

## **The Mana Vessel: Chapter 012**

By: Indigo Rho

It occurred to Hest that he'd never known true relaxation in his life.

There wasn't much time for that on the farm. From the moment the arctic fox could carry a bucket, he'd done his part to keep the place running. No matter the day or the season, there was always something to do or someone to help. Animals to care for, crops to harvest, repairs to be made, and a hundred other things, big and small. Hest didn't mind the work. It gave him a welcome appreciation for responsibility and cooperation as he toiled with his family and the occasional seasonal help.

Growing up, Relaxation was chasing the chickens when his parents weren't watching or swimming in the cool waters of the nearby lake. Simple pleasures that were the highlights of his day.

Life didn't change all that much when he joined the Order of Avmis at Rochdale Henge. He still had plenty of chores, still scrubbed things clean and lugged around heavy loads. He still heeded the instructions of his elders. But then he also spent time learning magic and the tenets of the Order, a whole new kind of work that fascinated him. Then relaxation became visiting the tavern with his fellow initiates or card games in the dormitory.

Regardless of where Hest was, his free time only came in short bursts. And he'd been fine with that until he finally experienced having entire days all to himself.

Despite being filled to the brim with potent mana, despite being a taut ball incapable of any significant movement, despite being held captive by a nobleman who viewed him as a mere tool, Hest felt more relaxed than he had his entire life. His feelings were complicated, to say the least.

The storeroom he now called home wasn't luxurious, but his captors provided him with practically every little comfort he requested. Fine cushions kept the lower curve of his spherical body from bruising. Fresh fragrances and colorful silk wall hangings helped him forget he was in a cellar. Enchanted music boxes played wonderful tunes at his request. They were expensive trinkets he'd never had access to on the farm or at the Henge, that he never would've considered vital enough to purchase. Curiosities he'd never seen in person, only heard of.

And, of course, there were the unbeatable feasts he indulged in multiple times a day.

Hest had lived like a bloated, spoiled nobleman ever since being brought to the manor, and he rather enjoyed it. Servants were at his beck and call, even if most spoke only the bare minimum and guards continued their occasional

teasing. He received everything he wished for, short of freedom, and that desire steadily dwindled with every decadent filling. He knew he'd likely never experience such pampering again in his life, so he cherished every second of it.

Hest hadn't realized how desperately he needed a good, long break from everything. To just not have any real obligations at all. No chores, no lessons, no orders. Eating and drinking were the closest things to tasks he had in captivity—since Lord Lochland needed him full of mana—but they brought him too much joy to consider work.

The blissful sensations produced by the excess mana continued to intensify, dousing any negative thought that dared arise. Euphoria made it difficult for fear to take hold. And, deep down inside, the arctic fox had grown to love being fully inflated. Remaining a blimp for a few weeks sounded nice. He was even open to staying that way for months. Anything to prolong the strange life of luxury hoisted upon him and the rapture of containing a stockpile of mana.

Creaking cart wheels pierced Hest's cloudy thoughts. Mercer had returned with a pile of potions, all meant for him. A pair of servants stood behind him, their eyes darting away whenever Hest looked toward them. What once made him nervous now made him wiggle in anticipation. More mana meant more pleasure. And more pressure. Not that he minded the faint strain of his hide anymore. The sturdy wards covering his body would hold him together, he was certain of it. After all, Lord Lochland's plan wouldn't succeed if he exploded. He was too precious to risk, and Mercer had proven to be an exceptional mage.

"Time for another round of drinks," Mercer said. The otter sounded distant, as if he had a lot on his mind and was going through the motions. A result of guilt, no doubt.

"There's no helping it," Hest said. His grin and eager tone gave away his desire for more mana. "And thank you once again for everything you've done, Mercer. You've made this situation bearable for me."

Mercer uncorked the first bottle of mana and pressed it to Hest's lips. The arctic fox greedily guzzled the contents within seconds. "It's the least I could do."

"People like me aren't usually pampered like this." The words tumbled from Hest's mouth in between bottles. Someone else needed to understand his joy. "I don't care that I'm inflated. This is the happiest I've been in forever." He pushed away the concern it was the happiest he'd ever be.

Mercer winced. "I think the mana you've consumed is having an intoxicating effect on you. It's not uncommon for those with magical inclinations exposed to excess mana, and you've certainly got an excess of it. That's likely having a significant effect on your emotional state." The otter poured bottle after bottle of mana down Hest's throat.

“I don’t care. I don’t want to lose this happiness. It’s making the world brighter and letting me live in the moment. I’ll embrace it for as long as I’m blessed with it.” More mana. More happiness. More endlessly delightful thoughts. He hadn’t noticed before how refreshing mana was. Better than any ale or wine or juice. Better than crystal-clear spring water. He muttered a prayer to Avmis for his jubilant gift.

“Perhaps the intoxication is for the best, then,” Mercer sighed, pressing another bottle to Hest’s lips. “I’d rather you be at peace than stressed out.”

Hest panted after finishing the mana supply, dipping in and out of the post-filling daze. “It’s so good,” he mumbled. In the distance, he felt Mercer’s soft pokes around his middle.

The otter sighed. “As I thought. You’re ready, Hest.”

“Huh?”

“Your mana’s nearly reached the necessary volatility. In my estimation, we’ll be able to conduct the ritual in two days at the earliest.”

“Oh.” Soon, the pampering would come to an end. Even if they continued treating him well, his precious mana would be gone, squeezed out for their daring scheme to create a new font. A tantalizing wave of pleasure surged through him, purging every negative thought in his taut body. So what if they were going to deflate him tomorrow? That still gave him plenty of time to indulge in the bounty of mana swirling within him. He’d simply have to cherish every last second of joy before then.

“We’ll move you to the ritual site now. That’ll allow me to properly attune you before...before we finish this. I do hope it’ll be as comfortable for you there,” Mercer said.

The two servants took position on opposite sides of Hest. Under Mercer’s direction, they cautiously rolled the arctic fox balloon onto his back.

Spikes of pressure rocked Hest, provoking a loud moan. He felt the mana swirl faster than before, teasing his sensitive circumference. At some point, he began to roll. The journey through the unfamiliar corridors was a blur. He made no effort to form coherent thoughts, riding the wave of euphoria that came in the wake of his volatile contents shifting about. Even rolling had become a wondrous thing.

Only the stunning colors of the evening sky broke him free of the ecstasy. Hest hadn’t seen the sky since being loaded into the second wagon and covered up. He took a deep breath, filling his nostrils with the scents of the outdoors.

He was rolled past manicured flower beds, all of which graced him with new aromas. He wondered if they would’ve brought him to the gardens earlier if he’d asked. It was a shame he hadn’t thought of the possibility. Then again, they

might not have wanted their captive out in the open. Hiding a mana blimp was hard.

A small stone building stood in the middle of the manor gardens. It was round and surrounded by columns, like a miniature temple. Something tugged at the edge of his senses, far below the earth. The ley line. It truly was as shallow as they believed, then. Curious, the arctic fox focused on the faint source of magic, gauging its strength. Weaker than the ley line below the Rochdale Henge. The font would still be valuable, though. And it'd only exist because of the power bottled up inside him. Pride joined the pleasure.

Lavish decorations adorned the interior of the building. Constellations covered the walls, each star represented by a polished stone. The ceiling depicted the various phases of the moons, with the Berry Moon given prominence. Bright glow stones hung in silver sconces. Mosaics of vines ringed the floor.

Such beauty for a rarely used place.

A nest of pillows sat in the middle of the room. But what garnered Hest's full attention was the cart loaded with mana potions beside the pile. The servants rolled Hest atop the pillows, adjusting him so he wouldn't tilt.

"More mana?" Hest asked, licking his lips. Fillings had never happened in such quick succession before. His fingers wiggled in anticipation.

"Yes, more," Mercer replied solemnly. "Lord Lochland is frustrated by what he considers delays in your preparation. I'd prefer longer breaks between fillings, but I'm afraid his word is final. This batch might finally send you into a daze, Hest." He met the arctic fox's gaze with sad eyes.

Hest returned it with elation. "I'll be fine," he insisted, thinking of nothing but the wonderful mana he'd soon chug. A break from the outside world sounded wonderful.

Once more, Mercer emptied mana potions into the captive, and once more, Hest greedily accepted every last drop.

Each potion stretched Hest's hide a small fraction more. Tingles arced through his body, accompanied by strings of quiet creaks. The thick torrent of mana churned within him, surging from bottle after bottle. Slowly, Hest's paws sunk deeper into his swollen body, until they barely stuck out. The massive curve of his round form pushed his feet off the ground. He gently swayed from side to side, only held in place by the pillows.

Euphoria radiated from the swelling mage. He plunged into it, intent on experiencing every blessing the mana had to offer while he still could. He cut ties with everything that grounded him to the waking world and reality, fully submerged. The pure joy felt better than anything in his life up to then. Better than the extravagant feasts he'd gorged on at the manor. Better than the nicest

day with nothing to do. Better than time spent with close friends. Even better than the loving touch of another.

And the bliss didn't come and go in small bursts. It struck Hest like a gale and didn't let up, only growing stronger and stronger with each gulp of mana. It promised to be endless, and he welcomed it with open arms.

Hest gradually stopped paying attention to his surroundings. He forgot the room, and the manor, and his kidnapping. He forgot his original honored purpose, filled with mana for the glory of Avmis and the Order. He forgot himself, scattering his past to the wind as he dedicated himself to the present. The dim sensation of bottles against his lips and swallowing remained, the last necessity of the outside world he happily sought to discard.

All that mattered was the happiness searing his mind.

Mercer watched Hest descend into deep intoxication, lost in his own little world. *No more worries*, he thought to himself. *At least when the end comes, you'll be oblivious to it.* But Mercer wouldn't. And he'd yet to figure out if he could live with himself afterward.