

## Liquid Fireball

By: Indi

Tycho finished off his cider and slammed the empty mug on the table, letting out a sigh of satisfaction. The noise was practically a whisper compared to the rest of the loud celebration going on in the great hall. The annual guild appreciation feast was in full swing. Leaders and members of every major guild in the city were packed into the room, glutting on a royal feast and guzzling kegs of wine, ale, and cider. At the front was the host, Prince Sterling. The golden lion was wedged into his wide bench of a throne, so full of food and drink he looked like a balloon. His belches could be heard throughout the room, often followed by a demand for more.

Tycho smirked at the round feline. Unlike the royal lion, he had far more self-control. He burped and looked for another pitcher of cider to chug. "These parties are the best part about being a paladin," he said, eyeing up his options.

"And here I thought you'd become a paladin to help people," the orange-striped zebra sitting beside him said. Rho was plump, especially compared to his slim friend.

"I *did*, and I *do*," Tycho insisted. "You're the one who's stingy about using your healing powers unless there's something in it for you. I thought clerics were supposed to be generous."

"I'm generous, but it comes at a price," Rho said. "And I've never pretended otherwise."

Tycho didn't have much of a counter to that.

A phoenix server got Tycho's attention from behind with a cough. He carried a platter with a single mug on it. "A gift, from our marvelous Prince Sterling himself." The phoenix lowered the platter.

Tycho glanced back at the prince, who had grown about a foot wider since he last looked. Small tears were visible on his strained robes, though he showed no signs of slowing down on the wine. He wondered if the lion was creaking.

The paladin's attention returned to the drink. It was bright orange and yellow, swirling within the mug. Magical mixed drinks were common at royal feasts, but Tycho had never seen one so vibrant before.

"Are you sure it's for me?" Tycho asked. He didn't think he'd done anything to gain the direct attention of the Prince.

"Oh, most certainly. But if it's not to your liking, I can return it to the Prince."

"No! I'm sure it's a lovely drink," Tycho said. The last thing he wanted to do was get on the bad side of a royal, even one as blimp-prone as Sterling.

Tycho picked the mug off the plate. He felt a warmth coming from it, much to his surprise. "What is it?"

"A fireball. It'll warm you up but it has a strong kick to it," the phoenix said. "I recommend drinking it all in one gulp."

“Thanks, I’ll do that,” Tycho said, looking down on the swirling drink. By the time he’d looked back up, the phoenix was gone.

“Where’d the fancy drink come from?” Rho asked.

“From the Prince!” Tycho said, his confusion quickly turning to smugness. “A personal gift. No doubt he’s heard of my many accomplishments.”

“Or your ability to drink whole taverns dry,” Rho snickered. He frowned as he examined the drink. “Something feels odd about that drink. There’s a whole lot of volatile magic coming from it.”

“All mixed drinks are like that.”

“They’re not *this* volatile. Maybe you should let me have a look at it first.”

Tycho scoffed. “You’ll just drink it yourself if I do! I bet you’re jealous the Prince gave me a gift and not you.”

“I wouldn’t drink that thing if you paid me,” Rho said. “I honestly think there’s something up with it.”

The zebra’s words fell on deaf ears, as Tycho had already begun to chug. The drink was warm, but not scalding. It took Tycho only seconds to finish it off.

Tycho coughed and shuddered. He’d expected more of a kick. A warm sensation filled his stomach, spreading throughout his entire body. He felt like he was sitting beside a relaxing fire.

“Oh, this is really nice. I should figure out how to—*uworrrrrrrrrp!!*” The lion belched out a small flame, startling everyone else nearby at the table.

Pressure joined the warmth in his middle, and Tycho realized he was swelling up. His belly puffed out rapidly, inflating like a balloon. His gut pressed against the table and knocked over his empty mug. His enchanted clothes stretched when he inflated, a precaution since Rho was prone to filling him up with restorative water any time he begrudgingly asked for healing. Of course it’d also come in handy any time he’d decided to guzzle whole kegs of cider at taverns.

“What was—*bworrrpff*—in that—*urrrp*—drink!” Tycho shouted, flames accompanying every burp. The warmth within him was increasing, growing less relaxing by the second.

The ballooning paladin with flaming belches caught the attention of the whole room. Guests were getting up, trying to put some distance between themselves and Tycho.

Tycho struggled to get up himself. By the time he bothered, his entire body had begun to puff up. He grunted and wobbled, before falling backward onto the floor. He bounced on impact, spouting another flame.

Helpless, the lion rocked back-and-forth in a futile attempt to right himself. His arms and legs were too puffy, his body too round. More and more he felt like a balloon.

Rho watched his friend with amusement and curiosity. He sensed a large buildup of potent energy inside Tycho. He couldn’t quite tell what it was, but he knew it wasn’t

good. He grabbed the circular censer at his side—the focus for his magic—and cast a few protective spells on the blimping lion. They didn't quell the strange energy completely, but they slowed his swelling.

Tycho's arms and legs sunk into his massive body as he took on a spherical shape. He winced when he heard the first creak. He knew it was normal, even when a person wasn't at their limit, but that didn't make the sound any less ominous.

Tycho tried to breathe a sigh of relief when he felt himself stop inflating, but a fiery belch came out instead.

Rho stood up and approached the round lion, shaking his head. "I told you not to drink it."

"You only said it seemed strange, not—*uworrrp*—dangerous!" Tycho groaned as he wobbled in place. He could feel the pressure within him pressing out against every inch of his hide. But worse than that was the heat. It hadn't waned at all, and he felt as if he'd laid out in the summer sun for hours.

"That should've been enough to deter you, but I guess you just can't resist a drink," Rho said. He saw lots of pointing in their direction from guests and guards. A creaking balloon paladin belching flames was hard to ignore. "Why don't we roll you elsewhere before a guard decides to pop you for being a menace?"

"They wouldn't pop a guest!" Tycho whined. The thought of being reduced to scraps at a party terrified him. It was utterly undignified, the sort of end that found its way into embarrassing bard songs.

"Pretty sure the royal guard can pop whoever they want, whenever they want, blimp," Rho said. "So the quicker we get going, the better."

Rho placed his hooves on Tycho's taut side and began to roll the lion towards the exit. He could feel the warmth coming from their body.

They traveled down a long corridor, only stopping when there didn't seem to be any guards or guests in sight.

"Alright, we're safe," Tycho said. "Mind deflating me now?"

"I've been trying to deflate you ever since we left the hall," Rho admitted. "None of my usual spells are working at all. How do you feel?"

"Bloated," Tycho said, glaring. "But also hot. Uh, and kind of light?"

Rho removed his hooves from Tycho. The lion slowly rose off the ground, like a sluggish hot air balloon. He poked him, chuckling as Tycho belched up another flame and wobbled in protest. "Sure you didn't chug a float potion again by mistake?"

"Not funny!" Tycho whined. He'd drunk the potion with his alchemist friend Indi on accident while at a tavern one night. Tycho had ended up bouncing around the ceiling. Indi had ended up bouncing out the door and into the air, lost to the night sky. He didn't want to tempt fate a second time. "This feels nothing like that. It's like I swallowed a sauna!"

Rho pulled his censer out again and cast a spell on Tycho's clothing, multiplying

their weight and causing the blimp to fall back to earth with a heavy bounce. “Well, let’s take a closer look and figure out what’s blimping you up.” He concentrated intently on the round lion, examining the magic within him thoroughly. As he focused, he noticed Tycho swell a bit further.

Suddenly, the zebra began to laugh. “Sorry, just figured out what’s going on in that big balloon body you’ve got there,” he said. “From what I can tell, you’ve got a fireball spell charging within you.”

“How is that—*braaap*—even possible!” Tycho said, his eyes widening in fear.

“Magic, duh. The drink you were so easily duped into guzzling was the catalyst, and now your body’s fueling the spell and enlarging it. Since it needed room to grow, you swelled up.” Rho slapped the round lion’s side.

“Well, when’s the damn thing going to stop growing. I’ll burst if it gets any bigger!” Tycho creaked as he puffed up again. Despite the growth spurt, his paws and head hadn’t sunk any deeper into his spherical body. He’d simply grown.

“Well you bursting is likely the whole point of the spell, so it won’t stop until you’ve become a pile of toasty scraps,” Rho said, amused. “My guess is you were meant to be a giant, gullible bomb. If you’d gone off, you’d have leveled the entire castle, along with the prince and the majority of the city’s adventurers. Good thing I acted quick and doused you in a series of defensive and durability spells. The spell is slowed down, and you can expand a good deal bigger before you explode.”

“I’m a bomb?” Tycho asked in disbelief. He couldn’t help but imagine a fuse leading right into his bloated body. The second it burned down he’d blimp out and burst apart, leaving behind nothing but a scorched crater. “We gotta get me cured right away, I don’t want to explode!”

Rho scratched the back of his head. “Well, there’s a bit of a problem. The spell feels incredibly complex. It could take hours for a mage or cleric to neutralize it. You’re gonna blow long before then.”

“There’s gotta be something we can do!”

“I’m way ahead of you, dude.” He began rolling Tycho again, staying clear of the occasional belch flame.

“I knew I could count on you! You’ve never let me down; even when you filled me with healing water and used me to make healing potions for a month straight you still deflated me in the end.” Though Tycho had never seen a single ounce of the profits.

“What’s the plan?”

“Simple, really. I’m going to roll you out of town so you can detonate somewhere you won’t cause any damage,” Rho said, proudly.

“But...but how does that help me?”

“It helps ensure your legacy isn’t as the paladin bomb that flattened half a city. That’s the one problem with keeping you intact—the bigger you get, the more volatile your blast will be.” Rho watched Tycho swell. The corridor was more than wide enough

to handle him, but Rho still picked up the pace. Servants kept their distance from the expanding lion, while guards eyed the creaking ball nervously.

“No no no, that can’t be the only option!” Tycho insisted.

“It’s not, but they all end with you going boom.”

“I don’t wanna be a bomb!” the paladin whined. A chorus of creaks escaped his body as it swelled once more.

“You have to look on the bright side. Think of all the songs they’ll sing about your valiant sacrifice to protect the city? A lesser hero would’ve given up hope and left the city in ruins, but without hesitation you’re putting the safety of others ahead of your bombastic self. They might even erect a statue in your honor,” Rho chuckled.

The pair exited the palace. Tycho belched out a steady stream of flames as he bounced down the stone steps leading to the street.

When the lion had first become spherical, he’d been the same height as Rho. Now he was a good two feet bigger around, and still growing. Rho pressed firmer against his volatile friend, keeping an eye on how taut they were becoming. As long as there was still some give to their creaking hide, he’d be safe. Too taut, and the lion would likely be about to blow.

“Why is my horrible doom so funny to you!” Tycho fumed.

“You can’t deny becoming a big balloon bomb thanks to a spiked drink isn’t funny. No matter how creative this scheme was, it’s an absolutely embarrassing way to go,” Rho said. “If I was the one about to become a zebra bomb you’d be laughing, too.”

The zebra spoke the truth. The thought alone made Tycho smirk before he remembered *he* was the one about to be blown to smithereens. “I’d only laugh afterward, not while you were still panicking and terrified. And I definitely wouldn’t have given up on you so fast!”

“I’m not about to be guilt-tripped by a future pile of scraps. Really, you should just accept the inevitable and try to enjoy yourself. Being a balloon’s not *that* bad.”

“It is when you’re also a bomb!”

They were rolling through the streets at a swift pace, people diving to get out of the way. A rabbit proved too slow, yelping as they were knocked to the ground and promptly run over. Tycho groaned as he felt his blimpy body push down on the unlucky rabbit. Rho smiled as he side-stepped the fallen rabbit, who was unharmed but dazed.

As they went, Tycho began to take up more and more of the street. A balloon being rolled through the streets would’ve been enough to draw attention, but one fast-approaching fifteen feet in diameter and burping the occasional flame was a crowd stopper.

The heat coming from within Tycho had become more noticeable to Rho. There was also a faint glow to the lion. He wished he had the time to play with his helpless friend. He adored teasing balloons, and the bigger they were the better. Though he had to admit playing with a hoard of blimped up kobolds was one of his fondest memories.

"I wonder if I'll get any recognition myself for rolling you away from the city before you exploded," Rho said. "Honestly I should probably get more praise than you, considering how fussy you're being."

"I've got every reason *toooooo* be pissed off!" Tycho's belch flames were getting bigger.

"At the very least I'll get a greater reward, seeing as I won't be a crater," Rho said, ignoring his friend's complaints. "Every place in the city will be giving me free food and drinks for years in thanks. Guess I'll just have to accept the fact I'm bound to get a lot rounder. And it'll all be thanks to your gullibility." He slapped Tycho's side.

"You're being a really bad friend right now," Tycho grumbled. Another swell made him moan. The pressure and heat were getting to him.

"Oh you'll get over it once you get all settled in the afterlife. You can drink until you explode every day for all eternity then," Rho laughed.

"I have stuff I still want to do in the land of the living and unpopped, though!" Tycho said. "If you *do* get a reward for betraying me like the jerk you are, then you should use it to have me resurrected at a temple. That's what a real friend would do!"

"I don't remember you ever talking about bringing back Indi after he floated up, up and away," Rho said.

"That was nature taking its course. Indi was more balloon than snake, of course he was bound to burst eventually."

"You're just as bad, balloonadin~" Rho teased. "I always knew booze would do you in—I just assumed you'd guzzle it until you exploded. This'll make for a much better story."

Traffic was forced to part as Rho rolled Tycho up to the city gates. Despite the considerable size of the gates, Tycho barely fit through them. The paladin groaned as he felt himself brush against the sides of the passage. Once through, Rho immediately left the road, rolling Tycho up a large hill.

Tycho had grown to be twenty feet wide by then. His eyes were half-closed and he could barely think straight. All his mind could focus on was the heat and the pressure. Sometimes he realized how massive he'd grown and whimpered. He couldn't believe he was truly about to burst. His glorious career brought to an abrupt end because he hadn't been suspicious enough about a drink. It was as ridiculous as it was unfair.

"Come on, Rho...there's gotta...gotta be something you can do—*braap!*"

"How about I tell everyone you purposely drank a potion meant for Prince Sterling, and weren't just tricked by a server?" Rho asked.

"That's not...ugh, fine."

"Aren't you going to say thank you?"

"Fuck you."

"I see being a bomb has made your language as volatile as you are!" Rho giggled.

They reached the peak of the hill. The slope beyond was steep enough for Tycho to roll down once he'd been shoved. Open land sprawled outward, marked by a few other hills. There was no one in sight, nor any buildings. Rho guessed it'd be good enough to contain a paladin-sized explosion.

"Well friend, it's time for your big finale. Have fun!"

Before Tycho could groan a single word in reply, Rho shoved him hard. The paladin moaned as he began to tumble down the hill, picking up speed. His whole world spun, faster and faster. The pressure building within him worsened, straining every inch of his hide. He swelled, his arms and head finally sinking into his immense body, turning him into a perfect sphere.

He felt his hide struggling to stretch further as the spell within him relentlessly grew. It quivered, unable to expand even a centimeter more. Every bounce caused spikes in pressure that jumbled his thoughts. He ceased being able to panic, only barely aware of the predicament he was in. The oppressive warmth radiating from his body put him on the verge of passing out. On instinct, he desperately tried to hold together. It was an impossible task. The paladin became vividly aware of the weakest points of his hide, the spots just about to tear. His face twisted when he felt the first pinprick of a leak.

Tycho had just reached the bottom of the hill when he exploded.

Rho hit the dirt hard, hooves over his ears. The ground shook, and a shockwave from the blast swept over him. Clumps of dirt and grasses rained down around him, followed shortly after by singed scraps of hide.

After the debris had stopped falling, Rho stood up. An enormous crater marked the spot where Tycho had popped. A pool of choppy water covered the bottom. The explosion had exposed an underground reservoir.

While the explosion had been a big one, nothing had been lost. Aside from Tycho, of course. But the city was safe, along with the guilds and the Prince. Rho rather appreciated not being blown up as well.

With his work complete, Rho dusted himself off and headed back to the city. He wondered if they'd name the lake in the crater after Tycho. Though they could also name it after him.

Lake Rho.

The zebra smiled; he liked the sound of that. Perhaps he'd suggest it once he'd had an audience with the Prince.