

The Kobold Thieves: Chapter 017

By: Indigo Rho

Virk stuck to the shadows as he scurried along the wall. Despite being shrouded in an illusion, he hid behind cover. The magic wasn't perfect. A keen eye might notice a shimmering or aura of magic. But finding proper cover for a pair of doughy kobolds was daunting.

He halted behind a shrub and scanned the area. The Academy of Zenith's Mount was lively. A steady stream of students and professors traveled the walkways between buildings. Small groups loitered around, in no hurry to get anywhere at all. Virk hoped none of them were hexmages in training. If Vex's reactions were anything to go by, he and Cleave were impossible to ignore, no matter how well they hid. They couldn't waste time. Merely being on campus put them at risk of drawing the attention of a hexmage concerned about the roaming font of cursed magic.

Neither kobold could keep up a sprint for long. Frequent stops allowed them to catch their breath and scout the path ahead. The outing was the first time Virk had noticed just how out of shape the curse had made him. His legs ached. Quieting his breathing took effort. He longed for a chair to relax in. At least Cleave looked far worse.

"How much...further," Cleave gasped. He crouched, leaning back on his heavy tail for support. His taut gut jutted out. Low gurgles rumbled from it. Taverns and restaurants surrounded the entrance to the Academy. They'd had to make a mad dash down back alleys and through the gate so Cleave didn't end up beached. The stuffing still left him more sluggish than usual.

"Patience, Cleave," Virk whispered. "There's a big celebration tonight, so we have to be cautious. It'll all be worth it once that damned fang is back in its rightful place." It remained in his pocket.

"Oh yes, then the months of backbreaking exercise begin. I wish returning the fang would undo the gains," Cleave grumbled.

"You wouldn't be having such lofty dreams if you'd followed orders and left it alone." Virk would never let him forget that.

"How was I supposed to know it'd make us all fat?"

"Quiet," Virk shushed him. The outburst went unnoticed. "Come."

Virk took them along the winding route he'd plotted out beforehand.

For the most part, it matched the route from their recent heist. He'd made a few key adjustments to ensure his new plan went off without a hitch.

They had to dash across a busy path as they neared one of the towering Academy buildings. A trio of hefty students slowing the flow of traffic offered a perfect opportunity. The fox, lion, and rabbit were huffing and puffing, arguing about being late. Virk recognized Buckle's handiwork from their last heist. He dreaded imagining the gains Buckle's latest creations would cause.

Virk halted beside the wall of the building. They lacked cover and were in sight of the main path. Only his illusions kept them hidden. "Alright, we'll wait here."

"Wait for what?" Cleave asked, crouching down again to rest.

"For the next phase of the plan to begin," Virk answered.

"What does that—" Cleave shuddered. His eyes widened in surprise, then annoyance, before he glanced down. His large middle had begun to wobble and swell. Within seconds, it'd ballooned down to the ground. Grass tips tickled his sensitive scales. He pushed himself back to a standing position, swaying the whole way up. "What the—*uworrriiiiiiiirrp*—hell! I thought we were past the taverns!" He slid an arm under his gut to prop it up.

"We are," Virk said. He stared at Cleave's middle, watching it expand in all directions as it filled with magically-stolen food and drink. "However, now we're right next to the Academy's dining hall. Hundreds of students have started dinner."

Cleave's mouth dropped open in shock. His heart raced, jiggling his ballooning belly more. "Why did you take us this way, you fool? I need to get away before it's too late!"

"You're already too late."

The world spun rapidly around Cleave, disorienting him. He stuck his arms out on instinct to keep balance, leaving his belly unsupported. Gravity pulled the stuffed kobold down. He fell forward, flailing, and landed upon the growing curve of his gut. "*Buh-urrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrp!*" The long belch made his throat feel hoarse. He rocked atop his middle, trying to gain momentum to right himself, but constantly fell short.

"What are you doing?" Cleave growled.

“Creating a distraction to guarantee the mission's success,” Virk answered coldly. “As I said, there’s a celebration tonight, so the Academy is more lively. The library should be emptier as a result, like during the night of our heist.”

“That’s not an answer! I’m being stuffed like a damn hog!” Cleave continued struggling. No matter which direction he rocked, he couldn’t get back onto his feet. The futile effort tired him.

“Patience, you oaf.” Virk took a step back to stay out of range of Cleave’s unimpressive swipes. “Last time, we had Buckle’s culinary magic to create a distraction that could pass as a random prank. My illusions aren’t as subtle. Someone might guess it was more than a prank. And the illusions would fizzle away once I left. People would be alerted, not distracted. But a massive, immobile kobold appearing on campus? *That* is an obvious prank that will distract everyone for a good, long while.”

Cleave opened his mouth to curse, but a burp came out instead. His claws couldn’t reach the ground anymore. A flurry of sensations assaulted his stomach. Ice-cold drinks followed warm food in rapid succession. His body temperature fluctuated wildly, worsening his discomfort. Food piled into him at a much faster rate than any previous stuffing. He felt himself rising as he swelled, inching further and further away from safety. He’d have to be rolled away to escape the feast, but at his size, Virk alone wouldn’t be able to manage it. Not that the traitor would have any interest in helping him.

“I’m not a distraction, you bastard!” Cleave swung at Virk. He didn’t care that his claws never came close, he desperately wanted to strangle the other kobold. Rolling on top of him might be satisfying, too.

“Not yet, but you will be soon enough.” Virk pulled out a lengthy sash. A flick of his wrist sent Cleave on a tumbling illusionary journey through clouds of dark smoke and rivers of murky water. He leaned up and wrapped the sash tight around Cleave’s snout, silencing him. Another flick dispersed the illusion. “There. I can’t have you giving away our plans. Remember, Cleave, if I fail, then you’re cursed forever. Better to be a blob who can still speak than a mountain of blubber who can’t see beyond his own wobbling cheeks.”

Cleave shook his head, his protests muffled beyond recognition. A

belch puffed his cheeks up, escaping slowly through clenched teeth.

“You’ve always hated how much we sneak around during heists.” Virk smiled. “Now you’ll never have to sneak again.” He wiped away the illusion that’d made Cleave invisible, revealing the expanding kobold for all to see.

Cleave was hard to miss. One-by-one, people stopped in their tracks to make sure they weren’t seeing things. But the longer they looked at the incredibly round kobold, the more real they realized he was. People started pointing, drawing attention to Cleave. A few dared to approach, curious.

Virk quietly backed away.

“What’s happening to them?” someone asked.

“Must be a mage screwing up a spell again.”

“No way, it’s totally a prank!”

“What are they filling with?”

Two smacks echoed out as someone slapped Cleave’s taut side.
“Something solid!”

“Hasn’t someone been stuffing students lately?”

“The spell’s not contagious, is it?”

Some stepped away, but a crowd was forming.

“Someone go tell a professor.”

Cleave’s eyes darted all around him at the swarm of gawkers. He wanted to tell them off, but the sash prevented him from saying a word. He couldn’t even growl properly. They poked and prodded him, talking about him as if he couldn’t understand a word they were saying despite the binding around his snout being plain as day. But worst of all, they mocked him. None seemed concerned about his well-being. Baffled and amused, sure, but not concerned.

He couldn’t sway anymore, only wiggle, and even that required effort. His arms, legs, and tail all rested upon the immense mound of his food-filled belly. His hide had stretched thin. Every touch sent a shiver through his body. He briefly feared bursting, before a food coma dulled his thoughts.

Anger and embarrassment faded away. He stopped swinging and growling. Stifled belching continued. His mind could only follow one thought at a time. A blob. He was going to become a blob. Hiding in the warehouse had only delayed his worst fears. The food and drinks he was cursed to consume would turn into fat. Layer upon layer of fat.

He had no idea what a blob even looked like. Where would he gain the most weight? Would he have to lay on his belly forever? Would he be able to move his arms or legs? Would he be able to move his claws? Could he genuinely become so fat he couldn't speak?

Being doomed to become a blob was terrible enough, but not knowing what the absurd gains would take from him was agonizing. Nightmares flooded into his head as the feast flooded into his stomach.

He'd be a joke—a curiosity. A story passed around the city from tavern to tavern. His name should've inspired respect or fear in all who heard it. Now, it'd only inspire laughter. Cleave closed his eyes, plunging himself into a fattening slumber.

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Virk wished he could linger to watch Cleave humbled, but he needed to take advantage of every second the living distraction earned him. He headed straight towards the library once he was confident a crowd was forming around Cleave.

He didn't know what would happen to the former bruiser of his gang. The Academy could keep him as an attraction for all he cared. Cleave wouldn't be able to rat him out without also implicating himself in a slew of crimes. He'd spend the rest of his days filling every inch of a cell, with no hope of ever slimming down or seeing the light of day again. And what proof would Cleave have? Virk didn't record his many crimes. Valuables he stole were sold for coin, without exception. If the guards dropped by, he'd be a moderately successful tavern owner who'd recently fired his gluttonous bouncer for stealing food.

No, he wouldn't fear vengeance from Cleave. The short-tempered brute was out of his life for good.

Word spread fast of the mysterious kobold ballooning outside the dining hall. Virk only had to wait a few minutes for the few occupants of the library to come pouring out, all eager to confirm the wild story they'd been told.

He followed the directions he'd forced out of Cleave before they'd arrived. They'd been vague, but eventually, he came across an aisle of

cabinets that generally matched Cleave's description. None were locked, and all were dusty. He checked each one, resisting the urge to pocket what must have been a fortune in arcane artifacts. The money wouldn't be worth the risk of being cursed again.

He had to check the aisle twice before he found the small wooden box with the circle carved into it. Cleave hadn't lied about it lacking much in the way of decoration. There was no binding or lock. It slid open without resistance, the interior as unadorned as the exterior. A single word had been carved on the inside of the lid. Karth.

Virk pulled out the fang and placed it in the box. He shut the box firmly and put it back on the shelf, taking care to ensure it didn't reopen. He brushed away the dust to make it less clear anything had been disturbed on the shelf.

"This better work," he muttered. He shut the grate, and snuck out of the library. Before leaving the accursed Academy, he took a detour to the dining hall.

Cleave was enormous. His belly had blimped to be about as big as a one-story house. Virk wouldn't have been able to tell he was a kobold if he hadn't known who he was beforehand. Half of campus appeared to be around him, oblivious to his true purpose.

For once, Virk was satisfied with Cleave's performance.