

The Mana Vessel: Chapter 011

By: Indigo Rho

Lartonberry was as remote and uninspiring as the water balloon mouse had implied. Conway had seen more domesticated sheep than people. The alligator didn't like small villages. There was no money in them. Do a job for someone in the ass end of nowhere, and the best you'll get in return is a dry place to sleep or a passable meal. His skills were wasted doing chores. And he couldn't even lay low in a village; there was nowhere to hide.

Lartonberry Manor wasn't much better. He and Tavo had discreetly investigated the manor once they'd arrived in town and found it frustrating on multiple levels. The damn place was hidden deep in the woods as if ashamed to be associated with the land it ruled over. A wall surrounded the manor, with enough guards to prove Lord Lochland had an exceptionally high opinion of his value or that he'd pissed off someone dangerous. Maybe both. He sure as fuck had pissed off Conway by turning a simple guard job into a damn rescue mission.

The manor's defenses made storming the place inadvisable. Tavo's words, not his. The viper blathered on about not knowing where Hest was kept or how they'd get him out or how many guards there actually were. Detail after nagging detail. It wasn't like they knew any of that shit when they took on jobs to deal with bandits or missing goods. They succeeded *because* they could dive into a risky situation and come out alive.

Conway begrudgingly admitted that Hest being a giant balloon complicated things. Raiding the manor was pointless if the cargo blew up before they got him out. So he'd agreed to try Tavo's plan to gather information beforehand.

Against the odds, Lartonberry had an actual tavern. With nowhere else to gather for miles, the tavern attracted the servants and guards of the nearby manor. Conway only took a day to pinpoint one with loose lips and a weakness for booze.

The light buzz of a few cups helped Conway forget how bad the local ale was. He sat in his usual spot, a crooked table crammed into a back corner with a clear view of the entrance. No one in the village cared about watching their back, so it was always open. Tavo sat to his left, nursing his drink to stay sober. The chump they were working over sat to his right, a few drinks ahead of him. He was a dalmatian named Cynbert with a beer belly that never seemed content to stay under his tunic. Against the odds, the tubby drunkard held a prominent position in the manor guard. Second only to the Captain, if he wasn't talking out his ass.

Conway sloshed the ale around his cup. "Ah, this reminds me of something from my days learning magic," he laughed. "One of my peers was a lion obsessed

with filling up on mana potions. Said it made him more powerful. And I'm not talking about one or two potions. He would chug so many his flat middle puffed out into a sloshing globe. Dude was rounder than most of our instructors, and they were a wide bunch." He gestured with his claws, tracing a middle a solid foot wider than his own. "I got so used to seeing him bloated with mana that he looked weird empty."

"The stupid thing is, the damn tactic worked! As long as his belly was big and round, he had a huge edge over everyone else when displaying power. He'd waddle around, tapping his gut and boasting of his intelligence and talent, as if the key to his success wasn't just guzzling an ample supply of mana potions. Made the rest of us angry as fuck."

"Then one day, his cockiness finally bit him in the ass, thank the gods. He showed up easily twice as round as before, practically glowing with excess mana." Conway had wanted to shove him over and watch him struggle to get up. What ended up happening was far funnier. "Another student got fed up with his grandstanding and zapped him with a spell that made the mana within him bubble. He thought it'd just make the obnoxious lion belch nonstop and humiliate himself. It did that and so, so much more." He cackled, already thinking ahead.

"Something about the spell and the mana potions didn't mix well. The lion ballooned with every belch, growing bigger and rounder. At first, he hissed up a storm between belches, but he lost his gusto when we all realized he was inflating nonstop." Watching the furious scowl vanish from his face was priceless. It was one of his favorite parts about inflating others. "He puffed up into a glowing, helpless ball in no time."

"Of course he begged us for help. Wobbling left and right, whining between rumbling belches. Loud creaks that sent a shiver down your spine. But after everything he'd done, we just laughed at him." And poked and prodded and teased him about how fragile his hide must be. It was great.

"Well, once his paws sunk into his body, this strange change came over him. It wasn't the usual pressure daze you see in people who balloon. No, it was like the lion had become the happiest, dumbest guy in the world. He moaned and shivered. And guess what? He begged for more!" Drunk on mana. Conway preferred sticking to ale. He didn't need to become a balloon to get his kicks.

"The whole lot of us were convinced he was a goner. A few good creaks and he'd pop, splashing mana everywhere. None of us were gonna personally send him over the edge. Figured we'd let nature take its course, like it had time and time again. You gather a bunch of students eager to learn magic, and someone's bound to screw up a spell and burst." Maybe into confetti, maybe into flames.

Training accidents had built up Conway's resistance to some horrible sights. "Not to mention when people start turning into overripe berries and stuff."

"Sadly, the damn lion remained intact. Guess he got lucky. Though deflating him turned into a challenge. The mana attuned to him strongly and resisted any attempt to drain. Took our instructors months to return him to normal, and they were as competent as they were rotund. Funny thing is, the lion would occasionally rapidly balloon without warning after that fiasco. There were rumors it'd one day be permanent." Baseless rumors, since Conway had started them himself to terrify the lion. He was still proud of that.

Tavo snaked his tail around the legs of his chair to keep it from flicking about. He dug his claws into his mug and took fast breaths. He'd heard the story about the mana-filled lion a hundred times—Conway told it every chance he got—and it *still* made him squirm. Inflated with mana for months and doomed to balloon afterward randomly—why couldn't he have been blessed with a gift for magic? A blissful, creaking daze sounded divine. Oh, but it'd be horribly embarrassing, too. If only more people embraced inflation rather than scorned it. People who didn't exclusively treat it as a religious experience that required you to float off into oblivion inevitably.

Cynbert smacked the table with his paw and laughed. "I can think of a few people I'd love to see meet the same fate as that lion! And maybe something a bit more bombastic." The dalmatian winked, as if there was anything clever about the insinuation.

"Sometimes it's more satisfying to watch them drift helplessly in and out of a daze," Conway lied. He'd never pass up an opportunity to burst an annoyance. "Lots of time to humiliate them."

Cynbert nodded while drinking heavily from his cup. "You have a point. That dopey, blissful face makes anyone look laughable. I've seen a fox going through it for days now."

Conway hid his excitement. The odds of more than one fox balloon being in Lartonberry were slim to none. "Let me guess: you're buddies with a mage who likes to bloat. I guess you've gotta entertain yourself around here somehow," he chuckled.

"Pah!" Cynbert snorted. "He's no friend of mine. Just a...guest at the manor." He briefly hesitated, too drunk and talkative to keep a total secret.

As far as Conway was concerned, they'd confirmed Hest remained intact. A nice bit of info, but not the main reason they'd worked so hard to butter up Cynbert. They needed a way into the manor to snoop around in peace. Conway didn't care for subtlety, but Tavo promised enough fun for him to go along with the plan. First they'd need to get a favor out of the guard.

Cynbert finished the last of his ale and placed the mug at the center of the table. “I suppose I’ve had my fill for the night. Can’t have the ale following me to work tomorrow.” He snickered and tapped his head.

Conway only needed a sip to empty his mug. “With how you’re swaying, you might not make it to bed. Why don’t we walk with you?”

“No need to worry about little old me,” the doughy guard replied with a wave of his paw. “I’ve only ended up in a ditch a couple times!”

Tavo had to guzzle his drink. His cheeks puffed out as he belched. “Why take the risk on a dark, cloudy night like—*urrrp*—this? I like walking before bed, anyway. Tires me out and makes sleep more restful.”

The viper would scare their mark away if allowed to go on. Conway thumped his gut and forced out a rumbling burp to quiet his companion. He hefted himself out of his chair, pretending to be wobblier on his feet than he truly was. He slapped Cynbert hard on the back. “Come on, let’s get you home.”

“If you insist,” the dalmatian caved. He stood at an angle and tripped over his chair.

Conway caught him and spun him towards the exit. “Yeah, you’d have definitely ended up in the ditch tonight, you boozehound.”

Cynbert belched out a laugh. “Alright, alright, you’ve got me there. In my defense, the local ditches are too cozy for their own good.”

Conway faked a laugh in reply as he guided the guard to the door.

Tavo hung back, walking behind the pair. The chill night air poured over him once he left behind the warmth of the tavern. He bit down hard on his lip with a fang. He counted the seconds, then pointed the tip of his tail at Cynbert’s leg. He swiftly jabbed the man and pulled his tail back.

The dalmatian stumbled. He rubbed a paw over the spot Tavo had stealthily poked him.

“Something the matter?” Tavo asked, moving beside him.

“No, no. Just a bug bite, I think. Or a damn splinter from that chair.”

“I’ve been feeling the bugs myself tonight,” Tavo said. He stifled a happy gasp as he felt his venom kick in and his middle puff out. He looked straight ahead, faking ignorance of his swelling.

Even drunk, Cynbert couldn’t overlook the lean viper’s steadily ballooning belly. He pointed in Tavo’s general direction, his arm drifting left and right. “You’re inflating!”

Tavo stared at the dalmatian with a suitable expression of confusion. From his experience, most blimping drunks dismissed warnings of their situation, not accepting reality until they saw their bellies rounding out with their own eyes. Tricking someone as drunk as Cynbert wasn’t difficult, but he aimed for a believable performance regardless.

Tavo glanced down, and his eyes grew as wide as his belly. "What's happening!" he yelped a little louder than he should've. He aggressively pushed down on his ballooning middle, acting out the same useless panic he'd witnessed his own victims display. Squeezing never worked, but it felt wonderful.

Cynbert was so focused on Tavo's sudden predicament that he didn't notice he was swelling as well.

Tavo waited for the dalmatian's belly to grow noticeably larger before he gasped in feigned horror. "You're belly! It's growing, too!"

Cynbert barked, leaping nearly a foot as he confirmed the truth. "How is this possible?!" He mirrored Tavo's pathetic attempts to deflate himself.

Tavo was born to brew elixirs. His mother had taught him the basics of alchemy growing up. He remembered clinging tightly to her tail as a child while she brewed batches of potions, explaining every step and answering his rambling questions. He'd expected to take over the business inevitably and make his mother proud. Reality had proven slightly more complicated.

One day, his mother left him with a friend and told him things would be very different but that she knew he'd make her proud. Then she went away, and he never saw her again.

Later that day, their home and shop blew apart when the city guard broke into it. A week later, he saw decrees posted around the city, offering an extravagant reward for the head of a prolific assassin named the Bloody Fang, whose description matched his mother precisely. Within a month, his mother's friend was teaching him the art of poisons.

Tavo missed his mother dearly, but he cherished the path she'd put him on. After all, his first mentor had introduced him to the wonders of inflation toxins. In fact, every one of his mentors had displayed a fondness for inflation. And a fair bit of bad luck with it. All had met unfortunate, blimpy ends. At least he'd always been around when they swelled for the final time.

Tavo widened his gait as his hips puffed up. "The bugs! Maybe it's an allergic reaction!" He had to nudge Cynbert's panicked thoughts as far from the truth as possible.

"But that's never happened to me before!" Cynbert thumped hard on his belly. Seams on his tunic and pants ripped under the strain of his ballooning body.

"I bet it's the booze," Conway growled. "You two had something different than me, and I'm the only one not blimping up." Tavo had suggested they all swell to make their plan more convincing, an idea he'd vetoed with growls and a stern "no."

"I thought the ale tasted weird!" Tavo cried. He swelled all over, his middle rapidly taking on the spherical shape he craved. Pretending to be scared of the

thing he most desired required considerable acting skill. Behind his facade of dread, giddiness dominated his every thought. "The swelling isn't stopping! I'm growing too big!"

Tavo waited for the massive curve of his round body to overtake his limbs, then shuffled back in a manner guaranteed to throw him off balance. The inflated viper rolled onto his back, claws wiggling frantically. Delightful spikes in pressure followed. He hoped the guard couldn't see him blushing at that angle.

"By the gods, someone help!" Cynbert barked as he lost mobility, reduced to a creaking spotted ball. The shredded remnants of his clothing fell to the ground. Wave after wave of pressure washed over him, interrupting his pleas with groans.

Conway let the dalmatian swell. He trusted Tavo's toxin to turn him into a balloon without blowing him apart; Tavo knew his shit. But Cynbert didn't know he'd be fine, and Conway wanted him to squirm in terror for a little bit longer. Anything to sweeten the incoming rescue.

Conway stepped in the moment Cynbert's paws sunk into his creaking body.

"I've got you!" Conway said. He formed a coating of water around the dalmatian, like he had when the inflation darts had sent them skyward. He slowly closed his fist to manipulate the water, squeezing him. Cynbert's cheeks ballooned, and a gust of air rushed out of his mouth. Conway opened his fist, then closed it again, forcing more air from the dalmatian.

Slow and steady. Slower than necessary, really. Cynbert couldn't suspect Conway had plenty of experience deflating balloons or that he was entirely confident his rescue attempt would work.

Conway squeezed the air out of Cynbert until he'd regained his mobility. The dalmatian's balloon belly hung low, covering his nudity. His whole body remained somewhat puffy, as if he'd packed on a lot of pounds. He swayed, breathing short, fast breaths. He ran his paws over his bloated middle but didn't feel himself expanding anymore.

"I'm saved!" Cynbert howled in joy. "I felt the daze tickling the back of my mind. A minute longer, and I would've exploded!" The swollen dalmatian shook. "You saved my life."

Conway wrapped Tavo in water and squeezed. "Just did what anyone else would've in the same situation," he said, slathering on all the false humility he could muster.

"Not just anyone could save a man from being popped like a balloon!" Cynbert insisted. He pushed down on his middle and belched out more air. He stopped once he realized shrinking his middle risked exposing himself in public.

“I’d be a pile of scraps if not for you. I felt my hide failing me, only a puff away from tearing apart.”

Conway held back a sigh. Somehow, Cynbert had gone from having a minute left to live to being just about to burst. Soon he’d claim he’d sprung leaks all over, and Conway had sewn him back together. There was no way the dalmatian had inflated before, at least not big enough to become a sphere. First-timers always freaked out about creaks and pressure, convinced they’d blow up at any moment. Groan-worthy behavior, in Conway’s opinion, but it’d be of use now.

“Just try not to swell up from now on.” Conway patted Cynbert hard on the back, nearly toppling him. “I don’t want to have to squeeze you down to size after every trip to the tavern.” He released his grip on Tavo, leaving the viper even rounder than he’d left the dalmatian, for fun.

“I don’t plan on ever inflating again. What a horrid experience.” Cynbert poked his taut middle and frowned. “I wish I could repay you for this miracle, but my means are limited. At the very least, you’ll never have to worry about paying for your own drinks while you’re here.”

Conway laughed. “After what those drinks did to you and my buddy here,” he pointed to Tavo wobbling about, “I’m not sure when I’ll trust a drink at that tavern again. But if any jobs open up at that fancy manor of yours, we’d certainly appreciate the work. Not much else for us here, I’m afraid.”

Cynbert rubbed his chin. “Keep this to yourselves, but I’ve got a feeling the manor will be looking for extra help in the near future. Nothing certain, just whispers of gossip I’ve overheard. Something about our, uh, guest opening up new opportunities for Lord Lochland. Something that’d require expanding the guard. So long as you’re still in Lartonberry, I’ll put in a good word for you. I’m on Captain Tamblyn’s good side.” He scanned the empty street. Their inflation ordeal hadn’t drawn any attention. “But again, keep quiet about it. Lord Lochland doesn’t like his secrets getting out.”

“Lucky us, then.” Conway grinned. “And of course we’ll stay tight-lipped. Now how about we get you home before you lose too much air and your junk hangs out?”

Cynbert blushed and agreed with a furious nod.

The rest of the journey was slow but uneventful, as both Tavo and the dalmatian awkwardly waddled along with swollen middles. Conway ushered Cynbert into his home and let out a relieved sigh. He no longer had to act.

“Excellent job pretending to be selfless, Conway,” Tavo said. The viper retained a small, air-filled pot belly. He locked his claws behind his back to avoid the temptation of playing with his middle. “I almost believed you cared if he popped or not.”

“I *did* care. We need him to get into the manor. According to you,” Conway added with a snort.

“Entertaining him has given us valuable information on the number of guards at the manor, the fact all the guards sans-Cynbert live there full-time, and confirmed the vessel is somewhere on the estate. And still intact.”

“And yet we’re gonna sit on that info and put our faith in your complex plan.”

“It’s really not that complex. A genuinely complex plan would require months of effort and more than the two of us. Something like pretending to be a traveling nobleman and his servant to gain access to the manor.” Obtaining proper attire would be challenging. And Conway would never make a convincing nobleman or servant. A guard, certainly, albeit one with discipline issues. Tavo himself doubted he could bluff his way through proper noble etiquette. “We’d have to slowly gain Lord Lochland’s trust to learn of his plans for the vessel, then stage a dramatic distraction so we could flee with the vessel. Spiking the food and drinks at a grand feast with inflation toxins, perhaps.” If only.

Gods, the viper could ramble. He waved his claws. “I get it, I get it. Your annoying plan could be more annoying, blimp belly.” The comment got Tavo’s face twisting, just as Conway had hoped. “All this waiting is driving me mad.”

Tavo sucked in his gut as if that’d do a thing to disguise his swollen middle. “It’s only another night until the next step, and then ideally only a few more days after that.” Earning Cynbert’s trust had taken much less time than anticipated, and he wished their luck would carry forward. “It’s a shame we couldn’t get Cynbert to reveal what Lord Lochland has in store for the vessel. The necessity for more guards isn’t much to go off of.”

“Maybe he’s gonna sell the balloon for a fortune and needs more people to guard his riches.” Nobles loved to hoard shiny things and fret over losing them. “Or he expects to piss a lot of people off.”

“So long as he doesn’t pop the vessel before we get to him. Dealing with nobles is tricky.” And terribly unfair. They had to overcome the defenses of a fortified estate and figure out how to retrieve someone fully inflated stealthily. But if the plan worked, Conway might become more receptive to his ideas in the future. If it didn’t...well, maybe the alligator would inflate him as punishment. Seeking a positive angle in failures was important.