

Expansive Countermeasures

By: IndigoRho

On a relatively flat plain of a desolate, distant moon two small ships landed, kicking up dust. The first was a sleek, pointed fighter craft, its canopy retracting back to reveal the pilot. Jac—a red fox pool toy—adjusted his cape as he stood to scan the horizon, frowning at the apparent emptiness of it all. Low hills and craters marked the land. There were some rocky formations that resembled stalagmites as well, though they were of little interest to Jac.

“Rho, are you *sure* this is the right place?” Jac spoke into his headset. “I’m kind of doubting we’ll find anything worthwhile here.”

The other ship with him was bulkier than his own, a boxy wingless hauler. Its white and orange paint were faded, entirely scraped away in some places. When the cockpit canopy opened it stuttered and creaked, stopping for a moment before continuing on. Within was another pool toy, an orange-striped zebra with glasses. He had a slightly over inflated look about him, and his puffy mohawk mane managed to appear tussled rather than straight.

“Trust the scans, Jac!” There’s definitely gravitino balls here, and we’ll be rolling in units once we find them.” Rho grinned at his friend.

“Well if they *are* here then we’d better find them quick,” Jac said as he readied his multitool. “Sentinels won’t be very happy about us taking them. Not that I mind the target practice.”

With ease the two pool toys descended from their ships, though Rho seemed noticeably less graceful. His steps were occasionally awkward, the zebra nearly toppling over a couple times. The much more comfortable Jac couldn’t help but smile.

“Being this light is so weird,” Rho admitted. “Though it’s way more convenient being a pool toy than having to suit up to breathe here. Makes me a bit jealous of you.”

“Ha! Just remember it also makes you much easier to inflate into a giant beach ball,” Jac laughed.

The two slowly trekked onwards, both running their scanners non-stop in hopes of finding their elusive prize. It was Rho who finally picked something up, eagerly leading them towards a crater still within sight of their ships. Resting in the crater’s center was a hoard of glimmering, purplish-pink orbs. Resembling giant marbles, there was no mistaking what they actually were: gravitino balls.

“I...I don’t think I’ve ever seen so many in one place before, it’s incredible!” Jac said.

“And look at how huge they are!” Rho added. “I think some might be wider around than I am!”

As Rho and Jac approached the balls began to glow, gradually at first but with greater and greater intensity the closer they got. By the time they were next to them they looked like miniature suns, too bright to look at directly. Rho placed his inflated mitts on the sides of the nearest one and sent a quick signal to his ship. In an instant the gravitino ball vanished. Jac did the same to one by him.

“The built-in teleporter on the ship is a real lifesaver,” Rho said, whisking away the glowing balls one at a time. “I honestly can’t imagine trying to haul these things back one at a time.”

“And we’d have to blast through a swarm of sentinels then, too.” Jac was keeping a close eye on his motion detector.

Sentinels were automated defenses that patrolled the wilds, and were known to attack those harvesting valuable resources or targeting defenseless wildlife. Individually they weren’t difficult to deal with, but neither pool toy was eager to dodge lasers if a whole group showed up.

Fortunately Rho and Jac were left in peace as they gathered the gravitino balls. Once the last one was teleported away Rho brought up the estimated value of their find, a wide grin spreading across his face.

“See Jac, barely any effort for an absolutely unbeatable reward!”

“Maybe you’ll finally treat your poor ship to a fresh coat of paint,” Jac teased.

A sharp alert interrupted the friends, their motion detectors suddenly pinging. A pair of small

airborne drones zoomed over the crater's ledge towards Rho and Jac, already scanning them from a distance.

“Spoke too soon Rho!” Jac pulled out his multitool and took aim, firing off a laser that struck the nearest sentinel.

Rho followed suit, targeting the other. Shields shimmered as the drones shrugged off the attempts to disable them, much to Rho and Jac's dismay. Then they finally fought back. Rather than the usual laser, the sentinel targeting Rho fired a projectile that struck the zebra's middle with enough force to knock him on his back. He yelped in surprise, convinced he'd been punctured, until realizing there wasn't any hissing sound or the sensation of deflating.

Where the sentinel had struck there was a small medal disk firmly attached to Rho's vinyl hide. It vibrated momentarily as the expected hissing began—within him. Rho's belly started to steadily swell, hide creaking faintly as it stretched. He was being pumped with air.

Jac, meanwhile, had managed to find cover. “Rho am I gonna need to find a patch kit for you?”

“Uh, kind of the opposite actually!” Rho said as he frantically pushed down on his inflating middle. “Those things are armed with air pump darts I guess!”

The shield of the sentinel Jac had been focusing on gave out, and a well-aimed shot sent the drone crashing to the ground in flames. “That's ridiculous, why would they possibly want to inflate—*Meep!*”

The surviving sentinel had snuck behind Jac and hit him with a disk as well, sticking the fox directly on the back. Jac's eyes widened as he heard and felt his own inflation begin. He was incapable of reaching the disk, quickly giving up on the futile task.

Rho grunted as he tried to stand back up, his growing belly interfering more and more with each passing second. He wobbled and rocked, almost succeeding before his unwieldy width grounded him for good. His paws and cheeks were getting puffy as well, every bit of the helpless zebra expanding.

Thinking quickly, Jac rushed off in the direction of his ship in the hopes he could find something of use there to avoid becoming an immobile blimp. His whole body squeaked as he ran, middle growing wider and wider with every step. The creaks were ever present, getting longer and louder. While his initial burst of speed was impressive he was battling both an uphill climb and his limbs expanding. The odds were definitely not in his favor.

Rho's body was becoming spherical, his bloated arms and legs extended outwards. Hissing was drowned out by creaks loud enough to interrupt his thoughts. The growing pressure wasn't helping, either. He felt more like a balloon than a pool toy, too puffed up to do anything. Rho wasn't sure when the disk pump would actually stop—or if it even would. For all he knew he'd just keep inflating until he burst a seam. All he was certain of was that Jac was *never* going to stop reminding him of the embarrassing predicament.

Jac's flight had grown to a crawl. The fox was waddling awkwardly, perpetually fearful of losing his balance and careening right back into the crater. Inch-by-inch he neared the crater's edge and hopeful salvation. He was only a step away when his legs finally swelled to large for him to move. Jac fumed as he creaked, considering his options as the lone remaining sentinel hovered into view.

“Oh, h-hello there,” Jac laughed nervously. “Any chance you'll let me leave if I tell you Rho was the one who stole everything?”

The sentinel floated silently for a moment, then moved forwards to nudge Jac right in his bloated middle. Jac flailed his puffy arms wildly as he tipped over, the round fox rolling and bouncing down the slope. He yelped, squeaked, and creaked the whole way, his senses assaulted by the barrage in pressure spikes. Still inflating, Jac was mostly spherical by the time he bumped right into the equally ballooned up Rho, his head spinning.

Rho and Jac drifted in and out of a daze as they wobbled in place, long creaks echoing out from the two over inflated pool toys. Only when their bodies were terribly taut did the hissing of each disk cease. The sentinel slowly floated over to the immobilized duo, scanning as it circled both. Apparently

satisfied with its efforts the sentinel wandered off, leaving the two behind to creak in peace.

During a brief bout of clarity Rho attempted to lighten the mood. “Well Jac, I...did promise we'd be...rolling...right?”

Jac groaned, almost wishing he were too dazed to hear the zebra. “Rho I'm gonna...I'm gonna deflate you the...first chance...I get, and lock you...in a...in a...*ooooof*.”

The creaking pool toys had a very, *very* long day ahead of them...