

Jac's Filling Wish

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The glow of instruments and display screens gently lit the spaceship's cockpit, stars racing by out the windows. Normally the atmosphere would've been relaxing, but Jac was both bored. The pool toy fox had been exploring, and while visiting new planets and searching ancient ruins had been exciting, the long trip back to his flagship the *Hyperion* was excruciatingly bland. Even attempting to relieve his boredom by examining his recent finds hadn't made the journey feel any faster, at least as far as he was concerned.

Eventually Jac grew tired of sitting around the cockpit staring at the same all clear reports from the autopilot. He slid off his chair and left the cockpit, passing by the small sleeping quarters before reaching the cargo hold. The room was littered with crates and barrels, each filled with objects of interest he'd come across, along with the occasional chunk of valuable mineral.

Amongst them was an object that reminded him of a classical oil lamp, yet undeniably advanced. Casual poking hadn't produced results, and in all likelihood Jac wouldn't be able to figure out what it did until he had access to the advanced facilities aboard the *Hyperion*. Regardless, he needed *something* to do, and examining the weird lamp in vain was still better than nothing.

"Open personal log and begin new recording on my mark," Jac said aloud. His visor responded with a short tone in recognition. "Begin."

Jac picked up the lamp, trying to keep himself focused and not thinking about the time. "Still working on the mystery of Artifact NF8. Discovered in a heavily reinforced ruin buried deep in a lifeless moon, probably a bunker or specialized storage facility of some sort. Only one vault hadn't been entirely looted by earlier scavengers, and this was the sole item in it."

Every one of his previous logs regarding the lamp started the same way, but Jac felt the repetition might help him figure out if he was missing anything obvious.

"Artifact has no obvious function, no buttons or touchscreens. Doesn't even rattle when I shake it." He gave it a frustrated shake, as if he had an audience he needed to prove the fact to. "Basic scans haven't provided any insight either. There has to be *some* reason it was considered important enough to put in a vault!"

The pool toy glared at the lamp in search of answers, but just like before he found none. In frustration he turned around and took a few steps away, pounding an inflated mitt against a crate. It didn't bounce nearly as much as it should've. Jac frowned as he gave his puffy arms a closer look, noticing quite a few creases.

"Ugh, how do I keep losing air? I wonder if my valve needs tightening or something," Jac grumbled. Honestly I wish I never had to worry about deflating ever again!"

Unbeknownst to Jac, the lamp behind him began to stir. Strips of light appeared and the tip glowed bright. The lamp rattled before sending out a bright pulse that caused Jac to jerk as it impacted him. His vinyl body tingled momentarily, as if a chilly breeze had hit him. A single alert about a sudden energy reading spike in the cargo hold popped up on Jac's visor, but the system hadn't found any noticeable effects from it. Weird.

Hisssssss.

Jac's ear twitched. The sound was faint and muffled, but he swore he could hear an air tank.

Hisssssssssssssssss.

Jac looked around, eyes darting from one crate to another, trying to pinpoint the sound. He didn't remember storing any air tanks in the room, though.

As the pool toy searched in vain, the answer was right under his nose. His creases had vanished, and his white middle was slowly getting rounder and rounder. Soon the creaking of stretching vinyl joined the hissing, and Jac knew all too well what that meant.

"Meep!" Jac nearly jumped as he realized he was inflating.

No hose or pump was connected to Jac, yet he was undeniably inflating somehow. He pressed down on his widening belly, provoking a series of low *creaaaaaaks* and *sqrks*. The act did nothing to halt his expansion, of course.

“R-run diagnostic!” Jac squeaked, eager to find a way to stop whatever was happening to him before things got out of hand.

The visor replied with a string of statistics detailing Jac's internal pressure, the strength of his vinyl, and the increasing volume of air within him. They weren't answers, just a complicated countdown timer to when he'd pop. No virus, no nanobots, no miniature pump. He was emitting an unusual energy signal but there was nothing else to explain where the air was coming from.

Jac's middle had rounded out considerably in the meanwhile, the pool toy fox starting to resemble a beach ball. The rest of his body was thickening ever-so-slightly, too. He had rounder cheeks and puffier paws, his ears filled with just enough excess air to make moving them take effort. The creaks were growing louder and more consistent, his vinyl being stretched all over.

With scans proving useless, Jac got desperate. Popping open his valve would at least force some of the air out, hopefully enough for Jac to remain mobile and not deflate completely. He reached for his valve with both mitts, only to discover it was just barely out of reach at the peak of his swelling middle. Again and again he reached, creaking up a storm as the valve only got further and further away with every hiss. Jac was simply too bloated to open it.

Nervousness quickly overtook frustration. Jac tried waddling around the cargo hold in search of something to aid his efforts, but his pace was woefully slow. He was bumping into crates left and right, nearly toppling over more and more. Inevitably even waddling became impossible.

Jac's eyes darted all over as he gently rolled over onto his expanding middle, too puffed up to move. He could barely hear himself think over the sounds of creaking vinyl and the nagging sensation of pressure. Wobbling back and forth as he expanded in all directions, Jac continued running every scan and check he could think of, but none helped.

Crates were slowly pushed away by the spherical fox's inflating body. His cheeks were big and round, pressing into his puffy snout and filling his ears with soft creaks. Jac's face flushed red as he blimped up. Inflating was always such a nice sensation, even when he knew he was approaching his limits. His seams were straining, hide stretched thin and taut. Wobbling was strenuous, so the pool toy stopped squirming entirely. All he could do was wait for the seemingly inevitable.

Jac had grown so large his back was almost touching the ceiling. The creaks were longer, more ominous. The breaking point was near. Jac's entire body vibrated as his vinyl struggled to stretch further, but a seam finally gave up.

Head swirling, Jac barely noticed the initial rip and loud hiss. Seams all over the pool failed simultaneously, tears racing across his surface. A thunderous *Boom!* rang out, the massive Jac balloon vanishing in a cloud of scraps in the blink of an eye. Vinyl rained down upon the room, pelting crates and bouncing off the walls.

At the explosion's ground zero, though, was Jac. Thoroughly dazed, the pool toy looked perfectly fine, filled with his usual amount of air and nothing more. As he came to his senses he was left confused. There were definitely scraps of himself scattered everywhere, and he certainly remembered popping, but now he was intact.

Jac let out a sigh of relief...only to have it cut short by a faint *hisssssssssssssss*. His eyes widened as he watched his middle start to swell once more on its own. “Meep!!”

While the reinflating Jac wobbled and fumed, the lamp behind him sat forgotten, patiently awaiting the next wish to fulfill...