

The Mana Vessel: Chapter 013

By: Indigo Rho

Tavo wrapped his tail tightly around his waist to prevent it from making noise. One inopportune flick could snap branches and rustle leaves, giving away his and Conway's position in the thick brush outside the manor walls.

Stakeouts relaxed the viper. They meant a lot of sitting around with sharp eyes and open ears. They gave him time to think. No worrying about Conway rushing him along from one hectic objective to the next. No back-and-forth threats bound to end with blades drawn and bellies swelling with water. As lovely as swelling was, he couldn't enjoy it in the heat of battle. If only he had an excuse to inflate while on a stakeout. Unfortunately, balloons tended to attract attention, especially in the forest at night.

The real challenge was convincing Conway to sigh quieter. The alligator squatted beside him, digging trenches in the dirt with a finger. Conway grew bored quickly and didn't care for subtlety. He wouldn't purposely ruin the stakeout, but he'd definitely complain about it afterward and veto the next attempt to approach a job carefully. Oh well, he'd endure the cursing chaos later.

Distant giggling broke the silence. Tavo remained perfectly still, eyes locked on the direction of the voices. A skunk and a red panda strolled along the outer perimeter of the wall, arms locked together. The skunk leaned against his partner, chuckling about something. Both carried a jug of liquor and swayed enough to show they'd already indulged. The red panda also held a lantern, bathing them in flickering light.

Tavo recognized them from the ambush. And from his recent spying on both the village and the manor. He rarely saw them apart; they didn't hide their attraction. Or their love of sneaking off to drink and fuck while on duty. Quiet estates like Lartonberry rarely needed to worry about thieves, creating a laid-back culture among the guards. Tavo's mentors had taught him to always take advantage of such complacency. So many nobles silenced in the night because their guards underestimated potential threats and left deadly openings.

The skunk raised his jug and chugged. Liquor dribbled down the sides of his muzzle and onto his padded armor. He belched. "Nothing, Paul. Still—*urrrp*—nothing. Not even a fucking 'good job helping us secure the balloon, Kent.' Fuck him."

"I keep telling you, you need to wait for Tamblyn to cool down. The Lord's driving him up a wall with all that talk about expanding the guard and making the place more defensible," Paul said. The red panda clung tightly to the skunk. "Or bring it up to Cynbert. Maybe he can approve that reward you were promised?"

Kent's scoff turned into a belch. "Bastard's only good at securing food, not gold. He'd get me my weight in pastries. Then *I'd* be the balloon."

"He's not that bad."

"He gets special treatment! They let him live in the village while the rest of us are stuck here."

"He's got a wife and kids. Don't tell me you want to deal with that in the barracks. And we don't have to worry about leaking roofs here. Or the smell of sheep on their way to market."

"I guess." Kent took another swig of liquor. "No one bugs him about being drunk on the job."

"He's a lot better at hiding it than some fluffballs I know," Paul said, playfully tapping Kent on the shoulder.

"I only got caught once!"

"Only once by Tamblyn, and you're lucky he didn't make you waddle around with a keg of ale in your belly after. The rest of us *always* notice when you're tipsy on duty."

"Speaking of fucking Tamblyn, he never gives Cynbert crap, either! That's playing favorites."

"Because Cynbert gutted that dumb recruit who tried to gut Tamblyn over missing silverware." Paul put the lantern down and slid his arms around Kent. "Enough about Tamblyn and Cynbert and everyone else. Let's just focus on us." He slowly backed Kent against the wall and gave him a deep kiss. They groped each other with their free paws as they kissed over and over again.

When they finally pulled away, Kent burped. "Hope you're ready, 'cause I could fuck you all night. Just gotta piss first." He stumbled off around a corner into the darkness.

"Always the romantic," Paul snorted. He drank from his jug and slipped off his armor.

Tavo tapped Conway twice on the shoulder—the sign he was ready to make a move—and slid silently out of the brush. Paul kept vigil for Kent, oblivious to the danger in the quiet forest. He didn't notice the viper slithering up behind him until a claw clamped shut around his muzzle, and fangs pierced his neck. His paws twitched a partial magical incantation, which Tavo interrupted with a crushing grip.

Paul jerked in pain. Tavo coiled his tail around himself and his target, pinning them together. Paul's eyes suddenly widened, along with his middle. The red panda's ballooning belly slowly loosened Tavo's coils.

Tavo's face reddened as he felt Paul's gut grow in his grasp. The steadily rounding globe pushed away at him, fighting to be freed. *Bigger*, he thought to himself, willing the red panda to expand. *Bigger, bigger, bigger, bigger!* He'd had

to take a hands-off approach with Cynbert, but now he could experience every wonderful moment of his target's inflation. He parted his coils to frame Paul's belly. Tensing his tail gave the ball a sharp wobble and made Paul squirm.

But the next squirm was weaker. And so was the one after that. Paul slumped in Tavo's grip, struggling erratically on instinct.

Tavo released his bite. The puncture marks were sealed as the red panda's body started puffing up. He'd injected Paul with one of his favorite venoms. Not only did it inflate the target, but it sent them into a stupor as well. Dazed victims didn't call for help or flee. They only swayed and ballooned. And, in this case, eventually floated off. Ideal for stealthily dealing with someone, so long as there wasn't a roof over their head or bystanders looking skyward.

Tavo could've let the red panda go—Paul had nowhere to go but up—but he clung to the swelling balloon, eager to feel him blow up. He would be his balloon for a short while longer, to squeeze and prod and fantasize about. Then he'd belong to the sky. An unfortunate but unavoidable necessity.

What little clothing Paul hadn't removed before inflating ripped apart. Lost in swirling thoughts, the red panda swelled into a helpless, round balloon. Tavo finally released him. He took a drunken shuffle forward, but his foot never touched the ground. He rolled forward and upward, drifting in the air with a confused moan.

Tavo gave his balloon one last poke before darting back into the bushes.

"You were holding onto him so tight, I thought you were gonna make out with him," Conway grunted upon Tavo's return.

"I was simply keeping him from alerting his companion," Tavo hissed. But Conway saw him biting his lip and holding his tail close.

"Took your damn time, too. Don't think I haven't gotten a feel for how long it takes for that venom to leave someone out of it." After waiting hours in the dark in total silence, Conway needed to entertain himself, and teasing Tavo served that purpose wonderfully.

Tavo gulped. "While I'm grateful for your confidence, my venoms don't always cooperate. Ingredients can go bad unexpectedly, or my body can alter the concoctions negatively. I couldn't risk him exhibiting resistance and getting away. A single shout would've ruined our ambush."

"Yet all that creaking didn't."

"He didn't creak that much," Tavo said. He narrowed his eyes, though, doubt creeping into his mind.

The creaks had been relatively quiet. Not that Conway would tell Tavo that. The uncertainty would get a few more amusing grimaces out of the viper. "From my vantage here in this dumb bush, I swore you clung to him just so you could get some gropes in."

“You’re mistaken,” Tavo squeaked.

“Sure. Oh look, lover boy’s back.” Conway elbowed Tavo, even though the gesture was completely unnecessary, and pointed at the wall.

Pissing hadn’t improved Kent’s coordination, and he zig-zagged the whole way to Paul’s abandoned lantern. The skunk looked left, then right, then spun himself around, falling on his ass. “Where’d ya go?” he mumbled.

Conway glanced up. Clouds snuffed out the moons and the stars, turning the sky into a dark, splotchy mess. Paul was somewhere up there, hidden by the night. No chance of Kent catching sight of him, then.

“Paul?” Confusion plastered the drunk skunk’s face. “Paul?” He dragged himself to his feet, leaving his empty liquor jug behind. After a painfully disoriented search, he found the clothes Paul had taken off in preparation for their fun. Torn pants lay near them.

“Paul? This...this isn’t funny anymore.”

Conway disagreed. The bored alligator basked in the fear brewing within Kent. A sober person would’ve understood the meaning of the shredded pants and worried about how their missing friend had inflated and where they’d ended up. They might have even looked for scattered hide scraps. But booze addled Kent’s mind, and the skunk fought to figure out why he was so nervous.

Panic, fucker. It’s the least you deserve for trying to send me to the afterlife through the damn clouds.

Satisfied, Conway manifested orbs of water and hurled them at the skunk, binding his paws and muzzle like he had the mouse back at the roadside inn. A flick of his wrist lifted Kent off the ground. He cracked his back and left the brush.

Tavo hurried after him. “Conway, we agreed beforehand that I’d sneak up on both of them and inject my venom.”

“Unless we lost the element of surprise. Then I’d bind them the old-fashioned way.”

“The old-fashioned way would mean ropes, not water you made appear out of thin air.”

“Creating water’s more complicated than that. And this *is* the old-fashioned way for us. We don’t keep rope on us.”

“We really should. And when did we lose the element of surprise?”

“The moment he spotted the pants that red panda burst out of. You should’ve waited until he’d stripped to inflate him.”

“Grappling a nude person is awkward. Less to hang onto.”

“What, afraid to grab a dude by the dick to subdue him?” In Conway’s experience, nothing dropped an opponent faster.

“The goal was to inflate him and let him drift away. That didn’t require anything so...vulgar.”

“Yeah, just a lot of important belly fondling while this one was only an empty bladder away,” Conway snickered.

“The red panda would’ve inflated at the exact same rate regardless of the grapple I applied to him, and my timing was perfect. Had the skunk returned earlier than anticipated, you would’ve been able to secure him just as you did.” Tavo resisted looking upward to get a last, fleeting glimpse of the balloon he’d set adrift. “The venom quietly disposed of the target, did it not?”

“Sure.” Conway wanted to overfill the pair with water and be done with it, but the noise of the detonation was an issue, and dragging two heavy balloons through the woods was a hassle. Sharp branches and narrow gaps between trunks would’ve burst them before they got out of range, anyway. “And I guess it’s only fitting that we send them soaring after they tried to do the same to us.”

Conway turned his sights on the captive skunk, who thrashed against his watery bindings. Enough sense remained in his drunken skull to assume the worst had befallen his companion and that he’d be next.

Gods, nothing felt better than revenge.

“What, don’t like hovering in the air?” Conway asked Kent. “Then maybe you should’ve made sure me and my friend here didn’t float back down after you darted us in the woods. I like feeling my feet on solid ground about as much as I hate being turned into a balloon. Fortunately, I’m damn resilient, and have been blessed with the skills to deal with those who cross me. And once you’re up, up, and away, I’ll only have one fucker left to get revenge on.

“First, I filled that dumb mouse with water until he sprung a nasty leak.” Kent’s struggles briefly ceased as he learned of Cob’s fate. “Then Tavo pumped your buddy up with venom.”

“Actually, I filled him with a gas very similar to air, which the venom tricks the body into producing in excess. He’d have sloshed if he was full of venom,” Tavo corrected.

Deep breath. “And now *he’s* gonna turn you into a babbling, bloated, blimp. All because you chose the wrong balloon to steal.”

“He’s just a guard, Conway, he wouldn’t have made the ultimate decision to take the mana vessel. Lord Lochland must be the mastermind, and he and the others were simply deemed most capable of securing the prize.”

“If these fools are Lochland’s best, then I say we storm the place and grab the balloon now. They must have gotten lucky when they hit us on the road earlier.” So much for being outwitted by someone competent. Smart enough to stage an ambush, too stupid to avoid getting picked off one by one.

“We also agreed we wouldn’t rush into things and risk the vessel, remember?” Tavo couldn’t let Conway’s impatience snowball into barreling through the manor. Success emboldened the alligator to do dangerous things, which often led to a lot of shouting, screams, and general chaos.

“From now on, let’s escort less fragile cargo. If I need to do any rescuing, I want to be able to throw them over my shoulder, not roll them out and pray they don’t explode.” The whole fiasco was trying his patience.

“Or we can be more vigilant. That’s what caused this trouble in the first place.” Tavo walked up to the squirming skunk and bit him on the wrist, injecting his special venom. “Though hopefully the Henge will consider hiring more security going forward. The vessel *is* a particularly valuable cargo.”

Kent’s belly puffed out. The freshly repaired threads holding his armor buckles together snapped, exposing his middle. His thrashing renewed in earnest.

“So that one only took a little nibble to swell?”

“I had to maintain a firm hold on the red panda until the daze kicked in.”

“A-huh. And don’t try to blame all this shit on us. We got bad info.”

“We could’ve done better. We did spend a lot of time chatting when we should’ve been keeping watch.”

“Keep the criticism to yourself. I’m not gonna take the fall and let our client stiff us on the payment once we return their precious balloon to them.”

Rips and tears filled the silence between their squabbles. Kent wobbled in terror as he rounded out, helpless against the swelling. Soon, the venom robbed him of his fear and much in the way of thought at all.

Tavo poked the skunk’s spherical middle with his tail.

“Just can’t help yourself, can you?” Conway teased.

Tavo snapped his tail back, wrapping it around his legs so it’d behave itself. “I’m making sure he’s inflated the proper amount. Negligence leads to venoms that are too weak or too potent. If it doesn’t make the victim float off, then what’s the point? The same can be said about it bursting people outright. Specialized venoms require considerable care.”

Few things were as embarrassing as accidentally popping someone you were supposed to capture for interrogation. A fellow apprentice was kept inflated for a month straight after making that mistake. Or at least he would’ve stayed inflated that long had he not accidentally popped after three weeks.

“Give me a holler when you’re done doing your very legitimate and serious tests. I think he’s ready for his one-way trip to the clouds. I can feel him tugging at my bindings.”

“The venom’s potency is satisfactory. You’re free to let him go.” Tavo waved a claw at the skunk dismissively. He badly wanted to have a few more minutes

with the balloon, but Conway already had too many suspicions about his interests. Oh well.

Conway loosed his hold on the water, causing it to lose form and splash to the ground. Kent darted skyward, never to feel the touch of solid earth again.

“You sure we can’t just barge in tonight and get it over with?” Conway asked. “I won’t pop everyone we come across.” Unless they gave him good reason to, and there were a lot of reasons to reduce someone to scraps.

“Not everyone in the manor will be as tipsy and horny as these two were.” Tavo kept his eyes on Kent, watching the balloon slowly shrink into the dark night. “Even if the guards don’t give us trouble, rampaging through a lord’s manor will cause problems. We might get bounties again. Or the vessel might burst in the escape.”

“If the balloon’s that important to them, they won’t pop him.”

“I’m more concerned you might swing too wide with a blade again.”

Conway rolled his eyes. “I’ve done that twice. Twice! Out of how many thousands of swings?”

“One of those swings hit me.”

“I kept you from bleeding out.”

“You left a rather long scare.”

“Scars are attractive.”

Tavo frowned. “Are you flirting with me again?”

“I never was, you idiot.” Conway smacked Tavo so hard on the back, he nearly knocked the viper over. “Come on, let’s get some sleep. We’ve gotta look our best when we join the manor guard tomorrow.”

The pair gathered up the clothing, jugs, and lantern the swollen guards had left behind, removing all trace of their sudden demise.

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“The gods are shining their favor down upon us all today, boys. If you say your prayers and make the right offerings, they’ll come through. I always say that!” Cynbert told Conway and Tavo for the first time. His padded armor showed no signs of wear, though the buckles strained around his round middle. The dalmatian looked like he’d never had to do anything more strenuous as a guard than salute his lord and wrangle his belt. Yet apparently he’d put his sword to good use before.

The manor disappointed Conway. For all the effort that went into defending it—walls, isolation, a full guard contingent—it didn’t stand out from any of the other country estates he’d found himself in. The views were nonexistent, the bulk of the interior felt dreary, and every painting, tapestry, and

sculpture depicted the same gaudy tiger, who Conway could only assume was Lord Lochland.

He still wished they'd barged in and grabbed the balloon. They might have to if the guard captain recognized them. As far as Conway knew, the elephant named Tamblyn was the only survivor of the group that'd ambushed them in the woods. If they were lucky, he hadn't paid much attention to them before they blimped up. If they were even luckier, they'd have an excuse to reduce him to scraps. Conway hated leaving certain jobs unfinished.

"The gods might have given us their blessings, but you're the one giving us work," Conway said. Flattery, always flattery. Make someone feel like they're the center of the world, and they'll ignore every warning sign. Like how two guards mysteriously vanished right after two strangers came forward looking for jobs. But he and Tavo were heroes in Cynbert's mind, so the dalmatian didn't direct even a hint of suspicion their way.

"I'm glad I got a chance to repay you two so soon. Otherwise, I'd be listening to the guard whine for weeks about extra work while I scrounge around for replacements. I'm sure you've noticed how small Lartonberry is," Cynbert said with a laugh.

"It's, uh, very quaint," Tavo answered.

"Sure is. We've hired every damn able-bodied person in the area who isn't content herding or hunting, and that's not nearly enough to suit the good Lord Lochland's needs. We're lucky most people stick with the work. Except for those two bastards who ran off in the middle of the night. They left the front gate unguarded when they did. Absolutely ridiculous! Captain Tamblyn's sworn he'll show them no mercy if they come crawling back." Cynbert looked over his shoulder, pinching his second chin with his muzzle. "Never get on the bad side of an elephant who can inflate you till you pop in only a few breaths."

"I wouldn't dare." Tavo gulped conspicuously. Good thing Cynbert mistook his interest for fear.

"Can't say I'd ever want to give up steady work. Guarding a manor like this is far more satisfying than wandering around doing whatever labor people will pay us for. I'd like to say I've pushed my last plow," Conway said.

"I can guarantee you that much, at least. Plows are a rare sight in Lartonberry. Too hilly for crops! Just follow your orders and show respect towards the lord, and you'll be fine."

Conway smiled, secretly thinking of how comically easy deceiving Cynbert had been. Friendly words and a fake rescue, and suddenly they were palling around a noble's manor like they weren't strangers. Clearly, Lartonberry faced little in the way of threats. Probably just poachers and petty thieves; no one on Conway and Tavo's level. They were in for a very rude awakening.

