

The Cleric's Euphoria: Chapter 08

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Tonic had smiled for two days straight. A steady stream of intoxicating praise washed over him, pushing away all ill thoughts before they could settle and fester. The passion of his swollen worshipers remained strong, having not faded in the slightest since he'd cast his spell upon them. The rabbit felt the worship increasing, nurtured and focused by Roland, his grand cleric.

His grand cleric. The very thought widened Tonic's grin, and he held back a laugh. Bit by bit, the dream even he had considered to be a longshot was starting to gain a hold on reality. He'd successfully crafted the relic, secured a captive congregation, and been blessed with a grand cleric who supported his divine scheme.

For the first time in a very, very long while, Tonic walked the streets of Bexley with the same joy he'd had while Nance was still alive. The sun felt more refreshing, the city sounded gentler, and the odors seemed less potent. Nothing worried him as he stood in front of a shuttered shop, watching people go about their lives.

Tonic became aware of a faint tightness coming from his stomach. His middle had puffed up a little again, giving the rabbit a chubby appearance that thankfully didn't stand out in a crowd dotted with those a few puffs away from needing to be rolled.

Slowly breathing in and out, Tonic concentrated on the divine mana pooling within him. He soaked it all up, flattening his middle until he returned to his usual, lanky self.

Containing the constant flow of devotion proved a challenge. When Roland had taken on the role of his grand cleric, Tonic had stayed a balloon for a whole day, entranced by the intense comfort of his new power. Eventually, he'd managed to absorb the mana and deflate. Inflating brought him a great deal of joy, but he'd never obtain godhood as a sphere. More worshippers needed to be swelled, and Tonic was in a strong position to do just that.

Roland's townhouse served as Tonic's base of operations, with the sloshed and moaning unicorn still wobbling in the hall where he'd accepted his vital role as grand cleric. Tonic cared for the blissful blimp's limited needs, all while reminding himself he wasn't an intruder in the elegant home.

Sanctuary and an ally. Tonic wouldn't waste the advantages laid before him by fate.

Now and then, another rumor about the incident at the Sanctuary of Edmir drifted Tonic's way. All of Bexley knew the clerics of the sanctuary were

inflated with beer, but the truth of the matter began and ended right there, overshadowed by conjecture, confusion, and fantastic lies.

People said thieves had raided the sanctuary for a hoard of gold and jewels, though Tonic heard nothing about missing relics that would imply the discovery of his genuine thefts in creating the mandolin. Then there were the rumors the Brewers Guild itself had inflated the clerics as part of a feud over the sale or quality of beer. Divine punishment from Edmir was considered the safe bet among the rumormongers despite the deity's apparent silence on the matter.

Tonic didn't know how the rumors would shift once he filled others with joy. He needed to swell his congregation while avoiding sending the city into a full-blown panic, lest the city throw every resource at its disposal against him. Surprise and stealth were the rabbit's strengths in his quest for divinity, not brute force. Until he gained more power, he needed to be a baffling nuisance whose true goals weren't discerned until it was too late to stop him.

Clunk!

Clunk!

Clunk!

Heads turned towards the clanking of the heavy bell down the street. Sporadic laughter followed as the crowd parted, and the flow of traffic slowed to a crawl. A sheep on city watch duty came through at a leisurely pace, ringing a bell at regular intervals. She appeared quite bored, tapping the bell with a hoof when not ringing it. Behind her waddled a blue jay and a green parrot wearing giant barrels that greatly restricted their movement, leaving only their heads, hands, and legs below the knees exposed. Neither could walk in a straight line, and they alternated between banging against each other and meandering off to the side. A squat, bottom-heavy goat—also on watch duty—nudged them on the right path, just barely more enthusiastic than the sheep.

"Hear me!" the sheep bellowed with an exasperated sigh. "The shameful pair I lead let beer steal their senses and destroyed the property of the one who quenched their thirst! Look upon them, and do not repeat their mistakes!" She recited the words expertly, but without heart. No doubt they'd begun to lose meaning after repeating them over and over again.

"If you'd been smart and taken a damn punch to the face like you were supposed to, we wouldn't be in this mess," the blue jay loudly grumbled at his rival.

"You can't blame me!" the parrot squawked back. "*You're* the one who moved and made me plow into that cheap table!"

"Cheaper than the shit beer!"

"The beer was fine, you bastard!"

“They should fine you for your shit taste!” The blue jay flailed his talons at the sheep, who had no way of noticing the gesture while leading the way. “Watch! Hey, Watch! Make the idiot pay more for having shit taste!”

“No,” the sheep groaned without turning around. “And if you ask me that again, we’ll add another loop to your stroll.” A gamble, since she clearly wanted to be free of overseeing the punishment herself. But the blue jay quit complaining, and the parrot had the good sense to stay quiet, too.

Rather than respond with solemn contemplation, the crowd watched with broad smiles and sneers. Some mocked the drunks on display with harsh words and lewd gestures. A few followed alongside the humiliating procession, having turned it into their entertainment for the day.

Tonic tried not to gawk when criminals were paraded around—even the inflated ones didn’t interest him much, and those were vastly more common than any forced to wear barrels or placed in the stocks. But the rabbit also saw an opportunity to obtain new followers *and* get a feel for how the public would react to seeing his second strike.

Tonic set aside the busy street full of people and reduced his world to himself and the two drunks. To his senses, the beer in their bellies shone like bonfires on a pitch-black night. He readied his divine mandolin. A bard strumming a tune to pass the time wouldn’t stand out, especially not with a procession of embarrassed criminals around to catch the crowd’s eye. And the power of his song would ensure no one bothered looking his way.

The pick plucked away at the blessed strings of the mandolin, causing the ample ale within the blue jay and parrot to increase. While the barrels blocked Tonic’s view of the birds’ middles, he could feel them swelling. Of course, so could the birds.

Blue jay and parrot came to a wobbling halt in the middle of the street, clanging their barrels together.

“You two just had a break, no slacking off,” the goat behind them demanded. He rapped on the side of the parrot’s barrel with a hoof.

“I feel—*hic*—funny,” the parrot mumbled.

“Well, I feel funnier,” the blue jay replied in a pointless effort at one-upmanship.

The sheep looked back, briefly closed her eyes in frustration, then turned to face the drunks. “I wasn’t lying about extending your punishment. You shouldn’t have trashed the tavern if you didn’t want to walk. Plain and simple.”

“I feel heavy. Why do I—*uworrrp*—feel heavy?” the parrot asked no one in particular. He shifted from one foot to another.

“He’s—*braap*—lying,” the blue jay accused, swaying more than before. “He knows I’ve got a stomach ache and is trying to make me sound like a faker!”

The goat leaned back. “If either of you are gonna puke, just don’t get it all over the barrels.”

“Damn it, I thought they got that all out of their systems *before* we put them in the barrels.” The sheep rubbed her brow.

The parrot let out a short giggle. “Wait, this is—*bworrrp*—kind of nice. Told you...told you the beer was good.”

“You should’ve told me how long it—*buhurrrp*—takes to kick in.” The blue jay moaned so loud he got a round of snickers from the crowd.

“Are they getting drunker?” The goat looked back and forth between the criminals and his watch partner.

“One of them’s sloshing. How the fuck is one of them sloshing?” the sheep asked in disbelief.

All eyes were on the strange display in the middle of the street. More importantly, no one bothered to pay any attention to the rabbit playing his mandolin in plain sight. Their distraction owed as much to the spectacle of the punishment as the influence of Tonic’s mesmerizing music, which urged them to continue staring.

The parrot’s barrel groaned under unseen pressure. He’d been the fatter of the drunks, and his padded belly filled the confines of its wooden prison first. The wooden planks quaked and bulged out. A wave of confused faces spread over the crowd, leading to a frenzy of questions and wild guesses.

The sheep and goat of the city watch backed away from their giggling and groaning charges. With a tremendous crack like thunder, the parrot’s barrel burst apart to reveal his mostly spherical body. The blue jay’s barrel didn’t last more than a minute longer, and he was as round as his fellow bird. They snorted, burped, and promptly rolled over, continuing to balloon out of control even as their barrels were reduced to scraps.

“What in the name of the gods?” the sheep gasped.

“Was the beer bad?” The goat nervously prodded the moaning parrot. “Shit, I drank the beer, too! I’ll bloat just like them!”

“Bad beer doesn’t bloat with that kind of delay!” the sheep insisted, though her gaze occasionally darted to the goat’s soft middle.

Delight returned to the crowd as they watched the blue jay and parrot expand in the street, few seeming to care about *why* the two swelled. Those close to the blimps tried to back away, even as others in the back leaned in for a better look. If the unexpected public swelling turned into an unexpected public bursting, the audience wanted to avoid getting caught in the splash zone. For all they knew, the brew bubbling within the criminals was the contagious sort, and popping excited them far less when they became the star.

While the blue jay and parrot grew plenty round, balancing on the curves of their swollen bodies with only their talons and heads jutting out, Tonic had no intention of turning them into booze bombs. The rabbit would only preach joy.

The city watch circled the balloons suddenly under their care, at a loss for what to do. Neither looked toward the crowd for culprits, as gentle notes on the wind suggested they focus solely on the blimped-up birds.

Fresh praise radiated off the blue jay and parrot. With Roland's distant help, their worship was directed straight at Tonic like a ray of sunlight piercing the clouds. Tonic clenched his mandolin tight as he felt the wonderful sensation of adoration pour over him. To his surprise, he felt a swathe of joy lingering in the air and realized it'd come from the audience entertained by the spectacle of the criminals inflating. It lacked the intensity of his swollen worshipers, but he welcomed every drip of divinity.

Tonic's middle poofed out as he soaked up the euphoria of the criminals and crowd, giving him a modest pot belly. He placed a paw on the dome and held back the bloating. He didn't feel like testing to see if his music could make a huge gathering of people ignore a *third* moaning balloon in their midst. A gasp escaped Tonic's lips, and he patted his small belly.

Two more ecstatic worshipers to build his strength. He wondered what kind of reaction the second, much smaller inflation incident would have.