

City of Gains: Chapter 013

By: Indigo Rho

I didn't rush to the wagons after work. For one, I hadn't gotten used to the weight I'd gained. Being stuffed with food could be a lot more awkward than simply being fatter, but I still carried significantly more weight than I had a few hours earlier, none of which was muscle. My thighs smacked together more than usual and my tight clothing made every step feel stiff. Slowing my pace didn't prevent me from panting the whole walk over.

I told myself I'd adjust after a day or two, a lie too half-assed to actually ease my concerns. It'd take closer to two weeks. *If* I were lucky. And even then, I'd be a little slower than before, a little quicker to tire. There were burdens to having a bigger belly.

But aside from having to reacquaint myself with my own body, I feared the reaction of others. Well, one other. Gideon wouldn't overlook my gains like Amir or laugh them off like Claude. He'd lecture me, like he had every time he'd caught sight of me cradling a full belly. I was already physically exhausted; I didn't want to be mentally exhausted, too.

I seemed to arrive at the wagons at the same time as everyone else. Goods were being loaded for transit to Fulworth, along with anyone small enough to squeeze in with them. People moved in swarms from one wagon to another in search of space. Some tried to bribe drivers, flashing coins, smokes, or even their comparatively smaller middles to prove room could be made for them.

I never liked navigating the chaos during busy times, but at least it'd provide cover so I could elude Gideon.

"By the Gods, what happened to you?!"

My fur stood on end as Gideon's voice came from right behind me. I flattened my ears and looked over my shoulder, praying he was talking to anybody else. Our eyes met and we both frowned.

I couldn't pretend nothing had happened. The horse could've been drunk and he'd still have noticed. "I had a bit of an incident with the curse." My gaze vehemently avoided his.

"A bit? This is more than a bit." Gideon slapped my ass and I yipped. "Look at you, you're practically bursting out of your clothes. Even if they

were skin-tight this morning, that's a serious amount of weight to gain!" He jabbed my exposed middle, flustering me as I jiggled. "You're fatter than I am."

I opened my mouth to speak but I couldn't form a single word. He was right. I looked rounder than him, and our height difference guaranteed I weighed more. Six months ago I'd been a twig in comparison and now I'd not only caught up with him, I'd surpassed him.

For the first time in a while, I genuinely felt huge.

"An ingredient went bad. It could've been worse."

"Yeah, a whole lot worse." Gideon exhaled. "Maybe you should consider a new career. Evington's gonna immobilize you at this rate."

"I'm handling it!" I snapped back.

"No, no you're not. You've only been here for six months and you've doubled in size at the very least. Those kinds of gains are unsustainable in the long run," Gideon insisted. "I've got people on my crew who've been working in the city for a solid year that aren't as heavy as you. And they aren't the most proactive about keeping their weight in check, either."

"So I've had bad luck. You've told me yourself a thousand times that the curse doesn't affect everyone in the same way." I'd seen it myself, too. The rabbit stuffed with escaped goo and the otter zapped by the weight gain spell. "I can still slim down."

"Not if you don't try. You've been slacking on the jogs. It's a miracle if we even do them three days a week now, and they're not that intense."

"They are after a day spent working over a cauldron and carrying ingredients," I muttered.

"Yet I can spend the same day delivering all over the city and still pull it off. You won't lose an ounce if you don't put effort into it," Gideon said.

I saw ears twitching and eyes wandering as we talked. I wasn't in the mood to argue about my weight, not in public. "I understand the risks of being here."

"I'm not sure you do. I think you've trapped yourself here and don't know how to move forward. You don't know how to tell your family no and you don't know where you want to go, so you've settled on parking your increasingly wider ass here in the hope your problem will solve itself. Which it won't." Gideon's stern tone reminded me of my professors. "If you don't

make a decision soon it's going to be made for you, one pound at a time."

He acted as if I hadn't already agonized over the same conclusion on a nearly nightly basis. "It won't end that way. Now that I've..." I had to take a deep breath to finish the thought "...gotten fat, the curse won't go after me as often. I'll gain less weight."

"Maybe. Or maybe you'll start letting your guard down and gorging in town."

"I've been very good about avoiding—"

A quick shove from Gideon shut me up fast. His hooves pressed into my doughy belly and launched me off my feet. I flailed uselessly as I fell, landing on the same fat ass Gideon had been so quick to point out. The extra pounds didn't soften the impact at all. Pain shot through my tailbone.

Gideon dove for the ground before I could demand answers. A second later a runaway wagon thundered by. It crashed into a stone wall, sending splinters flying as wood cracked and metal bent. The impact propelled the massive crate in the back forwards. It smashed into the empty driver's seat and rolled back, warped. After wobbling from side to side for a moment, creaking, it fell apart. One of the wooden panels fell off the wagon, narrowly missing Gideon's legs as he scooted away. In the crate's place sat a pink, translucent cube. It jiggled, and I realized with horror it was a fully grown gelatinous cube.

The gelatinous cube lurched towards the edge of the wagon with distressing speed and toppled over. It landed with a loud smack atop Gideon, covering the lower half of the horse's body and pinning him to the ground.

The cube began to suck Gideon in. He clawed at the dirt as he was dragged deeper and deeper, helpless against the massive goo. I stared, horrified, as my friend vanished into the cube.

I'd seen such creatures only once, at the Academy, and the specimen had been a mere foot wide and tall. The one gently swaying before me had to have been nearly seven feet in every dimension, big enough to comfortably suspend Gideon within its gelatinous mass.

I became vaguely aware of the crowd forming around the cube, of their gasps and mumbled curses. I heard something about a wagon and assumed they were talking of the one that'd crashed. Someone asked if I

was okay and I nodded without thinking, my gaze locked on the cube. Gideon wiggled weakly inside it, his mouth frozen open in a silent shout. His middle wobbled the most and it took me a moment to realize why. It was swelling.

The cube swayed in place, emptying itself into Gideon. It served as a prison, display case, and food for my friend, who steadily ballooned for all to see. Even through the semi-translucent goo, I could see the fear in Gideon's eyes. He didn't look for help on the outside—anyone with his experience would know not to expect it. Instead, he watched his gut grow larger, his mind undoubtedly focused on the same question mine was: how fat was he about to get?

More and more goo flowed into Gideon, turning his belly into an enormous brown sphere. Its rising peak broke the surface of the cube, slick with goo. Hands and feet breached next, wiggling in protest of the unstoppable filling. Though the cube continued to shrink, it never gave up its hold on Gideon, intent on feeding every last glob of itself to him.

I wanted to rush over and swat away as much of the goo as possible but I knew it wouldn't matter in the end. Too much had entered him already. At best, I'd spare him a few measly pounds, not enough to make a difference.

The cube rapidly dwindled, condensing around Gideon's head. It collapsed in on itself in the final moments, swirling down the horse's throat like a drain before disappearing entirely.

Gideon immediately fell into a coughing fit that shook his mountainous middle fiercely, with a few strained belches mixed in. People were already moving in to help, as they had with the rabbit I'd seen stuffed with goo months earlier. A sturdy wagon slowly backed through the crowd. They gathered debris, looked over the wreck, and checked on Gideon. They acted with practiced ease. It was another normal day in Evington, to everyone but Gideon.

With Gideon's filling complete, all I could think about was how I should've been able to stop it. I could feel accidents forming, and yet I'd gotten so worked up arguing with Gideon I'd overlooked the obvious signs. But Gideon had heard and seen the out-of-control cart and pushed me out of the way without a second thought, sacrificing his own chance at escape.

As thanks, he'd suffered a feeding meant for me.

I dragged myself up and stumbled over to Gideon. His half-lidded eyes wandered aimlessly and he groaned quietly. When I asked him if he was okay he mumbled something incoherent.

A group of bulky laborers marched over and politely ushered me aside. They surrounded Gideon and lifted him with great effort, before carrying the stuffed horse into the awaiting wagon. He filled most of the back and caused the whole thing to creak. I followed him in after convincing the driver we were friends. The ride back to Fulworth felt agonizingly slow. Gideon passed out within minutes, leaving me with little to do but watch his enormous belly wobble back and forth while imagining all the weight he'd gain because of me.

In Fulworth, the wagon left us with a cleric. The lean flamingo accepted his engorged patient with a simple nod, as if they were yet another person with merely a strain or stomach pain. I understood accidents and stuffings weren't rare, but part of me insisted everyone else should be as horrified as me. Gideon's whole life could be about to change.

The cleric slowly circled Gideon. At times he'd stop to place a palm on the horse's bloated middle. He'd nod, then pull back his hand without saying a word and quickly wipe off the gooey residue with a handkerchief. He tapped Gideon's middle and it wobbled.

"You said the gelatinous cube actively engulfed him, correct? It didn't just happen to fall on him?" The cleric asked, still looking over Gideon.

"Yes. It pulled him right in before feeding him." Such a gross simplification of the tragedy.

"Well, we won't be able to get it out, then. Too lively. It'll either resist or try to stuff itself into someone else the moment it's free." The sympathy in his voice felt too shallow to me, like when I'd politely laugh at a joke I didn't quite care for.

"Would you be able to transfer the goo into me?" I found the thought horrifying, but I couldn't stand to see Gideon blimp up because of me.

The cleric let out a harsh laugh that sounded more like a scoff. He turned to me and offered a slight smile. "I don't have any way to perform a transfer safely. And again, there's no guarantee the goo would want to leave. Once it settles on someone to fatten, there's not much we can do to

stop it that won't harm the host in the process." He returned to Gideon. "I've treated his bruises and a few strains. The best we can do now is let him sleep off the goo. You can remain here while he does that. I've got a mat and a blanket you can borrow. They're not very comfy, but they're better than the floor."

I nodded, and spent a restless night in the slowly dwindling shadow of Gideon.

* * *

Gideon woke in the early morning, long after I had. I was eating a meager breakfast of bread I'd bought at a nearby bakery, much to the disdain of my demanding stomach. I scarfed the last of it down when I saw Gideon stir.

"Fuck," Gideon said as he opened his eyes.

"I'm here, Gideon," I said.

"It's bad, isn't it?"

He didn't have to clarify, I knew what he meant. "It's...a lot."

From what I could tell, all the goo had digested, and to call it fattening would be an understatement. Even laying down, Gideon's gut jutted upward, a globe of soft chocolate. His thighs and rump had torn through the seams of his pants overnight. His shirt hadn't fared any better, ripped apart by his pillowy chest and blubbery arms. His cheeks stuck out and his neck had thickened into a soft roll.

I'd seen far fatter folk in Evington and Fulworth, round in every sense of the word. Despite his size, Gideon didn't look immobile or in danger of becoming stuck in any doorways. But he was undeniably huge. Significantly fatter than me now, anyway. At a glance, he reminded me of Berg, the polar bear I'd met at the retirement party and a few rare times since. Gideon couldn't have been much lighter than him. How many years of work had my negligence stolen from him?

Gideon braced himself on his elbows and tried to sit up. His arms shook as he struggled to overcome his gains. They gave out and he collapsed back, his belly wobbling in victory. He covered his eyes with a hoof and I averted my gaze to give him a moment of privacy. "I guess screwing up was inevitable. I'm never gonna hear the end of this."

“I’m sorry.” My voice cracked. “I should’ve been the one stuffed. If I’d been paying attention then you wouldn’t be...you wouldn’t...” I clenched my fists hard.

“It was an accident, you idiot.” Gideon didn’t sound any better rested than me. I couldn’t tell if his exhaustion was physical or mental.

“An accident meant for me.”

“How can you be sure? You said you weren’t paying any attention and I was sure as hell overdue for one.” Gideon stared at his arm, and the tattered shirt sleeve hanging from it.

“Why would it bother going after anyone else?”

“Because they’re thinner.” I blushed, and thankfully Gideon wasn’t looking. “In case you haven’t noticed, you’re fatter than most of the newer laborers. And you *were* fatter than me, at least for a moment there.”

“I still should’ve sensed it,” I muttered.

“We all make mistakes. Shoving your fat ass out of the path of a runaway wagon wasn’t one, to be clear. The consequences were a bit more extreme than I expected, but I’d do it all over again if given the chance.”

Genuine or not, his words didn’t make me feel less guilty. “If I’d had a spine and left Evington after a week this wouldn’t have happened.”

“No,” Gideon practically growled. “Blame yourself for getting fat all you want—I’ll agree till my voice goes out—but don’t you dare start blaming yourself for the rest of us gaining weight as well.” He sighed, eyes aimed at the ceiling. “I know I’ve been on your ass a lot about staying here, but that’s just because I want to make sure it’s a choice you’re making for yourself. Not one made for you by friends or family or a curse that can turn you into a mountain of blubber on a whim. I’ve seen people get stuck for those reasons before, and you can tell they’re adrift in life. And not in a carefree way, either. Seeing that happen to strangers and coworkers is bad enough. I don’t want to see it happen to a friend.”

I looked at myself, at the considerable gains I’d accumulated. At the belly that seemed modest compared to the doughy mound Gideon sported. “If I do end up staying here, I swear it’ll be because I want to, not because I was forced to. When my parents asked me to come, I dreaded it. I left Evington in the first place because the prospect of gaining weight terrified me. Going to the Academy was a convenient excuse. But aside from the

weight, being back has been pleasant.” I’d had so much trouble admitting that to myself. “There are people and things here I’d miss. Jogging with you is fun.”

Gideon let out a half-laugh. “With how much you complain, I wouldn’t have guessed.”

“I said it was fun, not easy.” And morale-boosting, knowing I was doing something—anything—to counter the curse. “When I left the first time, I had the Academy to distract me from everything I’d left behind. I went from thinking about everyone daily, to barely thinking of them at all. I’m ashamed to say I’d begun to think of everything before the Academy as a completed chapter of my life. I needed to move forward, not back. But instead, I just stood still.”

“You might find yourself moving in circles if you stay here,” Gideon said.

“Maybe. Maybe the curse will wreck me and I’ll spend years desperately trying to regain some semblance of mobility. Maybe I’ll spend the rest of my life wondering what I could’ve accomplished avoiding Evington and staying thin.” All my nightmares and fears made real. “Or maybe I’ll find a way to manage my weight. Maybe I’ll find a way to thrive that doesn’t end with me being a blob or too fat to do anything of note.”

“You need to make a decision, so that if the worst comes to pass, at least you won’t have many regrets.”

“I know.” I felt like every day I stumbled upon a new pro or con to remaining in Evington, a new excuse to accept my gains or put an end to them. But I’d never taken the time to dwell upon them. “I think I’ll figure it out soon.”

“Glad I could be of service.” Gideon tried to laugh but still didn’t have the energy for it.

I hadn’t meant to imply his accident had spurred me to action, though in a way I guess it had. “So, what are you going to do now?”

“Buy new clothes,” Gideon snorted.

“I mean, what about work?”

“I’ll keep doing it.”

“Even after the gains?”

“I may be obese, but I’m not going to be breaking any weight records

on the job. I'll probably have to drop a few routes and try something new, but once I've gotten the hang of wrangling this gut I'll be fine." Doubt drifted in the wake of his every word. He was saying what he wanted to be true, something I'd done a lot lately.

I didn't want to weaken his hope, not while the accident remained so fresh in his mind. "That's good to hear. I kept thinking about Berg and how close everyone thinks he is to retirement and, well, I guess I jumped to the worst conclusion."

Gideon whinnied in annoyance and began to rock. With a grunt, he rolled himself onto his side to face me. Seams shredded and a few more bits of his clothing slid off. His huge gut smacked the ground and bounced, jiggling his soft body. The effort left him breathing heavily.

"Don't compare me to *Berg* of all people. I could be twice his size and still outpace him on the job." I tried not to stare at the way his chest and belly jiggled as he talked. "It doesn't matter how much blubber I get stuck with, I'll find a way to rebound. That's how you beat this stupid curse, you just keep waddling onward to spite it."

Gideon had regained a degree of certainty, but I couldn't help but envision him retiring sooner rather than later. If I were here when that happened, I couldn't still be debating my place in the world. I owed that to Gideon, for all the help he'd given me and all the pounds he'd gained saving me. And I owed it to myself.