

Explosive Cultivation

By: IndigoRho

The soothing sound of cascading water drowned out the ambient noise of the Rainwood, much to Indigo's delight. The midnight blue cheetah was a freelance adventurer, and had spent most of the day traveling to the ruins of the Rainwood Druidic Academy, hiking through dew drenched underbrush and fending off would-be predators. He had accepted a simple job posting to retrieve personal belongings left behind when the Academy was abandoned two years before, but the many annoyances of the trip alone were making him regret his decision. So few postings had been left on the board in the guild hall, though, and he needed the money, no matter how little it was. At least the Academy itself was surprisingly peaceful.

No one had taken over the complex since it's abrupt evacuation—even the more aggressive beasts of the Rainwood seemed to avoid the place—and there was plenty of fresh water and food to be scavenged. A few dozen botanical golems still wandered the halls and gardens, though. They were tangled masses of vines shaped to resemble various furry species, clad sparingly in lovingly carved plates of bone that gave some the impression of wearing armor. Some had served as guards or laborers, others as assistants in the many experiments run by the druids. The vaguely newt-shaped one shadowing Indigo had been the latter, unfortunately.

“Would you like to hear the results of my ongoing efforts to improve cultivation speed in citrus fruits?” The golem asked. Again.

Indigo sighed, holding his waterskin under the steady stream of unnaturally clear water pouring from a crack in the basin in front of him. “For that last time, no! I'm not a druid, I only care about eating fruit not studying it, and I've told you to shoo about a dozen times already!”

“If you enjoy fruit, then you should be very interested in hearing about my research,” the golem insisted. “My continuation of the mega-flora studies has yielded wonderful new data that will revolutionize how...”

“I don't care! I really don't! Just leave me alone and poke your plants or whatever it is you do here!” Indigo yelled, glaring at the neutral expression of the bone mask that made up the golem's face. His gaze left the waterskin for only a moment, just long enough to miss a single seed ride the water stream straight in. He pulled the waterskin away and took a deep gulp to quench his thirst, before beginning to refill it once more.

“Poking the specimens would be rather reckless, many of them are quite fragile,” the golem said.

The construct's innocent response was more than enough to set Indigo off again. “I can't tell if you're taunting me or you're stupid!”

“Why would I taunt you?”

Indigo's tail poofed up a bit and he nearly chucked his waterskin at the golem. “You're the worst, you know that! Even the guard golems didn't bother me, why are you so damned intent on nagging me?”

“You said you were sent by the druids, I merely assume you'd like to report back my findings,” the golem said, though something odd was gaining his attention. Indigo's middle had swollen noticeably in the last minute, though the cheetah was seemingly unaware of the change. Having been magically gifted with a strong attunement towards nature, the golem could sense the growth of some sort of plant within Indigo, and his curiosity was peaked. It eagerly approached him to investigate.

“I took a mission from *a* druid, not the damn Academy! They're not coming back, they probably don't care at all about what you've...hey don't get closer, shoo—oof!” Indigo suddenly felt his heavy leather vest tightening, and his eyes widened in confusion as he looked down and realized his already chubby middle had somehow grown. The straps of the vest were groaning, their buckles quivering as they fought to hold on. He grimaced as the pressure suddenly increased, but before he could even

attempt to undo any one tore apart, then another, relieving some of the pain and exposing his tunic beneath. Indigo quickly unbuckled the surviving straps, still at a loss as to why he was swelling.

“W-what's happening to me?” Indigo asked, right before something tickled the inside of his stomach. “Oh Gods, there's something moving in there!”

The golem watched intently as the cheetah's belly continued to grow, attempting to use its innate senses to better understand the situation. “Your stomach appears to be cultivating one of our plant specimens. A fruit-bearing vine perhaps?”

“How is that even possible!” Indigo's tunic was already wrapped tight around his bulging belly, a strip of light blue fur poking out.

“Our seeds occasionally get misplaced. Have you eaten any by chance?” the golem asked, trying to be helpful.

“I haven't eaten a thing since I got here, all I did was drink the water!” Indigo whined as he gingerly touched his round gut, which by now was jutting out almost a foot in front of him. Initially it had felt rather light for its size, but a weight was now building in his middle, strange and lopsided. No, multiple weights.

“You must have at some point. Our enrichment serum doesn't work nearly this well on normal seeds.” The golem recognized the gradual appearance of several round bulges distorting the surface of Indigo's belly. “Very interesting. I wouldn't have guessed a plant—even one of our specially created ones—could thrive in such a hostile environment as a stomach, let alone produce fruit.”

Indigo pulled his tunic up over his rising gut to save it from tearing apart. “Serum? I thought it was water! Why'd you let me drink plant food!”

“I assumed you were aware of it's properties and were merely curious about the taste,” the golem said, disappointed that the hidden plant's growth appeared to be slowing. “Students would do that sometimes. I believe they referred to it as a dare?”

“You're the worst!” Indigo fumed. “Help me throw this stupid thing up before it gets out of control!”

The request troubled the golem, though it lacked the facial features to express it. “That could cause irreparable harm to the sample.”

“I don't care! Letting this stupid thing grow in my belly could cause irreparable harm to *me*!” Indigo said.

The golem was reluctant to cut the impromptu experiment short, but the cheetah was obviously intent on interfering, and for selfish reasons at that. Fortunately, a solution came to the construct quickly. Before Indigo could react, the golem grabbed the still-full waterskin from his waist, tore the cork out, and shoved the open end as far into the cheetah's mouth as it could. Indigo gagged as the serum within poured down his throat and doused the jumble of vines and fruit in his stomach. He gasped for air the moment the emptied waterskin was pulled from his mouth, but didn't even have a chance to curse and question the action before he was nudged against the nearby basin, maw forced open and lips pressed over the liquid flowing through the crack.

Indigo tried pushing himself away from the basin, shoved at the golem, even made a wild attempt to unsheathe his sword, all to no avail. The golem was far stronger than him, and vines unraveled from its arms to hold him in place and disrupt his efforts to escape. Again the cheetah's belly swelled, but now it was from the steady flow of serum. He felt the cold liquid filling his expanded stomach, sloshing with his struggles. His bloating middle soon pressed against the basin—prompting a pitiful whine from the unwilling test subject—then spread slowly across it. By the time the golem finally pulled Indigo away from the basin, the cheetah's belly had grown to nearly two feet across, a wobbling orb of blue fur. He slumped to his knees, vines still gripping him.

“W...w...why?” Indigo managed to say, still trying to catch his breath.

“This experiment is important, I need to confirm if excessive exposure to the enrichment serum is a key element in the abnormally rapid growth of the sample,” the golem replied. “Of course, there's

still the question as to what provoked the initial sprouting of the seed within your stomach. What have you eaten in the last twelve hours?"

Indigo could barely believe what he was hearing, not that he understood most of it. "You're trying to make the damn thing grow even more? What if I explode!"

"Creating an explosion was the primary reason I provided you with so much of the serum," the golem said matter-of-factly. "I admit the approach is risky, but it should be the safest way to extract the matured sample."

"Y-you can't do this..." Indigo's complaint was interrupted by the terrible feeling of something writhing and pushing against the walls of his stomach.

He watched in horror as his belly began to swell even faster than before, growing wider and wider. The weight of the water and what could only be dozens of fruit kept the cheetah grounded, at least until his terribly bloated middle expanded so much his paws actually lifted off the stones. Faint creaks began to emanate from his body as the plant within greedily tried to create more space for itself to grow unchecked, new vines and fruit sprouting practically by the second as his skin was stretched to accommodate it. As Indigo's belly ballooned towards its limit, the golem quietly observed the proceedings in anticipation, getting an odd amount of joy in seeing the curious bulges and lumps the hidden vines and produce created in the cheetah's form. The last couple years had been rather mundane—even for a construct—and the prospect of overseeing an unorthodox experiment gave it a renewed sense of purpose.

Creaks and groans were quickly being drowned out by the rustling monstrosity of vines building inside of Indigo. The cheetah was laying atop his nearly six foot orb of a belly, moaning pitifully as he felt his overstretched body reaching its limits. He realized in despair that his skin was horrifically taut and no longer had any give, but the plant's growth remained unabated. Every wiggling inch of vine, leaf, and fruit was felt painfully clear. A sudden prick and tingling sensation along his side instantly made Indigo aware of the first tear in his body, the beginning of the end. His eyes bulged in shock as he sensed the tear race around his middle, splintering into countless fractures like lightning in the process. In a flash his consciousness blanked, and the cheetah burst into a shower of spotted blue scraps.

The golem remained stoic as it was pelted with a wave of air, serum, and cheetah hide. With satisfaction it watched as an enormous tangle of dark green vines erupted into view, collapsing safely onto the stone floor before creeping into any crack they could find. Amidst the mass was a wonderful bounty of fresh fruit, each roughly the size and shape of an orange. Curiously, their coloration matched that of their former host—deep midnight blue with the occasional black spot. The golem approached the new plant—careful to avoid crushing any of the precious vines underpaw—and pulled apart a fruit to examine it further. Its interior looked nearly identical to that of an orange—besides the light blue color—and while the golem had no true way of tasting the fruit, the similarities in composition were a good enough hint.

Through sheer, beautiful accident, the golem had made a remarkable discovery. As long as the experiment could be recreated, fresh produce could be grown at a rate usually only matched by advanced magic. Additional research was necessary, of course, which the golem couldn't wait to begin. Travelers such as Indigo were rare, but there were plenty of larger animals in the surrounding Rainwood that could make suitable test subjects. The golem would need to get to work right away. After all, once Indigo re-formed, he'd surely pass the news of the wondrous discovery on to the druids, and it would be rather embarrassing to have no new progress to show them once they arrived.