

Coils and Berries

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As Syllas walked down the cellar stairs he found himself having second thoughts. The red fox was a student at the Rainwood Academy, and had agreed to do some extracurricular work for a professor for additional credit. Just ahead of him was the professor in question, August Days. August was a gray-and-white snake clad in a vest, and a practitioner of illusion magic. Syllas couldn't help but glance at August's legs, which were actually faintly glowing illusions that allowed him to walk rather than slither whenever he wanted.

"Um, Professor? What exactly are we doing today?" Syllas finally asked.

"Why wonderful work of course!" August answered, as if that explained anything. "You'll be helping me with a new magic-infused drink."

Syllas' attention was admittedly piqued. "O-oh! Well I wouldn't say alchemy's really one of my strong suits, but I'll do what I can."

"Don't worry Syllas, your role in the brewing process will be very straight forward, but also very important!" August insisted. "You'll do swell."

The fox swore he heard his professor let out a quiet chuckle, but quickly shrugged it off as his imagination.

The cellar itself was surprisingly sparse, containing a few desks and empty vats but little else. What *was* in the room was mainly huddled against the walls, leaving the center open. Professor August hurried over to a cabinet and retrieved a vial, returning to Syllas before the fox could even catch up.

"Now before we begin I'd like you to taste something real quick" August said, passing the vial to Syllas. "Think of it as a sample of things to come."

Syllas accepted the vial without question. The liquid within was bright blue and giving off a glow. It vaguely reminded him of mana potions he'd drunk in the past, though he hoped it'd taste better. He gulped it down swiftly just in case.

The drink was ice-cold, and sent a chill through Syllas body. Thankfully it tasted fruity, though he couldn't quite place the flavor.

"Well if the potion we're making is as good as that one then it'll be a winner for sure!" Syllas said, already wishing he could have more.

August nodded. "I'm certain it'll be even better."

Syllas didn't notice the Professor was looking him over intently, as if he were waiting for something to happen. Of course he also didn't notice his own nose turn blue. The change was fairly rapid, Syllas' fur shifting to brilliant shades of blue reminiscent of the drink he'd just had. He was feeling oddly energized as well; it was like he'd just woken up from a long rest.

August resisted the urge to smile as he watched, the snake distracting the student with small talk. Once Syllas' fur had completely changed to blue it started to glow, too, no amount of conversation could keep the fox from realizing that.

Syllas yelped, cross-eyed as he looked towards the tip of his snout. When he brought his paws up to poke his nose he saw that they were glowing as well.

"Is this supposed to be happening?" Syllas asked, nervously.

"Perfectly normal," August replied, now free to examine the fox. "The glow means your body's exceptionally compatible with the mana you drank, so you should begin filling up shortly."

"F-filling up?"

On cue there was a sudden, loud bubbling within Syllas' stomach, which began to swell. The fox's worry only increased as his waistline did. He desperately held his growing middle with both paws in an attempt to keep it in check, but it persistently continued to expand under his grasp. Syllas felt—and increasingly *looked*—like a water balloon.

August, meanwhile, appeared very pleased with the fox's predicament. "You see, Syllas, a short

while ago I discovered a spring of pure, volatile mana. It's amazingly effective, but if it hasn't been properly filtered it causes a *bit* of bloating."

Syllas' gut had grown to the size of a large beach ball, completely exposed and wobbling from the mana sloshing inside. He couldn't think of any way to stop his expansion and making a run for it wouldn't have done him any good at all. Instead the fox merely stood in place, wondering just how big he would get.

Unfortunately for Syllas, the answer was quickly revealed to be "very". He was swiftly resembling an orb, his limbs puffed up from the influx of powerful mana. The sensation of having such a deep reservoir of energy to dip into was kind of nice, but not enough to outweigh the fact he was rapidly becoming immobile. His cheeks were as round as his belly, distorted by his ceaseless looks of concern. Syllas' clothing remained intact thanks to a durability spell he'd frantically cast early on, though it'd been stretched comically over his inflating body.

The fox's head and paws sank slightly into his spherical form, faint creaks echoing from his hide. Then the swelling stopped. Once Syllas noticed he breathed a sigh of relief. Being a bloated ball of mana wasn't ideal, but ending up as scattered scraps was worse.

"Your capacity is impressive, Syllas," August said as he circled the wobbling fox, poking and prodding his taut sides as if testing a fruit for ripeness. "The batch you create will likely fill my vats completely!"

"*Mmrrrrmph*, P-professor, this isn't what I had in mind when I agreed to help!" Syllas whined, fidgeting at every poke. "Please get this mana out of me!"

"Syllas that was the plan to begin with! It's a lot easier to sell mana potions individually than in one giant, furry keg." August gave Syllas a pat. "Plus if you hold in all that mana for too long it might make you a permanent mana berry. Which could be interesting, honestly..."

The bloated fox whimpered at the thought. "I don't want to be a mana berry!"

"Again, you have no need to worry. A good squeeze will get all that precious mana out of you, and then you'll get to leave happy and with a slightly better grade."

Syllas didn't particularly like the idea of having the mana *squeezed* out of him, but if that's what it took to regain his mobility then so be it. He didn't remember seeing any giant press that could manage him in such a condition, though. Maybe the Professor knew a spell that'd do the trick.

The fox was correct—to an extent. With a wave of his claws August dispersed his phantom legs, taking on a more serpentine form. He slithered around Syllas until he'd made a complete circle, then began to slither up the fox himself. Another spell caused the snake to grow, thickening and extending as he slowly coiled around the sphere-of-a-student.

Syllas' wiggling intensified. He could feel himself getting wrapped up, coils working to cover every inch of his immense body. The gradual increase in pressure from the constriction was making his head spin. It was also juicing him. Bright blue mana was flowing from his naval and gushing from his mouth in bursts. The mana cascaded down the sides of Syllas and August, a river forming on the tiled floor that led straight to a grate. From a hidden tank below the floor it was sucked up into the vats.

"Professor—*glarrrgle*—please st—*gluuulck!*" Syllas' pleas were garbled by the mana pouring from his mouth.

At last August succeeded in coiling Syllas entirely, propping himself up on his elbows as he stared right into the student's eyes. "A press would take up far too much room in my lab, but thankfully coils are as good as any juicer~"

The snake applied just a bit more pressure, causing Syllas' eyes to widen and a geyser of mana to erupt from him. He was starting to deflate, but progress was slow; he was simply too full.

Little-by-little August tightened his grip, eager to speed up the juicing. The flow of mana increased—as did Syllas' squirms—but still progress was painfully slow. August wanted to start experimenting with the batch Syllas had incubated, wanted to search for more assistants, wanted to see just how big his spells could make others thanks to the new potions. While amusing, constricting the

mana out of Syllas was also getting boring. There *was* a faster way to get all that mana out, however.

A wicked grin spread across August's face. "Alright Syllas, I'm gonna have to hurry this up. Hope you don't mind going out with a bang."

August dramatically tightened his grip on the mana berry, prompting a chorus of ominous creaks and a fresh torrent of mana. The jolt in pressure prevented Syllas from struggling out of fear he'd burst, so instead he shook his head wildly, eyes bulging. The coiling continued, August straining himself as he attempted to burst the bloated fox. Despite his best efforts, though, Syllas endured.

"Popping isn't so bad, Syllas, it's fast and painless!" August grunted, finding it harder and harder to constrict Syllas more. "Just a quick boom and then you linger a bit before re-forming good and new in a temple! And there's only a slim chance you'll find yourself swelling up like a berry immediately after!"

Syllas wasn't comforted by the Professor's words in the slightest. He could feel his hide on the verge of giving up, and knew he was essentially destined to end up as scraps. He reminded himself to never bother with extra credit ever again.

Inevitably coils won out against berry. Syllas' whole body bulged before a pair of tears appeared on either end of the fox, which spread like lightning in a split-second. August hissed as he suddenly felt his body collapsing into the void Syllas was leaving behind, mana splashing him all over as it flew in every direction. The snake fell into a pile on the floor—dazed—his growth spell wearing off as he shrunk back down to regular size. The glowing pool of mana and fox confetti he was laying in gradually drained away, sucked into the vats.

August rolled over onto his back as he recovered, laughing and coughing. He hadn't planned on juicing Syllas in such a dramatic way, but the experience had been a fun one. The snake knew he'd want to constrict berries more in the future. For now, though, he had work to get to.

August's phantom legs reappeared, the Professor sluggishly standing back up. Mana was dripping from his scales and his body was sore, but neither were of real importance. Waiting for the vats to finish filling, August reminded himself to give Syllas plenty of extra credit for his part. And maybe place the fox's puffy face on the bottle labels for the batch...