

The Lion Berry

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When August finally slumped into his chair at math class he felt like he was going to pass out. The black-and-white lion had sprinted half way across the campus of Columbia State University to avoid being late, but now he wasn't sure he'd have the energy to actually pay attention to the professor. Heart racing and throat parched, August dug around in his backpack in hopes of finding his water bottle, as he'd not had a chance to stop by a fountain or even faucet during the rush. Though his usual bottle was nowhere to be found, there *was* a bright blue sports drink he'd completely forgotten about.

Most of the label had been torn off but the seal was still tight, and August was desperate for something to quench his thirst and help him recover from the unexpected burst of exercise; besides, there wasn't any reason to be suspicious of a drink he'd apparently put in his own bag. In a flash August opened the bottle and chugged it in one go, sighing happily as the cool-enough liquid wetted his tongue and poured down his throat. He was still tired, but an hour of sitting down taking notes was bound to fix that eventually.

Once the professor started lecturing August's attention became laser-focused, the lion oblivious to everything but his notebook and the talk. Unfortunately that meant he was oblivious to some concerning changes. His nose gradually took on a blue hue that crept outwards across his whole muzzle like a paint stain...or juice stain. Inch-by-inch the black and white fur on his face turned into a deep shade of blue, and his white mane soon followed. The shift in color continued beneath his clothes, sparing nothing and leaving his paws for last. Even then the lion took a few moments to realize there was something odd about his paw.

August jerked in his seat once he noticed the change, and a frantic scan of his other arm and mane was enough proof to convince him his entire body was blue, though he wasn't sure why. Of course the sudden movement had also made him aware of a faint sloshing sensation in his stomach. With a muffled groan he looked down: his usually flat stomach was now slightly round and taut. The lion had more than enough personal experience with inflation to know he was transforming into a berry, and the only reasonable source of his frustrating affliction was the mystery drink he'd indulged in.

Maybe it was a prank by a friend or a product defect, or perhaps even just a bizarre reaction to something he'd eaten at lunch. In reality the cause no longer mattered to August, only figuring out a solution before he became an immobile lion berry. As quietly as he could August searched his bag for meds to either reverse or delay the production of juice within him, still trying to pay attention to the professor and take notes as he did. Meanwhile his new belly continued swelling, stretching the creases out of his shirt and pushing against the desk.

One-by-one the students around August began to notice his changes, some staring and others holding back snickers. At least one carefully angled his phone to record the lion's predicament. Minutes of rifling through his backpack produced nothing of use, and by then he looked like he'd swallowed a basketball, his blue belly fully exposed after his far too small shirt had ridden up it. August sheepishly raised his paw into the air to get his elephant professor's attention, well aware of that most of the classroom was already staring at him.

When the professor finally looked in August's direction he raised an eyebrow and sighed. "Something you need to take care of August?"

"Uh, y-yeah. Sort of have a blueberry...problem." More snorts, all eyes now on the blue lion. "Mind if I leave early to get it handled?"

"Alright get moving then," the elephant replied, gruffly. "I'd rather not have a berry wedged in the doorway."

The giggles amongst the students were far less reserved than before, and August blushed at having to cut class because he was turning into a berry of all things. He hastily put away his notebook

and wiggled out of his chair, stumbling a little as the juice filling his round gut splashed about in a frenzy. August's struggles with his blue ball belly garnered more laughs and teasing, a couple daring classmates even poking his middle as he shimmied in between desks and fled.

While August found ease in the privacy of the barren hallway, he still needed to actually reach a public juicing station before he ended up a complete sphere; being immobile on a campus like Columbia State was a surefire way to end up kidnapped for the afternoon by mischievous students. He was certain the nearby park had a station, thankfully. With the juice still building up August hurried off, his belly swaying side to side with every increasingly-heavy step. Being on the top floor of one of the university's tallest buildings wasn't going to do the lion any favors, and he was forced to wait for the elevator and hope it was free in between classes.

Sloshes and splashes provided August with plenty of uncomfortable ambiance as he stood in the hall, compulsively tapping his sneaker on the floor. By the time the doors finally opened August's shirt was scrunched tightly around his upper chest—in danger of being torn apart at the seams if he swelled any bigger—and he'd had to unbuckle his belt before it burst right off. Entering the elevator meant another agonizing wait.

August's gaze instinctively went to the four corners of his cramped, hopefully-temporary prison, and he extended his arms out wide out of morbid curiosity; the tips of his claws nearly touched both walls. If the trip took longer than expected or the berrification process kicked into high gear he'd practically fill the whole elevator, requiring emergency services to get safely juiced and dislodged. He saw such accidents on the news every once in a while, and frequently online, and the lion wasn't eager to get that kind of exposure regardless of how much he loved inflation.

An attempt to remove his shirt before it ripped ended in failure as August's limbs had started to puff up somewhat from the juice as well, along with his chest. Removing his pants early would've been far too embarrassing, so August was forced to endure the steady tightening of his jeans as they succumbed to their expanding wearer.

As if swelling with juice and losing his clothing wasn't bad enough, the lion was gradually realizing a strange change in his fur. The larger he got the glossier his fur seemed, light reflecting off the surface in ways it never did usually, as if he were plastic. A quick touch revealed the surface was no longer fluffy, but smooth. Berrification could be extremely varied, and while most resulted in no external changes aside from color shifting and the obvious growth, some could make your transformation into a berry a bit more literal. Thankfully he could still hear and feel plenty of splashing within, a good sign he wasn't solidifying; a juicing station would be worthless then.

After what felt like an eternity August finally reached the first floor, the lion eager to squeeze his way through the elevator doors as soon as they opened. Two other students awaited him, and each were obviously caught off-guard by the sight of the ridiculously rotund blue lion. August blushed and politely wobbled past them, barely able to manage a brisk power walk with how bloated he was. The noise of the volatile juice swirling inside him was unmistakable, ensuring his face was a permanently flustered purple as the sparse bystanders actively tried to steer clear of him in the hall. None could be sure that he wasn't contagious, after all.

The swollen lion's next hurdle was the building's entrance, slightly more bustling and boasting an automatic sliding door of questionable width. Just like before the gathered students dispersed a little to let the berry through, and August cleared the threshold with centimeters to spare, much to his relief. The bright light of day shone off his now-slick hide, which was well on its way to lacking even a single misplaced tuft of fur. His mane had remained fluffy for the most part, though August was convinced it was more rigid than normal.

Fueled by adrenaline and determination August soldiered on, waddling towards the juicing station as swiftly as his bloated paws could manage. His cheeks and limbs swelled up, each step getting more and more difficult as the weight of his juice increased. By some miracle he reached the park, the brightly-colored juicing station—and salvation—within sight. Unfortunately he was simply too late.

August was practically a sphere already, his limbs reduced to domes and his paws rather puffy. Moving even an inch was an absolute chore, and by then the lion was fairly exhausted and out of breath, too tired to wobble forward anymore. He quietly cursed and grumbled, frustrated that the station was so relatively close yet so impossibly far for a massive berry like him. There was no one in his limited field of view to help, and he couldn't exactly trust a stranger to actually help him get juiced as opposed to teasing him. Admittedly the lion himself was guilty of playing with stranded berries more often than not, though it was doubtful the experience would change his actions in the future.

For a few minutes August simply stood still and pouted, a giant lion berry glistening in the sun for all to admire and mock.

“Well well, now isn't this an exquisite specimen!”

The voice that finally broke the silence came from behind him, and August's eyes widened with concern upon recognizing it.

A bulky black bear wearing a sharp suit strolled around August to face him, a grin on his wide face. His own belly was oddly round—even for his heft—the faintest, muffled sloshes coming from within. “Mr. August, I see you're enjoying a nice roll through the park.”

August blushed profusely. “N-not intentionally Professor Fisher. Had a bit of an accident in class, was just heading to the juicing station to deal with the issue!”

“I don't think it's really an issue to be a berry. After all, I'm one permanently and find it rather enjoyable!” The bear gave his gut a hearty slap to emphasize his own reservoir.

“Well, I mean, o-of course there's no problem with being a berry, I'm just a tiny bit immobile right now,” August stammered. Professor Fisher was one of his teachers, and notorious for turning his own students into berries—either as punishment or to serve as experiments in berrification. The lion feared he was looking like the perfect, helpless sample.

The bear ceased making eye contact with August half-way through his rambling, his gaze instead shifting to the berry lion's body. “It's rare to see a berry with slick hide like yours, usually means the juice is purer.” He rubbed August's surface, causing the student to wince and wobble, disturbing his juices. “And no internal solidification from the sounds of things, just liquid! It's your lucky day Mr. August, I'm about to give you a unique extra credit project.”

August feared where the conversation was headed. “Um, I'm good, actually! I-I appreciate the offer but I've got a lot of work with other classes to worry about and I feel pretty good in yours right now so—”

“Nonsense! I guarantee you'll enjoy this project a great deal, it'll feel just like a nice, long vacation.” Professor Fisher's grin grew a little more sinister. “All you'll need to do is be your wonderful spherical self and you'll be guaranteed an A. I'll even pull some strings so you can finish your other courses at an—ahem—later date. Now let's just roll you to the Berry Wing of the Chem Department and get you all settled in.”

August wasn't allowed a retort, the immobile lion gently pushed onto his side and rolled away from the park, away from hope of being juiced anytime soon. He blushed and winced at the sensation of the giant pool of juice rolling around within him, crashing waves echoing out frequently. The massive lion's weight required considerable force to move, and Professor Fisher's paws pressing hard against his taut hide made August fidget and whimper constantly.

Being rolled was disorienting, but unfortunately their pace was just slow enough for August to see other students pointing in his direction, laughing, recording. No one was about to cross the intimidating ursine professor in order to rescue him, so August didn't even bother shouting for help; it'd just make the inevitable videos of his predicament look even more ridiculous once they spread around online. Instead he attempted to make the situation appear as willing as possible given his lingering looks of nervousness.

Reaching the Chem Department took time, both due to distance and the sheer size of Professor Fisher's prize, but once they arrived August's unease returned in full force. He wobbled and squirmed

as best he could, asking to be let go once more. Of course his pleas fell on deaf ears. The doors leading into the Berry Wing were more than wide enough for someone as ripe as August to be rolled through, as were the corridors and freight elevator within. Along the way they passed another berry who August just barely recognized as a classmate he hadn't seen in months, and reality fully set in for the lion; he had a very, very long ordeal ahead of him. As the unlucky lion berry was rolled through a set up of double doors with a sign reading "Berry Processing" above them he let out one last whine—though it was heavily drowned out by raucous sloshing...