

The Cleric's Euphoria: Chapter 06

By: Indigo Rho

The sheer capacity for life to become worse threatened to drive Conway to madness. The alligator leaned against a wall of the Temple of Edmir, arms crossed, tail thumping the floor, waiting to be ordered around again like a servant. As a mercenary and wanderer, he was no stranger to following orders, but the orders he didn't mind were the ones that gave him a degree of flexibility. Deliver these goods. Protect me on my journey. Get me the money someone owes me. Pump someone up to remind them who's in charge. Reduce someone to scraps. Tasks that took time and let Conway handle business in his own way.

Laboring as an indentured assistant to an enchanter had yet to appeal to Conway. He was averse to consider it "laboring" at all. He'd spent the majority of the afternoon standing, waiting, and stewing in his boiling disdain for Bexley. A fucking city of blimps indeed.

Against the odds, Conway had gone from an annoying shortage of inflation to a dreadful overabundance of it. A whole sanctuary of clerics bloated with beer and moaning like they were having the time of their lives at a brothel, and no one had a clue as to who had done it or why. How could there *not* be an obvious motive for the absurdly outrageous attack? Someone had to know about the clerics engaging in questionable acts, or a group with a vocal vendetta against Edmir's sanctuary, or a divine spellcaster skilled enough to trap people in a state of blimpy bliss. Even Conway understood the basic concept of cause and effect.

Yet the incident at the sanctuary appeared to be a total mystery to the so-called authorities involved. Usually, Conway wouldn't care. Incompetence flourished at every level of society, from the petty criminals planning terrible heists to the monarchs planning idiotic military campaigns. Conway did his best to stay clear of both fools, but now he was chained to one with promises to balloon him if he didn't cooperate and little word on when his servitude would end.

The alligator lacked faith in the investigation. Certain individuals seemed devoted to solving the case, but the lack of trust was palpable. It reminded Conway of shadier jobs he'd accepted in the past, where everyone looked out for themselves first and foremost. They all inevitably ended in the same disastrous way, when someone found a way to either save their ass or make a shitload of money at the expense of everyone else. If guild politics dragged the investigation on indefinitely, he'd have to seriously consider finding an underworld enchanter competent enough to remove the boundary sigil.

Members of the Brewers Guild rolled one of the swollen victims away from the examination circles the enchanters worked at and out of the temple, heading

in a direction that led to the sanctuary's cloister. More victims were rolled off, forming a sloshing, giggling procession of spheres.

Aldric and his apprentices approached Conway from across the room as their patients were rolled off. Conway had yet to decide if he fully trusted the caribou's intentions. On one hand, Aldric was the only reason he wasn't sitting in a cell, fully inflated and wobbling in a fury. On the other, Aldric likely would've accepted help with the investigation from anyone and had the power to turn him over to the asshole Imbard whenever he pleased. Conway would have to keep an eye on him.

"We've decided to take a break from the investigation for the day," Aldric announced on arrival.

"Any good news?" Conway asked, though the beleaguered looks on the enchanters' faces answered his question already.

"Unfortunately, not." Aldric rubbed the tip of his antlers and looked at the balloons rolling nearby. Their sloshing echoed throughout the chamber nearly as loud as their moans. "We'll have to rest and look at it from a fresh angle in the morning." The hope in his voice was fleeting.

Tavo tracked every blimp as they were rolled away, his tail twitching erratically behind him. Their ecstasy didn't wane at all while rolling, despite the little spikes in pressure they should've felt. Fascinating. "What's going to happen with the victims, then?"

"The Brewers Guild will care for them until a way to reverse the spell is found. Master Veek is adamant that they're treated well, something I'm grateful for." Aldric turned away from the procession and sighed. "I don't envy his obligations. They make mine feel...manageable in comparison."

Tavo knew a wavering attempt at self-reassurance when he saw one. It was an important emotion to spot in a fight, when an opponent might only feign their confidence. The blue viper's thoughts swiftly drifted back to the balloons. They would be cared for, then. Perhaps even pampered. He bit his lip and tried not to imagine swelling then and there. He'd witnessed quite a few balloons getting waited on lately. There'd been the captive mana vessel on their last big job, who'd apparently been fed a lavish diet of food, drink, and mana. And now the clerics, who he expected to be indulged as well as the Brewers Guild could manage.

Both situations had their disadvantages, though. The mana vessel would've been popped if Tavo and Conway hadn't rescued him. Meanwhile, the clerics didn't seem the slightest bit aware of their surroundings or treatment, lost in the divine, liquor-fueled euphoria. Pampering didn't appeal to Tavo as much if he wasn't in a state of mind to enjoy it. It was like receiving a compliment while asleep. He couldn't deny the idea didn't remain somewhat tantalizing, though.

“Considering the innkeepers are currently indisposed, do you two have a place to stay?” Aldric asked.

Conway’s eyes widened. With everything that’d happened, he hadn’t thought about their living situation. “Fuck me.” The alligator resisted the urge to slam a fist on the wall behind him. He didn’t want to get glared at by the brewers again. As if his claws could cause any lasting damage to stone. “The innkeepers have got plenty of family members to keep the place running while they’re ballooned, but there’s no way we’ll be allowed to stay if we don’t have the time to work for our room and board anymore.”

“Our finances are also in dire straits since you insisted on paying off our debts today,” Tavo unhelpfully added. “I believe we have enough for a week’s stay, though that wouldn’t leave us anything for food and drink elsewhere.”

Conway snapped his tail at Tavo. “Don’t you dare try blaming me for this! How was I supposed to know our hosts would get themselves permanently blimped up right before they were supposed to pay us?” Why couldn’t the sanctuary attacker have waited a day—one damned day—to go on their inflation spree? Then he and Tavo could’ve shrugged and left as he’d originally intended. So much for Lady Luck being on their side.

“I simply think it was a bit risky for us to put ourselves into such a financial situation to begin with. I wonder if the brewers will allow us to stay at the sanctuary. We’re assisting with the investigation, after all, and there should be plenty of open beds, considering the clerics are currently too wide to fit in them.”

“I don’t want to give them any excuse to keep us cooped up in one place the whole time. Otherwise, we might as well accept the cell,” Conway grunted. He’d stay at the sanctuary if he had to—and if the brewers even allowed it—but he didn’t see it ending well. Putting up with the pushy brewers all day and night would drive him mad, and he couldn’t promise he wouldn’t humble one or two of them with a good swell.

“You could stay with me instead,” Aldric said. Mira and Vid looked as surprised as Conway and Tavo. “I have space in my attic for a mattress. A few trunks will need to be moved aside beforehand, but I’ve had guests sleep there without much complaint. Consider it payment for the work you’ll be helping me with.”

From one attic to another. But Conway knew the attic of a home would be more comfortable than the attack of a stable. At the very least, it’d smell less like shit. Though indebting himself to Aldric wasn’t ideal. He’d feel even more like a servant. Beggars couldn’t be choosers, not when the alternative was living off meager rations or whatever scraps the city gave balloons stuck in cells.

“Well, if you’re offering,” Conway said with reluctance.

“We’d be grateful,” Tavo said, worried Conway’s attitude might ruin a decent opportunity. Despite his partner’s frustrations, the pair had gotten lucky with shelter in Bexley. They weren’t holed up in a tilted boarding house that groaned in the night. They hadn’t been forced to cram into a packed inn room, either, where they might share a bed with two new strangers each night.

“Then let’s head home for now. We can drop by the inn where you two were staying and pick up your belongings. You don’t have horses or mules, do you?” Aldric asked. “My stable’s empty at the moment, and we’ll have to stock up on feed if you need to use it.”

Conway scoffed. “We don’t have the money to waste on them.” The last time they’d stumbled into having a donkey, they’d had to kill the unlucky beast for food after getting caught in a blizzard. He didn’t like getting attached to a potential meal.

Aldric simply nodded, and the group went on their way.

Conway welcomed the open air, though he could’ve done without the mob loitering outside the sanctuary. A gaggle of armed and armored Brewers Guild members served as uninspiring guards, angrily brushing aside the infrequent questions shouted their way. Half of the guards were as rotund as Aldric, sporting beer bellies cultivated from decades of guzzling their own handiwork. Some were likelier to fend off would-be intruders by popping a button than swinging a sword. Then again, larger foes had surprised Conway on occasion, and he’d had fools underestimate him because of his paunch.

The chatter in the small plaza was incessant and pointless. Everyone had a different idea as to what was going on in the sanctuary, and most were so distant from the truth that Conway couldn’t fathom how they’d come to their conclusions. There were rumors that Edmir’s clerics had brewed poisoned beer and were being detained before a public bursting. A ley line had opened beneath the sanctuary, and the city was trying to contain it. The Brewers Guild was allegedly taking over the sanctuary. Edmir himself had apparently filled a bunch of people with beer and given them visions of the future.

All the rumors got right was that people were inflated, and it was a big deal. Some semblance of the truth would gradually spread once members of the Brewers Guild shared eyewitness accounts.

“How do you think people will react when the truth gets out?” Tavo asked after they were away from the crowd. “The defilement of a sanctuary is never a good sign.” Riots would be an unwelcome complication to the investigation. Stirring up trouble might even be the reason the attackers inflated the clerics in the first place. They’d have to wait and see if the fires started.

“It’s not like the clerics were murdered,” Conway said. “They’re just blimped up with beer and incredibly happy. That’s practically a blessing as far as Edmir’s concerned.

“Inflating clerics in their own sanctuary and preventing them from deflating is still in bad taste. Surely Edmir won’t be pleased with that.”

“If he’s pissed, then let him smite the culprit and get this whole mess over with. That’d save us all a lot of time and trouble,” Conway said. “And if he’s not in the mood to strike someone down, he can just tell me who did it, and I’ll do the dirty work for him.”

“It’s not wise to invoke deities like that. You never know when they’re listening.” Tavo thought it best to keep such talk to offerings at shrines and sanctuaries. Not that he’d ever known someone who’d had contact with a deity before.

“I fear Edmir is likely to remain silent on this matter,” Aldric said. The caribou stayed in the middle of the group, allowing Conway and Tavo to lead the way to the inn. “As great an insult as this attack is, Edmir’s presence in Bexley is limited. The people primarily heap offerings on Ventus and Moldir, who each have massive sanctuaries dedicated to them. Their clerics hold a great deal of influence here. Edmir’s honored in the Brewers District and certainly receives toasts in taverns and inns across the city, but his festival is a relatively minor one. Deities aren’t prone to acting upon slights to small groups of clerics. As much as I would appreciate any divine aid, we’re on our own.”

Conway shrugged. “Probably for the best. Praise be to the deities and all that, but I prefer to deal with mortals.”

The workers holding down the fort at the Three Hooves Inn weren’t the sort of mortals Conway wanted to deal with, though. He was in and out as fast as he could manage, all while being barraged with obnoxious questions. They acted like he was holding back information about the condition of the innkeepers, despite the fact he knew jack shit. Then they had the gall to look relieved when he told them he was moving out while dealing with the investigation, as if they hadn’t actively sought his favor minutes before. He calmed himself by imagining them all wobbling and creaking. The pleasant thoughts stayed with him as Aldric led the way home.

Conway looked up at the four-story townhouse with approval. There were times when he forgot how well a mage could do for themselves if they had the patience for an apprenticeship. A sign depicting a glowing pair of crossed antlers hung outside the closed shop front. They filed into an entrance lit by glow globes.

“Mira. Vid. Please store our gear in the shop, then start on dinner.” Aldric commanded his apprentices firmly but not harshly. “I’ll join you shortly once I’ve shown our guests where they’ll be sleeping.”

“Of course, Master,” Mira answered for the both of them, and they slipped into the shop.

“You’ve trained your apprentices well,” Tavo said. The viper had gone through enough apprenticeships himself to recognize a competent master, and he liked what he saw of Aldric’s leadership. He trusted the caribou more because of that, which would make the investigation less stressful overall.

“They’re excellent learners. And I guess at this point, I’ve had enough experience teaching others to leave a positive impact on them.” Aldric headed up the stairs. “First floor is the shop. Hall and kitchen are on the second floor.” They didn’t linger, continuing upward. “Two bedrooms on the third floor. Mira and Vid share the spare room since my husband and I have no children of our own. It’s far more convenient than having them sleep in the shop itself, especially with how often we need to draw large enchanting circles on the floor down there.”

The stairs to the attic were narrower and steeper. Tavo foolishly considered how swiftly he’d become wedged if he inflated while heading up them and had to snatch his tail before it whipped about in a speculative frenzy.

Aldric tapped a glow globe at the top of the stairs, which flickered to life and added more light to the dim attic. Two small windows were on opposite walls of the attic, one facing the street, while the other faced the narrow yard between the townhouses. The only furniture was a desk and a stool positioned to receive the most of the limited light. Trunks filled half the attic.

“This is my husband’s space, more or less. He’s currently away and likely won’t return for months,” Aldric sighed, running a hoof along the dusty surface of the table. “A new mana font erupted along a ley line a few weeks ago, and the Enchanters Guild sent him to conduct a survey and check on its stability. The area where the font is sounds pretty, but he misses the comforts of the city.”

Conway and Tavo looked at each other, both thinking of their role in the incident that’d drawn Aldric’s husband away.

“Anyway, there should still be room for a mattress, and it’ll give you both a private space while you’re assigned to assist me. Is this acceptable to you?”

It was a silly comment, considering they’d lost having a choice in a fair number of matters since the city watch had decided they were criminals, but Conway appreciated the token civility. He was beginning to begrudgingly accept he’d made the right choice in accepting Aldric’s offer. “It’s not any more cramped than the stable attic we were staying in, and the smell’s an improvement, too.” He dropped his pack by one of the many trunks.

“Better a cramped attic than a cramped cell,” Tavo said.

“Of course, of course,” Aldric nodded. “Now, why don’t we help Mira and Vid with dinner? I wasn’t expecting guests, but my home’s never short on food.”

Conway stole a glance at Aldric's ample belly and thought of how obvious his statement was. He wisely kept the observation to himself, choosing to save his sarcasm for the Brewers Guild in the morning.

Mira and Vid were busy darting around the kitchen when the rest of the group rejoined them. A stew bubbled in a large pot in the hearth. Tavo and Conway stuck to a wall to avoid getting in the way of the apprentices, who cooked with the same dedication they gave to their enchanting.

"There's a barrel of water and a barrel of beer to quench your thirst," Aldric pointed them out to his guests. "The nearest well is only a short walk away, so we rarely run low for long. I'll have Vid show you the well tomorrow."

Conway's eyes locked onto a sizable leather vat full of water just beyond the barrels. He stepped closer to confirm its contents and grinned as he saw the swarm of fish swimming inside. He wasn't used to seeing fish vats of that size outside of inns. It looked almost as large as the one at the Three Hooves Inn.

"I take it you like fish?" Aldric asked.

"He can eat his weight in fish," Tavo said.

Conway shot Tavo a dirty look. "He's exaggerating," he insisted. Once. He'd cleared out the entire haul of a fishing boat *once*—practically against his will—and Tavo refused to let him forget. They'd tracked a mage with a bounty on his head to the docks, and Conway had fallen victim to a mind-altering spell that made him ravenously hungry. Unfortunately, a fishing boat had just returned after scoring the haul of a lifetime, and the crew had fled the magical brawl. Tavo's expertise had reduced the mage to scraps, while Conway had felt damn near ready to burst himself. Privately, he looked back fondly on the feast, the most indulgent meal he'd ever had. Though shedding the pounds he gained afterward had been a chore. "But I'll never say no to fish."

Conway and Tavo slowly eased into assisting the apprentices with preparing dinner. Even Aldric deferred to his apprentices in the kitchen, responding to their requests as if he were the student. Helping with dinner made Conway feel less like a servant than helping at the sanctuary had, perhaps because he knew he was getting a meal out of it. And a decent meal, from the smell of things. The kitchen spice chest contained spices Conway was more used to guarding than tasting, and plenty of them made their way into the pot.

Once the bulk of the cooking had concluded, Conway and Tavo set the table in the other room and readied it for dinner. As the junior apprentice, Vid handled serving the dishes, providing everyone with large portions of stew, bread, and beer. Conway wondered if Aldric had ordered a big dinner for the sake of guests or if the portions were the norm, and his apprentices had miraculously avoided matching their master in girth over the years.

Dinner was a quiet and delicious affair. The innkeepers of the Three Hooves ran a good kitchen and never fed Conway anything subpar, but he'd typically received the last bowl from the pot after the paying customers had eaten. The Three Hooves also lacked the luxury of Aldric's pantry and spice chest. Conway ate every last bite placed before him and washed the meal down with mug after mug of decent beer. His belly bulged faintly and pleasantly afterward.

Relaxation couldn't last forever.

Aldric tapped a finger on the table as he finished another beer. "I wish we had a motive for the attack on the sanctuary. I know it's key to figuring out the secret of the divine magic keeping the victims inflated. Conway. Tavo. Can you think of anyone—anyone at all—who might have wished harm upon the innkeepers?"

Conway made a passing effort to stifle a belch, but an alligator's jaws were difficult to hold back. "We're not the best ones to ask. We've only known them for about two months, and we mainly did manual labor and ran errands for them. But if you really want an answer, I can't imagine those three got into the sort of trouble that bred enemies."

"Is that an informed observation from working with those who *do* get into trouble?" Aldric asked.

Conway considered shrugging off the question, but he didn't feel any malice in the caribou's tone. He genuinely wanted to know if he knew what he was talking about. "When you travel from place to place as much as Tavo and I do, you do a lot of odd jobs and see a whole lot of things. Sometimes those things are smart, and most of the time those things are stupid. The innkeepers are smart, but they're smart in a sensible way, not a 'piss someone off enough to turn them into permanent balloons' sort of way. If they were doing anything real shady, they were being damn subtle about it."

"No disgruntled customers?"

Tavo shook his head. "They received minor complaints from time to time, but nothing out of the ordinary. The mattresses needed better stuffing, apparently. The rest of the staff might know something we don't, though, considering they've worked there longer."

"If they're involved in any business uncomfortable enough to lead to an attack on a sanctuary, that'd also make them the least reliable people to question," Aldric said. "Is there a chance any of *them* held grudges against the innkeepers?"

"Doubtful. They complained some as well, but again, it's nothing out of the ordinary. And none of them come across as capable of organizing something of this magnitude." Tavo had watched them struggle to control small crowds of

drunks. Subduing a room of clerics was well beyond their capabilities. “They all seem content working at the inn.”

“But they weren’t invited to the sacrificial feast while you both were.”

Conway was growing tired of that line of questioning, though dinner dissuaded him from snapping back at his host. “It’s more complicated than that. One of them is a vegetarian, so he doesn’t take part in the meat sacrifices; he handles fruit and beer offerings instead. Another is watching their weight, so they avoid any large sacrificial feasts because they feel bad turning down food. Someone else is in the mourning period for a relative, and she’s the sort who believes very strongly that those mourning death shouldn’t take part in rituals celebrating life.” He waved a claw dismissively and eyed another mug of beer.

“I suppose it was too much to hope for an easy answer,” Aldric said.

“If the innkeepers weren’t the intended targets, then that just leaves the clerics,” Mira said. The sabertooth swirled the beer around in her mug as she thought. “What if the target was actually a single person rather than the entire group? With everyone inflated, investigators aren’t likely to hone in on the real target. After all, we’ve spent this entire time assuming the attacker was going after everyone at the sanctuary, or at least a group of people at the sanctuary. Wasn’t one of the clerics discovered alone in the cellars?”

“He was probably just an accomplice,” Conway said. “The last loose end to tidy up after ballooning the others.”

“Or the first victim,” Tavo suggested.

“Doubtful,” Conway scoffed. “There’s no way the others would’ve gone ahead with the feast if he was missing.”

“That’s only true if his absence was prolonged or unexpected. He may have been tasked with retrieving something from the cellars during the feast. He stumbled into the intruders there and was inflated to keep him from alerting anyone. Then the intruders struck the feast, and finally the guards.” Tavo considered how he’d infiltrate the sanctuary. It was the sort of exercise he practiced on instinct, drilled into him through his varied apprenticeships. “No one was witnessed entering or leaving the sanctuary through the main gate. That means the attacker either snuck over the walls or used a secret passage of some sort. Maybe a tunnel or a side gate outsiders generally aren’t aware of. Stealth would be vital for a strike on this scale, and the best ways to accomplish that are either by blending in—which doesn’t seem possible—or by not being seen.”

“This is clearly something you’ve got experience with,” Aldric said with a faint smile.

Tavo froze, refusing to make eye contact with the glare Conway shot his way. “I’ve just heard a lot of fanciful stories at taverns. You know how bards get. They embellish things.” It was a poor lie that had no chance of holding up under

scrutiny, but Tavo didn't think Aldric would care to know about the numerous assassinations the viper had conducted over the years. People tended not to be very comfortable with all the popping, poisoning, and occasional stabbing.

Aldric didn't press Tavo further, as much to Conway's relief as the viper's. "I'll have a talk with Master Veek tomorrow about how much they've investigated the sanctuary itself. The Brewers Guild may be hesitant to dig too deeply around a sanctuary. But even if they find something, a point of access doesn't necessarily give us a motive."

"Maybe it really is all just divine punishment, plain and simple," Vid said as he brought another pitcher of beer to the table. "Something about the sacrifice was wrong, a vow was broken, or the clerics displeased Edmir." The flamingo snapped his fingers. "Remember that incident with Moldir's clerics a few decades ago? They were stealing money meant for the maintenance of the city's aqueducts and baths, which led to polluted water and a whole lot of sickness. Moldir was so enraged by the defilement of the water supply that he cursed the clerics to swell with water and spew it from their mouths like fountains for weeks."

The more Tavo learned about Bexley's interactions with deities, the lovelier he considered the city to be. Even divine punishment ended with swelling.

"True, but in that incident, Moldir went as far as to possess his own followers in order to publicly announce his intervention and decry the culprits in order to rebuild the populace's faith in him. Turns out water pollution led to fewer offerings in Moldir's name, as people assumed he'd abandoned them for some reason. Meanwhile, Edmir hasn't made his will known to anyone yet, and he had plenty of opportunities while we were investigating the attack on his sanctuary."

"He might have more punishments to dole out. What if this is just the beginning?" Vid asked.

Silence fell over the dinner table. The possibility of further attacks had crossed their minds throughout the day, though none had wished to dwell on it, especially while they had no clue how to deflate the victims.

"We can only hope for the best that it's not," Aldric finally said.

Conway drained the rest of his mug. Watching balloons full of beer wobble all afternoon hadn't hurt his desire for a drink. If anything, he craved beer more. He brushed it off as a consequence of the stress of all the crap the day had put him through. "Hope is nice and all, but it'll only get you so far. We're better off figuring this out on our own before some deity decides to start blimping people up as well. Shit's complicated as it is."

There was a murmur of agreement from the whole group, followed by stifled belches. More beer was in order.