

Healing Berry

By: IndigoRho

Dozens of glowing vials and partially-finished contraptions filled the cluttered workshop of Vitruvius Stormbrewer. The charr was a fairly skilled engineer and alchemist, though his attention drifted easily from one project to the next. One day he might be obsessed with turrets and the next gyros. At that particular moment he was very interested in alchemically-infused food. That made Raf—a fellow member of Vitruvius' warband—rather concerned.

Raf cautiously waddled around the workshop, trying to avoid knocking anything over with his sizable belly. The grumpy elementalist always felt like he was one sudden turn from wrecking something while in the workshop, and wished Vitruvius would keep it tidier. He remembered all-too-well the one time his gut had wiped out a stray potion, leaving Raf a grumbling, creaking sphere.

“Ok Raf, it's finished!” Vitruvius shouted, not bothering to look away from his work.

With some reluctance Raf heeded the engineer's call. “Ugh, I'm sure you could've found someone better to taste-test your weird concoction.”

“Nonsense, Raf, you're perfect for this,” Vitruvius insisted. “The whole point is to boost magic after all.”

In the middle of Vitruvius' table was a tall glass filled with something magenta-colored. At a glance it looked like a shake. Raf had assumed it'd be a pastry considering his poor luck, but didn't know if he should feel relieved yet.

“A shake?” Raf asked.

“The taste of a magic booster is almost as important as its actual effects,” Vitruvius replied. “Everyone always assumes potions taste bad, and it's hard to eat solid food in the heat of battle. A shake seemed like a good compromise to me.”

“Sure.” Raf thought the logic was sound enough, and he wasn't interested in debating such matters to begin with. He picked up the glass and looked it over with suspicion, as if it were poison. “What's actually in this?”

“Winterberries, omnomberries, a few tried-and-true alchemical enhancers—nothing unusual,” Vitruvius said.

The vagueness of “enhancers” didn't give Raf much confidence, but he didn't have the energy to argue his way out of the promise to taste-test. He just wanted to be done with it so he could leave. With a sigh Raf took a small sip, the refreshingly cold concoction pouring down his throat. The berry flavor *was* surprisingly good, and he couldn't resist taking a longer gulp.

“Huh, this tastes alright,” Raf admitted, absentmindedly drinking more and more. He was already hoping the shake wouldn't be effective, worried his waistline would only grow larger if he were made to drink it regularly on missions.

“Good, good. I was pretty sure the berries would add more flavor than my normal potions, but sometimes it's hard to tell,” Vitruvius said. “Feeling any tingling yet or changes to your magic?”

Raf went for another gulp only to realize there was nothing left, his face twisting into a partial scowl and turning red in embarrassment. “I've got a bit of the chill I usually feel after drinking your potions. I think. Might just be the crushed ice. As for my magic...”

The elementalist held out a paw and concentrated a globe of water manifesting above it. With a simple thought it grew, though Raf seemed surprised by how much. The globe swelled once again.

“Oh, whoa, it's doing something at least!” Raf said, adjusting and re-adjusting the size of the globe with ease. “Accessing my elements is smoother, and I kind of feel a little more—I don't know—*energized* when I use it?”

Vitruvius was grinning in triumph—at least until something odd caught his eye. Raf's nose and a bit of his muzzle were magenta. For a moment he thought the elementalist had simply gotten some of the shake on his face while hastily gulping it down, but then the color began to spread outwards. Soon

most of Raf's head had shifted from tan to magenta, aside from his light pink mohawk.

Raf himself remained oblivious to the changes, distracted by his boosted powers while his whole body steadily became magenta. By the time he finally noticed something was amiss it was far too late.

The globe of water lost form and fell to the floor with a splash as Raf frantically looked at his paws and then body. "W-what the hell!"

"Hmm, maybe it's a temporary effect of absorbing the infused magic," Vitruvius mused, far more curious than concerned. "Not unheard of."

"Would've been nice to know that ahead of time," Raf grumbled.

While a change in fur color was frustrating in Raf's opinion, he'd soon be wishing that was his only problem. The rotund elemental's middle also started to swell. Raf's expansion was rather slow at first, neither charr able to tell he'd gotten any bigger. A light bubbling sound accompanied it, and the sloshing of liquid is what finally alerted Raf to something *new* happening to him.

"Oh come on!" Raf growled as he gripped his bloated belly in both paws.

The elemental pushed down on his middle in a vain attempt to stop it from swelling. He knew it wouldn't make a difference, but simply accepting fate would have just made him grumpier. Vitruvius' eyes lit up at the most recent turn of events, the engineer scribbling down notes as he circled his inflating friend.

Vitruvius grabbed Raf's gut and gave it a solid shake before pressing his ear to its surface to listen to the muffled splashes. "Liquid? Maybe the shake expanding. Or perhaps you're turning into a berry—would explain the color change. Do you still taste the shake on your tongue?"

"Of all the things to ask you ask...I mean...yes." Raf scowled as hard as he possibly could at Vitruvius, only just then noticing the shake's flavor had never gone away. Becoming a giant berry was not how he'd planned on spending his day.

The buttons of Raf's vest creaked and burst one-by-one, his ballooning middle wobbling about once freed. He widened his gait as he continued to swell, already noticing his thighs and forearms beginning to puff up, too. Raf had a distressing amount of experience with being turned into a berry, and the charr was forced to admit that's what he was dealing with.

"My recipe didn't *look* like it resembled a regular berry potion," Vitruvius mumbled, more to himself than Raf. "Might be caused by the condensed wild magic in winterberries, combined with the potency of omnomberies, not to mention that accelerant I tossed in. Didn't explode in the vial, though, so the final catalyst must have been your water magic."

Raf's cheeks swelled up. The magenta charr was effectively immobile, able to barely waddle but not in the mood to embarrass himself further by wobbling around the room. As he blimped up his hide creaked and middle sloshed. His new magenta fur disguised his non-stop blushing to a degree, at least. He just wished Vitruvius wasn't constantly poking and nudging him as if he were a giant living science experiment.

"Watch it with those claws, unless you want a berry juice flood drenching your workshop!" Raf said, flailing his puffy paws as his body began to envelop his limbs.

"I've got grates in the floor to handle expected flooding," Vitruvius answered a little too matter-of-factly. "Though then I wouldn't have much juice to examine afterward."

Raf quietly fumed, reminding himself never to be pressured into helping out Vitruvius ever again. He grunted as he lost his balance, too spherical to do anything but wobble in place. The intense pressure that had built up within him was on the edge of being overwhelming, a persistent sensation intruding into his thoughts. Even thinking took an incredible amount of effort, and the slightest lapse of concentration would send him into a brief daze. It was like being drunk, but the only way to sober up was to deflate.

The elemental's grogginess only made Vitruvius' examination easier. Once Vitruvius was certain his friend had stopped expanding he began to take exact measurements, silently cursing his lack

of a scale big enough to handle the immense berry. At least he'd be able to get a decent idea as to Raf's volume so he could figure out how much juice he'd produced. If there were any beneficial properties to the resulting concoction than mass production would be simple—though finding volunteers would be a whole different story.

As Raf groaned and grumbled Vitruvius rolled out a bizarre piece of machinery. It was a pump with a long hose on one end and a nozzle on the other, with a platform beneath it that proved the perfect size for placing a standard potion vial.

“Alright, the shake *did* enhance your magic, though turning the drinker into a berry might be considered a bit of a drawback,” Vitruvius said as he tweaked some things on the pump. “If they can handle the minor pressure daze they might still excel as stationary artillery or rearguard medics. Will need to see how other magic disciplines are affected as well. But first, time to extract some of that juice within you for further testing!”

“D-don't you...you mean...all of it...” Raf managed, his frustration and embarrassment making it even harder to concentrate.

“I don't have a big enough vat to hold all that juice, and I'd hate to waste any of it if it turns out to have value, so you'll just have to stay put for a while until I've figured a few things out! I wonder if it'll have any of the healing properties of your water magic...”

Raf's likely droning protest was cut short as Vitruvius shoved the end of the tube into his mouth. The elemental's puffy cheeks pressed into his muzzle and made spitting the tube out impossible. A whirring noise from the pump preceded a stream of juice being sucked up the hose and into the vial, relieving Raf of a bit of pressure thankfully. Of course the relief was only marginal, as Vitruvius turned off the pump the second one vial was filled.

Ignoring his friend's glares, Vitruvius eagerly hurried off towards his work bench with the vial of juice. Many hours of testing awaited him, but at least he'd have Raf for company the entire time...