

The Mana Vessel: Chapter 014

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Mercer shuddered. The wards covering Hest no longer dampened the immense aura of mana radiating from the bloated arctic fox. He felt as if he stood beside a raging fire about to burn out of control. More than a fire. Fires could be outrun. The vessel was a bomb about to blow.

The otter closed his eyes and shook his head. No. Hest wasn't a bomb or a fire. He wasn't a nameless bottle of mana. He was a mage, a fox, a living being. And he didn't have much time left.

Dimples marked where Hest's paws had sunken into his massive body. His chin rested at an angle against his puffy chest, in danger of slipping entirely from view. His aimless gaze remained on the ceiling. He was lost to a blissful daze of pressure and mana, responding only in moans and giggles.

Hest's hide was taut as a drum, held together by magic strained to its limits. Mercer didn't dare touch him anymore. A gentle prod probably wouldn't detonate the fox, but he wouldn't risk testing his fragility. He guessed Hest *was* like a bottle in some ways.

One more potion would set Hest off. He'd swell into a perfect sphere before erupting, with the blast directed down into the ley line with a ritual. If all went according to plan, a brand new mana font would come into existence. Lochland would acquire the wealth and status he craved. Mercer would accomplish an impressive arcane feat and receive more funding. And Hest would be completely and utterly annihilated, his ultimate fate known to a select few who'd take it to their graves.

Memories were all that'd remain of Hest. The poor fox would even be denied the dignity of scraps for burial.

Mercer couldn't look Hest in the eyes anymore, not without a stool. And even then, the entranced fox didn't see him. Totally oblivious to the fact his captors were going to set him off like a bomb.

All because of an off-hand comment uttered during a bout of drunken rambling. And why? Because he wanted to prove his skills went beyond recharging enchantments and brewing sleeping aids? As if Lord Lochland gave a damn. The spoiled tiger had taken his boast and transformed it into a heinous plot requiring a literal sacrifice.

No matter how hard Mercer tried, he couldn't shift the blame onto Lochland. While the lord ordered the plan into being and provided the necessary resources, *he* was the one going right along with it. Lord Lochland couldn't create the font without him, as much as he couldn't create the font without blowing up an unfortunate soul filled to the brim with mana.

He clenched his fists. If only Lord Lochland were the one wobbling helplessly before him, one drink away from bursting apart. He'd never fantasized about doing such harm to his lord before. Maybe a bout of indigestion or the embarrassment of ripping a seam, but nothing that'd reduce Lochland to a crater. Then again, Lord Lochland had never ordered him to pop someone before, either.

It was a pointless fantasy, anyway. Lord Lochland was a dough ball, but Mercer wasn't in much better condition. He couldn't see himself overpowering the tiger, especially not if a guard was around. Casting a single spell would get him skewered.

A little thought dug into the otter's mind. Lord Lochland wouldn't have his guards during the ritual. He insisted on as few people as possible knowing about the exact nature of what he had planned. The majority of the servants and guards understood something unsavory was going on, but only select individuals knew the full details. Suspicions remained private. No one wanted to risk getting banished from the manor. Or worse. So only Mercer and Lord Lochland would personally witness the creation of the mana font.

Despite Lord Lochland's many annoying habits, he displayed no fear in his own manor. The guard contingent was a formality to keep away thieves and let him pretend he was still a soldier. They never followed him around unless he wanted to intimidate someone. At best, Captain Tamblyn might insist on keeping watch outside while the ritual was conducted.

Bit by bit, Mercer put together a plan of his own. Perhaps there was a way to spare Hest from his unjust fate and give Lord Lochland the punishment he deserved. Perhaps he could finally do the right thing rather than stand by and follow Lochland's horrendous orders. Failure would condemn him. But if he did nothing, his conscience would never let him forget it.

Mercer took deep breaths. He was shaking. He was either about to make the dumbest decision of his life or the smartest. Either way, it needed to be done.

"Hold on a little longer, Hest," Mercer said.

Cold water enveloped Mercer's snout. He jumped in surprise and swatted the liquid muzzle. His paws passed through it, flicking away mere droplets. Water forced its way past his shut mouth and into his throat. He couldn't hold back the torrent. It rushed in, and he felt like he was guzzling a waterfall.

Mercer's chubby middle ballooned free of his robe as it filled with water. Within seconds, he was burdened with a bouncing, sloshing ball gut, and it was only growing bigger. Clamping his paws over his mouth didn't help. The water slipped through any gap it could find, manifesting out of thin air.

Fear disrupted the otter's thoughts. He had to find some way to counter the spell filling him like a balloon, but his mind raced at a mile a minute, refusing

to focus on much aside from his rapid inflation. Who was attacking him? Had the Order of Avmis discovered their crime? How big would he inflate? No matter how hard Mercer tried to concentrate, frantic questions got in the way.

While Mercer fought to think, the water continued gushing into his belly. His legs quaked from the weight of the water within him, barely able to hold up his swollen body. He tried to spread his legs to stabilize himself, but worsened the situation. His enormous, waterlogged gut knocked him off balance. He fell backward, landing on the growing curve of his back as he ballooned into a sphere.

Mercer's body steadily enveloped his limbs. The terrified otter sluggishly rocked back and forth, barely able to gain momentum while weighed down. He felt like a boulder, like he might crack through the stone floor and bury himself into the earth. But, worst of all, he felt like he was about to pop.

Deep down, he wondered if he deserved to. He'd gone along with the preparation of detonating Hest until moments ago, only changing his mind when it was nearly too late. Now fate was judging him, and his punishment would come in the form of a sharp pain and a watery explosion.

The flow of water ceased, and his liquid muzzle splashed to the floor, sending the otter into a coughing fit.

"For how important this damn balloon is, you'd think they'd have more than a single mage guarding it."

"I don't think he's a guard. He didn't attempt to counter your attack and was rather easily overwhelmed. More likely, he's a regular old manor mage."

"Make sure his paws don't start wiggling off any incantations. A regular old mage can still roast you alive or make you think your scales are peeling off."

"Don't remind me of that."

An alligator and a viper walked past Mercer on their way to Hest. They wore the padded armor and heraldic badges of the manor guard, but Mercer had never seen them before in his life. He didn't necessarily socialize with the guards—and knew only a couple by name—but he remembered their species and faces at least.

The viper's tail flicked about wildly. "The vessel, um, seems a fair bit rounder than when we last saw him. He looks ready to blow."

The alligator placed his palm on Hest's side and immediately pulled back. "That mana's gotten way more potent. Have they been dumping potions into him? It's a damn miracle he hasn't split down the sides."

"It's been a long while since I've seen someone remain intact after their paws get sucked in." The viper adjusted the collar of his armor. "Impressive."

"Get some wards tattooed on you, and you can be this dumb and bloated every night."

The viper's tail stiffened, but he didn't say a word in response.

Mercer stared at the strangers. Despite their dress, they were clearly acquainted with Hest. He'd overheard two guards joking about blimping people up when they'd nabbed Hest. So, not everyone escorting the mana vessel had ended up as scraps.

The otter gathered all his courage. "Y-You're right, Hest is dangerously close to popping. Another potion or one sharp poke...that's all it'd take."

The intruders turned around. "I swear everyone's getting more and more poppable lately," the alligator said. He spun a finger, and a small orb of water appeared before Mercer's face. A casual gesture forced the water down Mercer's throat, increasing his pressure.

"Rolling the vessel out of here will be trickier than I thought. He's very taut right now. We'll have to take things slow and avoid any rough edges. He's so big..." The viper's voice trailed off.

"Told you we should've forced our way in earlier. Bet he would've been less bloated then."

Mercer pushed away the pressure daze creeping up on him. "You can't move him, he's too volatile! He'd explode before you ever left the gardens. But I can ensure that doesn't happen!"

"And why would the guy who's been filling him to the brim want to do that?" the alligator asked. He formed another orb of water. "Better answer truthfully, or we'll start testing your durability."

Mercer gulped. "I'm also the one who's kept him intact. Lord Lochland plans on detonating Hest to create a new mana font. Since you're a mage, I'm sure you can sense the ley line beneath us."

Conway's eyes glanced at the floor. "Hard to notice it with the mana blimp here, but yeah, I sense it. Can't say ley lines are my area of expertise."

"Far from it," the viper interrupted. "You never talk about them."

"Shut up, Tavo. Alright, otter ball, what does your dumb lord's plan have to do with *deflating* our cargo?"

"I'm getting there, please be patient. Venting Hest will be dangerous with how volatile he is. The various wards enchanting him are practically knotted together. Weaken the ones holding the mana in, and his durability will diminish and he'll rupture. But if we directly transfer his mana to another vessel, then he'll hold together." Hopefully. Once again, Mercer was working solely on theory. "I know a ritual that should work."

"Should?" the alligator asked. He looked bored to Mercer, who didn't know if that was a good sign or not.

“It should. I’ve only used it to transfer mana between storage crystals or from one glow stone to another, but the same principle should apply to a person-to-person transfer.”

“That’s a lot of ‘shoulds’ involved,” the alligator growled. “And we’ll lose all that mana we were hired to transport, too. This job has already been a giant pain in the ass, and I’ll be grumpy if I don’t get paid for the damn hassle.”

“Could we transfer a small amount of the mana?” the viper asked. “Just enough to return him to his previous capacity so he won’t explode when jostled.” He kept looking back at Hest. Probably worried the fox would pop prematurely.

“That would require a more precise ritual, which would take longer to prepare. And if something goes wrong, all the mana will vent into the other vessel anyway.”

“Well, that just leaves the little problem of who we’d cram all that mana into. I assume they’d end up as round as our current balloon but without the benefit of a bunch of wards keeping them from going boom,” the alligator said.

“Correct. I could cast an emergency ward on them, but it’d buy them a minute at most. Whoever gets filled is guaranteed to explode.”

“So, are you gonna volunteer to be the mana bomb?” the alligator asked Mercer.

“N-No. But I can think of someone we all wouldn’t mind meeting an explosive end. Lord Lochland.” Saying the plot out loud felt oddly treacherous, even with Mercer’s growing disdain for his lord. Thinking about turning a noble into scraps was one thing. Speaking about it could end with a noose around his neck. Or, more likely, a blade pressed into his creaking hide.

The alligator raised a brow. “That willing to turn on your lord, eh? Or just that willing to save your own hide?”

“A little of both, but I’m tired of Lochland using me for his own gains. He had no qualms about kidnapping Hest and bursting him so long as he profited. He’ll never see justice otherwise.” The worst the tiger would receive would be a stern reprimand and a pitiful fine. Only transgressions against the nobility or kingdom provoked actual punishment.

“Consider me intrigued.” The alligator dispersed the orb of water he’d used to threaten Mercer. “Now, how do you plan on luring that lord of yours into a ritual without bringing all the manor’s guards down upon us?”

“Lord Lochland intends to witness the creation of his mana font personally, and doesn’t want anyone else snooping—guards or otherwise. I simply have to set the transfer ritual up before then and set it off once Lochland arrives. And flee with Hest before Lochland explodes in a blast of mana.” Imagining the tiger detonating gave Mercer his first joyful feeling in days. A small spike in pressure within him dashed it swiftly.

“It sounds like a solid plan to me, Conway,” the viper said. “The lord popping and the creation of a mana font should serve as adequate distractions while we abscond with the vessel. Though I guess he’ll stop being a vessel once he’s empty. We won’t have to worry about him popping, at least.”

The alligator rubbed his chin. “So, I might still get paid for returning the deflated balloon to the Henge, *and* I’ll get to help blow up the noble who gave the order to blow me up?”

“I don’t think he knew about you specifically when he sent his guards to kidnap the vessel,” the viper replied.

“Doesn’t matter, I’m not half-assing my vengeance. Lochland will regret ever fucking with me,” the alligator chuckled. He walked up to Mercer. “Just remember, mage. If it turns out this is all an elaborate lie to save your skin, I’ll make sure you don’t survive the brawl that follows.” He dug a finger into Mercer’s side, pressing down until the otter squeaked in fear.

“I promise I’m telling the truth. But we’ll need to start right away. Altering the existing ritual to suit our purposes will take a while.” But it’d be worth it. He repeated that over and over in his head. He was plotting with two strangers to burst his lord and aid in a daring escape. What had gotten into him all of a sudden?