

Vel the Berrymancer

By: IndigoRho

Vel had lost count of how many times he'd read the titles of every decrepit book gathering dust in the storeroom, but he knew he was losing his patience. The white tiger mage had been attempting to secure some questionable spell ingredients through equally questionable means. He wasn't necessarily *surprised* the suppliers had opted to take his gold and then tie him up, just frustrated. And to make things worse they didn't even have what he needed!

As his captors had only bound him with rope they clearly weren't aware he was a mage. Being temporarily outwitted by amateurs was embarrassing, but Vel would be correcting his shame soon enough.

First he needed to trick the fools into taking him out of the storeroom.

Taking a deep breath to concentrate, Vel imagined his body as a jug, and pulled the stopper out. Beneath his shirt his white fur was rapidly turning blue, spreading outwards from his middle all across his body.

Once there wasn't a single white tuft left Vel felt a cool sensation within his stomach. It started as a trickle but quickly became a torrent, muffled sloshing echoing out. Soon he was swelling up like a balloon.

Vel was a berrymancer, and transforming into a blueberry was merely his most basic skill. Berrymancy wasn't exactly a common art, but easy to underestimate or outright overlook. Being filled with juice enhanced his spellcasting abilities, though it came at the price of limited mobility and increased fragility.

Even a poorly-shot arrow could burst him.

For Vel, the dangers were worth it, and he felt pride in embracing magic most scoffed at.

The ropes binding Vel creaked as they were stretched by his blimping, sloshing belly, and the buttons of his vest appeared strained. Vel was ready to initiate the second phase of his plan. A stiff kick to the closest shelf sent books and vials tumbling down onto the floor, creating a racket that was only worsened by an exaggerated shout of feigned pain from Vel.

Sure enough the storeroom door swung open, a hefty brown bear storming in. "You'd better not be trying to—what the?"

The bear grew quiet as he realized his prisoner had turned blue and appeared to be inflating.

"I...I feel funny. Something splashed on me when that junk fell over." Vel moaned and acted woozy.

"Oh...uh, shit!" The bear turned from the tiger to the doorway and back again, and hesitated before finally lifting Vel up and dragging him out.

A table was set up in the other room, a horse and a seagull seated at an interrupted card game of some kind. Both looked annoyed their companion had grabbed Vel, then confused when they noticed the tiger's strange state.

"What happened in there!" the horse demanded. Vel was certain he was the leader.

"He's getting bigger, he looks like a damn blueberry!" the seagull piped in.

By then the ropes had loosened considerably, but still dug hard into Vel's bloated middle.

"I don't know, he was exposed to something!" the bear said, defensively. "Not my job to clean up the storeroom!"

The seagull rolled his eyes and the horse looked ready to go on a tirade, but chose otherwise with a frustrated sigh. "Great, now we have to find someone willing to buy a damn blueberry. Maybe there's a desperate baker in need of a hundred pies."

"Could be fun for target practice." The seagull had strolled over to Vel, poking the tiger's gut out of curiosity. "Though I doubt he'd survive even a single dagger!"

Vel feigned appropriate terror. On the inside he was grinning wide. The fools still hadn't realized there was nothing in the room that could've possibly caused him to swell up, and certainly didn't suspect he was behind it.

The tiger's sides had ballooned out considerably along with his belly, becoming too much for the ropes to handle. After plenty of creaking the ropes simply snapped, Vel's middle wobbling comically as they fell to the floor around him.

Rotund and bloated, Vel wasn't seen as a threat to the three thieves, who made no effort to secure him again. After all, what possible harm could a blimping berry do to them?

As expansion played a key role in his magic, Vel's outfit had been enchanted accordingly. The fabric stretched far greater than most, not exhibiting a single tear despite the fact he'd grown over three times his width. It looked perpetually strained, as if he were seconds away from popping a button, but somehow it remained intact.

Such odd clothing *should* have made the thieves suspicious. Fortunately for Vel they were easily distracted.

"This just hasn't been your day, has it cat!" The bear gave Vel a light shove, laughing as the tiger wobbled and sloshed, helpless. "First ya lost your gold, then your slim figure."

"And soon you'll just be a blue puddle!" the seagull jumped in.

"Just remember you two will be the ones cleaning up the mess after," the horse grumbled. While he was amused by the tiger's predicament—especially since it'd interrupted his losing game—it did nothing to bolster the group's meager profits.

Vel's limbs had bloated with juice, steadily sinking into his increasingly spherical body as he grew rounder and rounder. He made a point of showing how nearly impossible it was for him to move, how he could do little more than shuffle at a snail's pace as he became more berry than tiger. His limited acting skills were on full display, Vel expressing despair and panic. A pitiful whimper here and there helped.

Once Vel had become a near perfect sphere his taut hide creaked and quaked. The trio of thieves suddenly realized they were in a potential blast zone if Vel didn't stop producing juice, and frantically dove for cover. The expected boom never came.

Cautiously they all looked up. Vel was miraculously still in one piece.

Worry faded, the thieves returning to the teasing of their captive.

"Wow, he really *does* look like an enormous berry," the bear snickered. He couldn't resist a few prods on the tiger's sides, though his touch was restrained. Getting hit with a wave of juice wasn't very appealing.

"I hear it can become permanent," the seagull said. "They just never stop producing juice, and their fur doesn't change back either."

"Now I know what to do with you the next time you score us such an underwhelming mark." The horse had come out last, slowest to become comfortable being so close to a volatile berry.

Confident the thieves were at their most vulnerable, Vel finally dropped his act.

The blueberry tiger's body glowed faintly. Before the thieves had any chance to react a blue mist spewed from Vel's open mouth, enveloping them but not spreading any further.

The thieves coughed and gagged, stumbling as they were blinded. Within seconds of being exposed to the mist they began turning blue. Fur, feathers, and hide alike changed color. Afterward their middles started swelling, just like with Vel earlier.

While the trio was inflating, Vel was doing the opposite. He grinned, feeling the pressure inside him slowly fading as the clothing of his former captors grew tighter. Seams were tearing, buttons on the verge of bursting. They were all sporting sizable ball guts by the time they regained their sight.

"He's contagious!" the seagull squawked, squeezing his ballooning belly in a panic but only sloshing in return.

The horse looked furious and nervous all at once, his shirt sliding up as his middle expanded

rapidly. “He’s not contagious, it’s a trap!”

Largest to begin with, the bear was now nearly unable to waddle, his clothing mostly shredded as he surpassed the shrinking Vel in width. “I don’t wanna pop!”

“Then pop him first!” the horse ordered, struggling to reach the dagger at his waist. He snagged it just before his belt burst off. Keeping a solid grip on it proved a challenge, his paw puffing up along with him. Determined and desperate, the horse awkwardly waddled towards Vel, slowing with every step. His grip loosened and arm stiffened as it swelled. Five feet away from his target, the dagger fell, movement impossible.

Throughout the futile quest the bear had remained in place out of fear, while the seagull had attempted an equally-doomed escape. For his troubles he’d managed to trip and roll over, stuck on his blimping middle as he frantically rocked back and forth.

Helpless and swelling, each of the thieves ended up exactly as round and creaky as Vel had been a mere few minutes before. Vel, meanwhile, was juice free--though the blue color had lingered in his fur.

“And to think I was becoming convinced this was all a waste of my time!” Vel laughed, eagerly checking on each of his new berries. “You know, I earn the majority of my money converting my rather unique spells into potions and scrolls, but that drains my energy quite fast. Coincidentally—for a berrymaner such as myself—living berries are practically massive mana potions!”

There was a chorus of distressed whines and wobbles from the fresh berries.

“Oh I can assure you it’s painless. Though it can be boring at times, stuck immobile and full of juice...permanently.” Vel poked the bear just hard enough to make him wiggle. “I’d been meaning to replenish my supply of helpful volunteers, and you three will do wonderfully. I just hope you prove to be more durable than the last ones.”

The whining only intensified.

“Alright, I’ll need to gather a few essentials so I can get this place turned into a spare laboratory, so try not to roll into anything sharp while I’m away~”

With a long, echoing cackle Vel walked away, leaving behind the thieves who’d abruptly found themselves in a very different line of work. None wanted to dwell on the possibility it’d all end with a thunderous boom...