

City of Gains: Chapter 014

By: Indigo Rho

I helped Gideon as best I could after the accident. The stubborn horse tried returning to his normal routines right away. We jogged together only two days later. He wore poor-fitting clothing a size too small that he'd borrowed from an acquaintance. It didn't completely cover his gut and looked uncomfortable, though he made no complaints.

For the first time ever, I felt we were going slow. Gideon moved awkwardly, as if always on the verge of falling over. His pace was erratic, picking up and slowing down in bursts. My own fresh gains made jogging a challenge, yet I still had to hold back some so I didn't leave Gideon behind.

We mutually agreed to stop much earlier than usual. Gideon panted so hard he could barely speak. He improved each day, but we both silently recognized the reduction in his endurance.

Being around Gideon so much made me acutely aware of my own weight. I'd spent months avoiding any real self-reflection on how fat I'd gotten. All I'd done is compare myself to others who, more often than not, outweighed me a fair deal. I remained thinner than anyone else in my family. My belly never bulged as greatly during our rare meals together. Conrad perpetually dwarfed me no matter how much weight I put on, his gains putting mine to shame. Even Gideon, who I'd briefly surpassed, hadn't felt that much lighter. When I stood beside him I only felt a little overweight.

I understood I'd been a lot thinner only a brief while before, but I'd reduced it to a vague notion so that I wouldn't fret over the situation at all hours of the day. And maybe that'd made it easier for me to put off my decision to remain or leave.

So one morning I stripped down to my undergarments and looked myself over like one might do to produce at a market. I slid my paws under the curve of my belly and lifted, feeling not only the heft but the softness of it. It reminded me of dough, bulging between the gaps of my fingers. A nudge from one paw sent a ripple through the whole mass, causing it to jiggle a couple of times after. Every meal—every misstep—had added to its bulk, layer upon layer of pudge.

I shifted a paw to my rump. It wasn't quite as soft as my middle, but I

still felt the way it filled my pants and chairs. It accented the more prominent curves of my belly and love handles.

I ran a paw along my neck and face. They'd changed subtly at first, so easy to overlook compared to the rest of me. Six months meant I could feel the thickness under my neck fluff and the roundness of my cheeks. The old sharp profile of my muzzle had softened.

I felt fat everywhere I groped. Not that I expected anything different. My tall, lanky frame hadn't stood a chance against the steady gains Evington had inflicted on me. Every day I remained would make me a little fatter. Or a lot fatter, if an accident struck. The gains might slow down to the point of barely being noticeable but they'd never cease completely. To live or work in Evington was to accept a life abundant in girth and short of breath.

Once again I asked myself if I was willing to accept that life, or if I wanted to reclaim the old me, who'd once been able to hide behind columns at the Academy and had cast a shadow as narrow as a walking stick.

Over and over I repeated the list of pros and cons I'd accumulated. I found a counter for each one. After six whole months, my future remained in limbo. I told myself I'd try again the next day, as if it wouldn't be yet another in a series of delays.

I had a hearty breakfast at the inn, enough to sate the appetite that'd grown along with my waistline but not overfill me. I cherished the meals in Fulworth. They lacked the curse-enhanced taste of food in Evington, but I never had to worry about my attention drifting or my belly ballooning out unexpectedly. Any distractions were of my own doing, and so were the bouts of gluttony.

A coyote marched up to my table as I ate. She looked young, but sported the slight paunch common in most who'd recently come of age in Evington but hadn't left. "You're Elias Brewer, right?" she asked.

I nodded as I finished chewing on some bread before answering. "Yes."

"I bring a message from Mr. Conrad." She pulled out a neatly tied roll of paper and placed it in front of me.

Conrad had sent the occasional runner to me at work before, but never all the way to Fulworth. We hadn't seen each other in close to three weeks. I'd been tackling larger elixir batches and hadn't had the time to

meet him for meals. Not even a “quick late afternoon snack” as he had put it, which I’d doubted would be quick or anything less than a full meal.

I untied and unrolled the sheet. The short message requested my presence at his home after noon, but made no mention of food in any form, unusual for him. I noticed the lettering looked exceedingly precise, lacking the meandering lines I’d grown accustomed to seeing from him. He’d dictated the message to someone while feasting on breakfast, no doubt. The coyote may have even been the one to write it down.

Unnecessary trips into Evington were a risk. I’d be at the mercy of the curse no matter how fat I got. It might not stalk me with the same tenacity as it did leaner folk, but it would have no qualms about overfilling my belly or swelling my hips enough to blow the seams out of my pants. Conrad undoubtedly kept his pantries well-stocked, too. Even if we didn’t sit down for a true meal, I’d be tempted with enough snacks and drinks to match one.

But I already went into town nearly every day of the week for work. In the grand scheme of things, visiting Conrad would be like adding a single drop of ale to my mug. One quick trip among the dozens, if not hundreds I’d already completed. I tried not to imagine the single drop being enough to make the mug overflow.

I released the note and let it roll back up. “You can tell Conrad I’ll be there.” I fished out a coin and gave it and the note to the coyote. She nodded with a grin and hurried off.

Doubt crept in before she’d even left the inn. What if Conrad planned a feast? What if he meant to bring me to his restaurant again, or anywhere else in the city to eat for that matter? What if I ended up immobilized before I reached his home?

I took a deep breath and cleared my mind. Such worries could apply to any venture into Evington, with or without Conrad. Blind fear did me little good. I’d need to remain alert and cautious, not terrified and frantic. So I returned to my breakfast, eager for a distraction.

Despite a host of lingering concerns, I went into Evington without hesitation. On the wagon, I listened more keenly to the conversations of the laborers than I had in months, wondering if Gideon’s accident would come up. They spoke naught of my friend or the curse in general. Instead, they spoke of the upcoming harvest festival and argued over which tavern they

should visit after work. Gideon wasn't any different than the countless others who'd fallen victim to accidents on the job. Maybe they'd see him hefting himself into a wagon and remember something about a gelatinous cube, but unless they knew him well, he really would simply be another statistic. They might follow in his heavier footsteps that day if the worst came to pass.

I envied the casual sense of normalcy they'd managed to achieve in a cursed place like Evington. My persistent concerns about my weight prevented me from attaining such relief. Otherwise, I'd have figured out what I wanted for my future months ago.

Conrad's home stood in the same neighborhood as his restaurant. I used my rekindled familiarity with the city to find a route that mostly avoided temptation. No street vendors lured me in with irresistible food and I didn't mindlessly stumble into any restaurants. There were no close calls or obvious signs of the curse in action, aside from how wide everyone in general was.

I blended right in, not particularly massive but fat enough to be mistaken for a local. The sight of so many wobbling bellies and round rumps no longer fazed me. When my gaze drifted, it settled on those who were thin. Younger folk just starting to feel the curse's effects. Wide-eyed visitors stunned by their hefty surroundings. New workers ready to test their resolve at a job destined to fatten them up.

Maybe I had achieved a degree of normalcy.

I'd stopped by Conrad's home a handful of times before but never actually entered it. He'd invited me in, of course, eager to treat me to a tour and a meal he'd cook himself. I couldn't imagine him maneuvering around a kitchen without wrecking everything with his belly or rear. Cauldrons tipping over and ingredients being swept off counters as he turned to check on the chaos in his wake. Could he finish preparing a meal without taste-testing it to mere crumbs?

He'd admitted he hadn't worked in the restaurant's kitchen in a while but had been coy about the exact reason. He always gave his gut a quick tap when he talked about it, though.

The home rose two stories high. The front doors were broad, even for Evington, and decorated with freshly-painted carvings of food. An

automaton servant answered my knocks promptly.

The automaton had the form of a stout bird of prey and wore the clothing of more traditional servants. Its tunic clung oddly tight around its artificial middle. I momentarily wondered if even the constructs could somehow get fatter from the curse. Nonsense, obviously. If anyone would want their automatons to match their girth it'd be Conrad, who'd embraced obesity like others did wine.

"I'm Elias Brewer. I was asked here by Conrad," I said.

"Welcome." The automaton gave a very slight bow. "If you would please follow me."

The first thing I noticed about Conrad's home was how clear the halls looked. There was nothing in the open that one could bump into—no decorative furniture, potted plants, or freestanding works of art. Even the sconces for glowstones were well above shoulder height. A few tapestries adorned the walls, depicting flourishing orchards and bountiful feasts.

Footsteps echoed ahead and I saw someone coming our way. They weren't Conrad or another servant, though. I recognized the coyote who'd delivered the message to me by the silver earring she wore. She cradled her bulging belly in her paws, moving at a slow, swaying gait. Her eyes were half-closed and her muzzle hung slightly open in a look of exhausted content. She paid me no heed as we passed, her attention on her immense belly.

Conrad's hospitality at work. The money she'd made running messages would likely go towards a new wardrobe rather than whatever she'd originally intended. Which meant she'd need to come back to make more and risk the whole cycle repeating itself.

Once again I found myself feeling fascination when I should've felt sympathy.

The automaton took me to an enclosed courtyard. Flowers hung from planters below second-story windows. A cascading fountain was in one corner. Conrad sat in the back of the courtyard atop a pile of pillows. Two more stout automatons fed him a steady supply of snacks. Smaller piles of pillows sat before him, along with towering stacks of empty plates and bowls that may have held the feast that'd stuffed the coyote messenger.

Nothing surprised me about the scene other than Conrad himself.

He'd grown considerably wider in the three weeks we'd been apart. His immense belly covered his whole lap. I swore it was nearly as wide around as I was tall, a feathery mound of pure blubber. His moobs sat above his gut, globes so big they could've been mistaken for modest bellies in their own right. He didn't wear a shirt, and I struggled to imagine how big one would have to be to fit him.

His arms rested upon his enormous middle. They were puffy and didn't look like they could bend well anymore. I suspected his legs were the same, though I couldn't see them past the daunting curve of his gut. His neck had grown so thick it blended with the curve of his massive cheeks, all of which pushed against his beak.

I watched in stunned silence, trying to take in Conrad's size.

"Welcome!" Conrad said after finishing a large bite. His belly jiggled as he spoke.

"Conrad, what happened?" I struggled to compare his girth to anyone else I knew of. Gideon, Berg, and the few other laborers on the verge of retirement I'd seen seemed merely rotund in comparison. Even Pierre from the alchemy shop couldn't match the sheer width of Conrad. The only one who came close was the otter I'd seen get zapped with the weight gain spell months back.

Conrad stared at me quizzically. "Ah, I guess it has been a while, hasn't it? I got rather caught up in work and couldn't find the time to say hello. Sorry about vanishing for so long." His laughter shook his mountainous gut and moobs.

"I meant your, um, your weight. You've grown enormous." I would've shown more tact with anyone else, but Conrad had never been shy about his weight.

"Oh, that." Conrad bellowed out a sharp, wobbling laugh. "I hosted an absolutely wonderful party a few days ago. It was mainly other restaurant owners, bakers, farmers, and a few traders who bring in foreign ingredients. A business party, really, otherwise I'd have invited you."

I'd have turned the invite down regardless and—from the look of Conrad—not regretted it in the least.

"Obviously the food for the party had to be perfect, so I spent the whole week leading up to it taste-testing dishes." Conrad grinned at the

memory and gently patted his belly with a doughy talon. “There were a few days I found myself too stuffed to move. You know how the curse is, always sneaking a few extra treats into our mouths when we least expect it. Though honestly, better me than Caleb. I need him mobile to help cook, after all.”

I hid my relief that Caleb seemingly hadn’t suffered a similar fate. It would’ve ruined any chance of him and Gideon making amends.

“So I guess I’d gotten a bit rounder going into the party. Gaspard *did* joke about not being the fattest anymore—he bakes the best cakes in the city by far, I highly recommend him.” I silently reminded myself to avoid Gaspard at all costs. “Anyway, I outdid myself with the selection of food. I ate and drank pretty much the entire night. I had to take a seat when I became too full to move, but thankfully my servants are always ready to step up when needed.” He accepted a bite from both. “I can’t remember the last time I feasted to such a joyous extent. On the first anniversary of the restaurant, perhaps. I don’t think a single guest was capable of waddling out on their own power.” He spoke of the achievement with pride.

I debated how big a role the curse had played in Conrad’s celebration. He never seemed to need much prodding to gorge and I imagined he’d cultivated business relationships with like-minded gluttons. But a greater concern stewed in the back of my mind. “Are you still mobile?” I asked, already fearing the answer.

“Nope,” he said, plain and cheerful, as if the answer didn’t have even the least bit of profound impact on his life. “I woke up flat on my back the morning after the party and could only wobble back and forth.” He wobbled in place to show me. “Fortunately, all my servants are sturdy models so they’ve been able to move me around the house as needed. Don’t worry, I tend to keep to my room and this courtyard to reduce the strain on them. It wouldn’t do me any good to crush one of them!”

None of the automatons responded to the notion of being flattened by their gargantuan master.

“Are you going to look into any compression gear?”

Conrad shook his head. “No, no. That stuff’s a pointless hassle to deal with.”

“But you’d regain your mobility.” And likely look thinner than he had in years. I could finally see him somewhat lean again.

The bald eagle shrugged, and his beak seemed to sink into his fat face. "It's not much of a loss. I don't see a need to bother with it."

I laughed, I couldn't help it. "But it's your mobility. Are you seriously fine with never walking again?"

"Even before the party, my size made walking a burden. Getting to sit all the time will be so much easier." He sighed happily, then belched. "And immobility was inevitable, anyway. I see it as the natural fate for anyone who comes to accept Evington for what it is. We're both blessed and cursed with a bounty of incredible food unmatched by that of any other place in the world. Yes, this joy comes at a hefty price, but it is one I've gladly paid without hesitation."

"But Conrad, you have decades ahead of you. You can't spend most of your life as a blob," I said, exasperated. I couldn't begin to comprehend his willingness to give so much up just so he could eat any and everything.

"Why not?"

"You can't even leave your own home right now."

"I already have a litter being crafted, along with the automatons necessary to carry it. It won't be a fast way of travel by any means, but I wasn't exactly zooming around before," Conrad chuckled. He'd already put mobility behind him, as if it were years in the past and not days.

My old memories of Conrad resurface. I saw the fit bald eagle who scaled the ruined walls of the city to hide from errands. Who once dragged Gideon and me out to a low peak of the Barrier to see the view and toss rocks at the high branches of trees. His transformation, in both appearance and mind, shocked me.

"And what about the restaurant?"

"I'm delegating a bit more of the management and will do my best to visit a few times a week at least. Our patrons will see me at the entrance and immediately know how good our food is," he smirked.

"Will you even be able to visit Fulworth again?"

"Wagons exist, Elias," Conrad laughed. "I'm thankful for the concern, but I don't understand why you're fretting so much over such a silly matter."

"It's your mobility," I spoke slowly. "You won't be able to do anything on your own anymore. You can't feed yourself, you can't clothe yourself, you can't go for a walk on a whim. You can't even pat me on the back or hug

me.”

“True, true, but that doesn’t mean I can’t still enjoy myself.” He shrugged my words off like they were coming from a rambling drunk. “Elias, my friend, trust me when I say I’ve spent years thinking about this day. You don’t get as fat as me without knowing which way the scales are tipping.” His smile remained strong in reassurance. “I admit I once feared becoming so immense, especially after my first accident. I had nightmares of entire feasts marching into my open maw, of my belly growing so large it knocked down walls. But living in fear is tiresome and cursed food is too delicious for its own good. To live in Evington you must adapt, and we all do so in different ways. For people like me, that means letting the pounds pile on.”

I struggled to understand him. The sacrifice he’d made seemed too extreme, and without benefit. I wanted so badly to tell Conrad the curse had warped his mind and that he’d come to his senses if he left the city, but I had no proof for such wild accusations. I only had my desire for them to be true, and for my friend to not eagerly spend the rest of his life as a steadily growing blob.

And—deep down—I feared I’d be in a similar position in a few years if I chose to remain. It’d only taken me six months to accept doubling in weight. Would it even take six years to accept becoming a blob? Would I be plopped down on a pile of pillows, letting myself be stuffed while Gideon shook his head and wondered how I could change so much?

My head spun with a swarm of hypotheticals that eventually jumbled into an incomprehensible mess and scattered. I cleared my thoughts. The curse wasn’t controlling Conrad like a puppet. Otherwise, the whole city would be blobs, not just a small percentage of exceptional gluttons and unlucky folk. He was right, people simply responded to the curse differently. Gideon acted like the lord of a besieged castle while Conrad acted like a welcoming host. I fell in between, reluctant to get huge but not entirely against gaining weight for the sake of my curiosity and a hint of stability. No single answer existed to the problem of living with Evington’s curse.

“Well, if this is what you want then I’m...I’m glad you’re happy with it.” I didn’t want to imagine myself accepting such a fate with doughy open arms.

Conrad let out a slow, rumbling laugh. “Oh Elias, I said I’d expected

and accepted this, not that I'd strived for it! Seeing the restaurant thrive gives me joy. Indulging in a wonderful meal gives me joy. Being with friends gives me joy. Being immobile is just an unavoidable consequence, like having a hangover after a night of drinking." Except for the fact one lasted a few hours and the other forever. "It's not like I'm hosting a party to celebrate the occasion. Though I wouldn't be the first."

"Are you joking?" I asked with great uncertainty.

"Believe it or not, there are some who adore growing fat more than anything else in the world and see immobility as a thing of immense beauty. I'm quite satisfied with my looks, but even I can't match their passion for a round belly. Evington must be like heaven to them, with the curse giving them the excuse and the means to grow as large as they want." The thought seemed to amuse him, as if he'd forgotten he'd spent the last few months casually glutting his way to immobility. "Anyway, when someone like that becomes immobile they tend to make an event of it. There's always lots of incredible food, naturally. Sometimes the party ends with one or two guests becoming blobs themselves. I'll keep you in mind when I'm invited to another one." He smirked at me, and I hoped he was merely joking.

The events seemed to me like an extreme take on the retirement party I'd been to. Rather than retiring from a job, they were retiring from mobility.

"Thanks," I said. "Uh, other than catching up, was there a reason you invited me over?" I kept expecting servants to arrive with carts of food for a "small" late lunch, something that would leave me as stuffed and bloated as the coyote messenger.

"No, no, I just wanted to chat. I thought it'd be good to inform you of my mobility situation so you didn't think I was avoiding you." I tried not to dwell too much on how often the opposite had been true. I'd been treating Conrad like a harbinger of the curse and a danger to my waistline. He *was* to some extent, but I still could've found the time to be social in relatively safe circumstances. "Obviously it'll be harder to eat out together. I do try to keep my home as welcoming as possible, though, and once the litter's ready there'll be nowhere I can't go."

I could think of plenty of places in Fulworth where a fat, round bird would have difficulty reaching, but I kept the thought to myself. "I'm sure

we'll figure things out." A sudden surge of relief came over me as I realized Conrad's immobility would likely prevent him from showing me any more restaurants and unintentionally fattening me up. Guilt immediately followed.

"And you'll always know where to find me if you need to send a message to arrange something." Conrad's indifference towards his immobility would take getting used to. He really was treating it as a completely normal occurrence, little worse than poor weather or a broken bone. "Though now that we're on the topic, have you considered finding a place a bit more permanent than the inn? I know there are plenty of nicer rooms to rent, both in Fulworth and Evington."

"My arrangement is still only temporary." My reply came so stilted I couldn't believe it myself.

"Six months isn't temporary," Conrad said, accepting a snack from one of the automatons. His eyes abruptly widened. "Oh, would you like a bite to eat?"

I clenched my jaws shut to prevent myself from unwittingly accepting the offer. Only after repeating my answer a few times over in my head did I say it out loud. "No, thank you." Conrad nodded, content to have all the food to himself. I wondered how much it took to sate the appetite of someone so massive, but quickly decided I was fine never knowing. "I'm still figuring my situation out here."

"Do you *really* believe that? From my perspective, you've all but moved back now. You have work and a respectable place to sleep. You certainly don't talk about any place specific you have to be. But you do mention how work at the shop is, and how your family's been doing, and even—sometimes—restaurants you've particularly enjoyed." He grinned as if that were the most important point of all. "You only bring up leaving when I ask if you're going to stay, and I've been hearing less and less conviction in your voice each time. You're not fooling anyone, Elias."

"I'm not trying to," I insisted. Except maybe myself. Like clockwork, my thoughts returned to the debate that'd raged since I'd arrived back in Evington months ago. No new insight came to me, only a headache. "There's so many risks."

"What, the risk of getting fat? You've already rounded out quite a bit

so it's too late to worry about that!" Conrad scoffed.

"Yeah, I know." Standing before the immense bald eagle had made me feel thinner for a while, but I became aware of the weight around my middle and the slight tightness of my belt.

"My apologies, I meant no offense. I was merely pointing out how you've already adapted to the curse rather than despair over a few dozen pounds."

I'd gained way more than a few dozen pounds. It was closer to a few hundred pounds thanks to the accident. "I haven't adapted, I've just been lucky. And that luck's come at the expense of others. Gideon got stuffed by a gelatinous cube because of me."

"Did you cram the thing down his throat yourself?" Conrad asked.

"No."

"Then why would it be your fault? I know Gideon's not blaming you, at least."

He hadn't, though I'd yet to let myself off the hook for the disaster. "How would you know that?"

"Gideon and I may have our disagreements, but I still talk with his brother Caleb and Caleb talks to him. Well, he gets chastised a lot by him at least, from the sound of things." Conrad shook his head. "Caleb took a couple days off to care for him. He kept mentioning how strange it was to be thinner than his brother again and how grumpy Gideon was about not being able to dodge a gelatinous cube of all things, but not once did he mention Gideon blaming anyone but himself for it. Gideon may be convinced I spend all my free time plumping up his brother, but he's not the sort to accuse others of being responsible for his own gains."

And if Gideon knew I was blaming myself again, he'd probably have a few choice words to say about it. I'd simply turned his tragedy into an excuse for my indecisiveness. "Yeah. Yeah, I know," I sighed. "Staying here is a big decision—probably the biggest in my life, in so many ways." I couldn't bring myself to smile fully, but Conrad snorted in amusement. "There's so much that could go wrong."

"That's true for life in general."

"Most people don't have to worry about, you know, becoming too fat to move." I didn't like using Conrad as an example, but his blubbery form

was hard to ignore.

“Not even most people in Evington have to worry about that!” Conrad laughed off my concerns. “None of us chose to be born in a cursed city, but all of us who chose to stay have found ways to make life here work. We accept the accidents and the appetites, the torn seams and tight fits, just like our ancestors did after they rolled Karth the Insatiable away. We’re defeating that dragon all over again every day we find a new way to adapt to his preposterous attempt at revenge. That’s what *you’ve* been doing for the last six months, and don’t even try to tell yourself otherwise.”

I did, of course. Doubling in size certainly didn’t feel like a grand victory against a curse designed to do just that. All I’d done was recklessly admire its complexity while it’d stuffed me until I became a dough ball. “Look, I’ll forever respect everyone who’s endured the curse, but I’m not sure this is the life for me.”

“Then let it be known I’m doubting your doubt.” Conrad looked upon me with as close to a stern expression as I’d seen from him in ages. “Elias, I may be biased in wanting you to stay in Evington. I’ve enjoyed having you back, and I’m certain others have, too. Again, Caleb’s a bit of a gossip and talks with his brother a lot. So if you ever do decide to stay or go, please keep that in mind.” His smile returned, and I knew the brief lecture was over. “Now are you sure you don’t want something to eat? My pantries are always open to you.”

I watched my friend’s massive gut wobble with every word he spoke and bite he took. “I’m good, honestly.” My thoughts swirled in my head like the energy of the curse around me. I couldn’t put off the question of my living arrangement any longer.