

The Cleric's Euphoria: Chapter 011

By: Indigo Rho

Guildhalls could be the most extravagant buildings in Bexley, second only to palaces and temples. The hall of the Brewers Guild dominated a plaza a few minutes walk from the Sanctuary of Edmir, surrounded by the townhouses of wealthy merchants and brewers. The towering buildings cast long shadows over the statue of Edmir in the plaza.

Aldric felt like an invader at the head of his small squad of apprentices and assistants. He'd originally intended only to have Mira along, but another incident of euphoric blimping the night before had encouraged him to give the others a break from the repetitive tasks of rolling and examining balloons.

Four guards stood watch before the entrance to the guildhall, displaying a spread of boredom and exaggerated attentiveness across their faces. An unusual show of force, though Aldric couldn't tell if they were meant to protect the hall from an attack or to shoo away people demanding answers about what had happened at the sanctuary. A few words and a letter with Master Veek's personal seal allowed Aldric's group to pass without complaint.

Compared to the bustle of the streets outside, the cavernous main room of the guildhall was eerily subdued. Footsteps and whispered conversations echoed off the walls and traveled from one end of the room to the other.

Tapestries and portraits portrayed the glory of the brewing trade alongside religious scenes of the legends of Edmir. Inflation was a common theme, especially in regard to Edmir, who frequently appeared surrounded by drunk balloons he'd outwitted. Aldric gazed upon the larger-than-life depictions of the blimps, the moans and giggles of the victims at the sanctuary never far from his thoughts.

"Mira and I will talk with Master Veek alone," Aldric told the others when he spotted a lanky dragon clerk heading their way. He hoped a smaller audience would make Veek more cooperative and trusted Mira to catch whatever he missed. His companions didn't protest the order; Conway seemed fine standing around, while Tavo examined a particularly blimp-filled tapestry.

"Master Aldric?" the dragon asked. The caribou nodded in kind. "Master Veek did not expect such a large delegation." His eyes briefly darted to the others.

"All but my senior apprentice will be waiting here. We have other matters to attend to after this, and I didn't want to backtrack unnecessarily to collect them." Aldric supposed he didn't lie, as they'd be returning to the sanctuary together afterward. The clerk didn't need to know how eager they were to take a break from the mysterious expansive attacks. "I do hope that's alright."

The dragon again considered Aldric's companions before replying with a very cautious nod. "So long as they don't wander further than the great hall, that should be acceptable."

"Of course."

"Now, if you'd follow me."

Aldric and Mira accompanied the hasty clerk, struggling to keep up with his frantic pace. They went through a corridor and up a grand stone staircase, passing more grand displays of the guild's pride and wealth. Portraits of stern guild masters judged the visitors, while tapestries of vast fields dutifully gave an illusion of space.

The extravagance wasn't all that different from the hall of the Enchanters Guild, or any other prominent guilds, for that matter. Generations of masters poured their prosperity into guildhalls to solidify their legacies. One day, Aldric would add his own touch to the hall of the Enchanters Guild, perhaps as the likeness of a background figure in a painting. He simply hoped there'd be no need to portray him as a creaking sphere.

Master Veek's office was surprisingly quaint after the journey past statues, paintings, and floor-to-ceiling tapestries. A sturdy desk formed the focal point of the room, faced by a cushioned bench. A raised chair behind allowed the kobold to remain at eye level with taller species. The sole piece of decoration was a portrait of Veek dressed as richly as Imbard, holding a bundle of hops with a golden field stretching far in the distance.

The room was not—in Aldric's estimation—a place where much work was done. It was a sign of the kobold's high office in general, just like his seal and extra fringe of gold on his Brewers Guild badge. No guild master could afford to waste their days in the guildhall while there was business to be done. Veek likely only used the office for meetings.

"Welcome, Master Aldric," A sigh tinged Veek's voice. Dark circles hung under the kobold's eyes. Aldric noticed a pillow on one of the padded benches, which he surmised was just long enough to serve as an impromptu bed for a kobold.

"I'm grateful for your time, Master Veek." Aldric gave a slight bow and took a seat in front of the desk as the clerk silently left.

"Your message stated you wanted to speak with me in private," Veek said. While he didn't look at Mira, there was no doubt who he was talking about.

"Mira's my senior apprentice and on the cusp of becoming a journeyman. As circumstances have limited the Enchanters Guild's presence in this investigation, I consider her input to be invaluable." And Aldric knew he'd require her support if Veek chose to be stubborn.

Veek closed his eyes and exhaled. “Understood. What did you need to discuss? I don’t mean to rush you, but I’ve had little in the way of free time lately.”

Aldric had practiced his speech over and over in his head, but now he faced an audience who could casually dismiss him if he so pleased. All he could do was trust Veek to be a sensible man. “Thorough and repeated examinations of the victims from all three attacks have offered us a trove of information—mainly on what the spell *isn’t*. It’s not an enchantment, hex, or berrification. It’s not multiple spells woven together, so it’s not something we can undo piece by piece. It’s very unlikely to be temporary, as the spell only shows signs of growth, not degradation.”

“Things you’ve told me before that didn’t require a meeting like this,” Veek said.

Aldric was losing the kobold’s attention fast. He’d thought to ease into the conversation, but he’d never get to the meat of it if Veek dismissed him early. “The truth is, we require more information about the victims themselves in order to proceed. Otherwise, we’ll have to blindly grasp at theories until we stumble upon something correct—which isn’t a guarantee. I’d much rather have a light to guide me in this search.” The caribou took a deep breath and readied himself. “Considering the clerics of Edmir are brewers, it makes sense to ask about them at the Brewers Guild.”

“I’m afraid you’ve misunderstood the relationship between us and the Sanctuary of Edmir,” Veek said. It wasn’t any of the answers Aldric had expected. “While the clerics are brewers and are associated with our guild, they aren’t proper members.”

“I don’t quite follow.” Degrees of membership didn’t exist within the Enchanters Guild. You were either part of the guild—and thus allowed to enchant in Bexley—or not—and therefore forced underground to illegally enchant for questionable clients. Aldric had never had reason to believe the other guilds of the city worked differently.

“The clerics are clerics of the sanctuary first and foremost, and brewers second. Religious orders are exempt from direct guild control, even when they engage in business we ordinarily regulate. I’m of the impression the number of clerics at the sanctuary who are actively involved in brewing varies from year to year. Some focus exclusively on the ritual sacrifices. Occasionally some will work as beer tasters.

“We do not wish to impose upon the servants of our god, so the sanctuary is afforded a high degree of independence. We send masters over a few times a year to inspect their equipment and observe their brewing practices, but that is it all. We don’t even maintain records of their members.” Veek’s tail smacked

against the back of his chair. “Despite the concerns of my peers, I’m unsure if greater oversight would’ve prevented this.”

Aldric tried not to let his disappointment show. He’d come expecting the Brewers Guild to know the ins and outs of the sanctuary, even if they had no intention of revealing anything to him. “Regardless, I’d assume your guild has greater contact with the clerics of the sanctuary than anyone else. I understand this may be a sensitive question, which is one of the reasons I wanted to talk with you in private, but are you aware of any,” Aldric struggled to find the most diplomatic word, “disagreements between the clerics and guild members?”

Veek scowled. “The relationship between the sanctuary and the guild is none of your concern.”

“It is if it played any role in the sanctuary being attacked.” Aldric stood his ground. “Every cleric of that sanctuary was filled to the brim with beer during a ritual meant to honor both their patron god and yours. Some might say that’s a rather damning statement against the clerics.”

“And there were two more attacks afterward that had nothing to do with the clerics of Edmir, or any other deity for that matter,” Veek snapped back.

“But they *did* have to do with beer. First there were the two drunks inflated while being punished, then the two porters who were found ballooned while delivering beer.” Aldric shifted in the uncomfortable silence that followed. Thanks to the telltale surge in the spell's power, everyone at the sanctuary had become aware of the third attack the moment it happened. Waiting to learn how many new victims would roll in had been horrible. The fact there’d once again only been two had been a slight consolation. “Master Veek. From my own experiences, I know disputes within guilds are inevitable. I don’t mean to challenge the integrity of the Brewers Guild or accuse you of widespread wrongdoing. I merely want to narrow down the potential sources of this spell so we can return the victims to normal. We can’t abandon them to be drunken spheres forever.”

Veek didn’t snarl or shout. The kobold slowly collected himself. “A very, *very* small minority of our members complain about the sanctuary clerics’ unique situation. They assume the guild is missing out on fees or question whether or not guild members deserve preferential treatment when it comes to arranging offerings or rituals. But those are just grumblings. Nothing that could remotely lead to a response on the scale of the attack on the sanctuary.”

“Since the clerics aren’t complete members of the guild, is there a chance someone considered them competition?”

Veek laughed so hard he coughed. “No. The clerics only brew beer for sale in the city, and Bexley’s overflowing with inns, taverns, alehouses, and cookshops thirsty for liquor. If anything, we need *more* local sellers, not less. Our best brewers exclusively export their beer, and that’s where the real competition

is.” The kobold scoffed. “Before this investigation, most of my time outside my brewery was spent mediating disputes between the exporters.”

“I didn’t realize there was any difference between breweries aside from quantity and quality.” Aldric hated to admit he’d hoped to learn of some enmity between the clerics and the guild—anything that might shed the tiniest bit of light on the culprit. Instead, he’d only managed to eliminate another potential lead.

“Brewing can be as diverse as any other profession. Some breweries specialize entirely in beer infused with magic. I’ve seen brews nearly as potent as mana potions.” Pride slipped through Veek’s stern facade. It was the closest Aldric had seen the kobold to being happy.

Mira perked up. “Master Veek. I have a question, if you’d permit it?”

“Go ahead.”

“Between the infused brews and the alcomancers, the Brewers Guild is clearly no stranger to magic. I overheard some guild members talking the other day about how the victims at the sanctuary reminded them of their time in the cellar. I didn’t get the feeling they were talking about a regular cellar,” Mira said.

Veek bristled, and his snout twitched. Aldric half-expected him to explode on the apprentice, but the kobold reined himself in—barely. “That is a wholly inappropriate topic for any member of the guild to casually discuss with an outsider during a crisis like this. I’d discipline them in an instant if I knew their names!”

“They didn’t tell me anything about it directly,” Mira said. The sabertooth cat remained calm under Veek’s sudden barrage. “They forgot I was on the other side of one of the balloons and clammed up once I was back in their line of sight.”

“Master Veek, if you’re aware of anything even remotely similar to the spell cast on the victims, then we need to know,” Aldric insisted. Mira had stumbled into a lead, and he wasn’t about to let Veek quench it. He’d continue pushing until he was dragged out of the guildhall if need be.

“I assure you, it’s nothing,” Veek hissed.

“Would Master Imbard agree with that?” Aldric asked. He loathed to invoke the pompous gryphon’s name, but he felt he had no other choice.

Veek narrowed his gaze at Aldric. “Any sensible person would agree, but I can’t risk Master Imbard jumping to conclusions and derailing our investigation in favor of an easy but incorrect answer.” The aggravated kobold clenched his fists and took deep breaths. “Let me show you what those guild members were referring to when they made the outrageous and frankly reckless comparison to what happened at the sanctuary.”

“That would be much appreciated,” Aldric said. The air between him and Veek remained tense.

Veek slid off his chair with a wobble. He escorted Aldric and Mira out of his office and down two sets of stairs into the cool basement of the guildhall. They stopped before a pair of unassuming double doors.

“I’m breaking a number of protocols by showing you this, but I’ve convinced myself the alternative would be worse,” Veek said bitterly. The kobold appeared more tired than ever, though Aldric couldn’t tell if it was due to the dim light of the basement or their terse conversation. “I expect you both to be discreet about what you see.”

Veek pushed open the doors.

Six wobbling balloons filled what looked to be a storeroom. Dread shook Aldric as he initially feared the six were additional victims of whatever had struck the sanctuary. The differences swiftly became apparent. The blimps in the storeroom sloshed audibly, but they bore expressions of a drunken daze, not the ceaseless bliss of the victims he’d been attending to. They were inflated with some kind of liquor, for certain, but they weren’t additional victims.

“What exactly are we looking at, Master Veek?” Aldric asked.

“Discipline,” Veek replied. He waddled up to a swollen weasel and examined them, apparently content all was well. “A guild lives and dies by its reputation. When a brewer betrays the trust of a customer or embarrasses us, it hurts the entire guild. Sometimes, public punishment only worsens the situation. If possible, we prefer to discipline the culprits in a manner that safeguards our reputation while ensuring the violation isn’t repeated.

“These six are all journeymen in the guild. Four of them were involved in a very public and embarrassing argument that narrowly avoided the intervention of the city watch. One misrepresented his skills to breweries to improve his chances of being hired on, which led to poor-quality batches of beer. The last was caught attempting to bribe a taste tester.”

“You have my apologies, Master Veek,” Mira said, flush with embarrassment. “The guild members who mentioned this place made it sound far more similar to the situation at the sanctuary.”

“Which is exactly why I’m channeling my frustration towards them rather than you,” Veek grunted. The ‘cellars,’ as they so aptly called it, are supposed to lessen mistrust in our guild. If rumors about this spread around, half the city would be convinced we were behind the sanctuary attack within a week. Too many already do.”

Curiosity got the better of Aldric. He focused his senses on the closest blimp and felt magic within them, though it was neither divine nor anywhere on the level of what he’d seen at the sanctuary. “What are they filled with, exactly?”

“Beer. They drink a concoction that creates a reaction similar to berrification, causing them to swell with beer for a few days. And no, the effects

aren't permanent; we worked with the Berrymancers Guild to ensure that," Veek said with a huff.

Aldric nodded. "Do you believe there's even a remote possibility our culprit intended their spell to mimic this punishment?"

"No," Veek firmly replied. "This punishment isn't widely known outside of the guild. And if our guild contained any mage powerful enough to cast the spell keeping the victims ballooned, we'd know about it," he said with finality.

Aldric accepted Veek's answer for the sake of their fragile relationship. He couldn't imagine an alcomancer of such skill hiding their abilities from the rest of the guild. "By chance, have you learned anything about the victims targeted outside of the sanctuary?"

"Nothing eye-opening." Veek seemed to deflate as he sighed. "The two drunks are carpenters. According to some painfully chatty acquaintances of theirs, when the pair aren't fighting each other, they're fucking each other. They lack any meaningful enemies, though their neighbors are glad to be rid of them for a while. The tavern they patronized before the incident isn't considered a trouble spot, either. As for the porters, they've been known to slack off, but that's it. If there's any connection between the victims, I'm simply not seeing it."

"None of us are," Aldric admitted. "Which means we'll have to keep waiting until our culprit or culprits slip up and give us something to work with."

"Wonderful. Absolutely fucking wonderful." Veek rubbed his brow. "Imbard's going to love hearing that."

"These are extraordinary circumstances. We're doing the best we can with the resources we have."

"It sure doesn't feel that way to me," Veek said.

Aldric wished he could disagree.