

An Expansive Fusion (Popping)

By: Indi

The room was—to put it nicely—a mess. Open tomes and empty bottles littered the tables. Pages of scribbled notes were everywhere. A few plates and glasses from past meals were piled together. Nothing was in its place, yet the two working there somehow knew where everything was.

August—a gray lion mage—and Indi—a blue jay alchemist—had long been friends, yet rarely worked together. But by chance they'd gotten into a discussion about fusion. It'd started with past experiences and various accepted methods for two individuals to fuse into one, then escalated to how they could improve it. For weeks they'd researched and experimented, eventually coming up with a risky ritual that would create a more powerful fusion than usual. At least in theory.

On the floor in the center of the room was a crystal ball serving as a magic focus for fusing spells. Around it a modified alchemical fusion circle had been drawn out by Indi. Alone either would've been more than capable of fusing the blue jay and lion, but together they hoped something better would result.

“Alright, ready to see if we made a mistake?” August grinned.

Indi held up the glowing potion that would help blend and empower their rituals. “The only mistake I expect is us having waited so long to try this!”

Both moved into their necessary spots in the circle. August focused on the crystal ball, beginning an incantation that made it glow. At the same time, Indi was pouring the potion onto the floor, repeating a little mantra of his own. The lines of the circle lit up and magic cackled from the ball. Power was flowing all around the pair, their excitement growing. Soon their bodies started to glow as well, until they looked like pillars of pure light.

A flash filled the room, followed by a burst of air that messed things up even more. In the ritual circle, where once had stood a lion and blue jay, now only a doughy gryphon remained.

The gryphon faintly swayed, eyes wandering. He slowly raised his arms, looking them over with curiosity. His legs and long tail received similar attention, but when he saw his belly he laughed with a voice reminiscent of both Indi and August.

“Well at the very least the ritual powered up my gut. Our gut? No, ‘my’ sounds right,” the gryphon mused while giving his middle a playful squeeze. Usually a fusion would end up as the average size of their combined individuals. Instead he was clearly as heavy as Indi and August combined. Thankfully he found the heft to be pleasant.

He was quickly growing accustomed to his new body and mind, both a blend of two friends who were now closer than ever. His clothing had fused as well, leaving him with an open vest that showed off his gut.

“Hmm, I probably should've settled on a name for myself beforehand. Oh well, that can wait till later!”

The gryphon felt oddly energized, as if he'd slept for years and would never need so much as a nap again. That half of him that'd been August recognized the feeling as having an abundance of mana. An overabundance, really. He felt like a fountain. A bottomless well of mana. A geyser!

August's specialty was manifesting spectral copies—mostly in the form of floating paws. The gryphon was able to create a trio of perfect duplicates with ease. He felt no dip in his mana pool, no fatigue. An act that should've left him at least tired instead had no noticeable effect at all.

“It worked, it actually worked!” the gryphon bellowed, and his copies soon followed suit.

As he was celebrating his apparent success, though, his already round middle suddenly began to grow rounder. The copies pointed the change out to him by poking his middle, which was slowly inflating like a balloon. Confused, he gave it a shake and focused all his attention on it. There wasn't any air or water or even juice in his stomach, the usual methods in which he'd been inflated in the past.

No, it was mana.

The revelation only made the gryphon laugh louder. Thanks to the fusion he was creating so much excess mana it was actually expanding him. Not a normal outcome, but he *had* doubled up on the ritual. Though odd, the gryphon felt no reason to worry about a little swelling, especially considering how incredible the rest of his experience was. If the price of power was getting puffy, then so be it!

Ignoring his inflation, the gryphon proceeded to test the full extent of his power. He created more copies to serve as assistants, having them tidy things up and retrieve whatever he wanted. Their bodies were altered at will, the gryphon frequently blimping some up until they were unrecognizable spheres. Soon most were round, transformed into a source of amusement.

“This is just incredible. I’ve got the accumulated alchemical and magical knowledge of both Indi and August, and I’m considering new approaches neither would’ve come up with on their own,” the gryphon said as he tweaked a potion with magic. “Splitting would be such a waste of potential—not that I *have* to. Really I’m better off in this form, an undeniable improvement!” His ego seemed to be ballooning along with his belly, which was now comically round. The swelling would slow any time he cast a spell, but the effect was negligible, more of a hiccup.

The gryphon couldn’t ignore his inflation forever, though. His entire body was starting to puff up, inhibiting movement. Skimming through tomes and moving bottles grew harder, prompting a frown.

“The overflow of mana is getting a bit ridiculous,” he admitted. “I hate having to part with any of it, but I can’t perform my experiments if I’m an orb!”

He spent a moment considering what spells might help, and began trying them one-by-one. The vast majority didn’t have any effect. The few that did were barely noticeable. Movement became awkward, the blimping gryphon stumbling a little. With every failure he found himself rounder and less concerned. All the mana filling him up was having an intoxicating effect. The gryphon was practically getting drunk off power.

“Maybe I’m overreacting. I’ve got my copies, after all. Do I really need to be that mobile myself? Honestly I should be welcoming any and all mana this fusion gifts me, even if I end up looking like a potion bottle containing it. And of course everyone will be able to see how powerful I am just by a glance if I’m full of that much mana!”

As he continued rounding out the gryphon wobbled towards the center of the room so he’d have space to grow to his full potential. His body had gained a gentle glow. By the time he reached the middle he was fairly spherical, his limbs well on their way to being fully enveloped. Since both Indi and August had been prone to inflating, the gryphon’s clothing was already enchanted to stretch along with him. Not only was it convenient, but it helped give the impression being round was his natural state.

“August had only been refining his existing spells these last few years, but with the power I’ve gained I could actually try creating new ones, stronger ones!” the gryphon mused aloud as his copies nodded along. “More complicated conjurations, larger copies, longer lasting ones, too! And with magic I can enhance my potions to a degree Indi never could. Why didn’t I think of this sooner!”

The gryphon was reveling in his newly obtained power. He wanted to show off, to be praised, to be known near and far! None of his peers would be able to match him now. He was simply beyond them. Even the head of the mage college was below him now. Once he was able to showcase his enhanced abilities to his peers they’d undoubtedly give the title to him instead. It’d only be sensible.

And why stop at just the mage college? He could certainly rule the whole city if he so wished, and the people would welcome someone of his unparalleled strength.

Fusing hadn’t just doubled Indi and August’s power, it’d doubled their egos as well. Delusions neither would’ve held individually were flowing freely in the gryphon’s mind, growing worse and worse as he swelled.

Eventually the gryphon’s arms and legs vanished, completely engulfed by his spherical body.

His paws and talons still stuck out, wiggling now and then. His head was nestled atop his body, sunken slightly, cheeks round. His hide had been creaking faintly for a while, but the ominous sound was increasing. The immense pressure of the mana pushing outward from within had become impossible to ignore. Though the gryphon didn't want to consider his new power to have any negatives, he couldn't deny the fact he might very well pop if he didn't halt his expansion somehow.

"A little pressure is nothing for a mage alchemist of my skill!" the gryphon boasted with a grunt. He quickly cast a couple durability spells on himself, quieting the creaking some. They also gave his hide more give, though, allowing him to blimp up further. His talons and paws sunk in a little more, and so did his head.

Copies were deflated, and directed to immediately begin brewing a variety of potions the gryphon thought might help. Some were a long shot, but he didn't have the luxury or time of only working with likely solutions. He also started aggressively casting every spell he knew in an effort to drain his seemingly endless mana.

Complicated and flashy illusions were conjured in the air. Firework displays, parades of rolling mages, bundles of balloons, and comical bombs. Thoughts of blimping and bursting filled his head, reflected in the spells. Another impressive display of power, but it did little to help his predicament. At best he was able to stall the swelling for short periods. Actually deflating was looking to be an impossibility.

The first of many potions were brought over, bottles held up to the gryphon's beak and guzzled. Some did nothing. Some did little. None were a solution.

"Impossible! I can't obtain such wonderful power and lose it all like this!" He wobbled and creaked furiously. "There's still so much I—*oof*—have to do! History needs to know my name—I need to know my name!"

Concentrating was growing harder and harder. He was juggling the clones, his spells, and the persistent pressure pushing at his increasingly fragile hide. He lost track of time, and worried he might be stuck in an eternal balancing act. Small spikes in pressure made the massive borb quake in fear before he spewed forth magic in a frenzy to quell them. Over and over the cycle continued.

And the worst part was, the gryphon knew he was failing.

He was casting spells practically non-stop, yet his body was *still* expanding, hide still weakening as it was stretched terribly thin. Paws and talons were being engulfed, his ability to cast spells hindered as even wiggling them grew difficult. Slowly his head was being angled upward, until he could only see the ceiling—and the puffy sides of his body he was sinking into.

The copies were still working tirelessly on potions and spells to save their endangered progenitor, but no progress was being made. They watched him creak and whine until even his head was pulled in, leaving only a feathered orb with a stub of a tail. A few spells continued to putter out from the sphere, a last ditch effort from the gryphon to prevent what was simply inevitable.

Trapped and a deep breath away from bursting, the gryphon was as furious as he was fearful. All the glory he'd dreamed of, all the praise and boasting, was slipping away. And all because he couldn't hold in mana of all things. His fusion had transformed from a triumph to an utter embarrassment.

Too big. Too big. How...how can I be too big!

The gryphon lost control of his copies, incapable of concentrating on anything aside from his terrible size. His body was so stretched out even the slightest brush of air felt like needles. A gentle touch could pop him, he was sure of it. The ordeal was dragging on so long the gryphon began wishing he'd just explode already. When the inevitable happened, he was in too deep a daze to notice.

The sphere that was the gryphon shuddered before bursting with a wall-rattling *boom!* Raw mana gushed out from the epicenter, dispersing all the copies and knocking over everything in the room. Bottles shattered, tomes were tossed, chairs were hurled. Mana-infused feathers flew in all directions, glowing as they fluttered to the floor. The gryphon's beak had soared through a row of

books on a nearby shelf, shredding a few before getting lost in the eruption of pages.

The explosion had wiped away the ritual circle on the floor and obliterated the crystal ball. There was nothing left to hint at the grand experiment that had been conducted there, no way of knowing why the feathers of an unknown gryphon would litter it. It'd just be another destroyed lab, another anonymous case of magic gone wrong. So much for glory.