

The Cleric's Euphoria: Chapter 010

By: Indigo Rho

More balloons. There were always going to be more balloons, Tavo supposed. Everyone at the sanctuary—from the guards to the guild masters to the fluctuating crowd of bystanders lingering outside the gate—had mumbled concerns about when there'd be another attack. They simply couldn't agree on how large such a follow-up attack would be, though they all assumed it'd be staggering.

So the arrival of two more euphoric drunken balloons strangely underwhelmed Tavo, who'd anticipated fresh victims to be rolled in by the dozen. He understood his mix of confusion and disappointment wouldn't be shared by the others who'd gathered to watch the bloated blue jay and parrot brought in for examination. It wasn't that the viper doubted any of the Brewers Guild members adored inflation—the pervasively positive attitude towards swelling in Bexley meant they made little effort to disguise what they did in their free time, and it turned out brewers had a taste for blimping. It was that few shared his appreciation for extended periods of inflation.

A few hours was the longest most people felt comfortable staying inflated, if they were comfortable inflating at all. But Tavo dreamed of being inflated for days or weeks at a time. A months-long stint as a blimp tantalized him, though he was unsure about remaining that way for a year or longer. He craved the sensation of being spherical and needing to be rolled from one place to another. A degree of pampering was implied, or at least the general care for his basic needs, not quite unlike what was given to the sloshy victims at the sanctuary.

Unfortunately, Tavo lacked the means to become a balloon for a week or two whenever he pleased. Doing odd jobs and traveling frequently prevented him from saving the money necessary to casually do nothing, let alone pay someone else to serve him while he indulged in being helplessly round. Asking Conway to assist him was out of the question. Letting Conway even suspect such a scenario would make him giddy was also out of the question.

So Tavo's dream of being a taut ball for days and weeks on end remained just that—a dream.

Meanwhile, the inflation-desiring viper had to watch a growing collection of folk live out his dream to some extent, all while pretending the baffling situation distressed him more than intrigued him.

“Tavo?”

Tavo twitched. He realized he'd been staring at the blimps again, a habit he struggled to kick. “Yes, Master Aldric?”

“Would you please roll this gentleman to the dining hall?” Aldric asked, gesturing toward the blue jay. The older caribou had proved pleasant to work for—a rare treat, from Tavo’s extensive personal experiences, especially considering the strange circumstances of the contract. Conway hadn’t decided if Aldric was genuine or not, but Tavo had settled on being cautiously optimistic.

“Yes, of course.” Having apprenticed under several masters himself—albeit ones engaged in the sorts of sordid activities that ensured they’d never enjoy an officially sanctioned guild—Tavo quickly fell back into the habits of a pupil at his teacher’s beck and call. Rolling balloons from one room to another was more relaxing than preparing poisons or throwing knife practice using only his tail.

Tavo placed one palm on the curved side of the bloated blue jay, then the other. He held his breath as he felt his claws sink slightly into the spherical bird. The victims at the sanctuary were different from any other balloon or berry Tavo had handled before. There was a surprising amount of squish to them, as if they could still comfortably swell a few more inches without creaking like a rotting chair about to collapse.

Moving the beer-laden blimp required considerable force to begin with, but once Tavo built momentum, the blue jay rolled as well as any ball. Any incredibly sloshy, moaning ball.

Ga-lunk.

Ga-lunk.

Ga-lunk.

The beer within the blue jay swirled and sloshed, creating muffled waves. Tavo felt the movement of the beer beneath the bird’s hide. Memories of similar inflations flooded the viper’s mind. He recalled the incredible weight accompanying such incidents and how the liquids always seemed in motion, faintly bulging his sides and causing pressure spikes. He flattened his mouth to disguise his joyous thoughts, but his tail treacherously flicked about behind him.

Tavo frequently peeked around the broad sides of the bird to make sure nothing blocked his path. Helpers at the sanctuary had swiftly learned to dodge the massive balloons after an early collision had left one person with a broken tail, but columns and walls couldn’t move out of the way. Practice saved Tavo the embarrassment of bumping the bird into anything or anyone, though his wandering imagination caused him to drift more than he’d have liked.

Victims of the attack on the Sanctuary of Edmir were split between the dormitories and the dining hall. They took up too much space to be adequately confined to a single room, and splitting the group up lessened their cacophony of moans and ecstatic sighs that threatened to drive their caretakers mad. Straw-filled mattresses were piled into individual nests for each balloon, providing a

degree of comfort and preventing them from rolling off whenever they started wobbling.

A single member of the Brewers Guild was in the dining hall when Tavo arrived, and it was one of the few people at the sanctuary he made an effort to avoid: the pigeon whose hasty accusations had played a central role in him and Conway being forced into the investigation.

Tavo wasn't about to ditch the blue jay just to avoid an awkward conversation. "I've got a new balloon. Where would you like me to settle him?"

The pigeon didn't respond. He stood before one of the swollen clerics, staring intently at them.

Tavo loudly cleared his throat. "Uh, excuse me?"

The pigeon's head jerked, and he looked around, confused. "How can I be of service!" he blurted out, poorly covering his momentary lapse of attention.

Suddenly aware of how he probably looked staring at the blue jay earlier, Tavo's face flushed red. "Just one of the new balloons. I needed to know where you wanted him."

"Of course, of course." The pigeon sounded distracted. "Roll him to the open spot at the end of the hall. The one on the left."

Satisfied by the pigeon acting distant rather than angry, Tavo rolled the blue jay to the mattress pile he'd live on for the foreseeable future. "Would you be able to help me get him upright?"

The pigeon nodded silently and joined Tavo by the blue jay. Together, the pair rocked and nudged the beer balloon over and over until he was standing upright in the center of the mattresses. Getting up close to the sloshing blimp some more made the effort worth it. A stream of giggles from the blue jay petered out into low moans.

"I've never been so jealous of a balloon," the pigeon let out a wistful sigh.

Tavo's tail flicked. Common sense told him to nod and walk away, but curiosity got the better of him. "Oh?" the viper asked, speaking in as neutral a tone as possible so he didn't give away his interest.

"They're round and basically immobile, but they're always happy. I'd be humiliated if I needed a team of people to roll me into position. They grin and moan when it happens, like it's the best thing ever." The pigeon placed a palm on the blue jay's side and gently pressed down, provoking a euphoric whine from the balloon. "It must feel so good."

Second-hand embarrassment got Tavo feeling warm in the face. He didn't know the pigeon well enough to openly agree with every word he'd said and worried he'd let something slip if he stayed much longer. "Magic can make many things pleasurable."

The pigeon merely nodded.

Two quick rings of a bell saved Tavo from himself. “Dinnertime already. I should get going in case my assistance is needed with serving.” It was a terrible lie that he immediately silently chastised himself for. The Brewers Guild didn’t allow him or Conway anywhere near the preparation and serving of food at the sanctuary, a blunt declaration of lingering distrust. Such a useless precaution, as Tavo firmly believed he could poison most of the guild’s members without ever touching their food or drink. After all, they didn’t guard their plates, cups, and utensils.

“Have fun,” the pigeon said and then let out a one-note giggle.

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Conway was gaining an appreciation for meals he neither had to pay for nor cook himself. It must have been how nobles felt—though, admittedly, Conway’s easy meals were a bit lacking in the spices or the extravagance of what he’d seen the nobility glut on.

With the dining hall the domain of the giddy drunk balloons, meals at the sanctuary were held in the cloister. The wide loggia circling the grassy courtyard offered ample space for tables and benches without being too far from the kitchen. Master Veek had authorized the raiding of the sanctuary’s cellars, so every meal was accompanied by barrels of beer. The members of the Brewers Guild didn’t hold back, nor did Conway. Endless beer was the least the guild could do to make up for the trouble they’d gotten him in.

“To Edmir,” Conway toasted out of habit as he drained the rest of his mug. The others at the table repeated him less enthusiastically.

Aldric nibbled at the food in front of him. He was thinking too much, like always. At least Conway assumed he thought too much all the time. Maybe the fruitless investigation had jumbled the caribou a bit, but he came across as the sort of person who had trouble putting his thoughts aside and enjoying the little things in life, like free food and beer.

“Two more victims,” Aldric muttered.

“But only two,” Conway added, hoping in vain to shut down another dreary work conversation when they were supposed to be eating. He was as unhappy as anyone else to be stuck in a city where someone was running around turning people into bloated kegs of ale, but he didn’t want to spend his every waking moment fretting about it.

“Who were they, anyway?” Tavo unhelpfully asked, ensuring the discussion would continue.

“Two drunks foolish enough to start a fight in a tavern while two members of the city watch were talking with the owner,” Aldric said.

“Brawling in a tavern with the city watch around is an impressive misstep. I’m not surprised it ended poorly for them.” Tavo dared a glance at Conway, who promptly ignored the inappropriate attempt to guilt him for a plethora of past accidents. “Did the watch stop them before or after they swelled?”

“Long before. The drunks were detained, made to wear a drunkard’s cloak, and marched between the markets of Ventus and Moldir, per tradition.”

“I’m surprised they weren’t filled to the brim with beer and rolled around instead, considering the city’s obsession with inflation,” Conway scoffed. He’d once experienced such a punishment after a job to force a bard to pay his outstanding debt went poorly. The filling had taken place in one market square in front of a jeering crowd with nothing better to do than watch him and Tavo swell. Then they’d been rolled down one of the city’s busiest streets before being left to wobble atop a platform in a different market square until nightfall.

“That’s reserved for anyone caught selling bad beer,” Vid said, returning with a large pitcher of beer. For some odd reason, their mugs seemed to drain fast. “And bad wine. And cider. And meade. Anything that can be drunk and make you ill, really. They also fill up any official taste testers caught lying about the quality of the drink in collusion with the seller. They’re not always deflated afterward, either. Instead, they’re left to digest every last drop of their terrible drink.” The flamingo patted an imaginary belly and smirked.

Conway didn’t need any further explanation. Certain drinks could be as fattening as the finest foods. Guzzling hundreds of gallons of beer would turn even the fittest person into a dough ball. “Should I worry if I see a blubbery tavernkeeper, then?”

Aldrich shook his head. “Most folks in Bexley don’t owe their heft to punishments.” The caribou quickly glanced at his own prodigious middle. “But as I was saying, the drunks inflated during the march between markets. According to the watch members escorting them, the pair abruptly started complaining about feeling funny, then ballooned right out of their barrels.”

“And the watch somehow didn’t notice anyone casting a tremendously powerful spell?” Conway asked in disbelief.

“They were caught off-guard by the swelling, and the street was packed with people. And neither is a mage, I might add.” Aldric filled his empty mug to the top with beer.

“Using the masses for cover is a tried and true tactic in both theft and assassination,” Tavo said. He was tapping the tip of his tail on the bench. “People’s attention would naturally be drawn to the criminals being paraded down the street, even before they inflated like balloons. Mages among the crowd might not have felt the spellcasting or been unable to focus on it due to the distraction.”

“Yeah, that’s possible,” Conway admitted.

“We should—*urrrp*—try to find out if the two new victims are connected to the sanctuary,” Vid said. He gave his mug more attention to his plate. “What if they’re accomplices, and the mastermind behind the attack on the sanctuary is tying up loose ends?”

“Doubt it,” Conway said. “What are the odds the mastermind would learn about their accomplices getting detained *and* have the time to set up a flashy ambush? No, if they were dealing with any accomplices, we’d either find them abandoned somewhere quiet, or we wouldn’t find them at all.”

Mira nodded along while taking a drink. “It might help if we knew anything about the latest victims, but the city watch only got their names. Someone will need to be sent to the tavern they brawled in to see if they were regulars. If not, then we’ll have to wait until friends or relatives come forward to figure out what happened to them. *If* there’s anyone to come forward. Their blimping will be in vain if it doesn’t give us a lead.”

“That’s for the Brewers Guild to worry about, not us,” Aldric said. “We need to focus on learning everything we can about this spell, and we *did* learn something from this incident. At around the same time the two drunks were being inflated, there was a surge in the divine magic filling all the original victims. And since that surge hasn’t noticeably subsided, it’s safe to assume the spell grows stronger with more victims.

“Which means there’ll be more balloons. A lot more balloons.” Tavo felt his tail wiggling as his heart rate picked up. He chugged some beer to distract himself from the thoughts of sloshing blimp after sloshing blimp getting rolled into the sanctuary. Half the city could end up round and giddy if the culprit were daring enough. The viper might very well experience that swollen glee whether he wanted to or not.

“It’s practically a guarantee at this point.” Aldric shifted in his seat and groaned. His belly filled his lap more than ever, bloated with a substantial amount of beer. But neither he nor anyone around him noticed. “What baffles me is the apparent de-escalation. Our culprit first attacked a sanctuary, inflating a sizable group with apparent ease. But their second attack came days later, with only two victims. Rather than continuing to target victims in a private setting, they went after them in public, drastically increasing their odds of getting caught. The first attack was against clerics, which was bound to cause a stir, while their second attack was against a pair of random drunks. If the spell is fueled by the number of victims, then wouldn’t they want to target larger groups? There was another surge the first night, but there weren’t any new victims then. Maybe we’re being too hasty in making assumptions about the spell’s nature.”

“No victims that we know of,” Mira said. “The culprit could be hiding other victims for some reason.”

“Maybe there’s more than one culprit. For all we know, there might be a whole gang behind this.” Conway loathed getting dragged further into the conversation, but he couldn’t deny his freedom from the boundary sigil and the threat of turning into a damn blimp was intertwined with the investigation. He didn’t feel like letting them ignore obvious possibilities if the result screwed him over. “They could’ve struck the sanctuary as a group, which would explain how they succeeded in inflating so many people. Now they’ve spread out and are targeting smaller groups.”

Conway imagined people swelling all over the city in taverns and quiet alleyways. His own belly jutted out half a foot further than usual, full of delicious beer and pressing against the edge of the table. The alligator had finished off every mug in two to three greedy gulps without realizing the fact.

Aldric cradled his mug. “I think the only thing that scares me more than one mage knowing this spell is a whole group of them knowing it. So my apologies for hoping you’re wrong.” He stared intently at his empty plate before speaking again. “I wish we had any idea as to the spell’s purpose. Divine power is building within the victims, but why? Are they supposed to be divine mana batteries for a ritual of some sort? Is the spell going to transform the victims, and we simply haven’t noticed the changes yet? Why are they trapped in a permanent state of bliss? Why bother ensuring their clothing didn’t rip apart when they ballooned?” The caribou huffed in frustration and downed his beer.

“Beer might be the key,” Mira said. Her round middle matched that of Aldric and Conway, as did her obliviousness. “Of all the things the culprit could’ve inflated their victims with, they chose beer. And—at least so far—their victims have had a strong connection with beer. First the clerics of the god of brewing, then a pair who’d gotten into a drunken brawl. We can’t ignore the possibility they’re sending a message with who they’re targeting.” The sabertooth cat looked around and then leaned in, lowering her voice so it didn’t reach anyone else. “Just like we can’t ignore the possibility the culprit is connected to the Brewers Guild in some manner.”

The controversial opinion they’d all had to dance around since the beginning. Allegedly, the Brewers Guild had the best alcomancers in Bexley, and Conway felt comfortable guessing the culprit was also an alcomancer. But he also felt comfortable guessing that the kobold running things would explode if any of his precious compatriots were accused of wrongdoing.

“It’s a very delicate matter, Mira,” Aldric warned.

“I understand that, Master. However, if there’s even a slight chance the culprit is a disgruntled member of the Brewers Guild—current or former—then

we need to know. I'm not saying Master Veek is covering anything up," Mira insisted, though Conway wouldn't put it past the kobold. "I just think he'd benefit from an outsider's perspective."

"I suppose it can't be helped," Aldric sighed, rubbing his head. "There are a few questions I've wanted to ask Master Veek myself, which would be inappropriate to bring up when he's here at the sanctuary. We'll visit him at the guildhall tomorrow and see how willing he is to listen. Do not be surprised if he declines, though. We're outsiders, as you said, and he could easily misunderstand our intentions."

"Or realize you're catching on to the truth and stonewall you," Conway said. He hated when the obsessive desire for decorum got in the way of a job.

The alligator's mug was empty again, as was the pitcher. He stood to mindlessly retrieve more, squeezing his bulging middle against the edge of the table in the process.

"*Bworrriiiiiiiiiii!*" The thunderous burp startled Conway out of his stupor. The weight in his belly was now impossible to ignore, and he glared at his gut when he saw how much rounder than normal it was. "What did the damn clerics put into this beer?" he snarled.

One by one, the others became aware of their own indulgences, and the indulgences of a fair number of the Brewers Guild members around them.

"Was it a—*buh-urrrp*—bad batch?" Vid belched. The flamingo had drunk himself into having a round ball belly in jarring contrast to his lanky frame.

"It didn't taste bad," Tavo said. The viper's eyes were glued to his modestly puffed-up middle, which he poked and prodded.

"Sometimes you don't know a drink's bad until you're hurling your guts out an hour later. Or ballooning out of control." Conway placed his palms on his belly but didn't feel his belly push back. At least he wasn't inflating.

"How did we not notice?" Aldric mumbled. He was as intently focused on his middle as Tavo, though Conway guessed their reasons differed vastly. He furrowed his brows. "I sense weak traces of the spell. I can't be certain if that's just from being around the victims for most of the day or because of the beer, though."

Mira and Vid followed their master's lead. Vid's talons wavered, and he expended as much effort keeping himself steady as concentrating. Mira fared better but couldn't confirm a reading any clearer than Aldric's.

"Something else to keep an eye on," Aldric said.

As casual as the caribou's tone was, the confusion on his face sparked worry in Conway. The last thing they needed was another mystery, especially one that got them aimlessly chugging beer to such an absurd degree.