

The Weight of Fate: Chapter 022

By: Indigo Rho

“Sticking to a trail would be wiser.”

“Moss said none of the major trails or roads lead to where we need to go.”

“If these ingredients are valuable, then why hasn’t a proper trail been established to reach them?”

“Maybe they’re valuable because they’re hard to reach?”

“Nonsense. We’d be better equipped if that were true. I wonder if our guide is as certain of where he’s going as he claims?”

“Of course he is.”

“Yet he only communicates in grumbles and scowls. Sounds like someone who’s lost.”

Walking in the woods typically brought Moss a sense of great calm. He didn’t have to worry about running into any living being other than wildlife, and even they were easy to avoid. The forest could be so gorgeous when he was alone. Light broke through the thick canopy to highlight ferns and fallen logs. Tiny streams meandered past trunks twice their width. Colorful mushrooms sprouted among dead leaves.

The companions he’d been forced to bring with him drowned out the forest’s beauty. Their questions, arguments, footsteps, and failed attempts at idle chatter distracted him from what should’ve been a pleasant trek. He’d wanted to go alone, as he always had. But orders were orders, and he didn’t care to test the limits of Damir’s patience. So he’d been reduced to a guide, with Tane and Emeric trudging behind him.

“The ingredients are only valuable because they have few uses, which leads to no one gathering them, which makes the few available expensive. And we *are* on a trail. If you paid more attention to the disruptions in the underbrush, you’d know that.” Moss tried not to growl, but there were limits to his civility.

“Then why are you convinced you’ll find a use for these useless ingredients in a weight-loss potion?” Emeric followed up without hesitation or apology.

The silver fox browbeat him, as usual. Not purely to be nasty—though Emeric had no trouble treating others poorly—but to obtain the answers he deemed himself entitled to. Emeric did a terrible job of disguising his lofty opinions of his place in the guild. The ass considered himself Damir’s equal on most days, and Damir didn’t do nearly enough to rein the pompous kid in. As long as the gold kept pouring into Miracle’s coffers, Moss doubted he’d ever be appropriately chastised.

Anyone else would've been more welcome on the journey. Well, anyone but Redford. The nonstop talking would've driven Moss mad, and he might have called the whole thing off before they reached the forest.

Bad luck had stuck him with Emeric. When he'd approached Damir with his plan to go gathering, the fox had wormed his way into the group. Moss trusted neither his motivations nor his competence in collecting ingredients.

"I've investigated these ingredients before to see if I could unearth a potential use. I didn't find anything conclusive then, but I wasn't trying to brew a weight-loss potion, either. I've got a feeling it'll mix well with some other things."

"A feeling? That's all you've got?" Emeric scoffed. Moss wondered if he'd learned such impeccable disdain from his fancy tutors or on his own.

Tane spoke up with more than a hint of uncertainty. "Exploring every lead is worth it. I don't see a problem with leaving the alchemical research to Moss."

Moss didn't mind Tane. The zebra rarely annoyed him, especially compared to his guild mates with egos like Redford, or those convinced they could open him up with obnoxious humor like Sivert. He left him alone for the most part, which was all he asked of others and never seemed to get. He thought Tane was a bit too sheepish for his own good and that Key coddled him, but everyone had flaws. Still, he'd have rather the zebra remained at the guild hall, and not just because Tane was fated to make him gain an absurd amount of weight in the uncomfortably near future.

Moss halted. The elk took deep breaths, tapping into his druidic powers to get a feel for the area. "Hmph. Not here. Should be getting close. I'm hearing more and more of the birds that feed on them. Also seeing bear marks."

"No need to worry about anything sneaking up on you while you track ingredients. My abilities are more than capable of fending off anything in this forest," Emeric gloated.

"Few things can sneak up on a druid in the woods. I can sense the movements of the plants around us, whether from the wind, stalking predators, or their natural craving for the light." Forests were in perpetual motion in ways few took the time to consider. "This is the safest place we can be right now."

Emeric made a little laugh, the kind that ensured his next words would be mocking. "Best to be careful. Redford got himself stuffed in the library, and I'm sure that was the last place he expected to be fed."

"I'm focused on the ingredients, not fate." Moss didn't want to think about the weight he was supposed to gain. Damir, Juliet, and the others made due, but he saw the struggle in everything they did. Straining to get out of chairs. Deliberate, sluggish movements. Hesitating before doorways they no longer trusted. If he couldn't make a breakthrough with the potions, that'd be his life for the next few years.

“Then you’ll balloon just like the others, regardless of the assistance I provide.”

“If you really want to help, just get in the path of whatever fattening thing finds us out here. It’d be much appreciated,” Moss grunted.

Emeric held back a snide remark for once.

Moss guided them onto a faint, branching path and then another. He kept his eyes straight ahead, searching the surrounding forest with magic instead of sight. Every plant grew and moved in its own unique way, allowing him to differentiate them in a moment.

“How do you know we’re on the right path again?” Emeric pestered him after a woefully short bout of silence.

“Druid magic,” was all the answer Moss bothered giving. Trying to explain his magic would be a tremendous waste of time. Emeric was as unlikely to grasp druid magic as he was to grasp the warlock’s pact with his dragon.

A few pointless arguments later, Moss finally sensed what he sought. “They’re just over here,” the elk grumbled, pushing past a shrub.

Brilliant clusters of dark blue berries hung ripe from bushes. They were too colorful to miss. Moss loomed over a bush, eyeing various bunches of berries. “Yeah, these are the ones we want. And we found a bounty of them.”

“Uh, they’re not considered fattening, are they?” Tane asked with trepidation.

“Not that I’m aware.” Moss didn’t say how dumb the question sounded, but he thought it.

“Really, Tane, you’re afraid of berries now?” Emeric smirked.

“Until this reversal of fate has run its course, I’m going to be wary of anything edible,” Tane admitted, embarrassed.

“Did you think Moss would start gorging on berries?”

“No! I—never mind.”

“If we want to leave the forest while it’s still light out, I recommend you spend less time talking and more time gathering.” Moss directed the suggestion towards Emeric. “Be gentle with them. I’m not sure how much I’ll need for my experiments. Making a second trip would be a real pain.” Especially considering the companions he’d be obligated to bring with him.

Emeric relented and approached the nearest bush. He plucked one of the big berries and rolled it between his fingers. He sniffed it. “Smells pleasant. Do they taste any good?”

“They’re sweet.” Moss considered leaving it at that but knew causing a scene would only lead to more frustration. “But don’t eat them.”

“One or two less won’t make a difference,” Emeric said.

“Not to me, but they will to you. Eating them without proper preparation can lead to a slew of adverse reactions.”

“What sort of reactions?” Emeric held the berry further away.

“Well for one, they’ll turn you blue.”

“Berries don’t make you change color,” Emeric insisted.

“How do you think fur dye potions are made?”

“So the price of losing weight will be turning blue? Some may choose to stay fat.”

Moss couldn’t tell if Emeric was pretending to be stupid or if the hike had messed with his head. “You won’t turn blue if they’re treated properly. The same’s true for the bloating.”

“Bloating? These damn things may as well be poison.” Emeric shot a dirty glance at the berry, the sort he tended to reserve for Redford.

The last side effect had been a lie, not that Emeric needed to know. The more the silver fox feared the berries, the more careful he’d be when gathering them. That’s what Moss hoped. “They’ll be fine once I’m through with them. Just don’t pop them in your mouth unless you want to have a preview of what it’s like lugging around a gut.”

Moss’ mix of truth and lies prompted Tane and Emeric to put all their attention into gathering the berries without suffering the implied consequences, dispelling conversation. The druid welcomed the wonderful silence, doing his best not to dwell on the fact it’d end once their packs were full and they turned towards home.

But the peace wasn’t absolute. In the back of his mind, Moss thought of fate. The fattening of his guild mates hadn’t been spread out consistently. Fate didn’t catch up to anyone on a predictable schedule. There’d been decent gaps between some, while Tane and Key had been stuffed simultaneously. Just because Redford had suffered a feeding the day before didn’t necessarily mean Moss was safe at the moment.

Would he fight it when it came for him? The others hadn’t come close to avoiding their gains. If Sivert’s exaggerations were to be believed, the wolf had run around half the city before succumbing to his new, blubbery form. Juliet had never stood a chance. Key had been forced to choose between his waistline and his boyfriend’s, sacrificing himself without a second thought. And despite Redford’s claims of being prepared, a simple distraction had plumped him up.

Gut instinct told Moss he’d resist, fate be damned. If he had even the slimmest hope of remaining relatively thin, he’d take it.

“It’s a shame these aren’t safe to eat.” Tane broke the silence. “They’re reminding me of the berry pies the cooks obsessed over last year. Each of them

was convinced they had the best recipe in the city, and they almost brawled about it.”

Emeric made a displeased noise as he gently added another berry to his pack. “Of all the things to unsheath daggers over. You’d have thought their jobs were on the line! We’re lucky no one got stabbed.”

Moss kept his back turned so neither of his companions saw his grimace. An impromptu duel between two of the guild’s cooks *had* occurred, and the pair had made a bloody mess of each other. Moss had returned an old, annoying favor by giving them healing potions to hide their wounds and avoid getting into serious trouble. He’d threatened to throw them out himself if they acted so idiotic ever again.

“We have Moss to thank for that.” Tane’s words made Moss freeze in place. “Agreeing to judge their pies was the only thing that settled them down.”

Moss breathed again. “It was just eating a bunch of pie. Anyone could’ve done that.”

“Not everyone could be as impartial about it as you, though. And it saved Key from the temptation of taste-testing again.”

“As if that matters now,” Emeric callously chimed in.

“Every pound matters,” Tane mumbled. The conversation died with that.

Gathering berries was tedious work, but the pleasant weather and peaceful surroundings made the effort worth it in Moss’ mind. He preferred the calm.

A bright red mushroom growing out of a tree trunk caught Moss’ eye. He stepped closer, unwilling to get his hopes up until he confirmed the telltale pattern of orange dots on the cap. “I’ll be damned, a flare cap,” he whispered under his breath. He didn’t think the rare mushroom would be of any use in making a weight loss potion, but he’d be a fool to ignore such a valuable ingredient.

Dense shrubs surrounded the tree. Moss pushed against them, his hoof inching closer and closer to the precious mushroom. One more step, and he’d have it. Dry branches crunched beneath his boot, which failed to find solid ground as expected. Moss lost his balance and slipped down an embankment he’d failed to notice.

The elk cursed and flailed as he slid. Thin branches battered him the whole way down, forcing him to shield his eyes with his arms for protection. A trip that should’ve lasted mere seconds dragged out into minutes, before Moss tumbled out of the brush and onto flat land.

He groaned on the ground and took stock of his injuries. He ached all over but didn’t feel the sting of scratches or broken limbs. He could still move. Though his head was sore, he felt both antlers and found them intact. Few things hurt

quite like a snapped antler, and losing one meant breaking off the other to keep the weight on his head balanced. Then he'd have to wait for them to grow in again.

Moss dragged himself to his feet. Nothing about his slide made sense. His druidic powers had given him a reasonably clear view of the forest in his immediate vicinity, and there hadn't been any ditches, let alone a hillside. The hunt for berries hadn't distracted him *that* much.

He shuddered from the surge of information assaulting his senses when he tapped back into the plants around him. Vibrant, unfamiliar energy radiated from them, more akin to the plants he'd altered with magic back home than anything he tended to find in the open forest. The plants *looked* strange as well, with brilliant blooms and pristine leaves. Moss didn't feel any hint of sickness or rot. They were unnaturally healthy.

"Tane! Emeric!" Moss shouted up the incline he'd descended, which he now realized looked too short. Nothing added up. His voice echoed through the woods, and no answer came in return. He couldn't have been out of shouting distance. He bellowed their names out again. Nothing. Emeric might ignore him out of spite, but Tane never would. The zebra didn't have it in him to pull a mean prank like that.

"I *told* you our visitor would pop up over here!"

Moss spun around, fully aware the voice didn't belong to either of his companions. He cocked his head. A short, plump goat stood a few feet away. Beside him was a parrot of equal width. The strangers had piercing green eyes and wore colorful flower crowns. To Moss' dismay, he could sense the pair with his druidic magic as if they were plants.

"One step to the left, and he'd have ended up by the creek for certain!" the parrot told the goat. "But what matters is that he's here."

"And that I won our bet."

"The most unimportant bet in history!" the parrot laughed.

"Every victory is worthy of being cherished, big or small."

"Nothing's ever small about you." The parrot playfully jabbed the goat's love handle.

"Nor you!" The goat jabbed him right back.

The parrot waved a talon. "Enough of that, we're neglecting our guest! He's traveled all this way and at the best possible time. Funny how fate works."

Moss slowly began to understand the situation he'd stumbled into, and he didn't like it one bit. The inexplicable fall, the bizarre plants, the silence of his companions, the strangers practically oozing nature magic—he hadn't slid down a hill, he'd slid into the world of the fae.

The normally grouchy elk swiftly bowed to the newcomers. Utmost respect was advised in the presence of the notoriously mercurial fae folk, who shifted from friendly to hostile on a whim. He didn't dare act stubborn around them.

The goat clapped his hooves together, jiggling his belly. "So polite! Please, tell us your name."

"Moss," the elk gulped. "I apologize for intruding upon your realm. I came by accident and will happily return to my own realm immediately."

"Bah, you're not intruding!" the parrot insisted. "Druids like yourself are always welcome here."

"Thank you for your generosity. As wonderful as it'd be to stay, I'm afraid I must return home. I was in the middle of some important business that I'd very much like to complete." Moss' words came out stiff. He hadn't been so formal with anyone since his training days, when disrespect would earn him a quick smack with a staff. Even Damir never saw this side of him. He only hoped he didn't sound insincere. Or terrified. Fear might lead the fae to mischief.

"Nonsense, you've only just got here," the goat said. "We have a problem only an outsider like you can solve."

"I'm but a humble druid. I'd hate to disappoint you." Especially if failure put them in a foul mood. Why had he obsessed over that stupid mushroom so much? A bit of clumsiness might lead to his doom.

"Almost too humble, but that's exactly what we need. And our problem is something you've plenty of experience with, so no need to worry your antlers off," the parrot snickered. "Come along now, Moss. Your other task will wait for you."

That's what Moss dreaded. All he knew of the fae realm came from stories, many of which contradicted each other. But the unnatural passage of time was a common theme throughout. Minutes could equate to days, and days could equate to minutes. Whenever a person went missing in the woods, someone would hold out hope they were simply waylaid in the fae realm, destined to return one day. He didn't want to become one of those stories.

But getting on a fae's bad side would be disastrous. Going along with their wishes was the sanest move he could make.

"Of course," Moss said with clear uncertainty. "I'm glad to be of service."

The goat and parrot swooped alongside Moss and guided the druid deeper into the unknown.