

The Thief and the Herbalist

By: Indi

Sporadic but steady rainfall had ensured the backroads leading to the city were even more desolate than usual. Anyone with a wagon was sticking to the main road so they wouldn't get stuck or washed down a hill, and few were bothering to venture out on foot, sticking to the shelter of way stations. As a thief Alan valued the coincidental privacy—but not how little cover the tree he leaned against provided.

The goat had escaped his cell a week before, regaining a bit of pride after having gotten caught by the town guards during a sloppy heist. Though his pursuers had long given up, Alan was now starving, and with barely a coin to his name.

When he spotted a traveler slowly making their way down the road he'd left, he thought his luck had changed. They were partially concealed by a cloak, but Alan guessed they were at least feline, *maybe* a lion. More importantly, they were portly. No cloak could disguise the bouncing belly they sported, or their thick arms and legs.

Alan's mouth was already watering.

While the goat's "profession" favored being lean, Alan still indulged in the occasional live meal. At times it was simply easier to gulp a merchant down than try to subtly snatch their coin purse. He'd never tried eating someone so big, though.

Doubts and caution were thrown out. He didn't care how fat the stranger made him, he was going to eat well that day!

Alan crept through the underbrush, eyes never leaving his future meal. The lion hadn't noticed him at all, too busy looking up at the sky as the rain started dying down. From his belt Alan grabbed a pair of bolas and waited.

The stranger came closer and closer, then away as he continued on, his back now to Alan. With well-practiced ease Alan silently slipped out of the bushes and spun his bolas, loosing them on the stranger at relatively close range. They struck true, provoking a surprised yelp from his target as he fell to the ground, legs bound.

With gluttonous glee Alan hurried over. He noticed his prey's paws were green, an odd color for any feline. Their tail was even weirder. It reminded Alan of a lion's, yet was clearly either covered or made of vines. Maybe they were a mage or druid?

No matter, they'd be goat pudge soon enough.

"Now aren't you the catch of the day!" Alan snickered and gave the lion's doughy side a nudge before firmly placing a hoof on their back to keep them pinned down. "And even fatter up close! You really *are* gonna do a number on my waistline~"

The lion groaned beneath him, but Alan no longer saw them as a threat. After his recent string of failures he needed his "triumph" over the random traveler to feel grandiose.

"Oh but don't worry about me—I'll lose the weight in no time, every last pound of ya." A sweet smell drifted into Alan's nostrils. "After all, it's a lot harder to squeeze through windows when you're sporting a gut!"

Alan laughed, but then swayed, suddenly having trouble with his footing. The aroma had grown stronger, almost overwhelming, as if his face were buried in a flower patch. He tried to shake the odd sensation off, but it was only getting worse.

"What the...what...what's going...on..." Alan collapsed, conscious but scatter-brained.

The lion removed the bolas tangling his legs and stood up. The hood of his cloak came off, revealing him to have a mane of leaves and hide of moss. His eyes were golden, shimmering like the sun.

Long ago Florin had been a regular lion, until one of the herbalist's riskier experiments had

transformed him into a hybrid of plant and feline. He happened to like the advantages his new form gave him, such as the ability to gather nutrients from sunlight and producing pollen capable of sedating a person.

“That was embarrassing,” Florin grumbled, still sore from the ambush. “If the fall had knocked me out I’d probably be sliding down a goat’s gullet right now. And what good would’ve come from that? He’d have just gotten fat and caught all the more easily, and ended up in a guard captain’s gut. If I’m going to end up on someone’s waistline, then they’d better be worthy!”

Florin bent down, thoroughly examining the dazed goat.

“Well my foolish friend, the tables have turned and I happen to also have a fairly voracious appetite myself. But while you were intending to waste the pudge you gained, I’m planning on putting every bit of you to good use. Now get up.”

Alan sluggishly complied. As long as the pollen held strong he would do anything he was told, though with questionable competency. He struggled both to stand and stay standing. A stiff breeze could’ve knocked him over.

“Just think of my belly as a cauldron and you as the stew. And where does stew belong?”

“In the...in the belly,” Alan giggled, prodding Florin’s gut.

“Close enough,” Florin said with a sigh, before opening his maw wide.

Without the slightest bit of hesitation Alan put his hooves inside the plant lion’s mouth and wiggled forwards. He fed himself to Florin as best he could, until his head was past their lips. At that point Florin gladly took over.

Strong paws grabbed the goat’s sides and lifted him up, and a series of swallows steadily pulled him in deeper and deeper. Florin’s middle began to swell outward, pushing up his tunic and wobbling from side to side. Pred and prey worked in unison, hastening Alan’s consumption and ensuring there were no delays from struggling. After only a couple minutes Florin was closing his jaws, his gut bouncing gently as his meal fell in completely.

Florin allowed himself a satisfied smile as he looked down upon his bulging belly. He took pleasure in being big, and the added temporary heft of a whole person was always a delight. Thought tempted to continue his journey for an hour or two more with the thief trapped inside him, Florin didn’t want to make himself an easy target for any other bandits along the road.

Instead he’d deal with him on the spot.

“I happen to be an herbalist, Mr. Thief, but I also dabble in alchemy. My greatest accomplishment has been discovering a way to actually make this plant body of mine bear fruit that can mimic various kinds of potions—like healing ones, for example.” Florin spoke with the utmost pride, even if his only audience was a loopy goat trapped in his gut. “Of course in order to promote that kind of rapid growth I need a considerable amount of nutrients. And few things are more packed full of nutrients than living beings.”

Surrounded by stagnant air and no more pollen, Alan was beginning to regain his senses. He squirmed weakly, fighting mainly on instinct.

“It’s surprisingly simple, really. You’ll be rapidly absorbed by my body, a significant portion of your nutrients turned into large ripe berries of my choosing. In your case they’ll be bright red, for healing. I’m always in need of those. What isn’t used for berries will be turned into fat for later use.” An excuse, really, that Florin told others when confronted about his weight. While he *could* burn away the pounds if necessary, he rather preferred keeping them around for his own pleasure.

Florin’s middle was glowing faintly, Alan’s struggles intensifying. The thief was being squeezed and massaged by the stomach walls. He couldn’t shake the feeling he was getting softer, his prison more compact.

Slowly the rowdy gut of the plant lion started shrinking, and all over his leafy mane small red berries bloomed. The bulges made by Alan were fading, lumps smoothed out. The barely coherent protests died out. Elsewhere Florin was plumping up. His face and rear grew slightly rounder, limbs

thicker. His sides looked a little fatter as well.

It wasn't long before all signs of Alan were gone, aside from the muffled *slorshing* of goop within Florin's stomach. Even that soon vanished, as the former thief was fully converted into pudge and berries.

Florin gave his gut a smack once the wobbling had ceased, satisfied with its efficiency. Nothing was left over.

Plucking one of the fresh berries from his mane, Florin gave it a careful look over. An almost perfect sphere, with a brilliant red sheen. It was like an oversized cherry without a stem. He tossed it in his mouth and chewed, pleased by the taste of the juice. A gentle chill spread throughout his body once they'd been eaten. The aches and bruises from the earlier attack faded, along with the exhaustion from his long journey.

"The batch was a success, wonderful! Looks like this trip was more productive than I thought. Perhaps I should consider eating a traveler or two from now on. That way I'll never come home empty handed again." Florin laughed, both his belly and the berries bouncing.

The trip wasn't over, though. Rejuvenated, Florin continued on his way, a little bit fatter and more colorful than he had been a few minutes before. Of Alan all that remained were a pair of abandoned bolas—along with a couple dozen healing berries that'd benefit many. There were worse fates for a petty thief.