

The Weight of Fate: Chapter 020

By: Indigo Rho

The only sound in the room was the tapping of Damir's fingers on the arm of his chair. The large lion looked from Tane to Sivert to Julia and back to Tane again without saying a word. His muzzle twisted in thought, squishing his doughy cheeks as he shifted between doubt and irritation. Tane had confessed his theory about the recent string of fattenings within the guild. Far from eloquent, the zebra had rambled throughout, stopping to mention essential points he'd forgotten to say earlier. Opening up to his comrades earlier hadn't eased his nerves as much as he'd wished. Neither had the support of Juliet and Sivert, as much as he appreciated it.

Damir had let him blather, responding more with his face than words. Tane got the impression the guild leader didn't like what he was hearing. Whether that meant he believed him had yet to be seen.

Damir let out a long, deflating exhale. "You understand that what you've proposed sounds ludicrous, right? You had a prophetic vision, and now an unknown force is gradually undoing it. On top of that, you've been the catalyst for each incident." He rubbed his brow with a paw. "It doesn't make sense."

"Which is why we can't ignore it," Juliet said. The otter had been offered and declined a chair, citing her belief getting up again would be harder than remaining standing. Her sturdy tail anchored her in place, anyway. Sivert had volunteered to endure the chair for her, earning him a snarl and a denial from Damir. The lion's tolerance for snark was at an all-time low.

Tane took over the argument. "If these accidents keep happening—and we have every reason to assume they will—then three more members of the guild are fated to gain a terrible amount of weight."

"Who are the next victims supposed to be?" Damir asked.

"Moss, Redford, and Emeric, in that order."

"I thought you said Redford just got stuffed in the library. I need to have another talk with him about storing enchanted items," Damir growled. The blubbery guild leader retained flashes of his old intimidation when he spoke, but the jiggling mass of his middle did him no favors.

"Redford was filled a little, but not to the degree I witnessed in my vision. He's bound to gain more weight if nothing's done to prevent it, either before or after Moss. I feel it's more likely to happen after."

"And why's that?"

"Because it'd be more accurate to my original prediction. Whatever we're up against has been very methodical about the accidents."

Damir kept tapping. “How fat are they supposed to get?”

“My best estimate is that Redford and Emeric will be immobilized, while Moss will be about Juliet’s size.” All Tane had to go on was glimpses of swollen middles from a vision he loathed to recollect. And the more time passed, the fuzzier his memory got. His predictions might be unintentionally exaggerated. He prayed they were.

“I suppose Moss can still brew potions and care for his garden if he does end up that massive. Juliet and I get along well enough, after all,” Damir grunted.

“It’s not preferable,” Juliet admitted.

“Of course it’s not. And having our best mage become a blob is unacceptable. As bothersome as Redford can get, he’s a valuable asset to jobs. People pay extravagant rates for skilled mages, even annoying ones.” Damir shifted in his chair, wincing through the creaks. “Allowing a member of a prominent noble family to be fattened to immobility can’t be allowed, either. Our reputation would take a serious blow, and we’d risk losing expensive clients. Aside from Emeric’s *generous* direct funding, he also promotes our services to other nobles. It’d be difficult to do that if he can’t leave his damn room.”

Tane considered what they’d already lost. Their most experienced scout, an excellent healer, and an unparalleled trainer. He hadn’t gained enough weight to consider himself a loss to the guild. He struggled to treat himself as a potential lost asset at all. “Now that we’re aware something strange is happening, there’s a chance we can evade it or at least diminish the outcome. That’s better than nothing.”

“Barely.” Damir closed his eyes, muttered a nearly inaudible curse, and opened them again. “For the time being, I’ll exclude Redford, Moss, and Emeric from jobs. Redford’s the only immediate loss on that front since Moss is rarely sent out and Emeric goes long stretches without accepting work anyway. I’ll also order the cooks to be careful with what they’re cooking. There’ll be no experimenting that could lead to disaster and no surprise celebrations. If one of them so much as whispers about toying with culinary magic, I’ll personally feed them until they burst. I miss when things were simple.”

“When were they ever, Damir?” Juliet asked. “We’ve always had to deal with various catastrophes. Guilds are never dull.”

“There’s a difference between struggling to secure jobs and struggling to secure your belt.” Damir glared at his middle before setting his sights on Tane. “And you don’t have any idea as to what could be the cause of this mess?”

“No.” Tane felt useless admitting that. The unexplained occurrences had something to do with his vision, yet answers eluded him. “I plan to beseech Opiter, the God of Fate, for answers. If divine intervention is to blame, he will know, and perhaps he’ll even deem me worthy enough to enlighten.”

Damir let out a sluggish laugh. “Hoping the gods will listen to us is the best we can do? Feel free to try, Tane, but I don’t expect an answer. The gods are fickle, no matter how devout we are.”

Later, Tane thought of Damir’s warning as he settled into the small, dark chamber in which he conducted all his visions. No instructions existed for communing with a deity. There were myths and legends, stories passed down by those who claimed to have entreated the gods, but nothing definitive. And each deity allegedly approached such attempts at an audience differently. Some demanded sacrifices or specific mental states. Myron supposedly only chatted with followers who entered food comas.

For Opiter, Tane had nothing to go off of. The temple hadn’t taught him a way to commune with his god. None of the countless stories of past oracles he’d heard involved talking directly to Opiter. The god might offer subtle signs of praise or displeasure but mostly kept to himself. Tane worried he’d set himself up for failure.

“I never should’ve told Damir I was doing this. What’s the point?” Tane complained in the candlelight. “As if my ordeal is of any importance to Opiter. I’m not royalty or a hero. I’m a subpar oracle who could only predict people getting fat.”

Tane didn’t leave the chamber, though. Redford and Emeric weren’t his friends, but he didn’t want to see them balloon like the others. He needed to salvage some bit of his disastrous prediction and understand why fate had turned his boyfriend into a blob. Key deserved an answer.

Desperate and without guidance, Tane mimicked the rituals he used for making predictions. He stared at the mirror, and the round face reflected back. His minimal gains fueled his guilt. A pot belly was more than he’d ever expected to lug around during his life, but how could he whine when a stroll down the hall left his friends winded?

“Opiter, watcher of the countless fates, I humbly seek answers to a mystery beyond my mortal understanding.” Saying the words out loud embarrassed him. His voice would never carry to the divine. “Your grace bestowed a wondrous vision upon me, providing me a gift with which to change the future. I witnessed the accident that would befall the Festival of Myron and the widespread stuffings that resulted. I faltered and very nearly squandered your gift, but was able to save some of my guildmates from a drastic transformation that would’ve had lasting effects on their lives. That success...overwhelmed me, and I admit I didn’t give proper praise for what you’d given me.”

Tane squeezed his shaking hooves. “But fate has begun to turn on those I saved, and I can’t fathom why. They grow incredibly fat, experiencing the same gains they would’ve if I’d never had my vision, and in the same order. I know this

isn't a matter of chance or simple bad luck. Something is deliberately undoing your work, and I wish to know why. I owe an explanation to those I've failed."

Faint wisps of smoke twirled upward from the candles. Nothing. Tane had had zero expectations, and yet he'd managed to disappoint himself. He sighed in defeat.

As his breath reached the mirror, its surface rippled. He blinked. Smoke must have drifted past, creating an illusion. But then the mirror rippled again in a manner that the smoke from his small candles couldn't have caused.

The edges of the mirror stretched until two more mirrors emerged. Those new mirrors duplicated, over and over, creating a ring around Tane. They hovered in the air, unaffected by gravity. Tane looked to his left and right and realized his reflections no longer matched his movements. The herd of himself stared directly at him.

"A mistake is being corrected." Tane's voice erupted from all sides.

The zebra shrunk in awe. Opiter had answered his call. Though he saw and heard only himself, he knew the deity spoke through the reflections. Even being in the abstract presence of a higher power dazed him.

Once Tane recovered from the awe, he was struck by his god's response. "A mistake? You mean, I was never meant to have the vision?" He nearly collapsed on the spot. His incredible prediction truly had been a fluke. Of course it had. Why would an oracle who'd never had a meaningful vision in his life magically have one with such clarity? Tumbling into a depressive spiral made him more willing to question the divine being before him. "If my vision was a mistake, then why must the others suffer for it? How can fattening them up be so important?"

Tane's reflections briefly looked away from him. Hesitation tinged their voices when they returned eye contact. "A promise was made and then unintentionally broken. Fate must run its course, as originally intended, lest there be...dire consequences."

The ominous revelation only confused Tane. A handful of guild members gaining a tremendous amount of weight couldn't be *that* important. He cherished his friends and his guild, but to think either was of major historical importance seemed a stretch, like one of Sivert's tales. Would Emeric rise to power if not immobilized? Would Redford only achieve glory if he was too fat to do anything but study? Would Key have inevitably trained the wrong person? Or maybe would only train the right person after years of immobility? He had no clue if their weight gain was to ensure they did something wonderful or to prevent them from doing something horrible.

But Opiter knew. "Please, Opiter, why is it so important for all of us to get fat?"

“That knowledge is not for the ears of mortals. Fate *will* be restored. Be grateful mobility is all that will be lost.”

Mobility was merely the most obvious loss. The weight would radically interfere with their livelihoods and passions. Dreams had been put on hold and willpower tested. The fear they might never recover loomed over all of them, especially Key.

Tane’s lip quivered. He looked back at the reflections and saw less of the divine and more of himself, who was far easier to talk back to. “Will we be stuck with these gains forever? If we lose weight, will fate conspire against us again and fatten us up at the first opportunity? Key—my love—he’s a blob now. He can hardly do any of the things that used to bring him joy. He can’t walk around the city, or take a swim, or use his skills to help others. He’s too big for me to embrace him like I used to. I no longer feel his sturdy arms wrap around me from behind as we sleep. Will you deny us that happiness for as long as we live?”

The many reflections grimaced in a way Tane had never known he was capable of. “Those whose fates have been corrected can lose or gain all the weight they want. They are free to return to their original size at any time. What matters is that they experience the change intended for them by fate.”

Something resembling relief washed over Tane. So they’d be allowed to recover, at least. Not that losing the absurd amount of weight inflicted upon them would be an easy task. Years. Years of struggling against insurmountable odds because Opiter deemed their gains to be essential. He wished he could be given even a hint as to why.

“So it truly can’t be stopped?” The words left Tane’s mouth before he could hold them back. He felt too dejected to regret them.

“All must accept fate,” the reflections recited plainly. “Fighting it is futile.” The faces twitched and steadily ballooned in size. Their blubbery cheeks pressed against the sides of the mirrors and warped them. Glass cracked. Tane saw embarrassment in his immense reflections. All at once, the additional mirrors shattered, the debris transforming into harmless smoke. Opiter had left.

Tane slumped back in his chair and stared at the ceiling. His reflection in the lone mirror reminded him of Opiter too much. He’d wished for answers, and he’d gotten them. Unfortunately, the truth painted a bleak picture of their immediate future. Redford, Moss, and Emeric were fated to grow immense. Rather than find a way to save them, he’d only confirmed they were doomed.

He felt as if they had no other option but to give up and let fate take its course. The best they might be able to accomplish would be to ensure the gains happened under less traumatic circumstances than Sivert’s and Juliet’s. Moss’ weight gain potions would work. No kidnappings or near-death experiences, just quiet swelling towards inevitability.

Tane doubted the others would surrender to fate so easily, though. If Key had yet to pile on the pounds, he'd have done everything in his power to help him dodge the divine gains. How long could they hope to hold out? Opiter wouldn't tire or let them off the hook for showing tenacity. The stakes were allegedly too urgent to show mercy. Regardless of how crafty they were, they'd gain the weight, it was only a matter of time.

"And will they blame Opiter for that, or will they blame me?" Tane mused in the empty chamber. It was the easiest question he'd asked all day. They'd blame him. He'd screwed up and given them false hope. They all should've been stuffed with pastries at the festival, a few nameless victims among many. But he'd shown them a way out, and now they suffered while fate caught up. They'd all lost precious time that could've been spent losing weight.

Tane flicked his belly with a finger. He felt shame at how thankful he was to have gained so little weight compared to the others. It was a slight inconvenience at worst. He could still find clothing that fit. He didn't have to worry about his plush sides brushing against door frames. His stomach didn't constantly rumble and demand more food. He could walk.

He'd have traded weights with Sivert, Juliet, or Key in a heartbeat. If only he'd thrown himself into the path of the pastry dragon that'd ballooned Key in his vision. If only he'd drawn in *all* the pastries back then. He guessed it was his fate to let the others down.