

## **The Cleric's Euphoria: Chapter 07**

By: Indigo Rho

Dinner disappointed Tonic. He thought access to expensive ingredients and spices would inspire him, but the dishes he put together were identical to everything he'd cooked at the sanctuary. The food somehow managed to look worse, sitting atop silver plates rather than wood. Still, the dishes tasted fine, so the endeavor hadn't been a complete waste.

Tonic carried dinner into the warmly lit hall. A pristine glow globe hung from the center of the ceiling, framed by an intricate silver encasing that resembled the sun with its outstretched rays of light. Dark blue paint and strategic splotches of white created the appearance of a starry night sky above. Tapestries depicting scenes of hunts and battles covered the walls. Two portraits flanked the hearth. On the left, a unicorn in plate armor stood before a table, pointing at a spot on a map while looking sternly at the viewer. On the right, the same unicorn wore an elaborate rendition of the robes of the clerics of Edmir, accented by heraldry of a mace overlapping a mug. Rows of barrels were arranged behind him, and he held a bundle of hops in his hand.

The unicorn from the portraits sat behind the table in a wooden chair with a plush cushion. Roland retained but a hint of resemblance to the young, proud man painted upon the canvases. Time and unfortunate circumstances had softened him around the face and middle, giving him a doughy belly that filled his lap and a round rump that filled his seat. His mane was unbraided and messy, with a few thin streaks of gray as he entered the middle of this fifth decade. His right leg ended in a silver peg below the knee.

Tonic placed dinner on the table before Roland. "I fear I may have wasted your pantry on this."

Roland offered a slight smile. "Food's only wasted if it's dumped on the ground. And at least you can cook." The unicorn exhaled and slumped into his chair. "I never bothered learning. Though it's not like I'd be able to make my way around a kitchen nowadays."

"I'm sure you'd manage after some practice," Tonic said as he quickly returned to the kitchen and retrieved food for himself. He eschewed tradition and sat on a stool directly across from Roland. Manners be damned, they needed to talk. "You should've kept more than a single servant, friend."

"Martel graciously handles all my needs," Roland replied between bites. "And don't sell yourself short, the food's good."

"Thank you, but you're usually more subtle about changing the conversation."

“Which is how you should know it’s a compliment.” Roland paused, on the cusp of guzzling his wine. “Unless you were joking. Maybe I’m finally too old for your jokes.”

“Another reason you should have other servants to help when Martel’s away.”

“Martel is rarely away. You simply happened upon unusual circumstances.”

“I happened upon dust, a sparse pantry, and a man in dire need of a bath.” Tonic had spent a busy evening doing his best to bring order to Roland’s townhome.

“Why worry about dust when I never host people?” Roland scoffed. “But I thank you again for the bath. That’s about the only thing I can’t do on my own, either here or at a public bathhouse. The leg...complicates things.”

“And what about the pantry?” Tonic pressed.

“By the grace of the gods, I am surrounded by a veritable blockade of taverns, wine bars, and cookshops, all of which have the audacity to be excellent. I can visit a different one for breakfast, lunch, and dinner every day and not run out of options for weeks. Saves me the trouble of dealing with the market or cooking while Martel’s away, even if I can feel the strain it’s causing on my trousers and tunics.” Roland glanced at his belly with more apathy than disdain.

Tonic had only known Roland fat, but the unicorn’s face *had* seemed a little fuller since they’d last had the chance to chat a couple of months back. “If you’re concerned about outgrowing your wardrobe, then perhaps a second servant is in order.”

“Martel barely has enough to do as-is. If I hired on another servant, I’d be paying them to be bored out of their damned mind. I won’t deny the convenience of help, but I tire of always having someone around wanting to do everything for me. I can’t sit up without Martel hurrying over to offer assistance. If I dare cough once, he’ll check the medicine chest and ask if I need a doctor brought over. I have to be careful how I look at things, lest he assume I’m displeased and try to fix what is in no need of fixing.”

Tonic heard the steady tapping of Roland’s peg leg. “He means well, he really does, but the lack of privacy is the reason I live here rather than at one of the manors. A single servant is far more preferable to a whole army of them.” The unicorn shifted the food on his plate, thinking long before his next bite. “I miss when things were simpler, when all I had was a squire who fought by my side in battle and tournament. Someone who was as much a friend as an aide. So much has changed, Tonic.” He shook his head.

“Change is something we’ll never escape. Sometimes, it gives us fair warning, as if daring us to try and evade it. Other times, it just grabs us from

behind and leaves us a mess.” Tonic had lost Nance so fast that he wasn’t sure she’d even heard him say goodbye. “But if there’s one thing about you that hasn’t changed, Roland, it’s your kindness. You’re the most generous person I know.”

The unicorn burst into belly-shaking laughter. “You shower me in undeserved flattery. I’m only generous because I have nothing else to spend my wealth on.”

“That’s not true, Roland.” Tonic nibbled at his meal, barely touching it. His mind was in a million different places, and he could hardly focus on one thing at a time.

“You deny the fortune I’ve stumbled into?” Roland stared incredulously at his friend. “Scattered acres of fields, herds, and vineyards. At least a dozen rural breweries, all of which are prospering. Did you know I apparently own the tolls on three bridges? I have more property than I know what to do with, and I came into it all through blind luck and the misfortune of others. There was a point where it felt like every other month, a distant relative I’d never heard of died and left their inheritance to me. I’ve told you before how much my family feuded with each other.”

“So much so that you left home to become a squire the day of your eighteenth birthday,” Tonic said. Getting that story out of the unicorn had required a few years and a great deal of liquor.

“Exactly. They argued over the littlest things and held grudges as immovable as mountains. I didn’t get involved, so they hated me the least. I’m sure some gave me their lands entirely to spite others in the family. At least one tried to have me killed before I made it known everything I owned would go to various sanctuaries of Edmir upon my death.” Roland smirked as he looked into the depths of his wine goblet. “They left me alone after that.”

“We do not choose our families. Sometimes, the best you can do is cut ties so they don’t drag you down with them, as you did.” Talking to Roland always made Tonic appreciate his family more. He would need to leave letters for them before the end. “And you’ve used their spite for good causes.”

“Again, because I’ve had nothing else to spend it on since losing half a leg.” Roland stopped eating. “No money for tournament armor and lances because I need a cane to keep my balance. No lavish tours of my many estates because my leg aches during long trips on horseback. No falcons or hounds because the hunt leaves me panting and craving bed before the quarry’s cornered. If you plan on growing old, Tonic, try not to lose a limb along the way.” He croaked out a hoarse, one-note laugh.

“You can try and paint yourself as a villain all you want, but I don’t believe for a second that your leg is the only reason you haven’t squandered your wealth on luxuries.” They’d had the conversation before, usually when the pain was

getting to Roland, or when he'd had a bit too much to drink. "You've personally delivered every gracious gift you've given our sanctuary. Whenever you notice us enduring even the slightest hardship, you have Martel arrange for it to be handled. And these aren't public improvements you slap your name on for all to see. They're better beds, roof repairs, stronger glow globes, and expensive brewing equipment. You're the reason our sanctuary thrives despite Edmir not being a patron deity of the city. Not even the Brewers Guild does as much for us as you.

"And you're kind. Most people in your position pay no attention to people like me. You're not merely a patron, you're a friend. You were there for me when Nance passed." Tonic gave up on eating his food.

"Few have brought me as much joy as you and Nance. You refused to leave me alone when I wallowed, like now. Of course I repaid the favor."

"Proof you're a good person who shouldn't forsake contact like a hermit. Maybe you should've accepted Grand Cleric Tolly's offers to join the sanctuary." Though if the unicorn had, he'd be wobbling in a state of swollen bliss like all the others right now, and Tonic would be seeking shelter somewhere cold and unfamiliar.

"As a former grand cleric myself, joining the sanctuary would be awkward in so many ways. I've too many opinions on the way a sanctuary should be run, and my wealth would give me the sort of sway Tolly wouldn't be able to ignore. He doesn't deserve to deal with that."

"How different could your ways be from Tolly's? You'd both have the sanctuary's best interests in mind." Tonic nudged Roland along to a greater extent than ever before. However his plan went, he doubted he'd be around anymore to offer companionship to his friend, and wanted the sanctuary to fill that void.

A slight smile returned to Roland's face, the sort that preceded him lecturing Tonic on his youthful naivete. "Edmir's sanctuaries lack official guidelines. No book or decree tells us how to organize the clerics, brew the beers for rituals and profit, or even conduct the sacrifices and feasts. We have ancient suggestions that have transformed into traditions, which vary considerably from place to place. You'd struggle to recognize the rituals of rural sanctuaries or rituals at sanctuaries in cities where Edmir is an uncontested patron deity. I served as the grand cleric in a sanctuary attached to a castle, where nearly every cleric was a knight from a noble family. I sincerely doubt Tolly has had to break up as many armed melees in his life as I had to in the average month."

"There've been scuffles. Though I believe the worst involved a mallet, not a blade." And resulted in three clerics inflated with beer for two days straight to discourage future disputes.

“Consider yourself blessed.” Roland laughed but soon grew solemn again. The peg leg tapped. “Speaking of which: while I was grabbing too many meat pies for lunch, I heard a concerning rumor there was an incident at the sanctuary today.”

Tonic broke eye contact with Roland for a moment but didn’t say a word.

“I once let slip to the shop owner that I was a cleric of Edmir, so she always tries to start conversations with me about Edmir. Anyway, she told me all the clerics at the sanctuary were found inflated with beer, that some strange new form of permanent berrification might be involved.” Roland stared at Tonic, more alert than he’d been all night. Age and weight hadn’t impaired his intensity. “Sounded like nonsense to me.”

“You know how rumors are.” Tonic hadn’t expected word of the incident to reach Roland so swiftly. He’d wanted to explain himself on his own terms.

Roland nodded. “But on the way home, I overheard others mentioning the sanctuary. A whole lot of different things that contradicted each other, but it all came down to something bad having to do with inflation. I admit I was actually considering visiting the sanctuary myself to learn the truth right before you showed up at my doorstep, safe and not the least bit inflated. I was relieved but confused. You didn’t bring me news of a disaster; you fretted about the state of my home and ran errands for me. That’s not the behavior of someone who just dodged being blimped up.”

“Not that I wouldn’t mind swelling right now.” Balloons had few obligations or worries.

Roland didn’t laugh or even smirk. “I was going to add that you’re behaving like someone desperate to distract themselves from something important. You’re certainly not inflated, but what about the rest of the clerics?”

No more evading. No more time to think. Tonic’s only option was to tell the truth. “The rumors were right, to an extent. Everyone else at the sanctuary is inflated.”

“Still inflated?”

“Yes. I can’t imagine anyone figured out how to deflate them yet.” Tonic had left behind a baffling scene of euphoric, sloshing spheres with no witnesses and hopefully no obvious motive. Confusion would be his greatest weapon going forward.

Roland exhaled. “What have you gotten yourself into, Tonic?” Roland’s tone reminded Tonic of his parents’ lectures about skipping out on work, the kind that got the young rabbit nodding and swearing he’d do better.

“I’m giving people joy, Roland,” Tonic replied after a stretch of silence.

The unicorn blinked and cocked his head at Tonic.

“There’s not enough joy in Bexley. There’s not enough joy in the world in general. Everyone here worships deities who promise to make them happy through some form of exchange. Praise a deity’s heroics in battle, and they might aid in your victory. Make regular sacrifices at a deity’s sanctuary, and they might nudge you towards a prosperous business deal. Toast a deity at every meal and public occasion, and they might influence your quest to obtain a prestigious title. It’s a gamble in every instance, as there’s a chance the joy you crave will come at the expense of others. Only one side can win a battle, only one merchant can secure a monopoly, and only one candidate can fill each influential post. Unwittingly or not, we’re forced to pray for others to suffer so that we may feel joy.”

“That’s the nature of divinity. The deities we bargain with for a better life were all once mortals who ascended by obsessively embracing an ideal until those around them couldn’t help but praise and worship them. They’re unrivaled in their domain, so they occasionally reward the most devout with gifts related to that domain. Edmir witnesses brewers devoted to perfecting their craft and gives approval by whispering advice only they can hear. But he can also witness a tavern keeper get away with watering down their brew for years and lure them into a situation where they’re finally caught and filled to the brim for the public to judge.” Roland brought his goblet to his lips but put it down without taking a sip. “I suppose it’d be difficult for someone to ascend simply by being the happiest person alive. We compliment those who keep a positive attitude but rarely devote a cult to them solely because of that.”

“Which is exactly why we need a deity devoted to joy in its purest, unconditional form. Not one who gives you something that might give joy, but joy itself. Someone to pray to when the entire world proves overwhelming for either no reason or too many reasons to count. Someone who can’t fill the void that drained your happiness but can give you a spark of joy to help you move on and recover.” Divine intervention when even the best efforts of friends and loved ones failed. The help Tonic had so desperately needed in the immediate months after Nance’s death.

“A noble dream, for sure. But what exactly does that have to do with a sanctuary of sloshed, inflated clerics? I know inflation brought me quite a lot of joy when I was younger and prone to pranking my peers in childish ways.” Roland’s smile flashed again briefly. “And having a belly swollen with beer can be delightful, at least until you have to experience the hangover the next morning. What am I missing, Tonic?”

“I’m sorry. I intended to tell you everything gradually, and I’ve never been the best at adjusting to situations on the fly. I’m the one who always stumbles during performances when something unexpected happens.” At least awkward

moments tended to make the audience smile more than boo. “Over a year ago, another cleric and I accidentally combined magic in a manner that inflated us into a state of utter bliss. Words can’t describe the feeling, Roland. It was happiness in its rawest form, independent from any inciting cause. Happiness for happiness’ sake. The rest of the world faded, and all that remained was ecstasy. That feeling remained vibrant and all-encompassing until the second we deflated.”

“I’ve seen people fall into a pressure daze or get giddy about inflating, but I’ve never heard of such a drawn-out and extreme euphoria before,” Roland said.

“It’s wonderful. I couldn’t stop thinking about it for weeks afterward.” In Tonic’s dreams, he swelled, growing as round as a ball and radiating glee. He’d woken each morning grasping for the fleeting joy and wishing he’d remained asleep a little longer. “But recreating the experience was complicated, and trying to find a solution got me thinking about how few would be able to enjoy it and how limited our prayers for happiness can be. That’s when I realized the need for a deity who grants joy to everyone, everywhere.”

Roland studied Tonic in a way the rabbit had never seen before, hiding his thoughts with a straight, unemotional face. “Well, that’s a lovely concept, but I can’t think of a single deity with that broad and generalized a reach. You said it yourself: no deity focuses exclusively on unconditional joy.”

“Which is why we’ll need a new deity: me.”

A laugh escaped Roland’s lips. Then another, and another, until the unicorn went into a coughing fit. He quelled the coughs with a deep gulp of wine, then stared back at Tonic, his smile fading. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

Tonic had expected laughter and doubt. They were the sane responses to any proposal as outlandish as his. He’d spent hours going over how he’d explain himself to Roland and anyone else who might aid in his cause. “I swear to you I’ve thought this through. Devotion is the main path to ascension. Faith can empower someone to become a deity with enough prayers, sacrifices, and worship.”

“There’s a reason mortals aren’t ascending left and right,” Roland said. “Even the most charismatic leaders tend to die before they obtain a fraction of that devotion. Sometimes, they’re torn apart by the spark of divinity ignited within them by worship. Sometimes, they’re just plain torn apart. Demigods heading towards ascension tend to make enemies. Tonic, you’re my friend, but I can’t possibly see you succeeding where legendary heroes, conquerors, and saints have failed. You’re passionate, I’ll give you that, but we all have our limits.”

“I won’t deny that. Which is why I’m going to cheat.” Tonic stood and picked up his mandolin, which he’d left on a bench by the wall. The rabbit moved

Roland's dishes and placed the instrument on the table before him. "Feel this, and you'll begin to understand."

Roland placed a hand on the mandolin. His eyes widened. He grasped the instrument in both hands in disbelief. "You never told me the Sanctuary of Edmir had a divine instrument. Edmir tends to leave the music to others."

"The sanctuary didn't have a divine instrument before today. I made it." A fact that continued to astonish Tonic. He'd turned one dream into reality. Now, he had to take it a step further.

Roland shook his head and scoffed. "People don't go around making relics like this from scratch, at least not anymore."

"I didn't quite make it from scratch. I cannibalized other relics for materials. The sanctuary only bothers taking inventory of its relics and treasures once a year, and it wasn't difficult for me to get myself charged with the most recent one. It's a chore most of my fellows disdain, and I'm...I'm trusted." Trusted enough to set his plan into motion without suspicion.

"Stealing relics and crafting one of your own. I never—*ever*—would've guessed you had it in you to do such a thing." There was an uneasy hint of pride in Roland's voice. "A relic of this caliber is damn near priceless; you could sell it for an unbelievable fortune. Congratulations on being the wealthiest person in Bexley."

Selling the mandolin had never crossed Tonic's mind. "Unfortunately, it's not for sale."

Roland placed his hands on the mandolin and gave it his full attention. "The divine magic coming off this thing is in a state of constant flux. It's drawing in additional magic from elsewhere. How?"

"When I discovered the euphoria spell on accident, I also discovered that whoever is inflated by it directs an endless stream of praise and gratitude towards the source of their joy. They can't give thanks through words, so they give it through silent worship instead." Along with moans, giggles, and blissful gasps. "I used this mandolin to cast an enhanced version of the euphoria spell on everyone at the sanctuary. The strength of the relic should make deflating them a daunting challenge. For the time being, everyone I inflate with this mandolin will remain swollen and elated, gleefully worshiping the instrument nonstop."

"Which means the more people you inflate, the stronger the mandolin will become. Every one of your blimps will be devoted to nothing else but worship. They'll make even the most fanatical followers of Ventus look like apostates."

So Roland understood his plan and didn't immediately react with abject horror. Tonic knew his idea was born out of desperation, but if there was even the slightest chance he could succeed, then he needed to try. He owed it to all



those in dire need of a glimmer of happiness in their darkest times. People like Roland and him. “Blimp by blimp, worshiper by worshiper, I’ll transform myself into the god of joy. Either I’ll fall short and fail, or perform a miracle and make the world a better place at times.”

Roland gently placed the mandolin on the table and exhaled. “It’s a bold plan, Tonic, but it isn’t going to work.”

“I know it sounds impossible, but I have to try.”

“It *is* impossible. Even if you can manage the exponential growth of the mandolin’s divine magic, you’re only drawing in a fraction of the potential worship you could be getting. And of course, that worship is all going into the mandolin itself, not you. No inanimate object has ascended—yet.” *Tap. Tap. Tap.* “If we take the often dubious origin stories of deities as fact, the first step of ascension involves building a legend for yourself, followed by a period of informal hero worship, and finally formal, organized worship. Inflating everyone at a sanctuary will be the start of your legend, albeit as a vague topic of gossip as more of the city learns what happened. But they’ll be talking. And you’ve got balloons eager to blindly worship whoever’s giving them joy. What you lack is a firm connection between your swollen congregation and you. You need a dedicated cleric. I guess it’s a good thing you know one with nothing better to do.”

Tonic let the offer set in before he smiled. “I’m honored, but I’d fear for your safety. Regardless of my intentions, my methods are unlikely to earn me much in the way of praise outside of my victims. If you speak out in favor of my rampant blimping, you’ll just be investigated, maybe even punished.”

“It’s not like I’ll be building a sanctuary or preaching to the masses about the would-be god turning people into giddy balloons,” Roland snorted. The unicorn was beginning to relax again. “I’m going to assume the rest of the sanctuary’s clerics aren’t willing participants in your plan?”

“Regrettably, no.”

“Well then, I’ll be the lone, completely willing balloon among your worshipers, the one guiding their devotion towards the proper source rather than simply an incredibly well-crafted instrument.” Roland leaned back in his chair. He brushed a wild strand of his mane away from his face. “I didn’t think I’d ever hold a grand cleric position again, let alone under such ridiculous circumstances. Fate’s a strange thing.”

“Are you *sure* you’re fine with inflating while I try to ascend? I’ve no idea how long that’ll take, and there’s no guarantee of success. You might endure it all for nothing.” Tonic didn’t care if he let himself down in his quest to bring joy, but the thought of bringing a friend like Roland down with him was distressing.

Roland shrugged. "I've taken plenty of bets before on things that weren't a guaranteed success. Getting away from my damned family, for one. Not to mention more split-second decisions on the battlefield than I'd like to admit." He looked at the portrait by the hearth of his younger self in armor. "Sometimes, it saved the lives of friends. One time, it cost me half a leg. If your plan works, I'll become the first grand cleric of the god of joy and get to boast about how I knew you before you ascended beyond your mortal coil. If it all falls apart, then I'll apparently enjoy a blissful vacation."

"I have no words, Roland. I originally came here merely hoping to seek sanctuary while I worked."

"I suppose you would've been forced to inflate me if I'd said no?" Roland asked.

"Yes." He wouldn't lie to the friend giving him so much. He'd lied enough already to friends like Karl and Tolly.

"Good." Roland hefted himself out of his chair, picked up his cane, and carefully made his way over to Tonic. "That proves you're dedicated to this wild dream of yours. Leaving a trail of balloons that can't deflate will eventually get most of the city after you, and your only ally will be immobilized. Be prepared to convert any and all who try to stop you into zealous worshipers. You can also do me a favor and watch my home while I work." He thumped his cane twice on the floor. "Well, no time like the present. Work your magic, god of joy."

"Already?" Tonic had wanted to spend at least another day with his friend before inflation separated them again, perhaps forever. He truly would be all alone once Roland ballooned. No one to drink with. No one to talk with. No one to worry with.

"At the moment, Tonic, you have the advantage in this scheme of yours. Even if anyone knows you're to blame for the incident at the sanctuary, it's doubtful they know your motives. When you catch an opponent off-guard in an ambush, you don't give them time to recover, you push forward with your advantage." Roland patted Tonic on the shoulder with his free hand. "Besides, I'm unsure how long it'll take me to adjust to my new condition. I may very well need all night to figure shit out. Oh, and if Martel happens to return early, just apologize and inflate him. I'll take the blame for it."

"Hopefully it won't come to that."

"Trust me, he could use the break."

Tonic cleared and put away the table, giving Roland plenty of room to expand. The unicorn positioned himself in the center of the hall with a clear view of the portraits of his glory days. Tonic stood before him, mandolin in hand.

"Are you ready?"

Roland nodded. "Good luck, friend. I'll do my best to support you."

“And I’ll do my best to live up to your expectations.”

With Roland as a willing participant, Tonic did not need to mesmerize the unicorn. He played a cheerful song worthy of a night at the tavern, directing his full attention on the wine in Roland’s stomach. All forms of alcohol reacted to Tonic’s magic, and soon, the wine was steadily reproducing, endowed with the divine.

“I’d almost forgotten the sensation of stretching hide,” Roland said as he looked upon his ballooning belly. “My clothes haven’t fit this comfortably in years, and I’ve already grown a foot in diameter. Including an enchantment that stretches clothing is a nice touch.”

“Anything to make the experience as pleasant as possible, considering not everyone enjoys inflation.” Tonic thought it a shame so many denied themselves a source of joy simply because it could be seen as embarrassing.

Roland widened his gait a little as his hips puffed out. “I’m curious, how did the others respond to your swell song, considering they weren’t as willing as me?”

“Bardic magic, naturally. After we finished the sacrificial feast, I calmed them with my music so they wouldn’t worry about inflating.” Tonic wasn’t sure he could’ve gone through with it if there’d been a panic. The shock of betrayal on his fellow clerics’ faces would’ve been too much.

“You’re a saint compared to me, Tonic. Back when I used to inflate others for fun, I reveled in the chaos I caused. People would shout and try to wobble away. If they knew I was to blame, they’d pelt me with curses and anything else at hand.” Roland’s grin widened, and he shuddered. “I think I just felt the start of that bliss you promised.”

Roland held his arms out as they puffed up, standing as still as possible. Tonic was ready to swoop in if his friend’s peg leg failed him and he fell over, but Roland maintained excellent balance even without his cane.

“Have I ever inflated with wine?” Roland giggled. His tail flicked about behind him, smacking against his swelling rump. “No. Grape juice, once, but that doesn’t count. Damn, Tonic, you weren’t kidding. This is...this is wonderful. It’s like the rush I used to get racing after a quarry during a hunt, with howls of hounds and thunderous bellows of horns echoing through the woods. Like floating in a cool pond in summer with the sun on my chest and my mane bobbing in the water. Like the time I turned all the squires at a castle into berries once I found out they were the ones stealing the wine.” The unicorn’s eyes watered, and he let out a euphoric whinny.

Tonic watched his friend’s limbs sink into his ballooning body one by one until even his peg leg was a small silver nub jutting out of a divet. Roland wiggled

and wobbled in ecstasy just like the others at the sanctuary had that morning, welcoming the unrelenting joy offered by Tonic.

The music slowly came to an end, replaced by Roland's moans.

Tonic placed a paw on Roland's swollen side. "I don't know if you'll be able to overcome the bliss, but I'll take comfort in seeing you happy."

"Praise," Roland gasped. "Him."

Tonic stumbled back upon hearing the balloon speak. None of the others had said anything coherent. He cleared his head and focused on the magic around him. A steady flow traveled from Roland to the mandolin, then pulsed outward like the flame of a candle flickering in a breeze. Little by little, the magic originating from the earlier balloons intensified until it felt as if he'd inflated dozens more people.

"Roland was right," Tonic muttered in awe as he felt his mandolin's power grow. "Thank you," he told his spherical friend, unsure if anything he said would breach the bliss enveloping the unicorn.

The magic in the mandolin changed once more. It struck Tonic, and the rabbit jolted as pure joy came over him. His flat middle swelled, not with beer or wine, but with divine mana. He breathed with staggered huffs, finally getting another taste of the wondrous magical joy after what had felt like a decade-long year.

"More," he whined, barely holding onto the mandolin. "Please, more."

Tonic's belly expanded bigger and rounder, wobbling with volatile mana. He stumbled about, swelling faster than the balloons he'd made that morning. Inevitably, the rabbit lost his balance and rolled onto his back, moaning and wiggling. His paws sunk into his body while his head just barely remained in view.

Giving in to the magic would've been easy. He could've just let himself get caught up in the flow and filled to the brim with bliss. But a strange sensation accompanied the mana, rattling him like a distant shout.

*Focus!*

Tonic clenched his eyes shut and followed the phantom instructions. He took the mana in deeper, letting it soak into his body rather than build up in his belly. The swelling slowed to a crawl, then reversed a little as Tonic took control of his impulses and properly absorbed the bounty of worship from his small congregation. His paws surfaced again, though he remained mostly spherical. He panted, gradually understanding better than ever the potential Roland had talked about.

The plan Tonic had labored at for over a year had gone from a dream to reality in the span of a single day. Doubts remained, but not nearly as many as he'd had when he'd descended into the sanctuary cellar with Karl to check on

the mandolin that morning. He *would* become a god, even if all of Bexley tried to oppose him.