

The Temporary Mana Bottle

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The sun shone through the canopy of the Rainwood, warming the worn road that weaved its way between the trees. In the distant past it had been a major thoroughfare, vital for trade between cities of the old Lokretian Republic. Now it only led to ruins. Fortunately the road had been built to last, much to the relief of the two mages traveling it.

The mages were from the nearby Rainwood Academy. In the lead was August, a black-and-white lion who was a professor at the college. A specialist in illusions, the cloak he wore over his vest and shirt was a purely magical construct meant to shield him from the occasional rain. In his wake was Aster, a black cat and post-graduate student actively working to advance his sigil magic abilities. He wore a bright robe in contrast to August, white and gold that covered his tunic.

“Have we managed to get any closer?” Aster asked. “It feels like we've been walking for ages!”

“Oh it's not *that* bad,” August insisted. “And you should be able to sense the magic just as well as I can, so you know we're getting close.”

The professor was right. He could feel the vague presence of the mysterious magic object they'd been sent to investigate, but his senses weren't precise enough to determine an exact distance.

“Or you can just divine its location so we know if we should stop for lunch soon,” Aster said.

August opened his mouth to make a snarky remark, but quickly realized the logic in the student's suggestion. From a pouch on his belt he pulled out a crystal ball, perfectly smooth and clear. He considered himself passable at divination, particularly when using spherical objects as his focus. Some of his colleagues liked to poke fun at the fact, but he took pride in the unusual affinity. He held the crystal ball in one paw, gazing through it in the direction of the magic source while funneling some of his own mana into it. In his mind a map began to form, mostly featureless but depicting both his own location and that of his goal.

“We'll reach it in about an hour.” August put away the crystal ball. “Surely you can wait till then to eat.”

Aster begrudgingly agreed. “Alright, but we're not heading back until I've had my fill!”

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August's prediction proved true, and an hour later the mages were wandering down a side path of the old road, near the flattened ruins of what may have been an inn at one point. The aura of magic was so strong they couldn't easily pinpoint its source. August began to wonder if it was coming from a large ward or charm, something created alongside the inn that'd managed to outlast it. Such a thing would be rather impossible to simply take back with them, unfortunately.

Then they heard the trickling sound. It was like a small waterfall, but no stream was in sight. Aster followed the noise to an area of thick overgrowth, pulling away vines and leaves. A wide grin came across his face.

“I found the artifact, Professor!”

August quickly joined the student. The remains of a large fountain stood before them, only partially intact. Long ago it had consisted of four jugs emptying out over a basin, but now only one remained, and the bright blue substance flowing from its mouth certainly wasn't water. To test his suspicions the lion cupped his paws beneath the flow and collected the glowing liquid, giving it a sniff before gulping some down.

“It's mana!” August laughed. “Very pure, and has a decent taste for something coming out of an old fountain.”

Aster couldn't resist a sip himself. The mana sent a light, chill through his body, waking him up in a way similar to coffee. “Oh wow, it *is* good! But I wonder why it took so long for it to be detected?”

“Might have just started flowing again recently. Maybe a spell designed to regulate when it starts and stops finally failed. Won't know for certain until we've had a team examine it further.” August shrugged. “All we can do now is take back a sample of the mana it's producing.”

“Unless you've been hiding a keg or a pile of waterskins I doubt we'll be able to bring back much,” Aster said. “Though maybe they'll accept a bellyful!”

While the student laughed an idea came to the professor. August smiled at Aster, his gaze drifting to the cat's middle. “That's an excellent idea Aster, and thank you for volunteering! From what I've seen you can literally be a waddling keg at times.”

Aster's face flushed red immediately, the cat trying but failing to speak for a good moment or two. “That was a joke! You can't just treat me like an empty bottle!”

“So that was a different black cat I saw in a white and gold robe with glowing sigils on his middle rolling himself out of the Bleating Blimp Inn, then?” August delighted in how the student squirmed. He knew how much Aster enjoyed expanding—a passion they both shared.

“T-that's not what I meant!” Aster replied. “I mean I don't see why I should have to guzzle down a bunch of mana if the Academy's just gonna send dedicated researchers here later.”

“The larger the sample we have the better prepared the researchers will be once they arrive. And besides, as my assigned assistant you are obligated to follow my definitely-reasonable commands.”

Aster scowled, but didn't bother arguing any further. The Professor was *technically* correct, and he didn't want to risk the lion taking a more direct approach in getting his way.

“Ugh, fine,” Aster relented. “But I'm not drinking myself to immobility! I've gotta at least be able to waddle on my own.”

“Deal,” August said. “Aren't you glad I kept my promise that we wouldn't leave until you were full?”

Aster shot a glare the lion's way before sighing and facing the fountain. Cupping the mana in his paws would be an obnoxiously long process, so he decided to just drink straight from the source. The cat pressed his lips over the stone jug's spout and began to gulp, the mana pouring down his throat and into his belly. His ears perked up as he felt the mana pooling within him, filling his stomach and causing it to expand.

Almost immediately his chubby middle started ballooning outward. Aster's tunic had looked just large enough to fit him perfectly before, but it stretched to contain his growing belly with ease. He was far too prone to expansion to *not* enchant his clothing with a fair bit of elasticity.

Despite his earlier protests his tail flicked around in glee as his gut swelled, gently bouncing and sloshing from the torrent of mana. The more he drank the better it tasted, and he felt as if he were being rejuvenated, energized. He almost wanted to forgo his promise to remain mobile, if only to experience the boost in his magic.

Aster's paws drifted to his belly as he continued bloating, idly rubbing his middle. It was wonderful feeling it expand in his grasp, growing heavier and heavier. He came close to losing himself in the joy of it all, until his gut pressing against the fountain snapped him from his daze.

The cat wobbled away from the fountain, licking the few remaining drops of mana from his lips in the process. His belly was huge, a ball that glowed the faintest blue in between the gaps of his tunic. He looked down upon it with awe, grinning as he gave it adoring rubs. Aster had nearly forgotten the professor was there until August cleared his throat.

“Great job gathering the sample Aster! I'll have to keep you in mind next time I'm in need of a bottle.” August gave the student's belly a teasing poke, prompting Aster to blush.

“This isn't gonna be a regular—uorrrrp—thing!” Aster insisted, a blue wisp of smoke escaping his mouth along with the burp.

“Whatever you say Kegster,” August chuckled. “Though now that you're nicely filled up, why don't we head on back to the Academy. You've got a long waddle ahead of you.”

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Naturally the journey back home proceeded at a noticeably slower pace than the journey there. Aster cradled his belly in his paws, working hard to prevent the sloshy mass from knocking him over. At first the constant sensation of mana splashing within him was odd, but he'd soon grown accustomed to it, gradually ignoring it completely. Thankfully he didn't feel the least bit exhausted, fueled by massive store of mana.

All that shaking was causing a reaction, though. Little-by-little Aster's middle had started to swell again as the disturbed mana bubbled and sloshed. Aster was too busy chatting with August to realize what was happening to him at first, and the additional weight was negligible.

Inevitably the cat's limbs starting puffing up slightly from the expanding mana, and Aster could no longer remain oblivious.

“Um, Professor, I think we've got a—*braaap*—problem.”

August turned around, his eyes immediately darting towards Aster's middle. “Hmm, well that's certainly interesting.” He walked up to the cat and pressed a paw hard into Aster's balloon of a belly, causing another belch. “Doesn't seem to be gas. I guess the mana's actually multiplying on its own. A rather wonderful development if you ask me!”

Aster widened his stance as his gut continued inflating, the cat almost too round to move on his own. His tunic still fit perfectly, though it looked somewhat comical stretched over his belly. “Yeah, but what if it doesn't *stop* increasing? Reducing your keg to scraps is kind of counterproductive!”

“Oh I'm sure you'll be fine.” August gave Aster's middle a hard slap, chuckling as it instantly blimped out in response. “If anyone can contain all that mana it's certainly you.”

Again Aster found himself frowning at the professor. His limbs had grown rigid as they filled with mana, the student's middle having become mostly spherical as it steadily engulfed his arms, legs, and neck. The faint glow had become rather prominent, making Aster feel like a giant, wobbling lantern.

August was clearly enjoying the student's expansive predicament, slowly circling the round cat and poking his taut sides at various points. “Impressive enchantment on your clothing, it doesn't seem to be straining at all despite being stretched to cover a cat as wide as he is tall! Guess I shouldn't be surprised you've mastered such magic.”

“It comes in—*urrrp*—handy.” Aster couldn't decide if he should be frustrated or flustered. Getting huge was *genuinely* enjoyable, and he couldn't deny a part of him was overjoyed to be growing so big. Having a professor know that weakness was the tough part.

Aster's head sunk slightly into his massive body, his paws just barely poking out. The pressure within him was strong, but not unbearable, and the cat breathed a sigh-turned-belch of relief once he felt himself stop growing. Inquisitive prods from August didn't result in further expansion, proving Aster was stable.

“Now we're sure to have more than enough mana to pass along to the researchers.” August grinned. “Aster you're just always exceeding expectations!”

Aster declined to respond. With the “keg” thoroughly unable to move on his own August was forced to take over. The lion manifested four spectral paws and directed them to Aster. Aster eyed the floating paws with suspicion, gaze moving left and right as they split up. The paws all gripped a side of the spherical student and carefully shifted him onto his back, then began to roll him along the road. August happily followed behind, amused by Aster's minor wiggles of protest.

“Alright Aster, just relax and enjoy the roll home. Shouldn't take more than a few hours.”

Aster pouted and blushed as he was rolled, already thinking of ways he could pay back the professor's “kindness” one day...