

Trial and Error

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Jac looked between his datapad and the strange, cylindrical metal object on his desk, sighing as he tried to make sense of it. The pool toy fox had found the relic during his most recent archeological dig, and had hoped it would somehow make the costly venture worthwhile. So far it'd merely been a priceless paperweight. As thorough scans and careful analysis had so far failed him utterly, Jac's frustration drove him to take a more blunt approach. He wailed on the cylinder with his rubbery paws, demanding the artifact turn on or off or just do *anything* at all. While initially as ineffective as any previous approach, he eventually managed to apply enough pressure to one side to prompt a loud *click* and a *whir*.

The fox stepped back as the scorned cylinder rattled on his desk, suddenly worried he'd activated some kind of self-destruct mechanism, or that he'd been messing with an ancient grenade of some sort. Thankfully there wasn't an explosion, and instead the cylinder rose into the air before hovering over to Jac and slowly orbiting his body like a miniature satellite. He breathed a short sigh of relief that he wasn't dodging shrapnel—sharp metal bits naturally didn't mix well with pool toys after all—but his investigation was far from over. Jac slowly wandered around the room, watching as the cylinder dutifully maintained its orbit around him, even when he ducked or actively tried evading it.

While floating made the cylinder more useful than a paperweight, Jac still hoped it held more secrets. With some effort he caught the relic in his paws, pressing on it until he heard another *click*. A jolt surged from the cylinder and into Jac, causing the pool toy to release his grip and shudder from the sudden shock. The tingling sensation that followed wasn't painful, but it lingered far longer than expected, and something about it felt oddly familiar. As he looked himself over he began to realize his rubbery hide seemed glossier than normal, like he'd been waxed and a little...translucent?

Prodding his stomach proved his hide wasn't as firm as usual, and the higher-pitch squeak was more like that of a latex than rubber. He had to be transforming into a balloon. As if on cue the nozzle on his navel sunk into his middle and vanished, leaving behind a smooth, shiny surface. On the tip of his tail a twisted knot was forming—just like a balloon's—and Jac groaned as he turned and spotted it. The fox was woefully familiar with such transformations, but that didn't mean he was any bit eager to find himself the victim of an ancient trap or prank. Fearful he'd end up either inflated or made inanimate as well, Jac furiously tried jabbing at the cylinder to undo the effect, which zipped behind him as soon as it clicked.

"I wonder if that worked—" Jac's question was answered almost immediately by the sensation of something latching onto the tip of his puffy tail.

Looking over his shoulder, the balloon fox's eyes widened as he spotted the cylinder sticking to his tail, covering the recently-grown knot. He tried shaking it off but wasn't able to provide nearly enough force in his current form to succeed, and of course he couldn't reach it to pull either. As Jac contemplated smacking the cylinder against a wall the echoing sound of flowing liquid caught his attention. Somehow water had begun gushing from the cylinder, pouring directly into his latex body.

Suddenly Jac was very much regretting his desire for the cylinder to be more than just a paperweight. He glared at the relic that had brought him nothing but annoyance, unwilling to blindly press any more buttons in case his situation somehow got worse. With water beginning to pool in his legs Jac knew he had to act fast; after all, there was no telling if the flow would cease once he was full or continue on till he burst. Jac left the lab, walking as swiftly as his squeaking, water-logged paws would allow. The fox constantly felt like he was on the verge of falling over, already longing for the return of his usual, sturdy pool toy body.

Half-way down the thankfully-empty corridor Jac was filled up to his chest, the water within splashing with every labored step. Though he wasn't getting tired out, handling the excess weight was still a challenge, forcing Jac to put much more effort into simple movements. Upon entering the closest

elevator Jac gave a voice command to bring him to a deck where advanced transformation machinery was, confident something there would be capable of returning him to normal. Unfortunately the unlucky balloon was running out of time.

Once the water level reached his snout, Jac felt his middle beginning to swell, the flow from the cylinder not slowing at all. Unnerving creaks echoed around the elevator as Jac rounded out, the fox widening his stance in order to remain standing. His gaze frantically shifted between the rapidly changing display of the deck number and his expanding body, abruptly very concerned about the width of doors. Jac's limbs and tail puffed up as well, and inevitably he became too bloated and heavy, tipping forwards just as the doors finally opened.

Jac grunted as his fall came to a sudden halt, his swollen sides wedged in the exit. He could hear the squeaking of his latex hide as gravity slowly slid him forwards, until eventually he became dislodged with an audible *pop!* The fox water balloon fox gained enough momentum to roll right out of the elevator and into a spacious common area, coming to a wobbling rest atop his spherical middle. With his hide close to its limits the cylinder shut down, falling off Jac's tail and onto the floor. His sloshy belly was so large and his cheeks so round Jac could barely even breath a sigh of relief.

Jac's odd arrival hadn't gone unnoticed. The room was bustling with activity as numerous Jac drones—loyal inflatable copies of the fox himself—went about their business, and now their attentions were firmly on their immobile leader. The nearest drone marched over and gave a brief salute before eagerly asking if Jac required assistance.

At first the fox was too embarrassed to ask for help, but he quickly came up with a lie to save face. “Just doing some completely normal training!” he blurted, voice muffled considerably. “Uh, though now I think it's time to test your reaction times. Get me drained and turned back to normal, on the double!”

He didn't have to give the order twice. Another drone hurried over, and together the duo of helpers rolled Jac away, the fox sighing as the water inside him splashed and swirled. Next time he'd make sure to have a drone test the relics out instead...