

The Cleric's Euphoria: Chapter 012

By: Indigo Rho

Once again, Conway found himself left with nothing to do but stand around while Master Aldric attended to allegedly vital business. The alligator didn't expect the visit to end in anything but disappointment. Since the very beginning, the haphazard investigative team had been way out of their league, ordered to solve a crime with no witnesses, no suspects, and no comprehensible motive. Aldric was delusional if he thought a private chat with anyone in the Brewers Guild would miraculously offer him a lead.

Tossing around the occasional idea or theory was fine, but Conway wasn't being compensated enough to serve as Aldric's advisor, so he let the frustrated caribou grasp at whatever false hope he came upon.

At least Aldric had abandoned him somewhere interesting.

Conway had visited a handful of guildhalls in his travels, and the only thing they had in common was the blatant desire to display power and extravagance. The grandest resembled miniature palaces, cluttered with works of art and gilded nonsense. Despite the size and considerable decoration of the Brewers Guild's hall, Conway gave it a solidly average rating. The lack of magical displays and wall-to-wall marble prevented it from being truly outlandish in his mind.

Edmir maintained a pervasive presence in the hall's decor. Not even the Enchanters Guild placed their patron deity on such a pedestal. The place could've doubled as a temple; perhaps it would if Edmir's sanctuary continued to remain off-limits while the random inflation attacks were investigated.

As Conway admired the paintings and tapestries and art out of pure boredom, he couldn't shake the feeling every depiction of Edmir in the hall was staring directly at him. He brushed it off as a trick of the light, or an uncomfortable coincidence of his position. Then again, maybe there *was* a bit of magic in the art, to give the impression Edmir was always keeping a watch over his loyal brewers.

A loud back-and-forth argument nearby graciously distracted Conway from his unease.

"You're not listening to a word I'm saying," a brown bear insisted.

"No, *you're* the one who isn't listening!" the bat across from her snapped back. He was more rotund than her, though lacking much in the way of muscle. "You'll be making a huge mistake if you push ahead with this."

"My brew isn't a mistake! It's what'll finally earn me a promotion to master *and* secure the funding for my own brewery." The bear bristled. "Why can't you see that?"

“All I see is a ridiculous idea doomed to failure. If you present this to the other masters as a display of your skill, you’ll be laughed out of the room! Do you know how hard it’d be to get another promotion hearing if your reputation is soured?”

“The guild supports innovation.”

“Innovation with *practical* applications! And you don’t need to innovate to become a master, you just need to prove you’re capable of keeping a brewery in operation and meeting standards of quality.” The bat let out a sigh that wobbled his ample belly. “You should be looking for business partners.”

“Anyone can brew *good* beer—I want to brew *unique* beer. This brew will be my legacy within the guild.”

“For all the wrong reasons.”

“Master Adeline disagrees.”

The bat rubbed his brow. “Master Adeline taught us well, but she’s horrible at criticism. We practically had to coax it out of her at times during our apprenticeship.”

“Which is why I’d know if she was lying to me. Look, if I gave you a demonstration of the brew, I know you’d change your mind and realize how popular it could be and how the guild masters would approve of it. And best of all, I’d have no immediate competition.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. I’m sure plenty of jesters have dabbled in this sort of thing before.”

The bear snorted at the bat in a huff and turned her back on him, abruptly becoming aware of their small audience. She started to turn away but stopped, her eyes widening. A small smile came up on her face, and she hurried towards Conway, Tavo, and Vid.

Tavo considered a few methods for tripping and subduing a rampaging bear before stiffly reminding himself the women likely had no intention of attacking them. He shifted his attention to the closest tapestry in an effort to make his spying less obvious. Unfortunately for the viper, that meant ogling a scene of a dozen folk ballooned at a festival.

It was far too late to evade the bear’s attention. “Gentlemen, you aren’t part of the Brewers Guild, are you?” she asked.

“No, but we have permission to be here,” Conway replied with his usual lack of decorum.

“Our employer is meeting with a master of the guild. We’re just waiting for them to finish,” Tavo jumped in, intent on salvaging the conversation before Conway grew bored enough to make a scene just to pass the time.

“I didn’t mean to imply you were intruders. My name is Jean; I’m a journeyman in the Brewers Guild,” the bear said. Tavo and the others politely

returned the greeting. “If you have the time, would you be willing to sample a new beer I’ve brewed?”

The bat waddled up to the group. “Jean, this isn’t the place to thrust that absurd beer you brewed upon others. You’ll humiliate yourself. And probably them!”

“That’s their decision to make, Harris, not yours.” Jean positioned herself in front of the bat. “I’d very much appreciate a taste-tester or two. I assure you the quality’s exceptional.”

Uncertainty froze Tavo in place. He didn’t see the harm in having a quick drink of beer while Master Aldric was away, but the argument he’d overheard between Jean and Harris hinted at the beer having a rather questionable nature. She seemed desperate for help, though.

“Uh, what kind of beer is it, exactly?” Tavo asked. Hiding the fact he’d listened in on the conversation would be difficult, but he could at least not overtly admit to it.

“It’s bloat beer,” Jean said with a smile.

The tip of Tavo’s tail twitched. “Excuse me?” He heard Conway snicker behind him.

“Bloat beer.”

“That’s a bold name for a beer.” Tavo couldn’t help but remind himself brewers rarely bothered naming their beer. When they did, the name was either a boastful exaggeration or quite literal. But surely she hadn’t just asked him to try something that’d actually bloat him. Offers of that nature were the thing of Tavo’s fantasies—and a few nightmares centered around his humiliation and inevitable popping. Though even those had their flustering highlights.

“Well, the bloating’s the selling point, so I thought it best to get right to the point.”

“Oh.” Tavo’s tail wiggled about, betraying the viper’s excitement. If only he were dreaming. “I’m not a local, so inflation’s not, um, not my thing.” A stiff lie lacking in emotion, the kind of automated response Tavo had cultivated through years of repetition. He wished it were as believable as his others.

“I told you no one would be interested,” Harris said. “Why don’t we grab something to eat and plan a more reasonable approach to getting you promoted?”

“Just because an outsider’s unsure of the beer doesn’t mean the rest of Bexley will be.” Jean held her ground, splitting her attention between Harris and Tavo, who couldn’t escape the bear’s sights. “Bloat beer is perfect for celebrations, religious rituals, personal amusement—any event where inflating is either necessary or beneficial.”

“Not like there aren’t already a thousand ways to balloon,” Conway said. He got a kick out of watching Tavo twitch and vowed to do whatever it took to make sure his companion swelled before they left the guildhall.

Jean raised a finger in response. “True, but the vast majority of those methods require magic or alchemy. Magic is an unwelcome expense for those not blessed with the talent or connections. Alchemists sell a variety of inflation potions, but their stock tends to be limited as it’s considered a specialty product. My bloat beer is alchemical in nature, but the brewing process allows me to produce it in bulk and sell it at a lower price. Taverns could afford to keep a barrel or two for special occasions and particular customers.”

“It won’t profit enough to justify the investment in time.” Harris shook his head. “A few curious tavern keepers might purchase a barrel on a whim, but they won’t return for more once they realize the stuff doesn’t sell before it goes bad. And with everything that happened at the Sanctuary of Edmir recently, I can’t see there being any interest at all in beer that inflates you.”

“There will again once that’s blown over. It’s not like people never drank water again after Molder briefly turned his clerics into water balloons,” Jean said. She brushed Harris aside and loomed over Tavo. “Will you try my bloat beer? It’ll only round your belly out. Deflating you will be easy, and I guarantee this’ll put a smile on your face and everyone else’s as well.”

Just what Tavo was afraid of. Despite inflation being welcome—and even encouraged—in Bexley, the viper didn’t know if he wanted to be seen smiling wide while bloated. Conway would certainly give him a horrible time about it before, during, and long after. Yet it was also the perfect excuse to willingly inflate, a pleasure circumstances had denied him for what had felt like an eternity. He’d be blimping up to help out a member of the Brewers Guild, who were technically his allies. Though the chances of Jean having any involvement in the general investigation beyond possible guard duty were admittedly miniscule. Tavo hadn’t seen the bear at the sanctuary before, at least.

“Well, so long as you deflate me afterward.” Tavo strategically neglected to insist on any immediacy to the act.

“Thank you!” Jean jumped a little in excitement before bearing down upon Vid, who’d made the mistake of staying close. “And what about you?”

“Me?” Vid asked. Jean nodded enthusiastically at him. The flamingo waved his talons in dismissal. “I shouldn’t be bloating right now. Tavo’s more than enough for your test.”

Amusement had finally come to Conway, and the alligator refused to let it be diminished in any way. More than one balloon would grace the guildhall, he swore it. Time to see if his powers of persuasion worked as well on Vid as they did on Tavo. “What, Vid, afraid of a little bloating?”

Vid rolled his eyes. "I've no problem with inflation. It's just not something I should be doing while here on business."

"What business?" Conway laughed. "We're just standing around waiting for Aldric to finish his chat. Loosen up, we're just along for the ride today."

"Master Aldric might still need my assistance," Vid grunted. Getting left out of the private meeting had clearly gotten to him.

"We'll deflate you if it comes to that. I happen to be an expert at squeezing people down to size. Just ask Tavo." Conway slapped the viper hard on the back and delighted in watching him squirm at the implication.

"It's a beneficial skill to have with how often inflation is weaponized," Tavo swiftly answered.

"Then why don't *you* drink the beer?" Vid countered, crossing his arms.

"I wasn't asked, and it's easier for me to deflate someone if I'm not a blimp myself." Conway had deflated himself plenty of times while on the verge of a pressure daze, but the alligator had no intention of advertising that. "But if you're *that* nervous about a little bloating, I guess I can step up." He'd pegged Vid as the easily-pressured sort and hoped the flamingo didn't prove him wrong.

Vid scowled, and Conway knew he had him. "I'm not worried about inflating. I inflate all the time in order to test compression and clothing durability enchantments. So yes, I *will* sample the beer."

Conway held back the toothy grin he had on the inside. Perhaps he could have some fun with Vid after all.

"Thank you!" Jean bounced in joy as she secured her volunteers. The eager bear retrieved a large leather flask from her pack. "You'll want to undo belts, buttons, and clasps so nothing pops off when you swell. And don't worry, you won't expand large enough to tear any clothing, so long as you don't try to keep your belly completely covered or anything like that."

"My clothing's enchanted to stretch when I inflate," Tavo said. The viper's tail flicked about. "It's a practical investment with all the blimp-crazed mages we've faced in the past."

"Mine are enchanted, too. No reason not to, considering I'm an enchanter by trade," Vid said. The flamingo was just defensive enough about the matter for Conway to take note.

"That's perfect. Now I'll need both of you to take good, hearty gulps of the beer. Too little, and you'll barely puff up." Jean passed the flask to Tavo and Vid, who both cautiously drank as requested.

The first thing Tavo noticed about the beer was how bubbly it was. A rumbling belch escaped his lips mere seconds after finishing his drink, too swift for him to stifle. Vid smirked at him, but the flamingo burped even louder after his drink.

Tavo's stomach tingled and bubbled. There was a moment of pressure, followed by the promised bloating. Slow and steady, his middle ballooned outward, stretching his enchanted vest. He didn't fill with sloshing beer as expected, but instead felt a light fizzing from within. "It's not heavy," he muttered, somewhat mesmerized by his rounding middle. The experience never grew old.

"I wanted to ensure a cozy swell above all else," Jean proudly said. She kept a close eye on the rounding bellies of her volunteers, along with their reactions. She didn't ogle the ballooning the way Tavo stealthily did or silently tease as Conway was prone to. Satisfaction in the brew was her sole goal. "A special mixture added during the brewing process causes the beer to foam dramatically once drunk. Inflating with foam instead of liquid maximizes mobility and comfort and eases deflation afterward. There's no risk of gaining weight from digesting the beer if you're unable to deflate for whatever reason, along with a lower chance of accidentally damaging anything or anyone with an unintended belly bump."

"It's very pleasant so far," Tavo admitted. He resisted the urge to rub his bloating belly, though he did prod it with the tip of his tail more times than he'd have preferred. Most people didn't stand perfectly still when they inflated—even willingly—but there was a fine line between curiosity and admiration Tavo struggled with expressing whenever he swelled. "*Uworrrrrrrrrp!* Is the belching normal?"

Jean rubbed the back of her head. "It's a known side effect. That might make it less viable for use in serious rituals for the time being, but I'm certain I can tweak the recipe to reduce burping in time."

"Showing the masters a brew you haven't perfected would be a huge mistake," Harris hissed at Jean, failing to keep his voice down.

"The inflation's what matters, not the belching." Jean shot the bat a dirty look.

Burps echoing throughout the hall attracted the attention of those passing through, drawing them to the bloat beer demonstration. Tavo couldn't avoid the gazes of the newcomers, who formed a wide semi-circle to watch the viper and flamingo balloon. His face flushed red from mixed emotions. Having an audience embarrassed him, yet there was something strangely appealing about so many sets of eyes glued to his rounding belly. They wanted to see him grow nearly as much as he did, otherwise they'd have continued on their way without a second thought. It was a shame he couldn't embrace his excitement and play up the experience.

All it took to make the pointless trip to the guildhall worthwhile was a bit of peer pressure leading to internal pressure. Conway let himself grin wide as the audience formed. Vid was trying far too hard to come off as unfazed by

