

Mana Incense

By: Indigo Rho

Early afternoon light poured in through a row of windows along one side of the round room. The rays warmed the stone floor and fell upon the leaves and flowers of the room's many plants. Vines grew around shelves and up the walls, neatly pruned and guided to serve as a decorative accent rather than simple overgrowth.

Savio had worked hard to bring what he considered to be a proper amount of nature into his workspace. Aesthetically pleasing, occasionally practical, and—most importantly of all—entirely under his control.

The gila monster examined a cluster of freshly-bloomed pink blossoms on a vine. Violet eyes stared from behind round glasses, looking for faults. He found none and nodded in approval. In contrast to most druids, he took a very academic approach to nature magic. He appreciated the wilderness as a source of ingredients first and foremost, preferring walks through orderly gardens to scrambles through thick underbrush.

Besides, trips into the wilds always wreaked havoc on his nice clothes, and he'd torn too many vests on branches to count.

Savio walked over to a wooden table only slightly nicked by use. He couldn't stand working sloppily, which was the reason he rarely worked alongside others. Well, one of the many reasons. Few had the intellect and dedication necessary to earn his respect. Though he took pride in being more knowledgeable than the bulk of his peers, teaching them was exhausting. So when possible, he worked alone, and didn't feel worse off because of it.

He placed two books on the table. One was an utter mess, poorly rebound with cord. The two-century-old tome looked like it'd been crushed in the past. None of the pages were aligned anymore and many were torn. The writings within were somehow even less organized. There weren't dedicated chapters. The text was rambling at its best and pointless excess at its worst, marred by spelling errors and whole sentences crossed out and restarted. It was supposed to be research, but felt more like a journal. To make matters worse, Savio had needed to translate the text, a slow and frustrating process he hadn't come close to finishing. And yet it could hold

the key to his most recent obsession.

For years, Savio had been researching methods to improve the potency of magic. Plenty of temporary boosts existed in the form of potions, herbs, spells, and divine prayers. Demonic pacts existed, too, but he hadn't gotten desperate enough to investigate them. He knew there must be a permanent solution, perhaps one that'd been forgotten over time or unjustly overlooked.

The damaged tome represented his most promising breakthrough. From what he'd managed to translate, the author had been investigating an incense that could empower mages. They'd recorded their numerous failures and commented on each one, though they often buried the details within rambling stories about their life. Savio didn't need to know about the time they'd been thrown out of a tavern for animating a keg or their obnoxious opinions on bards, he needed to know if their research had gone anywhere. And it had, if the most recently translated portion proved true.

Translating had only been the beginning. Savio had gathered the ingredients for the incense itself quite easily—they consisted mostly of common mana-infused plants along with a few used in cooking. Tracking down the specific enchanted censer to burn the incense in had been the real challenge. That alone had taken Savio over a year. It was made of clay from a continent on the other side of the world and about the size and shape of a melon. Only by happenstance had he found one in the possession of a visiting merchant. Now it sat on his desk with the special incense sitting inside.

Savio lifted the censer and hung it from a rope in the center of the room so that it was on level with his chin. If something went wrong, he wanted to be able to put plenty of space between himself and the smoke, no matter his condition. He lit the incense and placed his palm on the censer, repeating the magical phrase meant to draw out its power.

After a few seconds, pure white smoke swirled from the holes in the censer's lid. Savio waved the smoke towards his nostrils and breathed in deep. It lacked the pungent, floral aroma he'd expected from the ingredients. Instead, it reminded him of being inside a bakery, of pastries just pulled from an oven. An effect of the censer's magic, he supposed. He was merely relieved it didn't reek.

A gentle warmth flowed through Savio's body as he breathed in more of the smoke. It relaxed him, blocking out distractions and the world around him. He focused on the mana within him, vigilant for any hint of change. He didn't have to wait long. He sensed the unseen pool of mana begin to swell like a bubbling spring, or a well replenishing in the rains. Mana potions had a similar effect, but the incense had a different, almost deeper feel to it.

Savio slipped a claw into his pocket and pulled out a single seed. Feelings could be deceptive, especially with magic involved. He needed proof the incense enhanced his abilities. He gestured with his other claw and spoke a simple, shortened spell, one of the oldest he knew. The seed wobbled and split open, revealing a tiny sprout. The sprout steadily grew, crawling across Savio's palm and over his fingers. Leaves unfurled from the thickening vine as months of growth sped by in seconds.

Normally, the technique was a little slower and required more mana. Savio nodded and halted the spell. He'd have to spend the rest of the day creating new vines at regular intervals to see if the empowerment remained or faded. A tedious task, but one he didn't mind as long as it resulted in success.

At least there weren't any side effects to the incense. Some concoctions caused exhaustion or nausea. The most popular mana potion in the city even made you hungry. Mages who relied on them heavily were easy to spot, their round bellies filling out robes. He'd never accept such a permanent burden for a merely temporary boost to his abilities.

A wave of discomfort needled the edges of his consciousness. He pushed it away instinctively, holding onto the warmth of the incense. It persisted, focused around his middle. His vest felt tight, as if it had suddenly become two sizes too small for him. He looked down and dropped the vine in shock. His chubby paunch had swollen into a plump ball. Strained vest buttons struggled to hold together, wide gaps exposing the shirt below.

The weakened buttons burst off all at once and clattered across the stone floor. His belly ballooned out once free of the restrictive vest and wobbled from side to side. His shirt rode up, saving it from getting ripped along the seams.

Savio let out an annoyed huff, having spoken too soon. There were worse side effects than bloating but few as embarrassing. He was a

researcher, not a balloon. When he placed his fingers on his middle to survey the damage, though, they sunk in a little. He wasn't inflating, he was growing fatter. A *lot* fatter. The tightness spread to the sleeves of his shirt and pants as he thickened all over. He felt a heavier sway to his large tail behind him. His entire body puffed up like dough in an oven.

The gila monster blushed before shaking himself out of the flustered daze. He stumbled over to his desk, not used to the extra weight, and quickly snatched a cup of water. He returned to the censer and doused it. The white smoke dispersed, followed shortly after by the warmth. His gains ceased almost immediately.

No longer in danger of fattening up, Savio headed to a standing mirror. He grimaced at how his new gut jiggled and didn't stop once he reached the mirror. Unsurprisingly, no inch of him had been spared the gains. His pants clung to his rump and thighs. His fat tail had torn the fabric around the tail hole in the pants. He tapped the surface of his globe-like belly, scowling at every faint ripple.

Far fatter mages lived in the city, but Savio had no desire to be doughy. He saw excess weight as an inconvenience and a distraction. But if the effects of the incense proved permanent, the weight would be worth it. And if they weren't, then his belly might not be either. While failure would've been better for his waistline, the hit to his ego would've been worse.

Savio took a deep breath and flattened his scowl. He couldn't fret over the negative effects of the incense, there was work to be done.

He took a seat and continued work on the translation of the tome. He couldn't completely shake the distractions of his new weight. His belly inevitably pressed up against the edge of the table, no matter how far he scooted his stool back. Looking down at the tome, he felt his chin press against his softer neck. And as he shifted in his seat, his rounder ass was undeniable.

At regular intervals, he stopped to check on his mana and nurture another seed. The second grew as well as the first had, and he sensed no noticeable difference in the third and fourth, either. The fresh translation detailed the aftermath of the writer's first experiment with the incense. They rambled on worse than usual but expressed clear excitement over the

success. They too had gained weight, allegedly doubling in size. It didn't bother them in the least. They laughed off the concerns of their assistants and gloated about how much better their ability to animate objects had become.

Savio lacked the writer's apathy about the gains, but the matter was insignificant compared to the power he'd permanently obtained. Weight could be lost. He ate in moderation and wasn't adverse to vigorous strolls. He'd shed the pounds in due time while keeping every ounce of power. The gila monster smirked. A brilliant future awaited him, one a few extra pounds couldn't tarnish.

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The rhythmic tapping of claws on wood echoed throughout the room. Savio looked between the tome and his transcription one line at a time in search of mistakes. The entry had been dense with technical terms and shorthand but he believed he'd parsed it well enough. The writer had exposed themselves to the incense again, gaining a significant amount of weight and power in the process. They boasted of casting spells with four times the strength they had originally. They laughed about being four times the person they had been, too, and wasted Savio's time with a pointless story about getting stuck in a doorway for half a day before their assistants had freed them.

Savio scoffed at the very idea. And yet he couldn't stop thinking about the immense power the writer had acquired while becoming a doughy mockery of themselves.

In the month since he'd used the incense, his own power hadn't dwindled, but neither had his waistline. He'd gotten a bit fatter, in fact, mainly thanks to his increase in appetite. And since he'd been able to tackle new projects with renewed vigor, he hadn't found the time for walks like he'd used to. A stroll in the garden was time better spent reading or experimenting.

Adjusting to his new weight hadn't taken long. He barely noticed how he jiggled anymore and purchasing larger clothing had been a simple matter. The tailor had given him an odd look when he'd abruptly appeared far

rounder than ever, and feeling the measuring string wrap around his middle had made him pout, but within days he was better dressed than the majority of his colleagues.

Naturally, they had spoken of the changes behind his back, as if gaining a few dozen pounds had impaired his hearing the same as his stride. Sharp glares and a thump of his thick tail had put an end to that. Not that he particularly cared what they thought.

The incense had performed excellently, despite the hefty consequences that'd come with it, but Savio couldn't shake the feeling he hadn't gotten enough out of it. He was sure another boost would raise him far above his so-called peers. If he had to get fat to accomplish that, then so be it.

Savio once again found himself standing before the hanging censer. He wore clothes so loose he felt lost in them. They represented the limit of his ambition. He would allow himself to gain until they fit but would go no further. Imagining his belly expanding to fill out the massive pants made him blush with shame, but he reminded himself of the power that came with it. Any who mocked his weight would be buried in vines until they apologized.

He lit the incense without hesitation and smoke poured forth. He basked in the warmth and the swell of mana. When his belly inevitably began to balloon and wobble he didn't let it ruin his triumphant moment. The accumulating pounds were a means to an end, one he could deal with at his leisure later.

Beneath the loose fabric of his new clothes, Savio's body eagerly swelled to provide the power he craved. His arms puffed up like pillows and his rump like a cushion. His gut grew in every direction, sluggishly spilling over his waistline. His love handles turned into heavy rolls. Behind him, his tail swung less and less, weighed down by pudge as much as the rest of him.

Fat pushed against fabric and creases began to smooth out. The clothes that had been draped over him like a sheet now fit as if tailor-made. Pants, shirt, and vest clung to every roll of his body. The curve of his rump and the bulge of his belly were highlighted, not hidden. Large cheeks pressed against his snout, dimpled by a smug grin. The gila monster had grown nearly as wide as he was tall, round from every angle.

The buttons of his vest creaked as small gaps formed between them.

The belt around his waist sunk faintly into his blubbery waist. All gaps between fabric and scale vanished. Savio paid no heed to the tightening of his outfit, his promise forgotten.

He held out a thick claw and funneled mana into the seed sitting on it. The seed burst open and a vine surged out, growing ten feet in seconds. He cackled. Before the incense, such a feat would've required a sizable portion of his mana. Now he could pull it off casually, almost without thought. A little more power and he'd be unequaled among the city's mages.

A bursting button shook Savio free of his fantasy. He gazed upon his heavy chest and belly with dismay. The blubber dared to mar his ascension and sour his mood. But as much as he wanted to ignore it, he couldn't achieve greatness without his mobility. "I'm going to hunt down every tome on weight loss magic I can find after this," he grumbled. "Then I'll be free to indulge in the incense as much as I please."

The journey to his desk proved surprisingly tiring. He lumbered, uncomfortably aware of how determined his gut was to drag him down. The gila was panting by the time he arrived. He misjudged his new girth and bumped the table hard with his belly. The small cup of water he'd left on it fell over, spilling its contents on the floor.

"Damn it!" Savio hissed. He needed the water to douse the censer and stop the gains. Furious at the precious time his clumsiness had wasted, he snatched the cup and waddled towards the basin to refill it. The rest of his vest buttons popped off one by one, scattering across the room. Seams started to tear.

The massive gila monster's jaw hung open as he fought to catch his breath. He'd managed his old weight fine, but wasn't used to the ridiculous heft he'd piled on. His muscles ached as they tried to lift limbs twice as heavy as before. His huge tail became an anchor dragging behind him.

At the basin, he grunted as he bent over to refill the cup. A hole ripped in the rear of his pants and seams along his sleeves tore apart. His belly pushed back at him, leaving his claw hovering well over a foot above the water. A second try only blew open more seams.

"No no no!" he growled. He'd let the censer burn too long and had gained an unwieldy amount of weight. Moving was a challenge at best and impossible at worst. He dropped the cup in a fury and looked to the exit. His

only hope of escaping the smoke was to leave the room, but the doorway had always been narrow, especially lately. He feared he'd get stuck, just like the writer of the tome had. His gut would continue to grow and might even collapse the stone doorway down upon him.

He sluggishly turned to face the censer. If he could close the vents he could contain the smoke and let the incense burn itself out. He'd still be barely mobile and more belly than man, but at least he wouldn't get any fatter.

Savio lugged his enormous body to the censer. He was on the verge of collapse by the time he arrived. His blubbery arm shook as he reached for the censer. It felt like it was made of lead. He clenched his teeth and grunted as he poured all of his remaining energy into simply lifting his arm. It wasn't enough.

Suddenly lightheaded, Savio toppled backward onto his rump. The jiggling of his massive body shredded his clothes on impact. He made one attempt to stand, giving up seconds later.

Immobilized, Savio could do nothing but swell. He expanded outward in every direction. His belly steadily enveloped everything before him, spreading across the floor and against the row of windows. The window frames warped and the glass shattered, replaced by a wall of blubbery scales. Plants were flattened by his swelling love handles, while his rump crushed the water basin. His stool and the table collapsed under the weight of gila monster pudge. The binding of the old tome split apart, scattering the pages.

Savio felt himself press against every wall in the room at once and blushed a deep red. The smoke coming from the censer faded as the incense burnt out. His gains finally came to an end.

The immense gila monster sat in shock for a few minutes, barely able to comprehend his size. He could wiggle his fat fingers, but his arms had ballooned so big he couldn't move them at all. His thick neck prevented him from looking around much at all.

But when Savio examined his mana, he felt like he was looking into a vast ocean. The incense may have turned him into a blob, but it'd granted him astronomical power as well. Immobility would be worth it—it *had* to be. He'd find a way to take advantage of his power, even if could never move

again.

He nodded nervously. “Just a small setback,” he muttered, feeling his cheeks wobble as he spoke. He didn’t dare think of how he was going to get free of the room.