

Plant Food

By: IndigoRho

“Yuri, take a look at this flower! I've never seen a pattern like this before.”

Yuri looked away from the vine he'd been examining, the coyote's interest piqued. He hurried over to where his lab partner—a hefty macaw named Anton—was hunched over. They were both students at the Rainwood Academy with a focus on alchemy, but hadn't interacted much at all until getting paired together in a botany course. In two days Yuri had already learned Anton could be rather excitable, and he was half-expecting the macaw to have found nothing of actual note. He was pleasantly surprised to be proven wrong.

In Anton's bright wing was a large orange flower with black stripes.

“It looks like someone turned a tiger into a flower. Where did you find it?” Yuri asked.

“There were two of them on the ground,” Anton gestured to a second sample in much rougher condition nearby. “Must've fallen off, but I don't see a similar plant anywhere near.”

Yuri took the flower and glanced around himself. “Might've been dragged here by an animal. We're also not *too* far from the trail, so maybe it was dropped by someone.”

“I didn't sense any lingering magic on it, so it *should* be naturally occurring and not just an abandoned creation,” Anton added.

“Why don't we split up and do a search, see if we can't get lucky and find the intact plant?” Yuri suggested.

Anton nodded in approval, and the pair dispersed in opposite directions.

Aside from the sporadic bird calls the forest was fairly quite, and Anton enjoyed the serenity. After ten minutes of wondering without luck he was on the verge of giving up, until by chance he spotted another one of the tiger-print flowers. Two more close by formed a rough line, and Anton was hopeful he was on the right track. Then he smelled the first whiff of the aroma.

It was a citrusy smell of some sort, faint at first but steadily intensifying. Anton couldn't quite pinpoint what the scent reminded him of exactly, but it was undeniably wonderful. The macaw found himself caring less and less about the flower, now following the smell. His thoughts slowly drifted, the path ahead barely registering in his mind. Anton's gaze seemed aimless as he stumbled along, as if in a trance. Eventually he came to a sudden stop under a tree.

Solid amber eyes watched the macaw with curiosity. Clinging to a low, thick branch was an odd creature that blended in with the tree. It had appendages that resembled two arms and legs, though instead of flesh and bone they were made of bark-covered roots. A similarly-constructed prehensile tail was wrapped around the branch for support, giving the plant a reptilian look.

When the plant had released its intoxicating pheromones it hadn't expected to lure in such a large meal. Not that it was about to complain. The tiger it had caught a week earlier had been exceptionally filling, and it had been eager to find another bipedal prey soon. Lurking near the trail had paid off.

From the plant's arms crept tendrils that cautiously snaked their way down towards the macaw. They poked and prodded Anton to test for a reaction, but he showed no signs of noticing their presence. Perfect. Confident that its prey was subdued, the plant wrapped the tendrils around Anton's doughy middle, pinning the bird's arms to his sides. With effort the plant pulled, slowly lifting Anton off the ground.

Anton was too dazed to realize what was happening, and offered no resistance. Higher and higher he rose. The plant's head split open in three parts to reveal a wide, toothless maw dripping with fragrant saliva. A dopey grin came upon the macaw's face as his whole head was engulfed in a single gulp. Powerful swallows pulled Anton in deeper, the plant's bark “hide” creaking and separating as a bulge traveled down its throat.

The once-flat middle of the plant slowly ballooned outward as it consumed Anton, the green

mas sagging and swaying from its occupant. While it'd never eaten anything as large as Anton before the plant's body appeared to be handling the meal with relative ease, stretching to contain him. At no point did the plant feel as if it were overexerting itself, and it began to wonder just how much it could safely eat in one sitting.

Anton had been reduced to a pair of faintly twitching legs with ease, and wasn't about to come to his senses any time soon. With a content slurp the macaw vanished completely, sealed away within the carnivorous plant. The dim blue glow of digestive juices illuminated the plant's stomach. The intoxicating aroma was even stronger there, Anton moaning in joy even as the walls of his prison began to squeeze him rhythmically.

Loud *glrrrrgles* echoed from within the plant's stomach as it greedily started to digest its meal. Anton lost consciousness quickly, sinking into the bubbling brew churning him into nutrients. The plant's bulging belly wobbled, lumps smoothing out as Anton was broken down into a thick, bone-littered soup. Occasionally the process would expel a mix of gas and pheromones, prompting belches from the plant that sent soaked feathers falling to the forest floor below.

The plant's body was beginning to thicken, storing its meal away like fat. Little-by-little its belly shrunk. In a few minutes there'd be almost nothing left of Anton.

"Anton! Dude where'd you go!"

The plant flattened itself against the tree branch as best it could, eyes darting in the direction the unknown voice had come from. It'd assumed the macaw had been alone, but clearly there was a companion searching for them. It couldn't release more pheromones until Anton was fully digested, and fighting with an engorged gut would be difficult. Still, the temptation to add a second course proved irresistible.

Yuri frowned as he scanned the forest, shouting Anton's name once more. He doubted the macaw would've waddled far, and if anything he should've heard the calls. The coyote didn't think to look up in the trees.

Sensing a perfect opportunity, the plant launched itself off the tree. It tackled the coyote hard, using its considerable bulk to its advantage. Yuri yelped as the wind was knocked out of him, aches springing up all over his body. Struggling was painful, and unfortunately proved futile. With its bloated belly pinning its meal down the plant opened its maw wide once more. Yuri only got a brief glimpse of his attacker, but that was enough to shock him.

The plant took no chances. It swallowed Yuri with haste, as if it hadn't eaten in weeks. Yuri put up more of a fight than Anton had, but only just barely. He was outmatched both in size and strength, and the initial ambush had left him hurting. Soon he was sliding into the glowing stomach and the thick goop it contained.

Yuri clenched his eyes and mouth shut as he was dunked in what he could only assume were digestive juices. Hard debris littered the stomach, constantly brushing against Yuri as more and more of the him was pulled in. Once his arms had been completely swallowed he was able to brace himself against the stomach walls and shift into something resembling a comfortable position. Punching and shouting had no apparent effect on the plant.

Yuri was tossed about as the plant slowly stood up, gravity hastening the coyote's demise. When his footpaws fell into the stomach he frantically groped at the sphincter that'd closed tight after them. It didn't budge in the slightest. The stomach wall suddenly bulged inwards in two places, pushing against Yuri's face and arms; the plant was rubbing its gut.

The coyote was already in a state of pure panic when he finally bothered to investigate the strange debris in the stomach with him. He dipped a paw into the blue goop and fished around until he found something large and pointy. When he lifted it up he frowned as he realized it was a skull. An avian skull. He'd found Anton.

The plant wasn't sure why his second course suddenly started struggling more intensely than before, but he welcomed the pleasing sensation. A series of belches gradually quelled the internal

uprising, shouts replaced by gurgles. Once again the plant began to grow thicker. It had quickly gained a fondness for the added bulk, and a desire to one day be as wide as the delicious macaw had been, if not wider. The bipedal creatures always seemed to produce an excess of nutrients, more than sunlight or regular wildlife could ever provide. Perhaps it was time to venture towards the forest's edge, where the creatures lived.

It wasn't long before Yuri too was churned away, the plant's belly bulging modestly. Another belch came, this one accompanied by the coyote's skull, which bounced down an embankment and into brush, out of sight. More bones would follow as the day progressed, a messy and confusing trail for future explorers to find. As the plant began to head to the next potential feast small flowers bloomed along its back. Most were bright red, yellow, and blue, the same colors as Anton had been. Others were a sandy brown, reminiscent of Yuri's pelt. Signs of a filling, nutritious meal...