

Trial by Juice Part III

By: IndigoRho

Terry grumbled and kicked off the tattered remains of his pants as he sluggishly waddled into the next room, followed cautiously by Khendar and the cheetah. Expecting another comically easy puzzle, the bloated goat was confused to see only a long, plain hallway with multiple paths branching away from it. As if sensing his thoughts, the captor's voice echoed to life again.

"You three may have survived the first two harrowing challenges, but there's no way any of you will escape my masterful labyrinth of sorrow!" There was a definite hint of annoyance in the voice. "You'll all definitely find yourselves hopelessly lost, until one-by-one you burst apart!"

"Hmph, like you'd be capable of putting together anything worse than a fun house maze," Terry snorted, acting as if he weren't completely at the voice's mercy already.

While the goat was thoroughly unimpressed, the cheetah was terrified. With Greg and Flynn gone, and Terry well on the way to becoming a juice puddle, he knew there was a fifty-fifty chance he'd be the next one filled. Additionally there was always a chance the crazed goat would turn on him like he had Flynn, popping him just to survive a few more minutes. He couldn't trust anyone but himself anymore, and the faster he broke away the better.

"W-why don't we split up?" The cheetah suggested. "I'm the quickest amongst us, I bet I can scout ahead and lead you two to the exit!"

He didn't wait even a second for a response—assuming his plan would be rejected—and instead sprinted down the hallway and around a corner.

"Stop you idiot, that's the worst thing we can do right now!" Terry yelled after him. "You'll just go around in circles!"

Terry seethed as the cheetah vanished from sight, his hose rattling around as he got further and further away. The goat was tempted to step on the cheetah's tube in hopes of tripping him, only deciding against it out of fear he'd slip himself in the process. His confidence was beginning to falter. In order to reach the exit in time without bursting, he'd need the assistance of others, something he despised. He'd only get slower as his ballooning body continued to grow, and the obese deer still by his side might not have the strength to roll him to safety if things got bad. If Flynn and Greg hadn't been idiots and gotten themselves popped, then his survival would have been guaranteed!

Khendar was just as frustrated with the cheetah, who he'd expected to stick around till the end. He knew striking out on his own wouldn't help, so the deer decided to stay with the decreasingly mobile Terry. Any lingering fears he had of the goat had mostly vanished once he'd become rounder. The desire to poke or tease his inflating companion was strong, and Khendar couldn't deny how much he wanted to see Terry's middle jiggle and slosh about. If anything, he was in a prime position to witness the goat grow immense before bursting.

"Uh, d-don't worry about that guy, we'll find our own way out!" Khendar tried cheering up Terry.

Terry's frown didn't go away, but he was secretly thankful the deer hadn't bolted as well. "We're better off without him, anyway. Less distractions."

"Yeah, d-definitely less of those," Khendar said, his eyes locked onto the goat's wonderfully round form.

With as much haste as they could muster, the duo waddled off down a different path from the cheetah, neither certain they'd survive.

Elsewhere, the cheetah was sprinting through the maze of corridors, his hose still trailing behind him. As expected, he'd managed to clear out far more paths than he would've if he'd remained with the others. Speed *had* always been his biggest strength. Racing from hallway to hallway, backtracking from numerous dead ends, the cheetah came to a skidding stop when he stumbled into a small room with a single entrance. Directly in its center was a rope ladder. The cheetah laughed in disbelief, salvation

finally before him. For a moment he considered guiding Terry and the deer there, but his self-survival instincts won out swiftly.

Seemingly triumphant, the cheetah hurried to the ladder and looked up, gulping as he discovered the room was actually a dauntingly deep shaft. A beam of light poured through a hole in the distant ceiling, though, a patch of blue sky taunting the cheetah; the exit. With a deep breath the cheetah grabbed a rung of the ladder with his paw, only to have a chill run up his spine as the captor's voice came over the speakers.

"Harper, Harper, Harper. Abandoning the others at the first possible moment in order to save yourself?" The voice echoed in his ears. "You're always swift to leave behind anyone you feel is weighing you down. Now it's time for you to finally feel the true weight of a guilty conscious!"

Harper twitched as he finally felt juice flowing into him, his flat stomach immediately starting to bulge out. Panic quickly set in, and the cheetah desperately climbed up the rope ladder in hopes of escaping in time. The first few feet were relatively easy, though his trailing hose made things a little awkward. With every step his belly swelled and sloshed, becoming a bowling ball, then a basketball, then a beach ball. His tank-top rose up the curvature of his growing gut, and his athletic shorts fortunately had enough give to stretch along with his waist. The increasing weight of the juice was impossible to ignore.

The cheetah's pace slowed each passing second. His horribly rotund middle was pushing against the ladder and impeding his descent, and he was already feeling the juice slowly spread to other parts of his body. The glimpse of the outside world so far above tormented him, till he was convinced he could hear the sounds of birds over the bubbling within his stomach. Harper's limbs puffed up and his thighs expanded, the cheetah gradually taking on the dreaded spherical form that would mean his doom. Ominous tears heralded the end of his shorts, the remains of which fluttered down to the floor below, followed soon after by his torn tank-top.

His progress had become glacial as he closed in on the hole in the ceiling, his face pelted by a fresh breeze that fueled him on. One rung at a time the cheetah neared salvation, until one paw actually rose free of the dungeon, safe. With tremendous effort he lifted his hefty body up through the hole ever-so-slowly, but his bloated belly proved to be too wide to fit. Harper let out an exasperated cry as he frantically tried to force himself through the increasingly tight gap. He couldn't be stopped now, not when he was so close, when he could literally breathe the air outside. The cheetah's middle wasn't getting any smaller, though, and the growing weight of the juice started reversing his progress one inch at a time.

"N-no! Help me, someone help me!" Harper shouted, even though he couldn't see another living being nearby. "I don't wanna pop, I don't wanna pop, please!"

Harper's weight finally won out, the cheetah yelping in terror as his grip slipped and he fell a few feet back through the hole, just barely managing to grab a rung of the ladder again with his right paw. The ladder swung back and forth like a pendulum, the juice within Harper crashing around within him as waves formed. His arm was growing stiffer, his round body swelling to envelop his bloated limbs inch by inch. Long creaks joined the splashing and his panic breathing, the cheetah whimpering as he felt his fingers begin to puff up. He was almost completely spherical when he inevitably lost hold of the ladder.

The cheetah balloon screamed as he plummeted down the shaft, too bloated to even flail in fear. When his round belly finally slammed into the floor his entire body distorted and warped. An immense tear formed along his bulging circumference, a gusher of juice spraying out in all directions as the cheetah exploded. He blacked out instantly, reduced to a rushing river of juice and a discarded hose. A long laugh cackled over the loudspeaker as the entrance far above slammed shut. Three down, and two more to go...