! And if you keep gorging on fish all the time like that you're gonna get fat.”

“Uh, we're pool toys, we can't get poisoned,” Jac insisted. “And pool toys can't get fat either. Except for you I guess.”

“I just happened to be soft when I became a pool toy, and I'm totally not the only one!” Indi scowled, squeaking a little as he crossed his arms as best he could.

Jac grinned. “Well until my scale says otherwise I'm just gonna keep enjoying fish and assume you're an anomaly.”

As the last containers were finally put away the two dropped the conversation, both eager to head home so they no longer had to live out of the cramped scout ship. Indi closed the hatch behind him once he managed to squeeze himself through, passing the small living quarters and entering the cockpit, where Jac was already strapped in and preparing the ship for launch. Loud *squirks* filled the space as Indi sat down, the pool toy cheetah frowning as his belt squeezed into his plastic hide. Jac had made installing belt-extenders a low priority, mainly because he didn't need them himself—though Indi swore the fox simply enjoyed seeing him have to wiggle more during longer journeys.

The ship hummed as the engines came online, a slight rattle accompanying lift-off. Jac gripped the throttle in both paws and smiled as he felt the ship reacting to every move he made. Through the cockpit windows he could glimpse the sparkling water of the sea below and the tree-filled horizon fast approaching, the fox taking his time entering orbit so he could enjoy a little atmospheric flight. If not for the precious cargo of delicious fish he'd have attempted a few maneuvers, perhaps a roll or two or a steep ascent; the frantic chirps and squeaks from Indi would've been hilarious.

Jac was so focused on flying—and finding ways to tease Indi—he failed to notice the faint hissing echoing from his middle. He normally had just the slightest curve to his middle, but since sitting down he'd rounded out some, now sporting a small, but definite belly. Steadily the pool toy fox continued to inflate, plastic hide stretching and quietly creaking as he filled up for reasons unknown. The rumbling of the ship concealed the changes from Jac, and Indi's attention was elsewhere, keeping the pair oblivious.

Once the ship had cleared the atmosphere of Pisces E and a course towards the edge of the system was set things settled down. As Jac leaned back to relax he felt his belt digging into his middle, and looked down in confusion. To the fox's surprise he was noticeably thicker than usual, as if he'd been sipping on an air tank the entire flight. He tried loosening the belt, but in the process he discovered he was still swelling.

Suspicion instantly fell on Indi. “Real funny Indi, claiming I'll get fat and then inflating me! Stop the prank now or I'll push your wide butt right out the airlock!”

Indi had been doing his best to look busy despite not having much to do, but when he turned in his seat to face Jac he appeared just as shocked about the expansion as the fox was. “I didn't do anything, I wouldn't immobilize the pilot! I bet it's from eating that dumb fish before takeoff!”

“Well if that's true than explain why you're getting rounder too!” As soon as Jac let out the accusation he froze, thinking about what he'd just said.

Sure enough, the already-rotund Indi was even rounder somehow, barely able to move thanks to the seat belt holding him in place. The cheetah chirped and squeaked in surprise, but Jac was too worried about himself to enjoy his friend's ridiculous wobbling. “There must be a leak in the ship, or something from the planet maybe!” Indi shouted as he struggled against his belt, doing little more than squeak up a storm.

Jac was still mobile enough to unbuckle himself, the pool toy nearly being launched from his seat as the belt flew off. He immediately ordered the computer to run a diagnostic on everything—the ship, the air, the cargo, themselves. “Ship's intact, but there's something getting picked up in us and the fish we brought back, like a...virus?”

Indi had all but given up on trying to escape his seat, wincing at the pressure of the belt as it squeezed his bloating body. “We're pool toys, we shouldn't be affected by that stuff! Right?”

By then Jac was as round as Indi was normally, the fox increasingly worried about getting wedged in between his seat and the console. “Well...I mean there might be precedent, but I've never heard of a virus that inflates you.”

“W-wait, everything on that dumb planet was puffed up, maybe that's why?” Indi whimpered, unable to tell if the creaks he was hearing were from his belt or himself.

Unfortunately the two wouldn't have an opportunity to look into their strange affliction further. The hissing in both intensified, growing too loud for either to ignore, and the gradual inflation was suddenly very rapid. Jac stumbled backwards as his belly abruptly ballooned forwards, pinning him against the chair just as he'd feared. He was too puffed up to reach the console, and the chorus of squeaking and hissing interfered with voice commands, not that Jac knew what to even tell the computer at this point.

Indi whimpered as his girth finally won out against the seat belt, which ricocheted off the cockpit windows as it snapped off. The cheetah himself was bounced around from the force of being released, ending up on his back and unable to get up. His limbs were bloated and stiffer than usual, his middle a massive sphere that seemed intent on growing forever. He rocked back and forth in desperation—even when it became clear he wasn't leaving the floor without aid—barely able to hear anything aside from his own creaking hide.

Space was quickly running out in the ship as the two ballooning pool toys expanded out of control, each letting out a muffled whimper as their spherical forms pressed into one another. The chairs groaned from the pressure of the twin blimps, till inevitably they were snapped off their mounts and buried under swelling toy. Soon every inch of the spaceship was filled by Jac and Indi, who could do nothing but grumble and feel themselves getting bigger and bigger, beyond the sizes either were used to.

Their growth didn't cease, though. The ship's bulkheads were slowly warped as it's passengers expanded relentlessly, cracks forming and wires sparking. Muffled alarms blared as multiple ruptures appeared across the ship, systems failing one-by-one. All at once the ship tore apart, debris sent flying in every direction as Jac and Indi were violently ejected from the remnants.

The two pool toys wobbled wildly from the force of their ship's destruction, each massive and nearly completely spherical. Their paws and tails could barely be seen jutting from their round bodies, and their cheeks were so puffed up they could barely speak—not that they actually could while in space. Exposure to the vacuum wasn't much of an issue for pool toys, though their continued inflation certainly was.

Jac and Indi drifted and expanded helplessly, the fox gradually starting to orbit around his larger

cheetah compatriot like a moon. Indi in turn got caught in the gravity of the system's star, resembling a midnight-blue planet the larger he got. Their plastic hides stretched and vibrated, miraculously holding up thanks to the strange virus they'd picked up while on the planet. For what felt like an eternity they grew and grew, until both were planetary objects in their own right. Only then did the inflation come to a slow, slow end.

While the pool toys hadn't popped, being stranded in space wasn't much better. They were left to silently glare at each other, waiting for a rescue ship to wander by and realize there was a planet and moon there that weren't on the regular star charts...