

Galenus face-planted into the cushions of his couch the minute he entered his small basement apartment. The couch smelled musty and looked natty, but by the way Galenus groaned, he didn't seem to care terribly about that. In the short path from his entryway to the couch, he'd managed to divest his coat, drop his bag, and kick off a single shoe. Even Galenus' usually nicely-tended headfur was in disarray.

In short, Galenus looked like shit.

After a solid ten minutes of wallowing, Galenus rolled over and raised his hand above his head. Clutched in it was a small keychain shaped like the logo of Benevolence Pharmaceuticals, the last remnants of his big science career. It felt hot to the touch, burning with the anger that also welled up within Galenus' chest. In a sudden burst of rage, Galenus threw it at the ceiling. The aluminum charm bounced harmlessly off the wood.

A shuffling followed, and from a second stairwell door behind him, a kindly old voice drifted down.

"Everything all right down there, Galenus dear?"

"Yes, Ms. Wagner!"

"I heard a noise, though," the landlady began.

"Really, I'm fine! Just, uh...had to kill a bug!"

"Oh! Pesky bugs, they're everywhere this time of year. You need any traps? I think Harold has all sorts of traps in the garage."

"Really, fine! Totally fine!"

"All right, dear. But if you need anything, just let us know."

Galenus waited to hear the door shut. His apartment was the furnished basement of a perfectly sweet woman and her husband, and they seemed to like having the company more than the rent. And yet, for all of Ms. Wagner's good points, she was also a nosy biddy.

A frustrated groan tumbled out of Galenus' maw as he pushed himself upright and looked around in a daze. He wasn't sure what he was going to do now--perhaps go back to the comic shop for a while.

"No," Galenus said aloud. "You're better than that. Yeah! Yeah, you're better than that, G."

Cupping his hands around his maw, Galenus rubbed his thumbs at his jawbone in contemplation. What would be the best--no, what would be the most *satisfying* thing he could do now? Benevolence told him he was 'just too bumbling' to be a scientist, that 'he wasn't going to do anything but cause more trouble' if they kept him on.

That rankled Galenus the most. He went to school for years, he struggled, he fought his way to even score an interview with Benevolence. How dare they claim he wasn't good enough, that he was some sort of mistake. As if he was some kind of failure!

Galenus' eyes sparked with a sudden fire. His thin tail swatted the couch once as it transitioned into a sway of excitement. Yes, yes he knew what he needed to do.

"I'll show them," Galenus said as he marched to a small spare room in his apartment. With a flick, the ceiling light wheezed into life, illuminating the small work tables and rows of discarded microscopes, second-hand beakers, and cases of half-used chemicals.

All his life, Galenus wanted to be a scientist: he asked for chemistry sets every holiday, participated in every science fair, even had a signed and framed poster of Bill Nye in his

bedroom. When he was old enough for an allowance, Galenus started buying his own equipment through home scientist catalogs. What he couldn't get from there, he got from the science teachers he befriended. Through contacts and a not-inconsequential amount of schmoozing, Galenus grew his personal scientific collection until he had enough to make his own private laboratory.

Galenus took a big breath in, letting all the smells of science fill his nose and lungs. A grin grew on his face, his slight buck teeth showing as he did.

"Now, what to do?" Galenus asked the air. His answer came in the form of his stomach growling with hunger, a great and angry sound. With a day full of being fired, Galenus realized he hadn't eaten at all; ever since his termination, he'd mostly driven around aimlessly before swerving into home.

Turning to his kitchen, Galenus started to open cabinets and drawers. Each one nearly breathed a vacant sigh, holding absolutely no food. Galenus furrowed his brow and continued his exploration until every cabinet, along with the fridge and freezer, stood open before him.

Galenus had no food.

It struck the newly-jobless man that Benevolence had been his main source of food. Breakfast and lunch were catered, and he'd always bring home left-overs for dinner. In the year he'd been in the apartment, he'd not cooked once in it.

"Well, I guess I could order ou--" Galenus began, but a new thought struck him. He looked back at his lab and felt a grin breaking apart his face. Walking to the threshold of the lab, Galenus surveyed his workspace with glee. If he didn't have food, he could make food--that is, food that was scientifically perfect. Food that could revolutionize the way Americans ate. Then he'd show Benevolence.

"Wait, no. I can't start with *nothing*. I need to perfect a food," Galenus whispered. It only took the scientist a moment to raise his eyes up to the ceiling before dashing, with still just one shoe, up the indoor stairs. Nearly crashing into the top landing head-first, Galenus righted himself and knocked kindly on the door. He waited, bouncing on his half-shod feet. Ms. Wagner, with her pink rabbit nose twitching curiously, opened the door.

"Oh! Galenus, dear, what's going on? Is it the bugs?"

"No, Ms. Wagner. I was wonder, do you have any rice?"

Galenus beamed.

"Rich?" Ms. Wagner thought aloud. "Oh, I think we have some here. How much do you need, a cup, two?"

"All of it."

Ms. Wagner canted her head.

"All of the rice?"

"Yes! Oh, uh, er, it's for...work! It's for work. I promise to buy more the minute I can get out to the store, yes? Yes."

Ms. Wagner stared at Galenus for some time, clearly curious as to the fate of her rice. Her smile popped back on her face just the same, and she toddled off into her house. There was a sound from the kitchen, cabinet doors opening and closing, before the squat landlady returned with a full, ten-pound bag of long grain rice.

Clapping his hands, Galenus graciously took the bag from Ms. Wagner. He barely breathed a thank you before stumbling and half-falling his way down into his apartment. Ms. Wagner was left at the top of the stairs, staring into the late afternoon dark light below.

“Queer boy he is. Lovely, but queer.”

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Ten pounds of rice was surprisingly little. Galenus’ lab was speckled with remnants of the grain: little piles on tables, individual flecks mingling in the carpet. There were even small pockets stuck to the ceiling that Galenus would need to take care of later, lest Ms. Wagner saw. The actual bag of rice was empty, with the last two cups of rice sitting untouched in a bowl.

Galenus made a small mumbling noise from his position beneath a worktable. Somewhere around nine o’clock he felt a wave of sleep wash over him and decided a nap would do him good. Now in a waking stupor, Galenus groped limply for his phone before getting the screen lit. The bright background seared his tired eyes, but he at least knew what time it was.

Three in the morning.

“Augh!” Galenus yelled, going vertical and whalloping his head hard into the table above. He crumpled back and hissed between clenched teeth, rubbing at the crown of his head furiously. It only struck Galenus now that while he’d wanted to only nap for an hour or two, he probably didn’t even set an alarm. Sighing, Galenus clambered his way up to a standing position.

Hunger surged through his body. Galenus set out earlier to make the perfect food, and now he was still hungry and all the rice was gone. Slumping into a rolling chair, Galenus let his head fall against a table.

“Maybe Benevolence was right,” he mumbled, poking at the empty rice bag with two fingers. “Maybe I *am* a failure. I should go back to the comic shop, enjoy an existence of stocking new Spider-Man comics until I drop dead.”

Rolling his face on the table, Galenus turned and looked at the metal bowl, the one with the last clean rice. It felt like a taunt, a monument to his huge day of failures. The idea had felt so simple, add some proteins and chemicals to the rice, see if it’d grow bigger or become more glutenous.

In the end, all Galenus made was a mess.

“Well, at least there’s still enough rice to eat,” Galenus said with a groan. He grabbed the bowl and ported it through the inky blackness of his apartment to his kitchen. Galenus swatted the lightswitch and the tube lights hummed to life.

Galenus clicked on the gas and put the rice and some water into a pot. While the slurry heated, he spent ten minutes on a short quest to find booze in his barren kitchen. What Galenus found was a mostly-empty bottle of vodka and some flat soda. It’d have to do. Eschewing a glass entirely, Galenus poured the vodka into the soda bottle and gave the mixture a quick swirl before chugging back a mouthful. It was sour and made Galenus’ face knot up, but he drank more of it anyway.

With the wrong side of a spatula as a makeshift spoon, Galenus stirred the rice as the water began to boil. He clicked down the heat, lidded the pot, and pushed himself up onto the kitchen counter to sit and wait. The sadness of the situation hit Galenus hard in the chest: cooking the last two cups of a wasted ten-pound bag of rice, drinking the most depressing cocktail. It felt a proper end to a disappointing day.

Galenus leaned his head against one of the white-lacquered cabinets and closed his eyes. He might not have felt tired, but his body had different plans as it sank back into a stupor. The clattering of his soda bottle against the kitchen floor pulled Galenus out of anything deeper, and his eyes opened on the pot of rice overboiling.

Jumping off the counter like a crippled spider, Galenus immediately stepped in the spilled cocktail. He made a disagreeable noise but kept moving to pull the pot off the stove. As he shut the burner off, with a pot of overcooked rice in one hand and his foot in a puddle of soda, Galenus found this, too, was a perfect physical representation of how he felt.

At least Galenus still had rice. After dropping a towel down on the floor with the resignation of 'dealing with it later', Galenus grabbed a bowl and slopped some of the rice into it with the spatula. He jabbed the gelatinous mass of rice with a fork and screwed his face up with distaste; the sludge in the bowl was massively unappetizing, but that might've been Galenus' mood speaking for him.

Collapsing into his natty couch, Galenus scooped a forkful of rice and stared at it briefly before chewing it down. He moved his jaw slowly, the texture of the rice striking Galenus as odd. It was gritty, sticky, making it harder than usual to chew and swallow. With squinted eyes and a hard gulp, Galenus got a glob of the rice down. He only managed three more mouthfuls before just putting the rice down, having suddenly lost his appetite.

Galenus was only afforded a minute to mope over his poor cooking kills before a fluttering, blurling sensation filled his stomach. It was akin to nervousness, or fear, with a little hint of nausea. As Galenus was none of those at the moment, he found this passingly curious. Looking down at his stomach, he stroked his fingers against his smooth middle and pursed his lips.

"God, did I not only overcook the rice, but somehow give myself food poisoning, too? My luck would allow me to do both in a night."

Giving in to the idea of his body just being fussy, Galenus sunk into the couch further. He dug for the remote and flipped on the television, surfing through the deserted wasteland of infomercials and home shopping. There was close to nothing on, but Galenus was determined to take his mind off things. He traced the channel button with his thumb between presses, an extension of micro-fidgets in his tail, toes, and ears.

Galenus' other hand rubbed at his stomach. He pushed his fingers back and forth across his middle, shifting the grey undershirt against his fur. With more of that fidgeting energy, he drummed and, at one point, pinched a bit of fat near his belly button.

Galenus froze. He dropped his gaze back to his belly and pinched again. Not that he was a health nut, but Galenus was one hundred percent sure he was thin enough to not have fat to pinch. The remote slipped from Galenus' hand as he put both hands on his stomach, the television stopping on an advertisement for a fly-by-night kitchen device.

"What in the world," Galenus said, squeezing at his middle. It felt softer, definitely softer, but Galenus couldn't fathom why.

Was he hallucinating? As he drew a few more fingerfuls of fat and squeezed, it definitely *felt* real. Was he just going mad?

Standing up, Galenus moved briskly to his bathroom and closing the door; the back of the door held a full-body mirror. Scanning his body, Galenus was met with his once-thin frame sporting a starter belly. It wasn't the most massive change (his undershirt only looked the tiniest bit tighter), but it was enough for Galenus to finger against the soft layer on his middle. The fat shifted beneath his digits.

The burbling in his stomach came back into sharp focus and increase its intensity. Galenus grunted and leaned back onto the sink counter, squeezing his eyes shut momentarily. He really must have made himself sick with that rice, and now he was having an allergic reaction.

Galenus held at the bottom hang of his stomach, surprised that he even *had* a hang to his middle. Shakily, Galenus moved his other hand down to the first, and used his thumbs to stroke the light curve his stomach sported now. As he tried to soothe his upset middle, a sudden shock of realization rang through Galenus' brain. He could feel his stomach swelling in his hands.

The mirror helped prove his realization. Galenus watched as, over a few minutes, his undershirt growing tighter, losing wrinkles of bagginess. Between his fingers, a small sliver of his white fur crept out from under the heather grey shirt. It was a strange, and slightly terrifying, situation to be in.

For all the strangeness and terror, though, Galenus was still a scientist. He tested his stomach's heft, tried to roughly measure softness and circumference. It didn't feel like swelling or an allergic reaction, despite Galenus' first thought--it wasn't tense, it wasn't taut.

"The rice," Galenus said breathlessly. It'd been in a bowl he hadn't *remembered* using, but, as he was in the throes of some kind of reaction, Galenus couldn't think of anything *but* a tainted container. It was a mixed emotion, too: a growing part of him was excited something he did worked, in spite of his current predicament.

Galenus bent over to dig his scale out from behind the toilet. It was one of those fancy digital ones that you could program to track health over time, but Galenus hadn't bothered to set it up. In fact, he wasn't sure he'd used it at all, considering where it'd been stored. Stepping onto the scale, Galenus looked past his thicker middle to the LCD screen.

The crystal slivers flickered and thought, calibrating before flashing 210 up at Galenus. His ears stood upright, his tail made a single hard swish to the side. That was fifteen pounds more than his usual weight--a weight he only knew from using scales at Benevolence. Calculating time in his head from the first bite of rice until now, it'd been no more than ten minutes.

"A pound every forty seconds?" Galenus breathed, and looked back down to the scale: 212. He was in shock--this wasn't natural. This was the kind of thing you read in kinky stories found on very specific websites.

Galenus stepped off the scale, but stood in silent contemplation. He pushed the heels of his palms into his softened stomach, displacing some of the soft fat. Shifting from heel to

fingertips, Galenus slid his hands along the slight dome to his chest, cupping his pectorals. There was enough enough fat there to cup now.

Exiting the bathroom in a daze, Galenus meandered back to his living room. He stared down at the bowl of rice, eyeing it like one would the holy grail, before picking it up and stirring the fork through the remaining grain. In this bowl was some sort of hyperactive protein, or a steroid, or something Galenus made without even knowing it.

With the gentleness of a reverent monk, Galenus walked the bowl of rice into his lab and set it gingerly on a workbench. For a while, he just kept staring at it, his body vibrating with internalized excitement. This happiness counteracted the upset feeling of Galenus' stomach processing the rice. Digesting it, fermenting it, metabolizing it.

"This must be what the old masters of science felt like," Galenus said, groping again at his stomach. Leaning his head down produced a second chin he hadn't had moments ago, and his upper arms rubbed at his sides more fully. None of this seemed to bother Galenus, though. In fact, in the light of something he made working, his body gaining weight seemed perfectly legitimate. A casualty of progress.

The rice worked itself through over the next hour. Galenus wasn't sure whether that amount of time was because of how much he'd eaten, but he measured what he could. As a scientist, recording as much information as possible was his duty--not just to himself, but for the world. There was a timer running on Galenus' phone, and he'd even brought the scale into the living room so he didn't have to hang out in the bathroom all night.

Science wasn't all Galenus was finding in this moment. As the time ticked by, he spent time just groping and squeezing his body as it swelled. Particularly enthralled by his stomach, Galenus stroked the smooth, doming gut growing atop him. It gave at his touch, sending delicate shocks of enjoyment through Galenus' nerves.

The stretching of it must have been making it more sensitive, but that only made Galenus' belly more fun to manipulate. The soft comfort of his fattening form was driving more prescient questions from his mind, such as what others would say or what clothes Galenus would still be able to wear. Even when he peeled his undershirt off, letting his sagging stomach and chest free from the quickly-confinding cotton, the question of a wardrobe didn't even cross Galenus' mind.

Off came Galenus' pants not ten minutes later, leaving him in just rich purple boxer-briefs; the print on the waistband was distorted from stretching with his new circumference. As he wrote of how it felt to grow from the rice, Galenus adopted a pose fit for an ancient Roman hedonist, notebook on the upper shelf of his stomach with pudgy fingers wrapped around a pen.

Galenus found the friction between his thighs on a different level of pleasing, actively rubbing his softening legs together to feel fur, fat, and cloth all scratch and drag on one another. It became a new fidget, matching the way Galenus' free hand was pushing, shifting, stroking his stomach (which, with its white and brown fur, looked not unlike a hearty scoop of swirled ice cream).

"The weight feels natural," Galenus wrote while pushing his forefinger into his deepened belly button. "It is neither an artificial swelling nor working against the body's natural tendencies or fat deposits. Most weight has focused on the stomach, possibly four times the size of start.

Rump and thighs have also attained new size, while chest and upper body are the least affected. Not sure whether this is related to the rice's properties or the subject's personal body."

With a smile, Galenus tucked the pen behind his ear and put both hands just above his waistline, pushing the sides of his stomach together to make the fat bulge out. He did this three or four times, finding distinct pleasure in the way his new body addition shifted on his torso. Galenus traced the edge of his stretched brown fur, feeling a few small shivers run up his spine.

Sun crept through the basement windows, filtering out the incandescent yellow with more natural light. Galenus finally pushed himself up to weigh himself one last time. Settling his feet and sucking in his new gut just a hair, Galenus put his hands on his backside. He spent another moment in reverie, squeezing into the fat on his cheeks, appreciating the new curve of his rump. When Galenus finally looked down, the readout only made him grin wider.

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Just to make sure the growth was over, Galenus stood and watched the LCD screen for two minutes. It didn't move. What was more, the icky feeling in his stomach was entirely gone, the rice processed out. This was something for the history books, a weight gain food made of the simplest and most potent grain. If Galenus could perfect it and shop it around to the right people, this could very well be the first herald of a post-scarcity world.

There was just the sticky situation of test subjects. Galenus needed to recreate the rice many times over, to prove it wasn't a fluke of nature. More than that, he needed to prove it could work for a broad populace, not just *him*.

Sitting back down, Galenus stroked his stomach proudly. He sat in contemplation for a minute before shrugging, which made his chest jiggle just the slightest amount.

"Well," Galenus said with a big grin on his maw, "that's what Craigslist is for."