

Infinite Mana
By holodrom

It was tough work keeping a shop stocked for wandering adventurers and protagonists. The mysterious cultist in the hooded robes carried a small oil lamp in their hands as they lit the candles around their shop to illuminate it while waiting for the light of dawn to stream through the windows. One by one the candles pushed the dark back into the corners of the shop, giving them some light to work with.

The light in their hands did nothing to illuminate the shadowy circle of their face, nor did the light from the candles. Only their round nose and two bright eyes were visible under the hood. Once the candles were lit, Hardlight went about getting the shop in order. They unpacked boxes of basic supplies to set on display tables; health potions, ammunition, your basic bulk consumables.

Rare items went on shelves behind the register, making them tougher to steal. Hardlight bent down to unpack boxes of rare items from the floor, and one by one they reached up to set them on shelves overhead.

WHAM

"OUCH!" Hardlight yelled as they stood up and bonked their head on the bottom of a low shelf that displayed some of the rare wares. The shelf leaped out of its holders and tossed all of the objects across the store before the wooden shelf itself crashed to the floor at Hardlight's feet.

The shopkeep grumbled and rubbed their head as they scowled at the many scattered objects before sighing and beginning to set everything in order. They still had some time before the shop opened. They started by hoisting the plank of the shelf up over their head and setting it back into its holders. Once it was steady, they began to sweep up everything on the floor into their arms, using the oversized sleeves of their orange parka to gather everything together. They piled the objects on top of the countertop, right next to their register and a complimentary candy bowl.

They plucked a small decorative pin in the shape of a shield from the pile and set it up on the shelf before fishing out its matching tag that listed its effect and price in a few different popular currencies. Next up was a few pouches of assorted rare ammunition for ranged weapons. After that, an overpriced, gold-plated vanity weapon that had no advantages over the basic form other than looking cooler.

Those always sold well.

They had almost everything back in order, aside from a single display stand for a small item that they couldn't recall. The price tag he had for it read "Infinite Mana Orb (Cheat Item) 9999 Gold" but as he scratched his head through the hood of his vibrant parka he couldn't for the life of him remember what it looked like.

Hardlight shrugged. It would turn up sooner or later. He didn't have time to go looking under the tables and counters before opening shop for the day. He took his mind off the missing item by grabbing a handful of small hard candies from the bowl on the countertop and popping them into his mouth one at a time. They disappeared into the dark void of his hooded face.

The candies were small things. Round little marbles of hardened but brittle sugar that were hollow on the inside, encouraging you to bite down on them. He chomped down on them, enjoying the flavors. Cherry. Lemon. Blue Raspberry.

Crrrrunch.

The flavor of that one was weird, but Hardlight barely had any time to process that thought before they felt their head swelling atop their shoulders. Their thick orange hood stretched to contain their ballooning skull as their almost featureless face pushed forward. They could feel massive pulses of energy blasting out of the cracked surface of the candy they bit, filling their head with energized vapors. By the time they tried to spit it out the candy was wedged under the side of their tongue, and their bloating, expanding features robbed them of the dexterity necessary to remove it from under their tongue.

Their growing head bumped the shelf they'd just reset and made it tumble again. Everything fell and bounced off the top of their head, and a single label fluttered past their widening eyes and landed on the countertop in front of the. "Infinite Mana Orb." They realized immediately that the candy they just bit wasn't a candy at all. It was the cheat item they had up for sale, a small and starry little marble of an item that blended in with the rest of the hard candies when it had bounced into the bowl the first time she shelf was knocked over.

"Mpphh hhmhp!!" Hardlight bobbed around their shop, trying to find something in their inventory that could get them out of this situation. Their head knocked against the walls every time they took a step, and their face bounced against the floor when they leaned forward to pick something up. HP Plus? Nope! Double Strike? Useless! Accuracy Boost? Come on! They began to regret not carrying any status effect blockers, not that they imagined there was anything to prevent the "blimp head" affliction.

Their head grew so big that it became heavy from the gaseous energy pumping it up, forcing them to hold it up with their sleeves. It took up much of the space inside the shop now as their cyan eyes bulged out from the pressure building behind them. The roundness of Their black and orange head squared off as they pushed into the corners of the building. The wooden planks that made up the walls groaned as they bowed out from the building pressure, and Hardlight found their body pinned beneath the blimp of their own cranium.

Their features flattened against the walls and roof. Orange fabric pressed against the windows and cracked them before blowing them out and bulging through. Their eyes put excess pressure on the roof, and the shingles fell away from the bulging rooftop before thier eyes pushed through, popping off the planks and sticking through a pair of holes like oversized binoculars looking toward the sky.

The door popped off its hinges, spinning the exterior sign from Closed to Open. The supports inside the walls splintered from the force Hardlight's head was exerting on them, and they groaned as he felt the pressure on their head intensify as the little shop held together around him. Individual planks began to fling themselves free of the structure as it bent further out of shape.

When the shop could take no more, it exploded. The force of all that tension releasing sent broken chunks of wood flying through the air up to twenty feet away, and the roof was launched up at an angle as half of it was rudely burst by Hardlight's swelling eyeballs. The intact half of it splintered into firewood when it crashed to the ground nearby.

Hardlight's head decompressed, and their body bounced free from underneath it. The sudden release of the squeezing tension on their head caused the cracked mana orb to pop free from beneath their tongue and roll around in the stretched and hollow cavern of their mouth as they tried to get to their feet. The light from the magical, self-contained universe shined through their eyes, the intensity shifting as the marble circled the back of their throat. Their building-sized head creaked under the growing pressure within, stretching their face, eyes, and hood translucent without ever revealing any details of their visage.

Hardlight's head was too big for their body to manage, and they couldn't even roll over as the marble circled the proverbial drain before finally falling deeper. The mass of energy pouring out of it pumped up their neck like a monster truck tire as it passed through, stretching their cyan scarf around the entire swell of it. The curve of their throat deepened as the marble fell, and instead of descending all the way into their stomach, it stalled on the new rising curve and got stuck in their neck tire.

The scarf-clad innertube of inflating neck blew up around the bottom of their huge head. It passed over their shoulders and chest, and pinned their arms to their sides, constricting their upper body and puffed up lower jaw like a blood pressure cuff. The air already in their head was squeezed upwards, causing it to pool in their eyes, stretching and straining those lenses until the pair of them rivaled their head in sheer size.

Those translucent balloons squeaked as they rubbed and stretched together, and Hardlight strained to focus their vision thorough their distended ocular orbs. Their growing neck did have the singular advantage of propping them up, and with some scrambling of their legs they managed to right themselves. They were almost held aloft by their head balloon at this point, and as they tried to balance on their little legs, the marble rolled down their throat and past their chest.

Their chest and upper body followed the lead of their neck, *bwoomphing* out to rival it as the expansion shot out from the center of their chest all the way to their shoulders. The expansion helped wrestle their torso somewhat free of the constriction of their neck, but it mattered little as their chest and back took heavy punishment from the outpouring of mana. It ballooned into a sort of dome that was pinched at the bottom of their ribcage thanks to the cloth belt that was tied around their torso.

The uneven distention of their form pushed the magical energy further upwards. Their overinflated bobblehead creaked larger, expanding its diameter by meters per minute. Their neck insisted on taking up even more space and trying to squeeze out some freedom from between the head and shoulders that were constricting it. Hardlight's flailing arms stiffened as the outpouring of energy pushed outwards from their chest and into their limbs.

The loose sleeves that covered their arms and shrouded their hands tightened around their swelling limbs. The fabric stretched into distinct bulges: one for the bloat of the upper arm, one for the swell of the lower arm, and a sphere for the hands that couldn't escape the end of the sleeve as they ballooned bigger than the cuff. Their arms stuck out to their sides in a taut T-pose, looking like a wreath of balloons decorating the major blimps of their head and body. By now they covered almost a half mile of space.

The light of the marble was visible as it descended through them, landing in their stomach as it continued to release the energy within. Their growth was rapidly accelerating. The cracks in the marble widened from how much force the escaping energy exerted on the

damaged shell. It took a scant couple of minutes for Hardlight's stomach to catch up to the rest of them. It expanded at an alarming rate, creaking loudly under the strain. The rope belt stretched, but still pinched their torso into two distinct spheres.

Hardlight could only wonder when this would end. The Infinite Mana Orb was the real deal. It wasn't "technically" or "theoretically" infinite, it was actually, truly infinite in capacity. Nevermind how they acquired it, or how it was even created in the first place—the more pressing concern was how they were going to contain all this and come back from it. Their body was stretched miles in all directions and was overtaking more of the landscape every second, blowing up so quickly that outrunning it was now impossible. Walls of orange fabric covered entire landforms and floated atop rivers and lakes. They could feel wind buffeting their sides through the thinning fabric of their garments as their body grew large enough to disrupt entire weather patterns.

The last holdout of their original shape was their legs, or rather, the pair of pale blue boots they wore over their legs and feet. The thick leather of the material kept their legs compressed and minimally bloated up to this point. They weren't standing, of course. Miles and miles of expanded head and torso had long tipped them onto their back while jetstreams rolled them around, bouncing them off of mountainsides and across entire oceans. Their little legs flailed uselessly as pressure in their body ever increased. The leather creaked, doing its utmost to resist stretching, but it could only stand up so long against the Big Bang of magical energy seeping into every inch of the shopkeeper.

There was a loud bang as the material finally gave in and stretched across hundreds of miles in an instant, compressing a wall of air that exploded in a violent sonic boom that ripped the ground apart and launched Hardlight in an orbiting arc across the planet. They almost achieved permanent orbit, but their extremely ballooned head caught too much air and reduced their velocity, causing it to come to rest atop a city they'd never heard of.

As their massive head bounced around atop the metropolis that was once distant from them, they could feel... something... bouncing around against the bottom of their bloated, hooded head. It felt like small balloons, the way they were so weightless they bounced away when they collided with them before rising up again, slowly bouncing and floating their way to Hardlight's outskirts. The idea of turning to see what was going on below them wasn't worth entertaining. Mobility was already a distant memory, even though only scant minutes had passed since they swallowed the marble.

That, of course, was when they saw it. Colorful balloons were rising into the sky all across the planet. As they spun in the jetstreams of the high atmosphere, Hardlight realized that they weren't balloons exactly, even though the term applied well to their current state. But no, it was other hooded figures like themselves, ones whose faces were shrouded in shadows and robes. They were expanding into huge blimps, straining against their limits as they lifted into the air as colorful balloons.

Hundreds of them were floating upwards and Hardlight couldn't help but stare at them all through ballooned eyes. Their thoughts spun and reeled. There was only one horrible explanation for the sight they were seeing as their body expanded to planetary proportions: the unending storm of magic within their body was warping reality itself and causing everyone like them to also expand.

They watched—forcibly wide-eyed—as the other cultists and such expanded with worrying speed. Their bodies bloated into smaller mirrors of Hardlight, with their eyes and heads taking on the brunt of the pressurized punishment. Their limbs flailed for precious few seconds before the bloat hit their bodies and immobilized them from neck to boots. Their bodies grew into spheres flanked by additional swelling orbs that were once dextrous limbs.

Their heads cartoonishly expanded like so many hundreds of parade mascot heads escaping into the sky. The atmosphere filled with thousands of differently pitched creakings as they started to pull translucent, light glowing through each of them as though they were stars rising into the heavens. The pressurized forms surrounding and hugging into Hardlight contained so much pressure their smooth surfaces were rock-hard, and their material was stretched bubble thin. They looked like collections of bubbles that were stuck together, with increasingly deafening creaks and rumbles coming from the distorted bodies each time they bumped into one another while in flight.

BOOM

10,000 points!

Unfortunately for everyone else, they weren't as resilient or stretchy as Hardlight was. One of them exploded into a brilliant, colorful light show of falling sparkles and bright, flashing numbers. The glimmering sparkles drifted to earth and winked out of existence before hitting the ground. Hardlight's body was rocked by the shockwave from the explosion, as they swore they could feel their entire growing form shake from the boom.

Another one hit their limit and burst. Then another. They detonated like a fireworks show all across the planet, filling the sky with bursts of illuminated numbers, showers of sparkles, and a rain of fabric scraps. Each explosion shook Hardlight's body and was accompanied by a tremendous spike in their internal pressure. Something appeared in the corner of their vision, and as they thought about it, it came into focus. It was a score counter, and it was surging upward with an increasing multiplier as more and more hooded blimps burst. The rising high score was converted to more magical energy. The power and points released from each explosion surged back into Hardlight, accelerating their already ridiculous growth in exponential surges.

Atmosphere-shaking squeaks and creaks sounded out from their body with every explosion-fueled surge of size. They tried to grunt and yelp with each burst of stretch, but their hollow body couldn't vibrate enough to make any vocalizations that could be heard over the rumbling din of their star-swelling form. Their internal brightness intensified as the magical density within them spiked with every explosion of their fellows.

The cloth belt around their waist was at its limit at this point. It was stretched into an equator around their middle, still separating them into two hemispheres, but not for much longer. It had loosened to the limit, with scant material left still holding the knot together. Every surge of Hardlight's size pulled it thinner, tightening the knot but fraying the material. A particularly high-scoring explosion hit their body, and the *BWOOMPH* of size finally popped the belt off of them. Their body shape rounded out considerably once they were free of the cloth vice, and the scraps of blue orbited their mass like a planetary ring.

With another *BANG* they were as big and luminous as the Sun. *POW!* And now they dwarfed it. *Ker-BLAM!* Like a Red Giant bullying a smaller, younger star, Hardlight's expansion

knocked both the planet and the Sun away, and surged to the edges of the solar system, knocking aside every celestial body that encountered their drum-tight hide.

The bigger they surged the faster the smaller detonations occurred. The feedback loop pumped entire galaxies of energy into their bubble-thin body that swirled under the translucent surface as a turbulent nebula of stardust. Light beamed from their spherical, squashed-together eyes like headlights into the starry void. Their misshapen form quaked across the cosmos and could easily be mistaken for a horror as it smashed apart entire stars when it surged against them.

Any being even remotely similar, across all the universe, began to bloat up and explode, causing glimmering light shows to grace the skies of billions of distant planets as the dark void of space itself began to glow from the intensity of light Hardlight's body was putting out. The light took on a faint blue hue as the sheer speed of their expansion exerted a blueshift phenomenon on the light and sound coming from their body.

Bwom...

Their eyes hit a solid wall that didn't relent in the wake of their expansion.

Bwoomp!

The back of their head pressed against another such wall, squeezing their balloon head. The sides of their head followed suit until there was no room left for their head to expand. Energy surged into their body, forcing it to size beyond size in a desperate but useless bid to make it proportional to their overblown skull. There simply wasn't enough space remaining. Hardlight's expansion exceeded the expansion of the universe, and their body strained against the limits of how far space itself had spread from the birth of the universe.

They could feel innumerable supernovas going off against their body; the countless explosions of their brethren pinned against their flesh and exploding as they were compressed and pressurized beyond their limits. Hardlight's body greedily guzzled the energy of every explosion despite the protesting thoughts of the body's owner, and the exponential expansion rammed their form against the very limits of their reality.

It began to tear. Orange cloth and dark shadows and gleaming cyan eyes bulged through the tears. Their eyes glimpsed the things beyond through the tearing veil, the swirling sea of all reality, of universes not their own, of timelines flowing from past to future. Their brain interpreted it all as rivers of prismatic light through a void; light much like the luminance shining through the thinning veil of their own body.

They were something new in that void. Something expanding faster than all the other realities that swirled in glittering streams around them. It changed their nature, while retaining their form. Basically, what difference was there between Hardlight and an expanding universe at this point?

There wasn't one. After all, a universe is essentially a mass of energy and matter within a bubble-thin container. This had some odd effects on Hardlight's hollow, energy-filled insides. The infinite mana within their body began to collect and swirl into distinct accretion disks that formed entire galaxies and stars. In turn, planets formed around those stars, and life charged with magic flourished on those planets.

They were then subjected to the nature of their container. An expanding universe that was also a cosmically overblown cultist could only create life that was the same as itself, and so

Hardlight expanded *harder* as the tiny (to Hardlight), hooded, intelligent lifeforms within also began to expand.

At first Hardlight wasn't even certain what was causing the increasing and uneven pressure within. It started as an imperceptible addition to the constant expansion they were already experiencing, but even at their reality-shattering size they could tell that *something* else was adding to their bloat. Their suspicions grew as they began to feel something akin to insects bouncing within the vast hollow space of their body and head.

The bumps against the inside of their skin grew in size and mass but slowed in frequency. Colorful glitters rose to his surface and sank into his depths, growing in size with every cycle. The glimmering specks grew large enough to take on the shape of deformed spheres with vaguely recognizable features. Bright eyes, shadowed faces, hoodies that were once too loose, now stretched too tight.

The variously-colored creatures in hoodies bounced against one another as they blew up uncontrollably, helplessly. They increased beyond planetary size, surged past stellar size. They displaced the reality of magical energy around them, forcing it into the far corners of Hardlight's body. All the while, the broken mana orb continued to pour out magical matter as it swirled at the center of this new universe.

The movements of those billions of billions of blimping hooded figures slowed to a halt as the massive collection of them took up all of the space within Hardlight. They were sandwiched between the transparent walls of the body of their universe and the bloating forms of one another. The entire collection of misshapen, multi-colored spheres within a transparent container looked like a bubble gum machine.

The individual cultists weren't expanding anywhere near as quickly as Hardlight was, but the sheer number of them within more than made up for the gap. They wrestled for space and pressed outwards, pushing against one another and forcing their container to expand even faster. Hardlight strained. Their already distorted body bulged with slight spheres all over. It was no longer just pressure and energy expanding their body, but mass as well. Those blown up bubbles within them fought to stretch them faster than they already were.

The tension across their body grew uneven. The creaking across the void grew louder. If Hardlight had any semblance of a sensible body shape remaining, it was being stretched into oblivion by the collection of tiny universes blowing up within them. They were swollen so large that their form was crowding the other actual universes in the void to the edges of the darkness. The brilliant light within Hardlight's failing form brought a glimmer to the infinite nothing, a growing, surging light amid the dark. The pressure of so many beings within crushed the remaining shell of the mana orb, causing an infinite amount of energy to be released into their body in an instant.

And then they were nothing.

The first tear across their body released a searing beam of light that cracked the void before it split the bubble of their form. They could feel it run across them, splintering out into innumerable fissures across their surface. Their size was such that despite the crack traveling across them at a speed beyond light years, it felt like it was traveling in slow motion. Their torso burst like a bubble, flinging the cultists contained within beyond the edge of reality. Their limbs followed suit in quick succession, obliterating the timelines that had tangled around them. One

eye burst into a shower of color, followed by the other, and finally, with an exhausted creak, their head burst into a shimmering firework.

The collection of taut "gumballs" inside of their body couldn't handle the force of their container exploding. As the shock rocked through their forms, the vibrations caused them all to surge in size and explode in a wave that spread wide from the center. Countless rings of them burst and exploded, a series of miniature big bangs that left behind tiny singularities that might one day become proper new universes. The shockwave of Hardlight's explosion traveled across space and slowly dissipated, and nothing at all was left behind. By the time the final cultists exploded, the void was left an even deeper darkness than it was before.