

City of Gains: Chapter 012

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Herbs and zest bundled at the tip of my mask flooded my nostrils with a citrusy aroma that had stagnated after a few hours but still protected me from the worse smells in the lab. Nearly every ingredient used in medicinal elixirs smelled horrible, either from the start or once they began to boil. An alchemy professor of mine claimed it had to do with taking the good from the bad, though she liked to simplify her explanations of ingredient interactions so our eyes wouldn't glaze over.

The results mattered more than the stench, which I'd subdue before the end anyway.

Though not as potent as magic-infused healing elixirs, medicines were still important. They handled lesser afflictions for a fraction of the cost and were less prone to becoming cursed due to their humbler origins. No one wanted to get fat fending off a fever or cough.

Brewing medicine required a great deal of care. Too much of the wrong ingredient could make it do more harm than good. The Academy had hammered that truth into me time and time again. I triple-checked all my measurements and slowly stirred each ingredient into my brew.

Repetition helped the process run smoothly. Measure, add, stir, eat. Measure, add, stir, eat. I stuck with bite-sized snacks when I brewed medicine to reduce my exposure to the pungent odors coming from my cauldron. My stomach tended to want something more substantial, but the assortment of cheese, crackers, and fruit at least prevented it from grumbling too loud.

As I leaned over to grab my next snack I felt my middle warm up and realized I'd inched too close to the cauldron. A quick step back prevented my belly from getting singed, and I returned to my work.

I hated to admit it, but I took pride in how well I'd adjusted to my weight at work. Avoiding accidents and keeping my gains steady during the half a year I'd been in Evington had helped. I'd had time to physically get used to every pound I'd gained, even if my mental perception of myself still lagged behind a few weeks. Though in my defense, accepting I'd doubled in size in six months was difficult.

My exceptional height hadn't been able to disguise my gains forever. My large belly hung over the belt of my tunic at all times, not only after overeating. Doughy love handles poked out from my sides, while soft moobs sat atop the curve of my gut. My rump had expanded enough that I could no longer casually sit wherever I wanted. I actually had to ease myself down. The sharp features of my face had softened considerably, with my round cheeks at the forefront.

I'd grown to be just shy of the average weight for Evington, albeit on the lower end. I no longer stood out as I traveled the streets heading into work, just another belly in the crowd. It felt good losing the curious glances. That didn't quite make up for becoming fat, though.

As I'd suspected from the little information I'd gathered, the curse eased off me as I gained more weight. I gorged less but ate more in general. That spared me the embarrassment of lugging around a post-feast gut, though the pounds snuck up on me more.

I recorded the changes to myself and the curse's effects with an obsessive passion. Every new shift in the flow of energy or my appetite was noteworthy. I filled pages with conjecture, hoping I'd stumble upon patterns or weaknesses. Or maybe I hoped to give meaning to all the weight I gained. Purpose would give me an excuse for why I hadn't left Evington.

I didn't want to admit the obvious, that I'd accidentally started to build a life there.

Six months had made it harder to claim I was only visiting. I had routines, both at work and in my everyday life. I had favorite restaurants to eat at and favorite taverns to drink at. When I went to the market, I visited specific sellers I'd come to trust, some of whom I could chat the morning away with. I had a preferred tailor and a preferred bathhouse. I had opinions on the water in the various fountains of Fulworth.

I'd been in Evington and Fulworth long enough to get a feel for the gains of others. I knew who on the wagons were ballooning out of control and who were heavy but had a handle on their weight. I could guess who had a high chance of getting fattened out of the job next and who had the smarts to become a seasoned vet if the accidents spared them. I saw that immobility would be an inevitability for Conrad. And I saw that Gideon hadn't quite been fending off the gains as well as he claimed.

Every week brought me a new reason to remain, even as my gradually increasing waistline reminded me of the consequences. What had seemed like such an easy matter months ago had swelled into a complicated mess that'd left me divided. Refusing to commit to either staying or leaving would do me no good, but the fear of making a life-changing mistake kept me indecisive.

A chill brushed past me as the curse's flow changed. The energy hadn't converged on me, so an accident wasn't likely to happen. I could feel it pooling somewhere.

I calmed myself and concentrated on the room, visualizing the flow. The cauldron was fine and so were my snacks. Nothing around the bottles or the glowstones. I found it in a satchel of herbs.

"Shit," I mumbled.

The curse had infested the rarest ingredient in the room. Replacing it wouldn't be cheap. The energy around the satchel flared up, increasing the potency of the curse. I quickly grabbed the satchel and brought it to a counter on the far side of the room to prevent the curse from spreading to anything else.

I'd lost ingredients and even whole batches to the curse before. It'd happened less as I gained weight—a convenience that'd piqued my curiosity and kept me up at night pondering all the intricate ways the curse responded to weight. I couldn't complete the medicine brewing in my cauldron without the cursed herbs and I didn't have time to retrieve more. If I did nothing, the medicine would overcook and I'd have to start from scratch.

For once, I knew exactly what to do. I reached for the herbs with both paws and began pulling at the curse. It'd dug in deep, but I traced every unseen tendril and plucked them one by one. At the same time, I chipped away at it, trying to stunt the curse's growth. It pulsed at me like an angry animal puffing itself up when cornered. The connection it had to the herbs loosened and I yanked it free.

The only thing I could think of transferring it to was the food I'd been snacking on. The curse seemed to bind to food better than anything but people. I made it three steps before the offshoot of the curse slipped from my grasp and seeped into me.

“Shit. Shit shit shit!” My heart raced and my belly rose and fell, bouncing a little. My attempts to concentrate on the curse failed. I could sense it within me, but only in a general sense, like an all-encompassing chill. I swiftly shifted my attention to figuring out the curse’s intentions. I couldn’t predict what it’d do with one hundred percent certainty, but I’d learned that the feel of the curse itself seemed to change depending on what it was about to do.

I’d just started when a tingling sensation spread throughout my body, answering the question for me.

I couldn’t count the number of times I’d dreamed about instantly gaining weight since arriving in Evington. My subconscious had depicted it like being pumped up by a bellows, sometimes swelling an entire inch at a time. The reality that I’d seen on rare occasions—and was now experiencing firsthand—was more like slowly filling a waterskin. I watched my belly gently puff up, as if I were merely sucking in my breath. No amount of exhaling would make me deflate, though.

I tightly grasped my forearm. My fingers quivered and my grip loosened as my arm grew chunkier. I knew the same was happening to my thighs, my neck, my rump, my everything. The curse added fat to me like a potter adding clay to their latest creation, layer after layer so I’d round out to its satisfaction. For a moment I imagined Karth cackling as his masterpiece smote the distant descendant of yet another nemesis. Never before had the curse felt so personal.

The otter from months back squeezed into my thoughts. The curse didn’t necessarily have the same potency as the spell that’d immobilized him, but I had few examples to compare myself to. I could very well balloon out of control until my massive sides pushed at the walls of the room like a tsunami of blubber.

I’d only worked at the shop for six months and yet there was a chance I’d already end up a blob like Dale and Claude. Gideon would be chewing me out for years. Conrad would consider my new size worthy of celebration. Would my dad and brother be disappointed with my loss or shrug it off as yet another unfortunate accident? I’d need to look into the enchanted compression rings Claude wore, because I couldn’t fathom being permanently sedentary.

Though thoughts of doom and shame raced around my head, so did the much fainter spark of curiosity. The otter's gains had occurred too fast for me to react, and I'd left before I could give him more than a cursory, nervous glance. Since the curse had latched on too firmly for me to remove it, I had nothing better to do than observe it. Learning something would do me more good than potentially getting wedged in a hallway looking for help.

A series of deep breaths calmed me a little as I fought to think of my gains as an experiment rather than a possible catastrophe. Naturally, a considerable amount of the curse's energy had begun to circle me, making me nostalgic for my thinner days. I felt a portion of the energy empty into me directly, causing the miniature whirlpool to dwindle. More energy diverted into it, and then dumped into me again. My knowledge of magic outside of curses was wanting, but I guessed the energy was the direct cause of my instantaneous weight gain.

Theoretically, I could predict when my gains would stop based on the energy surrounding me. As it dwindled, so would my gains. But I wouldn't know for sure until it actually happened. *If* it happened.

I had on new, loose clothing meant to hide my weight and last more than a gorging session or two. But with the pounds piling on, I filled out my tunic and pants. Every crease gradually smoothed away as new layers of fat pushed at the fabric. Before long, a slight tightness joined the tingling and my clothes no longer fit well. I loosened my belt to relieve the pressure, letting my belly wobble out from under my tunic.

No seams had ripped yet, but my clothing could only stretch so much and I was only growing fatter. I'd have to disrobe soon if I wanted to avoid shredding my clothes. I chose not to bother after a brief debate. They would be of no use if I outgrew them, tattered or not, and their remnants might still offer me a modicum of modesty if my sheer heft didn't cover me up.

The whirlpool of energy around me abruptly wavered, rapidly losing strength. I heard a seam rip somewhere just as the tingling subsided. I stared down at my belly, watching it rise and fall but not swell.

Relief hit me so fast I felt lightheaded.

Fears of immobility had prevented me from considering even the possibility I'd survive the accident relatively unscathed. The gains had been considerable for sure—about as much as I'd gained in the last two or three

months combined if I had to hazard a guess—but they weren't life-altering. Well, not life-altering compared to what the curse could inflict in the worst circumstances.

Once I'd caught my breath and settled my heart, I finally felt how uncomfortably tight my clothes had become. I could wear them for a few more days out of necessity, but I didn't see myself losing enough weight for them to fit well, at least not anytime soon. Thankfully my tailor was as fast as they were discreet. They might raise a brow at me returning after barely a week, but they wouldn't comment on that or my obvious gains.

My ears twitched at the bubbling coming from my cauldron. I rushed over, ignoring the sound of another seam ripping. A few good stirs calmed the brew down. All the weight I'd just gained had been for the sake of the medicine and I couldn't bear it being for naught. Fortunately, there didn't seem to be anything off with the medicine. Yet another crisis averted.

I added a bit of the ingredient I'd absorbed the curse from and fell back into my routine with disconcerting ease. Six months ago, the accident would've left me in a state of panic. Now I treated it like little more than an inconvenience, favorable to the alternative of immobility. Though a boon for my mental wellbeing, it didn't bode well for my weight in the long run. Continuing to shrug off similar gains could lead me to immobility anyway. A steady swell as opposed to a sudden blimping.

Perhaps I'd grown too accustomed to the curse and Evington, as Gideon liked to persistently remind me. No doubt he'd have plenty to say about the accident. And I couldn't exactly avoid him, not with our regular jogs.

Desperate for a distraction, I focused on what I'd learned about the curse thanks to the accident. For one, I had a much clearer idea of how much weight someone would gain from a surge in the curse. A sample size of one was far from ideal, but better than nothing. And knowing the outcome wouldn't do a thing to prevent it. At best, I could either calm someone's fears or pre-emptively call for a wagon. Knowing how it felt to instantly gain weight would also be beneficial, if only for my personal research notes.

Grasping for a purpose to the accident and my gains the last six months helped work pass by fast. The curse left me alone, though I still went

through all my snacks as usual. I doused the flames and slid the cauldron off the embers. Bottling the finished medicine would be a job for the apprentices.

I tidied up my lab and packed my things. I found Amir in the basement taking stock of ingredients. He'd been brewing on his own for two months and showed great promise. His pace was a bit slow, but that'd pick up in time, and led to fewer accidents than being too fast.

"There's a fresh batch of cough medicine in my lab ready for bottling," I told the fat cobra.

He nodded before his eyes froze on my partially exposed middle. "Got it. I'll have it all bottled before I leave," he said, refraining from pointing out the obvious. I'd gained a reputation as one of the few alchemists there who cared about their weight, so the others brought it up less often. I appreciated the gesture.

Looking at Amir, I realized with dismay we were now about the same shape. I couldn't claim I was the thinnest at the shop anymore. My face suddenly felt warm. "Thank you," I said, then quickly retreated upstairs.

"Elias! Just the person I wanted to see!" Claude's voice echoed down the hall ahead of me.

I saw the bull's massive belly jutting through a doorway, along with his thick chest and arms. Even from a distance, I could tell he'd gotten himself stuck.

"Did you get caught in an accident?" I asked, looking the blubbery bull up and down. He'd been at least a foot narrower when I'd seen him at lunch, though I'd left before he'd finished eating. His clothes clung tighter to him than mine did, with sizable tears along the seams.

"No, no, nothing so dramatic," Claude said. "Well, maybe. One of my rings failed on me and I just sort of ballooned. You know how it is."

He'd spoken of it before, but I'd never seen it happen in person. I hadn't even seen the immediate aftermath until that moment. "Do you need me to find grease and a hammer to break you free?"

Claude laughed, his whole body wobbling. "I'm just a little stuck. A few good tugs should be enough to free me."

"And how are you planning to get out of the building, after?" I asked. His thighs looked about as wedged in the doorframe as his gut.

“We both know the front doors are wider than any others here. So if you’re done being funny, you’re free to start pulling,” Claude said with a smile.

Life in Evington had increased my weight and arguably improved my endurance, but my upper body strength had remained questionable at best. I grabbed one of Claude’s doughy arms and carefully tugged. I didn’t want to hurt him or myself in the process. The weight I’d gained wouldn’t be nearly enough to cushion the fall of someone as hefty as Claude. Even if I didn’t break any bones, I could very well be buried beneath him.

“I can’t believe you found the smallest doorway in the entire building,” I grunted, pulling Claude at different angles in the hope it’d help. He inched forward slowly, still stuck.

“I fit perfectly fine on the way in. It just shrunk on the way out,” Claude said with a wink.

I didn’t know if I envied his casual attitude towards his immense weight or feared it. As much as I respected Claude, there were some habits I never wanted to pick up from him.

I tried Claude’s other arm then switched back to the first, before finally getting his wide ass free of the door. He stumbled but didn’t topple, saving me a world of pain.

Naturally, the bull laughed off the incident immediately. “It’s been a while since I last got stuck in a door, at least in Evington. I guess I was overdue!” he bellowed.

“Next time make your appointment with the doorway *after* I’ve left for the day,” I said, panting some.

“No promises.” Claude’s gaze lingered on my middle far longer than Amir’s had, and I braced for the inevitable. “I take it you ran into a little problem with your batch?”

I had no reason to deny it, especially not to the man who’d just gotten stuck in a doorway. “I caught the curse digging into an important herb and yanked it out. Wasn’t able to move it into something else fast enough so I took the blow.”

“Only a few inches, lucky you.” Claude taped the exposed portion of my belly with a hoof. I hadn’t quite gotten used to how common it was to poke and prod bellies in Evington. It was like a second handshake for some.

“Yeah, that’s what I keep reminding myself. And that I saved the batch.”

“Few things feel better than saving a hard day’s work from getting ruined. Though you should also consider yourself lucky for even noticing you’d gained weight,” Claude said. “I like to bring up gains when I spot them, because sometimes the curse can leave a person oblivious to them for a while. When it does, there’s always a chance that anything they’ve brewed recently is cursed, too.”

I’d never considered that particular possibility and quietly added it to my seemingly endless list of things to be on the lookout for. “Well, unless the curse strikes while Amir is bottling it, the medicine should be clear.”

“If I see him waddling around with a sloshing belly we’ll know for certain,” Claude smiled. “Though I’m glad you’re still mobile. Having another blob around the shop could be fun, but someone needs to stay slim enough to get us out of trouble now and then.”

I laughed along with him out of politeness, but the thought of being too fat to move continued to fill me with dread. We parted ways after a quick goodbye and an enveloping hug. As I watched the massive bull leave, I tried my hardest not to imagine him as a mound of maned wolf. I failed, as always.