

## The Mana Vessel: Chapter 07

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Rough paws shoved Hest down a corridor. The fox felt none of the care and reverence the priests had exhibited rolling him from the ritual. He was merely an obligation to the manor guards, not a precious vessel. Even if he hadn't been muzzled, he doubted he'd have gotten any sympathy from them.

"I don't think Tamblyn's gonna give me that reward, Paul," Kent, the skunk, said.

"Of course he will. He promised," the red panda replied.

"He wanted to pop me back there! All because the stupid balloon bounced a little." Kent pushed harder on Hest's taut hide.

"He wasn't gonna pop you."

"Only because he needed me to help load the balloon. If we'd brought along anyone else, I'd be scraps!" Kent's voice broke.

"Tamblyn only bursts people who really, *really* fuck up. Like when Don got caught stealing the Lord's jewelry."

"Don was an idiot."

"Yeah, and that's why Lord Lochland used him as a pin cushion after Tamblyn pumped him up," Paul said. "Tamblyn's just in a shit mood right now. He'll spend a few days scowling at ya and making empty threats over nothing, then he'll reward you for introducing him to Cob."

"He'd better," Kent grumbled. "Without me, we wouldn't have had Cob. And without Cob's darts, we'd have had a bunch of corpses to deal with instead of letting the sky handle that for us."

Hest's heart sank. So the others truly were gone, then. He'd wanted to believe they'd merely been inflated and left on the road with some hope of survival, but instead, they'd floated off. A horrible way to go. He prayed to Ventus, god of the winds, that they'd fallen into a daze before their inevitable end.

"The balloon's room is down there, right?" Kent asked.

"Yeah, the one with the double doors. Hope they're wide enough for him."

"I'm not the one telling Tamblyn if they aren't."

Hest came to a stop. He heard the creaking of heavy doors. The guards spun him, pushed him through, and let him roll across the room. He yipped in fright.

"Look at how far he went!" Kent laughed.

"Rolls pretty well for a balloon." A paw thumped Hest's side. "Why don't we have a bit of fun while we're here? Who knows when we'll have another balloon around to play with."

“Tamblyn didn’t want us risking the stupid thing. I don’t want to get the trunk again.”

“Tamblyn’s not here, silly. And no one’s gonna believe the balloon if he starts blustering.”

“What if he pops?”

Hest wiggled nervously in response. The wonder of inflation faded as he faced more and more dangers.

“He won’t. Nothing around here’s sharp, and he’s gotta be sturdy. Otherwise, he’d have exploded in the wagon after the first bump in the road.”

“Don’t remind me. My ass still feels sore from that.”

“If we get some free time later, maybe I’ll make it sore for a good reason.” Paul winked at Kent, whose tail stiffened.

“M-Maybe,” the skunk sheepishly replied.

“Now fetch,” Paul said, shoving Hest.

Hest rolled across the room, halted by Kent’s palms. The skunk patted the helpless balloon and sent him back to Paul. The guards rolled Hest back and forth, taking joy in the fox’s distress. They smacked and slapped and thumped him, snickering at his creaks and squirms. His muffled pleas fell on deaf ears.

Hest thought of the times he’d watched kids in the village run with a ball, laughing as they batted it around. He also thought of how often he’d seen the seams of balls burst, shedding the hay within.

The guards toyed with Hest until they were nearly out of breath. Tired of their game, they rolled him atop a pile of straw mats. Either by chance or a rare show of mercy, they set him upright. They left the room without paying him much attention, busy planning a romantic rendezvous. The wooden doors slammed shut. He didn’t hear them lock. A bloated fox wasn’t exactly a flight risk.

Alone and stationary at last, Hest took a moment to look at his prison. He’d expected a dingy dungeon cell, the kind with a skeleton chained to the wall and a single dim torch for light. But from what the fox could see, they’d rolled him to a rather plain storage room. Everything had been pushed against the walls, creating plenty of space for someone inflated. He didn’t see any crystals or jars—nothing that might be used to store the bounty of mana sealed inside him.

What did the tiger—Lord Lochland—want with him?

Lochland had wanted to do something with him immediately, but the otter implied Hest wasn’t ready yet. Ready for what? His captors had prepared a space for him but clearly hadn’t equipped it to drain the mana from him in any manner, not even popping. Did they plan on using him as a bargaining chip? Would they sell him to someone else for a profit? But what would a Lord need with the money? No doubt his taxes earned him enough.

Thinking of answers only created more questions, all of which scared Hest.

He clenched his fists and tried moving. He'd gotten some practice while inflated with air, mainly to pass the time. Shuffling had been possible, if incredibly awkward. He'd had to wobble from side to side until he'd gained enough momentum to rotate on the lower curve of his body. The endeavor had exhausted him, so he'd stopped bothering after only a few steps.

Hest leaned to the left with all his weight. His hide creaked, and a faint spike in pressure raced along his opposite side. Then he leaned hard to the right. More creaks and pressure.

And bliss.

Just a bit, like a gentle touch to the back of his neck, but enough to interrupt Hest's momentum. He settled back in place, warmth in his face.

*That euphoria hasn't gone away*, Hest thought to himself. If anything, it'd grown.

He didn't try to move again. Why bother? Merely reaching the doors would be a miracle, and he had no way to open them. Even then, there'd be no outrunning the guards. Any random servant could stumble across him, go for a guard, and return before he made it more than a few feet. Then he'd be rolled right back to his prison. His blimp of a body had become a giant, creaking shackle.

Deflating on his own was impossible. The seals keeping the mana bottled up in him tight ensured that. They also sealed his magic. He couldn't move, couldn't break the seals, couldn't defend himself. Hest had heard of places where prisoners were inflated to prevent their escape. He'd thought the method absurd, a joke passed off as truth by those who didn't know better. Now he saw the sense in such an approach. Blimps were helpless. Inflated large enough, they lacked any ability to break free. In a pressure daze, they'd lose their ability to think straight. He wondered why every town didn't puff up their prisoners.

The doors lurched open. Hest's ears flattened. He feared more guards had come to mess with him.

An otter entered, pushing a cart filled with bottles. Hest recognized him as the otter who'd been with Lord Lochland earlier. Mercer, maybe?

Mercer briefly stopped as Hest's gaze fell upon him, then pushed on. He hurried out of sight behind Hest.

A single palm rested against Hest's back. He instantly tensed up. More rolling. Perhaps everyone in the manor waited to have a go at him. But the shove never came. The palm retreated, only to return a foot away, still gentle.

"Hmm," Mercer mumbled. He came back around and removed Hest's muzzle.

Despite the gesture, Hest feared to speak. He knew little of the otter but trusted no one in the manor. They'd kidnapped him, after all. Curiosity got the better of him. "Why am I here?"

Mercer looked at him in silence. He sighed. "Because Lord Lochland requires mana."

Not good enough. "Surely a Lord can obtain mana without resorting to kidnapping a vessel of the Order of Avmis?"

"Lord Lochland's needs are considerable. A vessel such as yourself conveniently provides that." Mercer took an avid interest in the floor.

Hest saw the discomfort all over the otter's face. He was the first person he'd met who exhibited any shame about the situation. Not much, but he needed to cling to whatever victories he managed, no matter how small.

Mercer placed his palm against Hest's side again. "These enchantments are very finely crafted. I wasn't sure if I'd need to reseal you upon arrival, but I don't suppose you've leaked even a wisp of mana since your filling. The durability wards are solid as well. Your Order doesn't take risks with their vessels. They'll need a slight bolstering, though."

Mercer whispered a soft incantation. The seals painted on Hest's body tingled, sending a chill through him. The everpresent pressure pushing against his hide weakened, as if he'd deflated some. Mercer tapped Hest's side afterward and nodded. "That should work. Building upon the wards wasn't difficult. Easier than removing them, I assume. Very solid. I wish I had the time to examine them properly. Seeing a quality ward in action is different from reading about them."

Mercer's unease appeared to wane as he talked about Hest in academic terms. He seemed the sort of mage who got lost in his tomes and viewed every new magical trinket with awe. Hest couldn't let himself become yet another trinket in Mercer's eyes.

"Why do I need to be more durable?" Hest asked. Conversation would remind Mercer he was a living, breathing being, not a bottle. "My wards were more than adequate for my current capacity." He warily eyed the collection of bottles on the cart. "Tapping me won't work, I'm not a keg. I won't leak pure mana if you shove a spigot in me."

"I understand how mana vessels work," Mercer replied curtly. "An ordinary spigot would vent your precious mana in the best-case scenario or burst you in the worst. Both would be a terrible waste."

At least the otter didn't want him to explode. "Then what are the bottles for?"

"They're mana potions. For you," Mercer said.

The response added to Hest's confusion. "I'm already full of mana. What would I need with more? What are you planning to do to me?" He'd have stepped back if he were mobile.

Mercer didn't reply. He returned to looking at everything but Hest's eyes.

"Please, after everything, I deserve an answer." No matter how he feared it. His captors had made no effort to hide their identities, only their intentions. That didn't bode well for him. Common criminals were rarely so careless, let alone a Lord.

Mercer exhaled loudly. "You'll be used to create a new mana font."

Hest could've made a hundred guesses and never come close to the truth. "That isn't possible, no matter how much mana I'm filled with." Otherwise, there'd be as many fonts as water wells.

"A ley line runs under the estate. A shallow spot near the gardens occasionally leaks weak wisps of mana. So weak it's easy to miss. You wouldn't even be able to fill a small bottle during a lunar alignment. But a powerful release of mana should weaken the boundary between realms and cause a new font to erupt. We just need to position you above the weak spot and...vent your mana in a ritual."

Hest didn't consider himself a scholar. His knowledge of the Rochdale Henge's mana font involved more history than magical theory. Yet Mercer's proposal didn't make sense to him. "There won't be enough mana. It'll gush out in every direction."

"Yes, if you were vented in your current state without the slightest preparation, nothing would happen. But that's not what we're doing!" Mercer insisted. "First of all, the ritual will concentrate the mana in a single direction: the ley line. And second, the mana will be even more potent than it currently is."

"How?"

Mercer gestured toward the bottles. "You're to be put on a hearty diet of mana potions and mana-infused food. That'll both increase your quantity and potency of mana. That's why I increased your durability. It wouldn't do to have you burst before the ritual. If it works, it'll be a spectacular achievement." His tone dripped with regret rather than enthusiasm. For a mage who'd put a great deal of thought into the plan, he didn't sound happy about the potential outcome.

"There's too much that can go wrong." Durability spells had limits. He could explode if they forced him to chug too many potions. The excess of mana could put him into an altered state. He thought of the strange bliss he'd felt ever since being filled. Would it grow worse?

"Lord Lochland is ready to take the risk," Mercer said glumly. "I'll do my best to calculate your capacity and enhance your wards."

“When the Rochdale Henge discovers you’ve used one of their own vessels to blow open a mana font, there’ll be a reckoning. There are strict laws regarding the handling of ley lines to prevent arcane accidents. Avmis’ veins can’t be tapped casually like ore!” He imagined the grand phoenix, deep within the planet, springing leaks all over as new fonts were created one by one. Could a god pop? Could the planet?

“The Henge won’t find out. If we’re successful, the font will initially be kept secret. Lartonberry is sparse, and the estate is about as far from the village as possible. Only those on the estate will witness the eruption, and money will keep them quiet. And threats. Lord Lochland is never reluctant to step back into his role as a knight,” Mercer frowned. “I’ll record false observations about unusual changes in the ley line. Then, in a few months, Lord Lochland will announce an unexpected accident occurred during a ritual, which created a new mana font. A happy little accident. The realm will have no reason to suspect the Lord of a tiny estate conspired to tap into a ley line, especially one with an unexceptional manor mage like me.”

“What about when the Order starts looking for me? They won’t shrug off the loss of a vessel, and suspicion will fall upon your new mana font.”

“I fear you put too much faith in your order. So long as Lord Lochland’s men did their job well, there’ll be no sign of you, your wagon, or the poor souls who accompanied you.” The color drained from Mercer’s face. “Assumptions will be made, but you’ll be considered lost long before the revelation of the mana font. By then, no one will make the connection.”

“Then what...what will happen to me?” Hest gulped.

“If you cooperate, you’ll be fine. Lord Lochland will come up with an adequate reason for you to appear safe and sound later on, no doubt supported by fearsome threats to keep you quiet. The word of a landed Lord always exceeds our own.”

Hest believed him. He rarely heard of Lords facing justice. “I’ve no choice in the matter, do I?” he asked, dejected. His dignity had been stripped away, leaving nothing but a tool. A tool that could be callously disposed of if he didn’t do exactly as he was told.

“Unfortunately no. But I promise to do my best to make this situation tolerable for you.” Mercer grabbed the first bottle of mana and unplugged the cork. “If you start to feel any unusual increases in pressure, please tell me.” He placed the tip of the bottle to Hest’s lips and gently tilted it up.

The cool liquid rushed across Hest’s tongue and down his throat. With resistance futile, the inflated fox chugged.