

Swell Wine (Popping)

By: Indi

Bacchus frowned as he looked at the decadently decorated walls of the palace. He wasn't surprised a wealthy noble like Stelios had filled his home with riches, but that didn't mean he was about to appreciate it. The lion paladin wasn't so easily swayed by such things. Course he also didn't have the time to even pretend to admire it, not with how fast the kobold butler ahead of him was moving. They'd barely said a word since he arrived, merely acknowledging his presence and escorting him to where Stelios allegedly would be waiting. No attempts to shoo him off or distract him or anything like that. Bacchus didn't like how willing Stelios was to meet with him. He didn't keep his paw on his sword, but it was never far, just in case.

Dozens had gone missing over the last few weeks. Merchants, adventurers, clerics, thieves. The one thing they all had in common was that they'd last been seen associating with Stelios. As a paladin, Bacchus felt obligated to solve the mystery—and to stop Stelios if the noble was in fact behind it all.

The trip through the palace came to an end in a large grand hall, illuminated by the afternoon light through wide windows on one side. The room was open, with furniture against the walls. At the far end was Stelios. The lean white lion was laying on a lounge chair, eating grapes from a nearby bowl, a silver goblet in reach. His robes were of an open style, leaving his chest exposed. Silver bangles and necklaces reflected the light.

"It's a pleasure to have you, selfless paladin," Stelios said, his voice carrying across the room. "I've been wanting to entertain you for a while, but you always seemed so busy."

Bacchus thought back on the sporadic ambushes he'd endured lately. Now he knew the source. "I'm always willing to make the time for an important noble such as yourself."

"Oh you flatter me." Stelios grinned. "But where are my manners? I'm sure your journey to my estate was tiring, please have some refreshments." He clapped twice, and a pair of kobolds hurried into the room. One carried a decanter and a cup, while the other had a platter filled with grapes. "My family's vineyards are the finest in the land. Nothing compares to our grapes or our wine."

Bacchus looked down upon the full decanter, smelling the fine aroma of the wine. Liquor was one of his weaknesses, perhaps his favorite vice. And he was rather fond of grapes as well. But the lion didn't trust the hospitality of his host, not at all. "Later, perhaps. I'd like to discuss some important matters, first."

The kobolds looked towards Stelios for guidance, leaving only when he bid them away with a wave of his paw. "And what matters are those? Do you need funds to support the temples? Or are there pirates menacing our shores again?"

"No, not that I'm aware," Bacchus said. Two new kobolds suddenly entered from the opposite side of the room, bearing a different kind of wine and grape. He shook his head. "I'm fine."

“Shame, it’s one of my favorites. And the grapes are popular as well.” Stelios plopped one of his own into his mouth, smiling as he finished it. “Ah, now I know! You’re hoping to plan a grand festival for the city, and hoping to finance it through generous donations from prominent citizens such as my humble self?”

It took a lot of effort for Bacchus not to roll his eyes. He’d rarely had positive interactions with nobles, but Stelios was proving obnoxious in his own special way. The two servants hadn’t even left before two new ones arrived, also carrying wine and grapes. Bacchus was beginning to suspect it was a ploy to annoy him, yet something seemed off. What if the offerings were drugged? Bluntly asking for a taste tester wouldn’t work, but Bacchus had ways of making it happen. He used his magic to alter the luck of the lead kobold, making it bad for a quick moment.

As soon as Bacchus did, the kobold stumbled. The surprised servant tried to catch himself, but failed, spilling wine all over both himself and his peer. The platters fell to the floor, the kobolds looking shocked, then guilty. Stelios raised a brow, but his expression barely changed. No shouting or cursing.

When Bacchus turned back to the kobolds, though, his eyes widened. Both had turned green, just like the grapes. And they were suddenly rounder, as well, as if they’d both been guzzling wine. No—they were *still* getting rounder. Both were steadily swelling up, nervous looks upon their faces. Sashes were undone, and the seams of their pants tore apart as they grew. They stumbled about, not knowing quite what to do, and quickly looking back and forth between their ballooning middles and their boss. No answer came from the white lion, though.

Before Bacchus’ very eyes both kobolds became spherical. Their gazes drifted and they wobbled in place, too big around to even waddle. Their claws barely juttied out from their swollen bodies, and Bacchus swore he heard faint sloshing coming from them. They truly looked like they had become giant, living grapes.

“Seems like your wine has some pretty nasty side-effects,” Bacchus said. “I’m not sure round is the best look for me.”

“I disagree.” Stelios looked at the two helpless kobolds and shook his head. “Good help is so hard to come by. At least there’s plenty more.” He clapped again, four times in quick succession. More kobolds rushed in, all wielding small clubs. They charged.

Bacchus rushed over to the pair of wobbly kobolds, and gave the closest one a hard shove. The round kobold flailed his claws and let out a sloppy belch as he was pushed, rolling straight for the incoming guards. A few managed to dodge the grape, but three were bowled over. The grape kobold let out a loud yip as the armor of a guard pressed hard into his dangerously taut hide. In a flash the swollen kobold burst like a balloon, splashing wine and hide scraps all over. The guards who’d fallen were completely drenched, coughing. Soon the three on the ground were swelling up as well, rocking back-and-forth as they did.

Bacchus winced as he watched the kobold blow. He hadn’t intended to pop the unlucky servant, but the explosion only reinforced how dangerous drinking the wine would’ve been. All it took was one stiff poke to turn a grape into a puddle. But he had more important things to worry about.

As the first guards arrived, clubs swinging, Bacchus jumped back. They missed the lion but bounced off the other grape, provoking a burp and a gargle as his eyes bulged wide. Another guard was splashed by wine in the ensuing explosion, the straps of their breastplate straining and snapping as they started to blimp up. They tried their best to keep up the attack, but struggled to waddle after the more mobile Bacchus.

That stuff is potent as hell! Bacchus thought, as he watched the guard roll over onto his belly in a drunken daze. *One sip and I'll be the biggest paladin in the damn city. And one poke and they'll be bottling what's left of me to serve at a damn feast.* For a split second he thought of himself as a round grape, jabbed with a spear until he popped. The mere idea was too embarrassing for him to dwell upon, and he found himself blushing. Was that all Stelios wanted to do, pop him? Obviously the noble had a reason for wanting to get him sloshy, and it was bound to be bad, regardless if it ended with the paladin intact or not.

More kobolds arrived, not guards but mere servants. They lacked the bravado of their armored brethren, but Bacchus viewed them as a greater threat as soon as he saw what they were wielding: goblets of wine. There was no doubt in his mind the wine was drugged, too.

There was hesitation amongst the ranks of the new arrivals as they spotted the puddles, scraps, and bloated guards, before one finally hurled the contents of his goblet in Bacchus' direction. The paladin barely dodged, the wine instead dousing the face of a guard, who swiftly turned purple, then round. More wine was thrown, Bacchus having to dive out of the way at times. He shifted the luck of himself and his foes, causing kobolds to stumble right into the path of the menacing wine. They were swelling left and right, turning green and purple and red. Armor and torn clothes littered the floor, the room filling with swelling kobolds.

Some were unwillingly rolled right at him, turned into impromptu wine bombs. They smacked into the corners of furniture and statues, or straight into the pointed snouts of their peers. Wine was everywhere, Bacchus quickly losing track of just how many kobolds had popped trying to fight him. And yet no matter how many were turned into grapes or burst apart, there always seemed to be fresh recruits swarming in to replace them—and join them.

The frantic fighting was starting to tire Bacchus out. He couldn't fight the kobolds off forever. Unless he changed his tactics, they'd inevitably overwhelm him and blimp him, turning him into the biggest grape in the room. Bacchus needed to deal with their source.

Stelios hadn't left his lounge chair, watching the fight in comfort as he continued to eat grapes. Bacchus charged towards him, weaving in between kobolds. But as Stelios met the gaze of the paladin, he grinned, and retrieved a small crossbow from behind his chair. The bolt shot out before Bacchus could even think to dodge, and he braced for an impact that never came. A red grape kobold nearby yelped as the bolt thunked right into him, popping him instantly. The wine that'd filled him just seconds before splashed Bacchus, soaking the paladin completely.

Bacchus froze in place and shuddered, his tongue teased with the sweet flavor of wine. He coughed and wiped his face with a paw. Only a few drops had made it into his mouth, but the taste hadn't faded. In fact, it was intensifying. A chill hit his stomach, and he saw his fur was already starting to shift from brown to purple. *Damn!*

Stelios shifted to a sitting position. “Turns out purple paladins are a pleasant sight. I’m glad you reconsidered my offer of wine.”

“It was delicious, but you should really try serving it in a less fragile cup!” Bacchus flicked his paw in Stelios’ direction, throwing drops of wine right back at the white lion. But Stelios was too far away to get hit, and the drops just speckled the floor before him. He tossed the crossbow aside, grabbing a sword of his own from behind the chair before jumping up. Suddenly he was a challenge to the paladin. Bacchus felt his middle begin to swell, muffled bubbling coming from within. If he didn’t defeat Stelios swiftly he’d have no hope of escaping—and perhaps no hope of avoiding a fate as a puddle of wine.

Swords clashed as the two lions began to duel. Bacchus was faster, but Stelios was competent at defense, not bothering with offense at all. He merely needed to outlast his sloshy opponent. In between swings Bacchus’ belly grew rounder and rounder. It wobbled as he lunged and dodged, wine splashing about inside. The alcohol hit him gradually, starting as a buzz and growing stronger. The paladin started using his luck with reckless abandon just to keep up, sending kobolds slipping and sliding and smashing into one another via supernatural clumsiness. More burst, but Stelios always managed to avoid the splash zone. The power was harder to control as he got drunk, and not nearly as potent.

One-by-one the buttons of Bacchus’ vest popped off, his ballooning belly wobbling out of his undershirt. He smiled as he felt it bounce, blushing and burping a little as he continued swinging at Stelios.

“You’ve gained quite the gut, paladin!” Stelios laughed, easily deflecting a strike. “You’re reminding me of my portlier peers. Merchants who’ve guzzled wine and stuffed themselves silly night after night, their waistlines swelling faster than their wallets. Not sure you’ll still be as intimidating to bandits while looking like an overfilled keg. They might carry you off to camp as loot for celebration, though. One jab with a dagger and you’ll shower them in booze!”

As Bacchus took a swipe at Stelios, the noble elbowed him in the gut. His cheeks puffed out and he let loose a rumbling *bworrnrnrnrnrp* that shook his belly and made his purple face flush red. “I’m not—*hic*—going down so easily. Not while—*urrrp*—while I’m still—*hic*—standing!” the drunk lion rambled. The seams of his shirt and pants started tearing, large rips accompanying every clumsy maneuver.

“Sounding rather sloshed, Bacchus. In more ways than one.” Stelios danced around the rotund paladin, giving his taut belly a slap as he did. The resulting burps made him laugh. “Everyone talks big—at least until they become big. How does it feel to become a giant grape? Swelling in every direction, getting rounder and rounder and rounder, out of control. Filling up with enough fresh wine to fill a modest cellar. You’re more bottle than lion now, and not a sturdy one. Your belly’s becoming quite the tempting target. Would be a shame if my blade reduced you and it both to scraps.”

Bacchus’ head was spinning. Any time he moved he felt the wine within him splash about, threatening to knock him right over as it rocked like a storm. Anything resembling a sharp edge was making him nervous, from Stelios’ sword to the armor of the kobolds. His own

burst belt buckle caused him worry, laying on the floor, waiting to prick him if he fell. He was struggling to concentrate, at times even forgetting *why* he was trying to fight the annoying white lion evading his every attack. It was all so frustrating, and yet he couldn't help but giggle some. He'd always been a happy drunk.

"You're—*hicurrrp*—scraps," Bacchus managed, barely. The paladin was too round to move in any meaningful manner. Kobolds had surrounded him, snickering as they smacked his sides and dodged the drunken swings that went their way. Bacchus arms grew stiff as they puffed up, his sword finally falling from his grip as even his paws rounded out. He wobbled some, but as a ballooning grape he was far from menacing. The noble paladin had failed, and in the back of his boozy head he knew it. His paws and head slowly sunk into his spherical body, Bacchus' transformation into a grape complete.

Stelios ran a claw along the vaguely glossy side of the helpless lion, grinning as he felt Bacchus shudder and whine. "Nice and ripe. If I wanted, I could make sure you were stuck like this forever. But as fun as my own personal paladin trophy would be, I can't risk you somehow managing to roll away when I'm not looking. No, instead I think I'll have to settle with filling a few kegs with a limited vintage with a feline kick to it." Stelios pressed a bit harder with his claw.

Bacchus groaned, besieged both by the wine and the pressure that threatened to send him into a daze. He couldn't put together words to throw back at Stelios, but the taunts reached him. The noble had to be lying, just toying with him before he revealed what would actually become of him. Anything but popping!

"I can see that doubt in your aimless eyes, *keg*. But also that fear. I produce more wine than all my competitors combined, and yet my vineyard is amongst the smallest in the land. Did you ever wonder how I manage, then?" Stelios asked, still occasionally prodding his sloshy captive. "My secret is larger grapes. A single, properly transformed person can produce kegs of wine with a fraction of the effort it takes to grow and process regular grapes. And in the right conditions it takes mere minutes. All I have to do is lure over fresh grapes from time-to-time. Rivals, underwhelming servants, foolish adventurers...suspicious paladins. They provide enough wine to fill bottle after bottle, keg after keg, as much as I need to keep up with demand."

Bacchus' eyes widened slightly as he listened to Stelios gloat. He'd feared the worst for those who went missing, but he'd never entertained the notion they'd all ended up as wine in the cellars of homes and kegs of taverns. He may very well have indulged on a bottle that'd once been a local mage or merchant. And now he was facing such a fate himself. He rocked frantically, but there was no way to escape. The kobolds laughed and sneered at his distress. Bacchus felt claws poking him, making his hide creak ominously. He wiggled and whimpered.

"Already looking forward to your legacy as fine wine? Good." Stelios slapped the paladin. "Soon you'll be filling the bellies of drunks all over the city. And of course I'll keep a few bottles for myself to be aged for a special occasion. My life would be so much easier if I could do this to *every* paladin. At the very least you'll be able to valiantly protect my coffers from running dry! Take our latest guest to the press." The noble laughed, then looked at the

numerous kobolds who'd ended up as grapes during the brawl with Bacchus. "And bring along any other fool who ended up as a grape, too. They'll clearly be of better use as liquor than servants."

The kobolds left standing swiftly went into action, not hesitating for a moment to carry out their boss' orders, even if it meant rolling a sloshy friend to their doom. Bacchus waved his paws and groaned as he was carefully rolled onto his back and turned to face the exit. He put up a token fight, which only amounted to wobbling and belching. The kobolds had no trouble rolling him along, poking and teasing him as well in victory. A frown flashed on Bacchus' face before the grin of his drunken stupor returned in full force.

Bacchus was barely conscious for the trip to the pressing room, unaware of just how many corridors he was taken down. The room was far darker than Stelios' grand hall, lit only by torches, with no window in sight. They couldn't have anyone witnessing the secret method for producing the best vintages, after all. Bacchus ended up on his middle, with a good view of the press itself. A massive wooden barrel made up the bulk of it. The base was stained purple, and all around it were smaller barrels where the wine would be drained. Above the main barrel was a complex series of giant gears, meant to lower the press itself.

One of the kobolds barked out orders, and a pair of purple grape kobolds were rolled up a ramp in front of the press. There was plenty of cursing and begging from the helplessly drunk and swollen kobolds, their words mixed with hiccups and burps. They were ignored, and rolled one-at-a-time over the edge of the main barrel. The first to go over yelped loudly, before being interrupted by a heavy *thunk* and a *pop*. wine splashed out of the barrel, and the servant who'd been doing the shoving wasn't able to shield himself from it in time. In seconds he was turning purple, his middle ballooning right out of his tunic. Stunned, he didn't notice the servant behind him stroll up and shove him into the press unceremoniously. The other grape kobold on the ramp was then rolled into the barrel, bouncing but not bursting.

With the grapes in the barrel, other kobolds went to work pushing the crank that got the press lowering. Bacchus watched the press descend into the barrel, There were yelps from within, and the press slowed some, but not completely. A bang echoed from within, the press lurching. It slowed again as it reached the fresh grape who'd been tossed in, but he didn't hold up any longer than the grape who'd been above him. Another pop, the protests from the barrel silenced.

Wine was gushing into the smaller barrels, rapidly filling up with the contents from the three juiced grapes. Only when the flow was reduced to a few drops were the barrels sealed and rolled away, replaced by fresh ones. Then Bacchus felt claws pushing at him. It was his turn at the press.

The drunk paladin wobbled fiercely, still alert enough to understand the danger he was in. "W-wait—*hic*—you can't—*hic*—you can't—*braaap*—do...hehehe..." Being rolled only made his head spin more, and he started giggling.

"Haven't had a grape this big in a while!" a kobold snickered, squeezing Bacchus' side. "Kegs might overflow with all the wine we're about to free from ya!" Others joined in the laughter.

Bacchus was trying to think of a retort when he felt the firm shove, his round body rolling over the tip of the barrel. He howled as he fell, afraid he'd end up like the first kobold in and pop right away. The pressure on impact was enough to scramble his thoughts, but he held together. It was dark in the barrel, the aroma of wine strong enough to overwhelm his senses. He wiggled a bit, but with his sides pressed against the barrel walls there wasn't much room to move. Creaking came from above as the gears began to turn, and the press lowered.

The helpless paladin's struggles intensified as his doom steadily approached. He threw his luck around, but giving himself good luck only seemed to daze him, and sending others bad luck only seemed to make the press slow down a fraction. Luck couldn't save him.

The press finally reached the lion, pushing down upon him. The pressure made him groan, then moan, his concentration shattered. His hide was creaking in protest, wine leaking out of his mouth. He managed to curse the embarrassing trap he'd fallen for, blushing one last time as he thought of the wine he would soon be reduced to. His eyes bulged open when he felt the sharp tingle of his hide giving out, and in a flash he was gone.

Bacchus' bursting rattled the barrel, the kobolds cheering as another wave of wine gushed forth into the barrels. Each one was filled to the brim, some bulging from the deluge. They were marked with Bacchus' name and directed towards the cellars, where they'd be processed further at a later time, divided between bottles for private use and kegs for sale. The paladin's wine would be scattered across the city, and perhaps even the land. And no one would realize the refreshing drink they were indulging on had come from Bacchus, who'd disappeared without a trace. No one except Stelios, at least, who would enjoy a goblet of the sweet paladin wine for years to come.