

## Vel's Ambition

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There were many forms of magic, and berrymancy was one of the strangest. It was the ability to fill people with juice, to make them change color and swell up like an enormous, living berry. It did other things, of course, but for most that's what berrymancy meant: turning others into berries.

But some didn't think it so odd. Some even rather enjoyed becoming blueberries themselves, either temporarily or permanently. One such mage was Vel, a tiger who'd devoted his life to perfecting and expanding berrymancy—and quite often himself in the process.

In the past he'd been a white tiger, but years of being a permaberry had dyed his fur a deep shade of blue. His stripes remained black, but there were still hints of blue if you stared long enough. Regular juicings ensured he was usually mobile, though there were occasions when Vel remained spherical for days at a time, either as an experiment or out of pleasure.

If the experiment he was about to attempt succeeded, it might very well be one of those times.

For years Vel had been trying to infuse living blueberries so they'd produce mana instead of regular juice. In theory such a thing would allow a berry mage to cast more spells, stronger spells, as they pulled from a deep well of internal mana.

But mana and berries were both volatile, and the mixture had always ended in failure. Test subjects would swell out of control, well beyond their limits until they exploded. Every precaution he'd attempted had been for naught, and he'd gone through dozens of "volunteers" in the process. At long last, though, he was convinced he'd figured out a workable method. And the ideal test subject: himself.

"Prepare to witness history, Rye!" Vel told his head assistant, a sabertooth tiger. They were as blue as he was, having been berrified within a month of getting hired. Most of Vel's staff ended up as berries inevitably—if they didn't pop first.

"Are you sure we shouldn't conduct some more tests first, sir?" Rye asked, nervously. He was a fairly timid feline. "

"Have faith in my power and durability!" Vel said. He was carefully arranging a golden censer on a pedestal. It would release mana in the form of incense, which he believed would work better than the liquid and solid forms he'd tried previously. "My berrymancy allows me to control my swelling with ease. Even if this somehow fails the worst that'll happen is I creak a little and get stuck as a ball for a while. You won't be dodging juice this time!"

Rye frowned. He remembered most of the other tests vividly. How the subjects wobbled as their limbs were enveloped. How some would fall into a pressure daze while others would have a dopey look of delight on their faces as they ballooned. A few flailed in a panic as they leaked mana and juice. But they'd all burst in the end, leaving behind nothing but scraps and juice. And one time a beak.

"Alright, Rye. Keep your distance, but be ready to cast support spells as requested. If you start to swell, you'll be on your own!" Vel unsealed the censer as Rye fled.

A faint, blue mist rose from the numerous holes in the censer. Vel breathed them in deep, a smile forming as he smelt the wonderful aroma of pure mana. At the same time he kick-started his internal juice production. There was a bubbling within his stomach, and almost instantly the mage began to swell.

Vel inflated, quite like a balloon, his body expanding in every direction. His rounding middle was filling with juice, a torrent that splashed and swirled as it came into being. A gradual swell may have been the safest approach, but the mage was eager for results. And, admittedly, to be a berry.

The mana incense was flowing into him as well, puffing him up slightly faster. Once inside, it fused with the juice. Before long Vel had taken on a somewhat oblong shape, his limbs swollen and then sunken into his body. His clothing still fit perfectly, enchanted to be the ideal size for even the most massive of berries.

Vel gradually slowed the flow of his juices. He rounded out further, his footpaws lifting off the floor as he became a near-perfect sphere. The berry tiger wobbled gently. It wouldn't have taken much to send him rolling across the room.

With effort his juice production was brought to a crawl. He was rather taut, faint creaks echoing from his hide. An ideal form in Vel's opinion, one he'd normally plan to idle in for hours. But for now there was work to be done.

"See Rye, this is already going better than all the previous tests!" Vel said. He slowly turned himself around by shifting the juices within him. Yet another advantage to being a berryman. The movements caused little spikes in pressure that made him smile and blush. He didn't *want* to pop, but the sensations of being on the verge of bursting were surprisingly delightful. "I'm going to try infusing more mana with my juices. Be prepared for support spells on my command."

Rye nodded.

Vel breathed in deep, provoking plenty of creaks as a result. He drunk from the censer like a tap, expanding even more. His paws were pulled in until they couldn't even wiggle anymore, and his head was tilted upward. The pressure intensified, requiring greater concentration from the mage. Within he worked to merge mana and juice, but his progress was slow, and his swelling wasn't subsiding.

"Rye, reinforce my hide—two layers as a precaution!" Vel ordered, holding back a slight moan of pleasure. He brushed aside an odd desire to just get lost in his size and ignore the experiment completely.

The spells were cast, lessening the creaking as Vel's hide became stretchier. But being more flexible also allowed him to inflate more. Suddenly he was starting to gain both width and height.

Not an unexpected outcome, so Vel paid it no attention. With more space to work with, the tiger was actually managing to infuse more and more of his juice with mana. His body gained a faint shimmer, then a glow.

The mana was seeping into his body, energizing him like never before. It was like he'd guzzled kegs of mana potions. He could feel the power building within him, and it was becoming as intoxicating as his increasing success. Vel put less and less effort into holding back his juices. After all, it would all end up as mana in the end, and the more of that the better.

Swelling that had been slow and steady abruptly picked up. Rye watched his master blimp up with concern, expecting to hear a request for more spells at any moment. Instead the tiger merely smiled and giggled to himself, as if oblivious to what was going on.

"Um, sir? Should I cast a spell of juice suppression on you?" Rye asked.

It was a moment before Vel responded, the tiger barely glancing his assistant's way. "Of course not. Just layer three more reinforcement spells on me."

Rye wasn't pleased with the order, but he was too timid to voice his opinion. The new spells were cast on Vel, swiftening his expansion. The glow of the mage intensified, turning into an aura that wafted towards Rye. The sabertooth shivered as the ambient mana touched him, a chill building in his small belly. To his shock, his juices started bubbling, and Rye began to very slowly inflate.

Unfortunately Rye had more important things to worry about than his own unwanted expansion. Vel was growing far bigger than they'd planned—not that the excited tiger seemed to care—and his available space was starting to dwindle. The massive blueberry was blimping up against tables and chairs and counters. The smaller items were simply knocked over, but the heavier ones were pressing against Vel's taut hide. All represented a possible popping risk.

Belly sloshing, Rye hurried to clear the dangers as best he could. Keeping up with his master was a challenge, and it only grew harder the more Rye himself filled with juice. A small fallen chair was crushed beneath the weight of Vel, who quite literally expanded over it before Rye could pull it free. After witnessing the destruction he did his best to keep some distance. There wasn't much space to flee, though.

Vel only saw his growth as a boon. The new juice he was producing had faint traces of mana,

his body actually changing. He was transforming from a blueberry to a manaberry.

The mage felt beyond incredible. He felt like he could've transformed a dozen people into berries all at once, swelling them so quickly they'd barely have time to react before they rolled away. He bet he could juice himself in seconds, and refill just as fast if so desired. Rolling himself would be a breeze, the act of a casual thought.

And yet Vel found himself desiring even more mana.

"M-Master, you're getting too big!" Rye found the courage to say. He was waddling, dangerously close to being too round to move well. He was no longer able to help, wincing at the sounds of furniture and equipment getting crunched and flattened. The exit was far for a swelling berry, and there was no guarantee he'd even reach it before the path was cut off.

"Impossible!" Vel bellowed. "I need to test the true extent of my wondrous success! I'll deflate later—*maybe*. To be honest it seems more sensible to remain this way so I can take advantage of my endless pool of mana."

Rye didn't need to hear anymore to realize there was no point in trying to talk sense into his master. He frantically waddled towards the exit, then wobbled, then shuffled. Finally he rolled, losing his balance and ending up on his back, helpless. The immense berry that was Vel loomed overhead, swelling closer and closer. Rye remembered the chair from earlier, and whimpered.

Big berry bumped up against small berry. The gentle poke rolled Rye a little bit, but overall he was getting more enveloped than pushed. Steadily the pressure on him increased. His hide creaked loudly in protest. His whimpers swiftly became groans as a daze came over him. In the back of his mind, behind a swirling jumble of thoughts, Rye knew he was in danger. All he could do was wiggle and creak, though.

Inevitably, Rye was overcome. The comparatively smaller berry quaked, and his bulging sides burst. In a flash he was reduced to a splash of juice and scattered scraps of hide. Even that was swiftly covered by Vel's perpetually ballooning body.

Vel, of course, didn't notice the loss of his assistant. He was far too busy dealing with the more important matters of growing further and remaining intact.

Despite the multitude of reinforcement spells cast on him, the creaking and pressure was steadily increasing. His paws and head were starting to slowly sink into his body again, which was on the verge of filling the once-spacious lab. Vel grunted as his sides pushed against two walls, then three, then four. They were made of stone and well-built, which meant trouble for the gigantic blueberry. He was running out of room to grow, and if the walls didn't fail, his hide very well might.

"J-Just a little bit more," Vel lied to himself. "Just a little bit more and I'll stop, this is—*mrrmph*—nothing, nothing at all! I bet the whole lab will crumble around me. I'll be a landmark, large enough to finally match my grandiose power. No one will be able to deny how incredible berrymanancy can be!"

But boasts didn't stop the bloat. His paws were enveloped, and his head was forced to look straight up. He felt like he was sinking into his body, darkness creeping in on the edges of his vision. The pressure within him was astronomical, but he remained steadfast in his obsession with growing bigger. He was too powerful to pop, practically invincible! The creaking and pressure would subside, and he'd laugh and order Rye to spread the news of his accomplishment. He hadn't heard from the sabertooth in a few minutes—hopefully he wasn't laxing on his duties.

Finally Vel's head vanished from sight. The tiger had become a big ball of blue, squeezed into a space never meant to handle a berry of such magnitude. The few parts of the lab he hadn't filled he bathed in blue light. A cacophony of creaks, sloshes, and groans echoed about.

One-by-one small leaks sprung up all across the tiger's body. They didn't ease the pressure of the manaberry, though. Likewise, cracks were forming in the walls and ceiling. Now both lab and tiger were coming apart. Unfortunately the battle was fated to end in the worst kind of tie.

With a tremendous boom Vel exploded, thinking of nothing but expanding until the very end. The force of his destruction demolished the lab, shattering its walls and collapsing its ceiling. Mana

splashed in between the debris, flooding the surrounding area and creating a short-lived rain of glowing blue.

The few witnesses to the eruption were left in awe at the strange sight. Rumors ran rampant in the days that followed, with no one knowing the true story behind the annihilation of Vel, his assistant, and his lab. It was suspected the berrymaner had burst, but how could the popping of a single berry cause so much damage?

In the end, Vel had gained the fame he'd wanted, and sparked conversation and interest in berrymaney. He'd just needed to pop spectacularly to accomplish it.