

## The Cleric's Euphoria: Chapter 04

By: Indigo Rho

*Don't smile. Whatever you do, don't smile.*

Tavo repeated the command whenever he felt his thoughts drifting. No smiling. No sighing wistfully. No looking comfortable in general. But he also shouldn't appear overly worried, as if he genuinely *had* taken part in a strange plot to inflate a bunch of people at a sanctuary and feared the punishment awaiting him. He believed he'd adequately asserted his innocence, though the unfortunate scuffle with the city watch greatly complicated things. He couldn't deny his involvement with that—he'd turned a bystander into a balloon, after all. Conway's rather rude behavior since their capture hadn't helped, either. The alligator might very well have accumulated a few more offenses along the way.

Going over the dire situation he and Conway had found themselves in distracted him from how delightful being inflated was. Tavo hadn't realized how often he tended to inflate until spending two months in Bexley with barely a puff. There wasn't room at the inn for Conway to use him as a waterbed. None of their recent jobs had given Conway an excuse to blimp him up or led to situations where someone else decided to blimp him up. Conway hadn't even gotten angry enough in two months to inflate him for stress relief.

Of course now that Tavo *was* inflated nice and round, the circumstances surrounding it were less than ideal. But filling with air felt good. It left the viper light, but not so light he'd float into the air and possible oblivion. Practice had made him more mobile as a balloon than the average person, and he could generally wobble about so long as his claws hadn't sunk entirely into his body and a pressure daze hadn't overcome him. He doubted the guards would appreciate him wandering around; though it wasn't as if he was capable of outrunning them.

Tavo sighed with an appropriate degree of disappointment. Lack of inflation aside, Bexley had treated him well until that day—steady shelter, steady meals, steady work, and an appreciated lack of life-or-death situations. Now he and Conway were in trouble again, and it felt to him like the kind of trouble that led to Conway popping people and them having to flee across a border. He'd have to be ready to act if Conway chose to make things worse and attempt to escape. That was just how life was at times.

Conway's rage had boiled over so many times that he considered it a miracle he hadn't passed out. Enchanted rings on his fingers dampened his magic to prevent him from using it, a gift from his stupid, bitter guards. The alligator wasn't in a pressure daze, but he'd struggled to keep his thoughts straight ever since the rings had been forced on him. He couldn't tell if that was

an intended feature or merely a side effect of piss-poor enchanting. Either way, it hadn't prevented him from making his opinions known loud and clear to the growing gathering of fools ignoring him.

He was astounded anyone still believed he and Tavo were responsible for inflating everyone at the sanctuary. Any half-competent mage could tell the culprit was an alcomancer, not an aquamancer. Sure, he could manipulate beer with about the same ease as he could water, but he couldn't manifest a single drop of the stuff. Did they think he'd lugged a hundred barrels of beer into the temple and then filled the clerics up one at a time? He'd told them as much, and they'd responded by sending people to check the cellars for empty barrels as if he'd confessed. And when they'd found another swollen, giggling cleric down there, they'd used the discovery to reaffirm their idiocy.

So many brainless fools. Conway kept hoping in vain someone sensible would come along, and he'd been disappointed every time. First, the dough ball of a kobold from the Brewers Guild marched in with a swarm of armed guild members and yapped out orders as he played general. Then, a pretentious merchant with more titles than sense took over, blabbering out threats about how much worse things would be if he didn't cooperate and admit his guilt.

Stupidity alone would be manageable, but his captors had the gall to trap him as a damn balloon, as if the humiliation would coerce him into confessing to the absurd crimes he hadn't committed. They'd rolled him around the entire sanctuary, unable to settle on where he should be kept while they conducted their failure of an investigation. His various incompetent interrogators had jabbed, shoved, and smacked him, venting impotent rage. Conway was almost grateful they obviously lacked experience handling captives they wanted information out of.

When not cursing everyone in earshot who'd listen, Conway entertained himself fantasizing about inflating every last one of them until they burst. He vividly pictured them flailing helplessly, the terror on their faces dulling as the pressure got to them. They'd pop in waves so that those with their wits still about them had time to think about their fate. Perhaps becoming scraps would teach them some better manners in the next life.

The idiot brigade had gained a fat caribou and were on their way over, no doubt eager to repeat the same questions all over again. Conway was running out of inventive ways to tell them to fuck off.

The gryphon with the wardrobe that likely cost more than the temple opened his beak to speak first. "I'm going to ask you one last time, mage. Why were you trespassing on sanctuary grounds?" From his tone, he meant it as a warning, but Conway prayed it was a promise.

“Since you’ve already forgotten what I said the last hundred times, I’ll tell it to you again.” Conway loved seeing the gryphon’s eye twitch at his blatant disrespect. Whatever power the merchant commanded in Bexley meant nothing to an outsider like him. “We weren’t trespassing, we were invited. We’ve been doing work for some innkeepers, and they wanted to make an offering to Edmir to celebrate the place doing well, I guess. Since all three of them are sloshing and moaning over there, I’m thinking Edmir found fault in the ritual.”

“It’s unwise to blame the divine for the crimes of mortals,” the gryphon grunted. “And if we are to believe you were supposed to play a role in the sacrifice, then why aren’t you two inflated like the others?”

“We were *invited* to take part, not obligated to. Which is why they went ahead without us when we were late. By the time we arrived, everyone was sloshed and sloshing.” Conway hadn’t settled on whether that was a lucky thing or not. A drunken stupor might be preferable to repetitive interrogations.

“And what made you late to a sacrificial feast? I can’t think of many who’d pass on a chance to give gratitude to a deity and enjoy a great meal at the same time.”

“We were clearing out some debts, and that took longer than expected.”

“What kind of debts?”

Finally a new question, and it was an inane one at that. Conway couldn’t hold back any longer. “Oh, the most scandalous sort, of course! There was the rest of the money we owed for renting a wagon a few weeks back. Then there were the tools we’d borrowed to mend a hole in the stable attic. We owed a tailor for new trousers, how shocking. Then there was all the money others owed us for small jobs here and there. Is being paid a crime in Bexley now?”

The gryphon glared but didn’t take the bait. “Why did you choose to handle all these alleged debts in one day? And on a day that’d coincidentally keep you away from an unprecedented attack on a sanctuary?”

“Because I was tired of owing a pittance to so many people, and because we expected to leave the city shortly.”

“So you already planned to flee the city? How convenient,” the gryphon smirked, so damn full of himself.

“Do you ‘flee’ the city every time you leave for travel? We weren’t fleeing, we were leaving to find more interesting work! And seeing as you can’t conduct a damn sacrifice in Bexley without someone turning you into a booze balloon, I’m sure we won’t be the last to pack up and leave.” Conway instinctively attempted to smack his tail on the floor, which got him rocking back and forth like a fool.

“This is an isolated incident, and the culprit will be dealt with, rest assured,” the gryphon said. “Now, then. After handling those alleged debts, you arrived at the sanctuary and found everyone inflated, correct?”

“We only found the guards like that. We didn’t know anyone else was a giggling blimp until you rolled us in here.” The gryphon’s persistent leading questions and attempts to trick Conway into lies were exasperating. “The city watch barged in and started shouting accusations right after we arrived.”

“The city watch members who responded to a crime and were then swiftly attacked by both of you upon making their presence known,” the gryphon corrected with his usual lies.

“They’re the ones who started this whole mess!”

“When they fought back after you attacked them with magic?”

“When they immediately accused us of inflating the guards. That damn pigeon was going to strike even if I hadn’t defended myself first!” Conway deeply regretted failing to balloon the pigeon when he had the chance. His only solace was watching him waddle around with his bloated, sloshing belly, too busy to deflate. He hoped the bird woke up the next day with a sore back.

Conway heard the kobold snarl somewhere beyond the curve of his spherical body. “Those who volunteer for the watch are tasked with maintaining order, and they have every right to demand the cooperation of those engaged in suspicious acts!” The kobold—at least Conway assumed it was the kobold—jabbed his taut middle, causing him to wobble once more.

Conway wanted to ramble on and on about all the times he’d witnessed members of a city watch abusing their positions during the two or three days a month they played soldier, but then he might start gloating about some of the watch members he’d popped elsewhere, which he doubted would help his case.

“Calm down, Master Veek,” the gryphon ordered. “Well, mage. Despite your atrocious behavior when confronted by the watch, Master Aldric of the Enchanters Guild has confirmed your magic doesn’t match that used to inflate those at the sanctuary.”

“That’s what I’ve been telling you this whole time! Thank the gods, you finally came to your senses,” Conway couldn’t believe they’d learned the truth and still interrogated him one last time, probably out of spite. “Now would you kindly deflate us?” he growled.

“About that. The fact of the matter is, you assaulted two members of the city watch without provocation. Feeling disrespected by someone doing their job generally does not justify you making an effort to inflate and disable them.” The gryphon’s beak curved into a smug grin. Conway fantasized about it being squished between swollen cheeks as his hide creaked ominously. “But we are not a lawless city. You’ll have a trial, and a jury will determine whether you’re

guilty. If you aren't, you'll be free to go. Otherwise, you'll be fined. Would you *kindly* provide me with the name of someone who'll pledge for your character to ensure you won't flee the city before your trial starts?"

Tavo understood the scheme the gryphon had set into motion and thought it terribly clever. The gryphon knew they were strangers to the city who weren't likely to have people willing to vouch for them before or during a trial. They were almost guaranteed to be found guilty, barring some extraordinary circumstances, like every member of the jury having a vendetta against the city watch members. If Tavo had to guess, the gryphon probably owned the right to collect fines in the district, as good an excuse as any to want a guilty verdict.

Political intrigue both fascinated and overwhelmed Tavo. He preferred sticking to the shadier side of politics, which tended to involve far more popping than plotting.

"I believe the innkeepers we've been staying with would vouch for us," Tavo said, hoping to cut off any snarky response from Conway and possibly salvage the situation. "We've done honest work for them, and they were willing to include us in a sacrificial feast to give thanks for their prosperity."

"Perhaps, but they're currently in no condition to confirm any such claim about your character," the gryphon said.

"So deflate them already," Conway snapped back. "At least *one* of your alcomancers should be competent enough to suck the beer out of a balloon."

"Deflation isn't possible at the moment."

"Why the fuck not?!"

"That information is related to a sensitive investigation you aren't privy to."

"We sure as fuck *are* privy to it if it's going to screw us over!"

"Wait," Tavo interrupted, wary of Conway talking his way into more fines. "You can contact the others who work at the inn."

"Yes, Tavo, have them contact the people we *famously* get along well with. I'm sure they'll rush to our aid and not spew a bunch of lies instead," Conway scoffed.

For once, the alligator wasn't exaggerating all that much. The pair's relationship with the inn's regular employees was occasionally tense. Conway spurned early friendly banter with his usual bluntness and found plenty to argue about. Meanwhile, the stablehand had made unrequited romantic advances towards Tavo, which earned the viper the ire of the cook's assistant, who apparently considered him a rival now. Work thankfully kept them busy, but some slower days got awkward fast, and Tavo's head ached figuring out which conversations were innocent and which ones were laden with innuendo.

"What about Symon?" Aside from the innkeepers, the bookseller was the only other steady employer they'd had.

“Tavo, I shouldn’t have to tell you why someone like Symon might not rush to our aid.” Conway turned his head as much toward Tavo as he could just to glare at the viper.

“Oh, yeah.”

The gryphon watched their back-and-forth with glee. “It sounds to me like you don’t have anyone to vouch for you. If that’s the case, you’ll be kept in a cell until a proper trial can be arranged, which may take time. Handling the attack on the sanctuary will take priority over any other case. We simply can’t waste valuable resources on the likes of you. Were you aware, by chance, that criminals in Bexley are kept inflated while awaiting trial?” His smile widened, and he stood a little straighter, as if to strike a more imposing figure as he lorded the revelation over them. “It’s an old deterrent, one we rarely get to utilize.”

Conway wobbled and snapped his jaws in fury. “Why bother with a trial if you’re already ensuring we’re going to lose? Just fine us and get it over with!”

“Order would collapse if we took shortcuts with the law. And even if I were so unscrupulous, how do I know you have the money to pay the fine? You’ll be gravely disappointed if you expect to have the fine waived for being poor. In Bexley, those who can’t afford fines for outrageous crimes like yours work to pay it off.” The gryphon oozed baseless pride as he made the declaration.

“The innkeepers owe us a considerable sum, which should be more than enough to pay any fine you force upon us.” At least, Conway hoped that was the case. He tended not to get caught when he brawled with the city watch.

“I assume that requires the innkeepers not to be in a hedonistic daze?” the gryphon asked. “We don’t take promissory notes for fines, either.”

The caribou stepped forward and cleared his throat, saving Tavo the trouble of quieting Conway. “If I may, Grand Master Imbard? I have a suggestion.” Imbard narrowed his eyes at Aldric but didn’t silence him. “I’ll pledge for these two, so long as they assist me with the investigation.”

Conway and Tavo—and everyone else for that matter—stared at the caribou in confusion. Imbard was the first to break the silence. “Master Aldric, what use could you *possibly* hope to get out of them? They apparently respond with violence to even the slightest provocation.”

“Whoever’s responsible for the attack on the sanctuary was able to inflate close to thirty people without alerting anyone. In all likelihood, those of us investigating will need to confront them at some point, and while I’m truly humbled by the faith you have in my skills, I’m not a fighter. I specialize in wards and enchantments, not pyromancy or aquamancy. Having a pair of assistants who can double as guards could be of great benefit.”

The kobold growled, still out of Conway's line of sight. "They attacked two members of my watch—and *lost* to them, I might add—and you want them to assist us?"

"Master Veek, the earlier incident between them and the watch sounds like the result of an unfortunate misunderstanding that grew out of hand. I say we let them atone for helping us."

"Why would they be motivated to help you?" Imbard asked, making sure to send a dismissive glare at Conway and Tavo.

"Assisting me means they won't be stuck blimped up in a cell for the duration of the investigation. And if, as they claim, the innkeepers owe them money which could be used to pay the fine for the incident with the city watch, they should be plenty motivated to see them deflated and returned to normal."

Tavo saw an opportunity and piped in before Conway's stubborn pride could get in the way. "The very kind and generous Master Aldric is right about us wanting to see the innkeepers regain their senses, and not only because they owe us a tidy sum. All three of them have been very good to us. They've provided food, shelter, and work, and haven't mistreated us. They don't deserve to be trapped as balloons." He would've loved the excuse to remain inflated for an extended period, but the exact circumstances he faced would've been less than ideal. Cells were dreadful places—cold, dark, smelly, and lacking in decent food or drink. And Conway would be in an absolutely foul mood the entire time, which would grow tiring.

"This is a fool's endeavor, Master Aldric," Veek insisted. "We can't trust them to keep their word and not run the second they're in your custody. They might even take you hostage!"

"He has a point, Master Aldric," Imbard said. "How will you guarantee they'll stay honest?"

"Boundary sigils," Aldric answered.

Conway didn't consider himself knowledgeable in a lot of magic outside his own aquamancy, but he'd seen and heard plenty about boundary sigils before and didn't like them one bit. They were enchantments drawn on a person's body like tattoos and attuned to a predetermined boundary. Leaving the boundary inflicted ill effects on the wearer. Typically, the sigil generated burning pain, like being poked with a branding iron. Other sigils blinded the wearer or even stopped their breathing. He and Conway had smuggled people marked by the sigils before. Lucrative pay, though they'd had to watch their clients endure horrific pain while waiting to have the sigil removed.

Imbard nodded in approval. "That'd do a fine job of keeping them in the city. We'd still be able to track them if they did anything foolish like go into hiding as well. If they accept the sigil, then I'll allow it."

Veek exhaled loudly in frustration but made no further argument against Aldric's plans for the pair.

"Do you both understand what a boundary sigil entails?" Aldric looked between Conway and Tavo until they gave him an affirmative. "I assure you our variation is more civilized than most. There'll be no freezing cold that deadens limbs or rings that snap bones in your fingers and toes." Conway was suddenly happy to have only seen a few comparatively tame versions of the boundary sigil. "Instead, you'll simply inflate nearly spherical. No pain, but you'll fall into a strong pressure daze that'll keep you from doing much of anything at all until you're retrieved."

"Don't make it sound impotent, Master Aldric," Imbard commanded. "If the sigil is set off, it'll keep you bloated regardless of any attempt to deflate. You'll also swell so large that the sigil will be thoroughly covered, thwarting any attempt to remove it. Now that you understand the degree of control we'll maintain, are you still willing to assist Master Aldric?" he sneered.

Conway held back the urge to spit in the smug gryphon's face. The bastard couldn't accept the fact he and Tavo might actually keep their word and not bolt. He firmly believed he had every right to leave the horrible city and had spent most of his time while inflated coming up with numerous questionable plans to escape custody and flee, but Imbard was the sort of conceited person who infuriated Conway to no end. He wanted to punch the arrogance right off of Imbard, and perhaps his beak while he was at it.

"We'll take the offer!" Conway roared, drawing the room's attention back to him. "Just do us a favor and stop accusing us of every fanciful crime that confuses the fuck out of you." The raging alligator wanted to be deflated, wanted his money, and—now most of all—wanted to get back at whoever actually *had* inflated the clerics and dragged him into a huge mess. He had plenty of spite to spare, and he personally believed he was at his best when fueled by spite. Tavo could disagree all he wanted.

"Finally, some progress," Imbard grunted. He scanned the room and started snapping at a squirrel lingering a short distance away. The squirrel rushed over. "Go to my home and retrieve my boundary sigil stamp. You should know where it is." The squirrel nodded three times in quick succession and went on his way.

"I'll need to send for my apprentices and some gear," Aldric said. The caribou rubbed a pointed tip of an antler, his thoughts elsewhere. "Master Veek, would you be willing to spare someone to get them? They'll be invaluable for a more thorough examination of the victims."

"Linna can handle it. She already knows where you live, after all. I'll just need to make sure she pumps the water out of her belly first." Veek trudged off.



“Consider yourselves extraordinarily fortunate,” Imbard coldly told Conway and Tavo. “But remember this: if at any point you attempt to either flee Bexley, remove the boundary sigil, or sabotage the investigation in *any* way, you’ll be rolled off to a cell and charged accordingly. My generosity will not be taken advantage of, understand?”

“Of course.” Tavo replied loudly to distract from the palpable disdain in Conway’s less enthusiastic reply. The day kept getting stranger and stranger. From collecting debts to losing a fight against the city watch to getting conscripted to help with some sort of investigation. Conway would have plenty to say about it later, once they weren’t in earshot of the people he likely wanted to curse at. But for the time being, Tavo wanted to enjoy being inflated. He didn’t know when he’d be able to indulge in ballooning next—or if he’d be doing so willingly.