

## The Kobold Thieves: Chapter 016

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The steady tapping of Virk's boots was the only sound in the Cracked Coin. The tables and bar were empty, and most stools remained neatly tucked under, awaiting the day's first customers.

Virk nitpicked everything he believed to be out of place, despite the fact he rarely bothered to oversee the tavern at all. Two mugs had been left under tables, unnoticed by the servers, or perhaps a nuisance for the tubby kobolds to reach after a night of waddling around. Ale slowly dripped from a keg tap, pooling in a tiny puddle behind the bar. Negligence, or had it been jarred open by a passing gut or rump?

He didn't care about answers. He needed something to distract him. Desperately.

For once in his life, the thief didn't know what to do. No genius plan had come to him since he'd learned how difficult removing the curse would be. Though he was loath to admit it, Krix was right about stealing back the tomes. They lacked the resources and luck to pull such a heist off, now more than ever.

Krix had abandoned them. He'd either run afoul of the law or retreated somewhere to find a cure on his own, as he'd claimed he would. He'd kept the compression ring to himself; who knew what other secrets he had?

Buckle was busy filling more and more of the kitchen each day. Talking to him was pointless. He only cared about gaining weight and seeing others grow. The only saving grace was that he remained uninterested in force-feeding people. Yet, in the back of his mind, he feared he'd one day hear a commotion coming from the main room as an army of animated pastries poured forth to fatten everyone in sight.

Virk didn't know how Cleave fared. He'd heard no rumors of a kobold blob found blocking the street, so he assumed the short-tempered brute remained mobile. Maybe he'd fled the city. The life of a highway bandit suited Cleave, and he wouldn't need to worry about being stuffed by his curse out in the countryside.

The gang had utterly fallen apart. He'd always known it wouldn't last

forever. Members were to be expendable in case they were caught or proved too troublesome. Except for himself, of course. That's why he'd kept a tight lip on his contacts. If anyone dared to oust him, they'd have no way to obtain high-quality jobs and keep pockets full of coin.

But he'd expected to lose one member at a time, not everyone all at once. Forming a new crew would take time, and he lacked that more than anything else. He woke up fatter every day. Potential recruits wouldn't take him seriously if they believed him to be nothing more than a portly mage eager to play thief. And they certainly wouldn't accept meager earnings while he saved money to purge his curse.

No. Playing the long game was too risky. A recruit with even a modicum of ambition would overthrow him when he became too fat to participate in heists. They might even use Buckle's creations to fatten him into a helpless blob. One final indignity as his dreams evaporated.

Virk slammed a fist onto a table, rattling it and wobbling his belly. He considered looking into a compression ring. The costs Krix had warned him about wouldn't matter, thanks to his illusions. The seller would give him a ring to try on, and get back a worthless band glamoured to look like the real thing. Returning to petty theft left a sour taste in his mouth.

But what then? Compression magic was only a temporary solution. It wouldn't stop him from gaining weight. The enchantment might not even be permanent. He didn't want to become like Krix, a mass of kobold kept mobile by fickle magic alone.

There was a crack at the front door, and it creaked open. Virk got his hopes up and prepared a flurry of scathing insults to hurl at Krix. But the snout that poked through the gap was red, not orange.

"Cleave?" Virk asked.

Cleave jolted at the sound of his name. His ample belly bumped the door wide open, exposing him. To Virk's surprise, the other kobold wasn't as fat as he'd feared. He'd imagined Cleave as a blubbery ball with a perpetually stuffed stomach, who struggled to shuffle along.

Reality had been marginally more kind. He was large, from the tip of his chunky tail to the end of his thick snout. His muscles were gone, replaced by rolls. A loincloth cobbled together from burlap sacks wound snug around his waist, the only piece of clothing he had left. His love handles and

overhang covered most of it.

Not long ago, the sight of a kobold as fat as Cleave would've shocked Virk senseless. Buckle and Krix had desensitized him to enormous bellies. Nothing short of immobility surprised him anymore, and he feared he'd become jaded to that in time as well. He certainly didn't recoil as much on the rare occasions he peeked in on Buckle.

"Good to see you're still walking," Virk said.

Cleave's familiar scowl returned. "Buckle's not awake, is he?" He hadn't crossed the threshold into the tavern yet.

"No, not yet." He'd have heard clanging echoing up the order tube if so. The chef spent every waking hour cooking. Anything he didn't eat ended up in his ever-growing cooks, all of whom had succumbed to his encouragement. Virk supposed he might also be to blame, since his touch ensured even their humblest snacks were fattening. But if they'd wanted to stay slim, they could've brought their own waterskins and bundles of food. He dreaded potentially having to replace them as well once they were more pillow than cook.

Cleave breathed a sigh of relief that jiggled his middle. Then his anger flared up. "I'm tired of this exile. He's the one who should be holed up in a dirty warehouse in the middle of nowhere, not me!" he growled. "Kick him out!"

"How?" Virk scoffed. He'd have been furious with Cleave's tone if his whole body hadn't shaken like dough whenever he complained.

"Just shove him out the back! I'll do it myself if I have to." He couldn't quite cross his thick arms over his soft chest, but he tried.

Virk laughed as he imagined the grouchy kobold trying to budge Buckle an inch and becoming buried beneath blubber instead. "Wait, you haven't seen Buckle in days, have you?"

"Of course not. He's a threat while I'm still cursed." Cleave finally entered and shut the door behind him. He waddled over to the bar and poured a mug of ale. He'd only filled it halfway before he gulped it down. Ale must have been a rarity in his hiding spot.

Virk realized Cleave didn't know about his fattening touch either. Not telling Cleave brought him some satisfaction. "A lot's changed since you left. Buckle's too fat to move now. You'd need a team of oxen to drag him out,

and only after knocking down a wall.”

A curved smile appeared on Cleave’s face, but it didn’t last. “Great, now I’ll never be able to come back.” He poured himself another fattening mug of ale and drained it instantly. “*Braaaaaaaaap!* I’ll need to grab my things before he wakes and starts stuffing himself into oblivion. He must eat as much as an army now.” He shuddered.

“Probably.” Virk watched the humiliated brute, considering if he had any possible use for him anymore. He doubted he’d retained any fighting ability after blimping up. Unless he threatened to sit on someone, he wouldn’t be intimidating, either. At best, he could serve as a distraction. People were bound to gawk at the doughy kobold dressed only in a crude loincloth and a necklace that looked ready to snap off.

He frowned. Dealing with the curse had made him forget about Cleave’s reckless little theft from the library heist. A few more pounds, and Cleave would have to start wearing it around his wrist. At least until that grew too thick as well.

His gaze lingered on the necklace. Thinking back, he couldn’t remember any of the students they’d stuffed wearing it. And had anyone but him and Krix handled the stolen books they believed were the source of the curse? The scribe he stole them for had, but he hadn’t gained a single pound. But everyone in the gang had touched the damn necklace while celebrating their success around the table.

Virk stormed towards the bar. He leaned over the bar and snatched the necklace from Cleave’s neck. The frayed cord snapped quickly.

“Hey!” Cleave shouted. He sluggishly reached for the necklace well after Virk had pulled back.

“Tell me, Cleave, where did you get this again?” Virk hissed. The fang was larger than he remembered. He’d assumed before that it was carved from wood, but as he ran his claws over it, he knew it was a real fang. He’d heard plenty of tales about curses and bones. A cursed tooth didn’t seem too far-fetched.

“I found it.” Cleave swiped at the fang, but his gut pushed back against the bar, limiting his reach.

“Yes, you ‘found’ it in the library. A student had it, right?” Virk took a step back, where his doughy companion couldn’t get to him.

“Yes! Give it back!” Cleave boldly hefted himself onto the bar in a last-ditch effort to steal back the necklace. He still couldn’t get close enough, and soon slid off. He started panting.

“I think you’re lying, Cleave. I don’t think any of the students had this on them.” He let his anger flow freely. He didn’t need to tread carefully around Cleave anymore.

“It was in a pocket,” Cleave insisted.

“Strange place for a necklace to be. Even stranger that you told me it’d snapped off one of their necks when they were stuffed.” At least his memory hadn’t abandoned him. “I’m not in the mood for lies, Cleave.”

Virk waved a claw, and the tavern was replaced by towering cliffs overlooking a stormy sea. While he was on solid ground, Cleave stood atop a crumbling pinnacle of stone, with jagged rocks and frothing waves below.

The change in scenery startled Cleave, but only briefly. He snarled at Virk. “I *know* it’s an illusion, idiot! Your flashy magic doesn’t scare me!” He turned, took a step forward, and walked right into the back of the bar. Unseen mugs clattered about. He stumbled back and hit the other side of the bar.

“My flashy magic seems to have done a wonderful job of disorienting you, Cleave.” A flick of his wrist turned the other kobold ninety degrees. “If you don’t want to tell me the truth, you’re free to stumble around blindly and hope you find the front doors before Buckle wakes up.”

“Alright, alright!” Cleave twisted, and his tail slammed into something. “I stole it from the library! It was in a dusty little box on a shelf with a bunch of other abandoned junk. It’s not like they’ll notice it’s gone!”

“You stole something stored in the section of the library dedicated to curses, you absolute fool!” Virk hit Cleave with a barrage of illusions, causing the kobold to stumble around some more. “Those tomes we stole aren’t what cursed us. This is!” He held the necklace up, wishing he could truly throw it off a cliff. “We’ve all been gaining weight because of you. Buckle and Krix are blobs, you get winded after throwing a single punch, and our gang’s gone—all because you couldn’t listen to my damn orders!” He got rid of Cleave’s fake pillar and let him feel like he was plummeting. Cleave yelped and actually fell over.

Virk considered marching down into the kitchen and ordering Buckle

to eat as much as possible, just to swell Cleave up. Maybe becoming a blob would teach the fool to follow orders. But then he'd be the last member of the gang left standing, quite literally. Now that he had the likely cause of their curse in his claws, he could bring it to Vex and see if a cure was attainable. He might still have some use for Cleave yet.

Virk clenched his fist shut and shattered the illusions. Cleave dragged himself to his feet, his eyes wide and his breathing heavy.

"While you were hiding and growing fat, I found a hexmage who can help us. We'll pay him a visit and confirm your mistake is the cause of all our problems." Virk struggled to keep his voice calm.

Cleave found his fury again. "I'm not going anywhere that'll get me stuffed."

"You'll go anywhere I tell you to, otherwise I'll have Buckle feed you until your limbs sink into your immense body and no one will be able to tell you were ever a kobold." Virk didn't raise his voice. He needed to make sure Cleave understood the threat wasn't blurted out in a moment of rage. It was a cold and calculated promise.

Cleave recoiled. It was the first time Virk had seen genuine fear in his eyes. Good. "Whatever. I'll go," he relented, trying and failing to conceal his worry beneath a mask of apathy.

"As I thought." Virk smiled. "And don't worry, I'm sure we can find a route that only leaves you *marginally* stuffed."

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Virk tossed the necklace onto Vex's counter. The hexmage backed into a wall, hissing out a curse. "Be careful with that thing!" the snake stared at the necklace as if it were poised to strike.

"I take it that's what cursed us, then?" Virk asked.

The journey back to Eastwall had been a chore. The range of Cleave's curse had been greater than he thought, and he'd had to make even more detours than when Krix had accompanied him. Additional threats had coaxed Cleave along, but he'd begun to doubt that taking him had been worth it. Cleave stood well behind him, leaning against a shelf as he fought to catch his breath. His belly was a taut, bloated ball that gurgled loudly

every so often. From the smell of his breath, Virk had the impression a fair bit of ale had made its way into the kobold's stomach.

"Yes, without a doubt. Where did you even...no, no I don't want to know." Vex's tail whipped back and forth. His unease was contagious, and Virk wondered if carrying the damn necklace had worsened his curse.

"Now that you have the item, would you be able to break the curse?" Virk wished he could coerce the hexmage as easily as he had Cleave. He was beginning to enjoy intimidating people.

Vex's voice cracked as he laughed. "I would love to get even a glimpse of the hex oozing from that thing, but that's all I'd get before it overwhelmed me. Considering how it afflicted you and your companions, I'd probably end up as a blob in seconds just from poking at it. No hexmage in their right mind would delve deep into that thing, not for any price."

Virk had spent the trip considering the possibility of such an answer, but wasn't prepared for the wave of dread that struck him once he heard it. He desperately wanted to lash out and berate Vex for failing them, but he found he lacked the energy to. "Then what are we supposed to do?" He couldn't hide his sense of defeat.

"You seal it." Vex's gaze hadn't left the necklace. Virk saw the awe in the snake's face. "A cursed object of this magnitude must have been sealed in some manner. Binding cord, empowered runes, maybe even a box. It cursed everyone who touched it once freed. Reseal it, and the curse will lose its power source and dissipate. It's like plugging a jug so it doesn't spill water. If you can't do that, your only other option would be to put a few days' distance between you and the object. There's no guarantee that'd be a permanent solution, though."

Virk would never flee the city in fear of a necklace, no matter how cursed. If Cleave had at least told the truth about finding the necklace in a box, then sealing it would be possible. They'd just have to sneak back into the Academy's library and return what Cleave had foolishly stolen.

"We'll seal it." Virk gingerly picked up the necklace and returned it to his pocket. "This better work," he said to Vex. The hexmage had offered as much disappointment as answers.

"I hope it does. I don't like the idea of such a potent curse being on the loose. That thing could turn a whole city into blobs within weeks under

ideal circumstances.” Vex stared at the pocket with the necklace in it. Averting his gaze appeared to take considerable effort. “I may have something you’ll find convenient, though.” He reached below his counter and dug around, eventually retrieving a small, milky white stone. He tossed it to Virk.

Virk caught the stone. As soon as it touched his claw, it glowed a bright purple. “A light?”

“A curse detector. The glow is based on how cursed the individual is.” Vex raised a brow. “I didn’t know it could get that bright. Honestly, I feared it might shatter the second you grasped it.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Virk grumbled.

“If the curse starts fading, so will it. At least you’ll know for sure if the necklace is properly sealed. Consider it a gift.”

Virk hadn’t considered how he’d confirm the curse was gone. “Thank you. We should be going now. I do hope you don’t take offense at me hoping I never have to step foot in this shop again.”

“None taken. Can’t say I’m eager to test my luck for a third time either,” Vex laughed, but he kept his distance from Virk and the necklace.

Virk turned and walked away. “Come along, Cleave. We have to undo your stupid mistake.” Or become blobs trying. After so many setbacks, he struggled to feel hope.

“Fuck...you,” Cleave panted. He waddled after Virk, holding his bulging gut with a claw.