

City of Gains: Chapter 015

By: Indigo Rho

I knew my dreams would be rough that night after seeing what had become of Conrad. They'd already been rough ever since the accident with Gideon, filled with blame and my ever-expanding belly. But now Conrad was the wobbling embodiment of my greatest fear.

My dreams took me to a finely decorated home. Mosaics on the floor depicted food and cheerful, gluttonous folk, all of whom were fairly rotund. Tapestries on the walls were of familiar landscapes, though I couldn't quite pinpoint their actual locations. The halls were wide and the doorways designed with my height in mind, a welcome reprieve. I was in Evington, obviously.

A delicious aroma suddenly flooded my nostrils. Sweets. I'd started walking in the smell's direction before I'd even realized what it was. As I went, the people in the mosaics grew fatter and fatter, the food more decadent. Immobility only made them happier.

The corridor ended in a walled garden nearly identical to Conrad's. Water poured into the corner fountain from the mouth of a blubbery dragon's head, modeled after Karth the Insatiable. The flowers were nicer, with a fragrance that blended well with the food sitting on carts. It was the kind of garden I'd want for myself.

An immense maned wolf sat in the garden like a centerpiece. His belly rested on flattened pillows and spread his legs wide apart. His love handles were massive rings that curved around his back and bulged out almost as far as my gut. The two domes of his moobs weighed heavily on his middle. His cheeks were practically perched atop them, so big they threatened to envelop his fat muzzle. His legs were so doughy I doubted they could bend at all, while his arms seemed well on their way to joining them.

He wore no clothing, not that I could imagine someone so immense being able to, even in my dreams. Maned wolf automatons attended him, their extended reach allowing them to easily lean over his bulk to feed him donuts and pie.

The maned wolf offered me a warm smile and behind the blubber I recognized myself.

“Welcome!” The declaration jiggled his immense body from head to toe. “How do you like your home?”

I couldn’t pry my eyes away from him. From me. “It’s nice.”

The enormous me laughed at my sheepish response. “It is, isn’t it? It’s everything you’ve ever wanted—tastefully decorated, spacious, but not overwhelming. And it’ll be yours once you’ve reached your full potential as a true citizen of Evington. You’re far too scrawny right now.”

He gestured at me with a pudgy paw. Two more automatons appeared with platters of snacks. Pastries fell behind them as they approached, but the contents of the platters never dwindled.

For once, I didn’t immediately start to gorge. “I think most would agree I’m pretty fat already. I don’t exactly stand out in Evington.” I admitted it with less despair than I’d expected.

“Preposterous, you’re practically wasting away! You can’t honestly take one good look at me and call yourself fat!” Every word—every *syllable* wobbled him. He was immobile yet always in motion.

Part of me wanted to nod in agreement. Fat was a relative term in a place like Evington, where anyone could end up weighing a ton due to bad luck. I took a donut from one of the platters and swiftly devoured it. My whole body puffed out at once, my belly alone distending a foot further than before.

I frowned at my gains and didn’t go for a second treat. “I don’t want to be a blob like you. Losing my mobility is unacceptable.” Could the gigantic version of me even be lifted, or did the automatons roll him from room to room, feast to feast? He’d been eating since before I arrived and only stopped to speak. I didn’t want my life dictated by my appetite.

“You speak of it like it’s the most dreadful thing in the world.” He let out a strained sigh. “Have you ever considered you might be overreacting? You’re so afraid of gaining a few pounds that you’ve treated the city like a powderkeg. You dart to and from work, never taking the opportunity to see the sights and explore. You haven’t even visited the Bountiful Pools, the pride of Evington! And what about the library? Imagine how many unique works are kept there. But no, instead you fret about gaining more weight and waddle back to Fulworth as if you’ve been banished.”

The shaming finally averted my gaze. I *had* been too afraid to have any

real fun in Evington. My knowledge of the city consisted of a few lines between the shop and the gates, and little else. Gideon liked to say Evington was nothing but restaurants and markets as far as the eye could see but there really was so much more. There were theaters, parks, and plenty of shops run by craftsmen who'd accepted heft to continue their trade in the city.

Rather than judge my days on what I'd accomplished or experienced, I judged them on how much I'd gorged or the weight I'd gained. In a way, I'd narrowed Evington down to the worse effects of the curse and nothing else.

"I guess there are things I've neglected," I said, trying not to dwell too hard on the time I'd wasted worrying. I picked up another donut without thinking and ate it, puffing up once more.

"Don't let his sweet talk fatten you up!"

My voice came from behind me, far more bitter than normal. A new me had arrived. He was as lean as the day I'd arrived in Evington, with a sharp chin and a flat middle without even the faintest curve. A memory that'd begun to fade.

"You again," the fatter me said with a disdain I hadn't personally expressed in a long, long while. "Have you come to spoil what little fun he has in his life?"

"I've come to remind him of what he used to be before he came home and started recklessly pigging out," the thin me spat. He shuddered at the blob and turned his attention to me alone. "Remember your promise? One month. *One*. Not two or three and certainly not six!"

"Plans change," the fatter me said, before accepting a wide slice of pie. I swore he'd begun to eat more since our thinnest version had arrived.

"You didn't change plans, you stopped having any at all! You work at the shop and grow fat, all while acting like you face the greatest conundrum ever." He squeezed my belly and shook it hard. "By the gods, look at what you've become! You're as fat as the librarian at the Academy library, the one who kept breaking chairs."

Chairs we both knew had been weakened by pranksters wanting to embarrass the librarian. They'd succeeded, but mysteriously ballooned in size months later while studying. No one had made fun of the librarian's weight after that.

“The weight’s temporary. No one stays thin in Evington.” Will and determination alone couldn’t defeat a curse.

“It’s only temporary if you leave. So, are you?”

I didn’t respond right away. I’d always implied I would to Gideon, but when faced with myself, I wavered. “Probably?” My answer didn’t satisfy any of us.

“Really? The blubbery fate that awaits you is sitting right here but you’re still not sure you want to avoid it?” The thin me’s exasperation surpassed even Gideon’s at his worst. “You used to be fit!” He thumped his chest with a fist and didn’t jiggle at all. “You never had to worry about knocking anything over with your damn ass, never had to lug your belly home because you mindlessly ate a dozen plates of food. Losing weight and returning to the old you—the *true* you—will take time, likely years, but at least it’s still feasible. Though only if you leave.”

My middle suddenly shrunk, as if I were a balloon having its air squeezed out. I hadn’t exercised much lately, certainly not enough to slow the gains brought upon by the curse. But if I left the city and kept Gideon’s routines, I’d definitely start to shed some weight.

“I liked not struggling to bend over. And having clothes that always fit.” I deflated again, to a size I hadn’t been in at least two months.

“And you miss not having to guess how round you’ll be after every meal,” he said. “If you stay here you’ll become a blob, plain and simple. You can’t handle the curse. You’ll give up, eat to your heart’s content, and end up like our mountainous doppelganger or Conrad or Claude. A helpless blob who only gets joy from eating because they’re denied every other pleasure.”

“None of us are helpless!” the immense me declared. “We have ways of getting around the limitations of our incredible size. Automatons, assistants, and compression rings. Becoming a blob hasn’t slowed down Claude, has it? He still works as well as any other alchemist, still has an active life. Being fat is only the end of the world if you let it become the end of the world.”

Claude *had* been an inspiration to me, proof you could beat the curse in some way. I began to swell, regaining all the weight I’d lost and then some. My clothes dutifully adjusted to match my shifting size, clinging to me somewhat tight but always fitting.

The thin me clicked his tongue at my swelling. “Ah yes, the magical rings that barely hold back Claude’s room-filling girth. Don’t forget he has to take those off at home to preserve their power. And meanwhile, he’s getting fatter and fatter with each passing year, straining the limits of the magic that compresses him. That trick works in Evington, but what about elsewhere? You’re already an inconvenient size for the rest of the world. Another couple hundred pounds and you’ll be too fat for most places. Your dreams of traveling will be as crushed as the chairs you try to sit on.”

“How long has it been since he put any thought into those so-called dreams?” the fattest me interjected.

“He’s had distractions,” the thin me grumbled. “Like ballooning with blubber.”

“You’re not dumb enough to believe your own lies. Those promises he made to travel were shallow from the very beginning. He only made them because everyone else at the Academy talked of traveling and he felt like the same was expected of him. So he said the same whimsical locales the others did, along with a few he’d heard about in his studies.” He let out a low moan as he chomped down on a large donut, and I felt my belly grow a few inches rounder. “He’s never put genuine thought into traveling, has he?”

The thin me stayed quiet, but I mumbled out a “no”.

“His dream has always been to study hexes, and Evington gives him the opportunity of a lifetime. Karth’s curse is the most complex and powerful curse he’s ever known, yet it’s woefully ignored. Everyone here is uninterested in the details and everyone abroad is too afraid of getting fat. Why not become the first in generations to study it? He could very well secure his legacy as the foremost expert on the curse!” For a moment, the idea seemed to please him more than food.

The temptation alone of making an actual impact on the study of hexes made me gain a hundred pounds. I enjoyed alchemy, but my love of curses existed on a completely different level. I might not be able to make any groundbreaking discoveries on my own, but maybe my work could encourage others and lay the foundation for future research.

“The only research you’ll manage is a log of your uncontrollable gains, which’ll be cut short once your paws are too fat to hold a pen,” the thin me

said. "There are plenty of other curses for you to look into, ones that won't end your career in a matter of months."

I shed a few dozen pounds as I remembered how fattening simple field research would be.

"So he'll transcribe his findings. Getting fat hasn't weakened his sensitivity to curses!" My belly grew rounder.

"He'll be too busy eating to examine anything. Think of all the gaps he'll have in his notes from when the curse decided he needed to be stuffing himself, not paying attention!" I lost the weight.

"Any information gathered would be better than none at all!"

"Only if it amounts to something more than 'being within reach of food makes you fat', you gluttonous oaf!"

"Because obviously that's all he's recorded these last few months. So convenient for you to forget that!"

"And when will he have the time for research, when he's too busy working at the shop or shoveling food into his maw?"

"He'll be able to cut back his workload once more apprentices are trained!"

"Yes, more fools to fatten. He should be encouraging them to work anywhere else but Evington!"

"Again you act like having a gut is a death sentence! Some people are fine being fat, get over yourself."

The furious argument had my waistline swelling and receding at a dizzying rate. One second I was chubby and the next I felt about to topple. I struggled to stabilize myself, afraid I'd either explode or collapse into a speck. Six months of uncertainty struck me all at once, every doubt, worry, and dream. Everything I'd lost and gained. It was all too much.

"Enough!" I shouted, shattering the two competing versions of myself and the dream itself.

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I awoke in a confused sweat. I rubbed my eyes and slid into a sitting position on the side of my bed. The jiggle of my belly didn't go overlooked for once. I stuck a paw under the overhang of my gut. Pudge buried my fingers,

warming them in a flash. There was so much more of me than there had been six months ago. Curves and rolls and bulges I'd never imagined I'd have. My concerns over the dramatic changes to my body were muted. I'd lived with them long enough and seen far worse. My mind couldn't generate the same level of fear that'd made me reluctant to return to Evington in the first place.

The events of the last few days made ignoring my situation no longer possible. Putting things off was unhealthy for me mentally. My life was in danger of being dominated by arguments, and the blame rested as much on me as it did those who'd spent months trying to sway my opinions. I needed an answer, to whether I'd stay or go, to what I wanted to do with my life, and I needed it now, not later.

But life-defining choices are never so easy. Despite dedicating myself to the cause, I didn't come to a definite conclusion for another week. Doubts lingered like they always do, like they had when I'd left Evington for the Academy. You can't purge them all, no matter how confident you believe you are, and that's okay.

So it came to pass, after conferring with myself and my friends and family, that I found myself finally packing up my things in my room at the Stuffed Dragon Inn. I'd accumulated little in six months aside from a pile of clothing that no longer fit me. I kept it all just in case, though I didn't know if I'd ever be able to squeeze into the smallest pieces again. Being constantly prepared to leave had stopped me from buying anything unessential, and even a few things that may have made my life a little more comfortable. What I had fit into a pair of packs.

I looked around the humble space that'd been my home for half a year. It'd never been much, but it'd been mine. A place to rest after jogging in Fulworth or gorging in Evington. A refuge from the curse but not the consequences of it, which I carried on my soft waistline. I knew I'd miss it, like I had my room at the Academy and the one I'd rented for a time in Vastport. I'd—hopefully—live in better places, but memories make a space as much as the comforts.

The packs felt heavy in my paws. I waddled to the door and didn't look back.

The day was brisk and cloudy, but the rain had thankfully held off. A

wagon filled with cushions and Conrad sat in front of the Stuffed Dragon Inn. The blubbery bald eagle was propped up in a corner, one heavy arm resting on the side of the wagon. An automaton offered him snacks, which he grazed on sparingly. His appetite actually became somewhat restrained when away from the curse. Gideon leaned against the wagon, dressed in his loosest outfit. A similar horse stood beside him, slightly smaller but wearing a tunic that barely fit.

“You’re not getting out of jogging, Caleb,” Gideon warned the other horse.

“But what if it rains?” Caleb asked. “We should find a tavern with nice music to relax at.”

“I’m sure sitting around all day guzzling ale will do wonders to your waistline,” Gideon scoffed. “No. Since you’ve decided to get fat, you’re gonna have to start exercising more. You can’t cook if you’re a blob.” He prodded Caleb’s belly, causing the other horse to twitch and flatten his ears.

“It just sort of happened!” Caleb insisted.

“A-huh,” Gideon said, side-eying Conrad in the cart. The massive bald eagle didn’t seem to notice. “Well, now I’m gonna make sure it stops happening so damn quickly. If my fat ass can still jog then so can you.”

“He means well, Caleb,” Conrad said. “Immobility can wait.”

“I never said I wanted to be immobile!” Caleb’s mouth twisted and he blushed in embarrassment. Conrad didn’t say a word, he only grinned.

“Could’ve fooled me,” Gideon said.

“I’m only gone for a minute and you’re all back to arguing,” I teased.

Gideon crossed his arms on his soft chest. “We’re not arguing.” Caleb quickly nodded in agreement while Conrad accepted grapes from his automaton.

“Good. I didn’t want this to be awkward.” I hefted my packs onto the back of the wagon.

Gideon followed my every move, his mouth twitching faintly as he considered what to say. “You’re sure about all this, right?” He sounded far less frustrated than when I’d first told him my plans, which I took as a good sign.

“For the most part, yes.” That got a grunt out of him, but I defused it with a smile. “I spent the last six years trying to convince myself that I

wanted to be as far away from Evington as possible, all because I was afraid of this.” I grabbed my belly and squeezed it gently. “And I still kind of am,” I said, trying not to glance at Conrad, “but more and more I feel like Evington is where I was meant to be.”

Gideon let a small smile break through his stern facade. “I guess we really can’t escape this dumb curse. Don’t for a second think I’ll stop bugging you about your weight just because you’re staying. I’ve got too many blob friends as it is.”

“The more the merrier,” Conrad chuckled.

“I’m rather fond of my mobility,” I said. “And once I’m officially settled here in Fulworth, I won’t have to worry about going into Evington as often. I’ll be able to do most of my brewing here, so I’ll finally be able to lose a bit of the weight I’ve gained.” Or at least slow the gains down. My brother hadn’t been fond of me working away from the shop—he’d grumbled about efficiency—but Dad understood it’d keep me around and ensure they had an experienced alchemist on staff who wasn’t as likely to get retired by the curse.

“Limiting your time over in Evington is a smart move,” Gideon said, though I felt he intended the words more for his brother than me.

“I’ll do my best.” I hadn’t told anyone my plans to start studying the curse more thoroughly, which would require frequent travel into Evington. In theory, I’d be less exposed to the curse than I was now, but I’d still be at the mercy of accidents and unintended gluttony. It was a price I’d decided I’d be willing to pay to give the curse the academic attention it deserved. I had no doubts my waistline would continue to expand, that one day I might find myself struggling to get out of bed and a feast shy of immobilization. But I’d work diligently to delay that day for as long as possible. Whether that would mean taking months off of work to slim down in Fulworth or the purchase of compression rings, only time would tell.

A single drop of rain landed on my muzzle. I looked up at the clouds. “We should probably head out before it decides to rain. Maybe we can grab a bite to eat after dropping my packs off at my new place.”

The others agreed, even weight-conscious Gideon. Despite our differences, our appetites could always bring us together. Waddling beside the cart as Gideon and Caleb negotiated their exercise routine, I felt a sense

of relief that'd eluded me for months.

I was still figuring out my purpose in life, but I knew it would involve Fulworth and Evington. Maybe I'd become a respectable alchemist. Maybe I'd write a tome hexmages at the Academy would study. Maybe I'd simply become fat and immobile. The one thing I knew for certain was that I'd never be alone, surrounded by friends and family all enduring the same fattening curse as me. Regaining my old, lean form didn't seem so important in comparison.