

## The Kobold Thieves: Chapter 018

By: Indigo Rho

The journey back home was uneventful. Virk didn't have to worry about companions being swarmed by mesmerized feeders or swelling up because they were within sight of a restaurant. No complaints or snarky remarks assailed his ears. He had only himself for company, and he realized that was preferable.

An empty room greeted him when he returned to the Cracked Coin. He'd ordered the tavern closed early for the night, as he had during their regular heists. It didn't matter that he'd been returning an item, not stealing one, or that the gang was all but gone. He wanted peace and quiet, either to celebrate success or dwell upon failure. Fortunately, he'd been blessed with the former.

Virk pulled Vex's stone out of his pocket. The glow had already faded some. He'd revisit the hexmage once it went out completely to make sure no trace of the curse remained in him, but he allowed himself to believe the worst was over. He'd beaten the curse.

The fat kobold cackled. Against the odds, he'd overcome a powerful curse that made a hexmage quake in fear. And he'd done it on his own. *His* connections had discovered Vex and confirmed a curse caused the weight gain. *His* keen skills of deduction had pinpointed the fang necklace as the source of the curse. *His* plan had returned the fang to its rightful place without anyone being the wiser. He'd even used his curse to cultivate a dedicated group of regular customers now helplessly addicted to the tavern's fattening food. The food would no longer pack the same punch without his cursed touch, but he was sure Buckle's obsession would keep them swelling regardless.

Plenty of work remained. While Virk had avoided the immobilizing gains of his companions, he'd still grown portly. Shedding the pounds without magic could take years. But at least it was possible. The others weren't as lucky, and they had no one but themselves to blame.

He'd begun to doubt that Buckle would come to his senses, even with the curse defeated. The chef had been exposed for too long. At least he could still serve a useful purpose working in the tavern kitchen. And a blob

could never leave and expose Virk's secrets.

Krix had proven he couldn't be part of a team, so Virk wished never to see him again. With luck, the cocky thief would keep getting fatter and fatter and never slim down. Maybe he'd consider accepting him back if he came crawling back on his hands and knees. His gut would likely be too big for that, of course.

Virk smirked. Krix would regret crossing him for the rest of his blubbery days.

Cleave didn't bear mentioning. He'd been volatile and barely worth keeping around when he'd still been in shape, and the curse had wiped away every useful trait he had. Bringing the curse down upon the gang was also unforgivable, which was why Virk had sacrificed him as a distraction without a second thought. The next time he needed brute force, he'd make sure there was a brain behind the brawn.

Virk looked forward to rebuilding the gang from the ground up. He'd been too lenient with the old one. His new gang would put them to shame. He'd make fewer compromises and discover even more remarkable talent. It would take time, but he was a patient man. The profits from the tavern would satisfy him for the time being.

Hunger pains interrupted his gaiety. Bread and water wouldn't do after triumphing over his greatest foe. His touch likely retained its fattening qualities while the curse lingered, but a few extra pounds wouldn't make a difference in the long run.

He headed down into the kitchen to find himself a proper meal and a captive audience to gloat to.

Buckle filled up his side of the kitchen as usual. A trio of pastry kobolds waddled around the room under his command, lugging around ingredients. He grinned at Virk's arrival. "You're looking pleasantly fat! How has your evening been?"

He remained overjoyed with his immobile life, as Virk had guessed. "Fantastic, for once," Virk replied. No matter how often he saw Buckle, he couldn't fathom the chef's absurd size. At times, he felt like he was talking with a colorful ball of dough. "I've succeeded in breaking the curse that's bedeviled us for so long."

Buckle's smile diminished some. "So you'll no longer be able to make

the food more fattening?”

“Never again.”

“Oh well. I’ll just have to increase the serving sizes to compensate for it.” Buckle seemed to try and shrug, though his blubbery arms never left their resting spot on his belly. “I do hope you’ll consider keeping the weight you’ve gained. It’s wonderful once you adjust to it.”

“Enjoy the fat me while you still can, because I’ll be losing every last ounce eventually. You can remain a blob if you want, but I refuse to have my mobility stifled like this forever.” Waddling was far more favorable to being beached like Buckle and the others, but he refused to let himself grow complacent with such comparisons. That would lead to the very gains Buckle wished for.

“Never say never,” Buckle replied with unfounded optimism.

Virk rejected the comment with a scoff. He passed the pastry kobolds and retrieved an unopened bottle of wine from the pantry, which he popped open. Forgoing a goblet, he drank straight from the bottle. “Soon, Buckle, soon. I’ll no longer have to worry about a gulp of wine having the same impact on my waistline as an entire turkey. I’ll be able to have fine food, rather than fasting like a hermit.” He shuddered, ignoring how it jiggled him. “I never realized how much I enjoyed food until the curse shut me off from most of it.”

“That doesn’t sound like someone trying to lose weight,” Buckle snickered.

“There’s a difference between enjoying food and shoveling it down your throat. I’ve always understood the importance of restraint, Buckle. That’s why I’m still walking while you and the others are blobs.”

“Wait, Cleave and Krix are blobs now?” Joy radiated from the massive chef and he wobbled. “How big are they? Where are they? When can I cook for them?”

Virk took another sip of wine as the questions blew over him. “No clue. Krix decided to run off on his own and Cleave couldn’t handle the curse.” Less a lie and more a firm twisting of the truth. Buckle didn’t need to know that he’d abandoned Cleave. It’d stay his little secret. It wasn’t as if Cleave was in any position to return and tell anyone.

“Well, I hope they’re not having too hard a time while they settle into

their new size. I know they'll accept it eventually. By then, I'll have a special treat ready for them!" Buckle's obsessive giddiness over excess weight never waned.

Virk spotted some plates of food left on a counter. There were a few pastries and stuffed rolls shaped like small animal heads. Each would no doubt be excessively fattening. His stomach rumbled. What harm could a few more pounds do? He picked out a pastry shaped like a round dragon's face. "I fear you'll be sorely disappointed if you keep expecting the rest of us to match your adoration of fat."

"Virk, be careful with that—"

"The vast majority of us prefer to be fit and lean, not blubbery," Virk continued, caring little for what the chef had to say. He scarfed the pastry down in two bites. Avoiding desserts for so long made the pastry taste divine. "Though I can't blame anyone for getting fat off your cooking. Your pastries are as delicious as usual," he admitted.

"Thank you! I've actually been working on some new animated food for you to bring along on heists, seeing as I'm working in the kitchen full time now."

A silly way to describe being too fat to leave, but Virk would let the chef have his delusions. He snatched another pastry, he couldn't resist. "Good of you to consider the needs of the gang."

"A bit of a happy coincidence, to be honest. I started out simply wanting some more portable creations that might also advertise the tavern. Something like a pastry dragon."

"Sounds flashy. Make sure you don't give me the same pastries you'd use for advertisements. We wouldn't want anyone we rob using them as evidence against us. *Buh-urrrrrrrrrp!*" Virk blushed in annoyance as he covered his mouth too late to stop the belch. "When can you have them ready?"

"Oh, they're already done!"

"They are?" Virk asked, covering up another belch.

"Yes! Or well, they were, until you ate them." Buckle smiled.

Virk's jaw dropped. He looked to the plate of animal-shaped snacks and then to Buckle. "Neutralize them!"

"I could if they were still in one piece, but it gets tricky if someone

chews them up like you did,” Buckle let out a sheepish laugh.

Virk rocked forwards as his belly puffed out, ripping his tunic apart at the seams. It puffed out again, twice as large. He had to clutch the sides of his bloated gut to stay standing, and his knees quaked under the sudden influx of weight. “No no no, this isn’t happening! Make it stop, damn it!”

“Don’t panic, Virk, it’s just pastries. When has my cooking harmed anyone?” Buckle asked, trying and failing to calm his distressed companion with positivity.

“It turned you into a blob, you blubber-brained dope!” Virk hissed. He squeezed his belly as hard as he could. It only made him belch again. His middle ballooned twice in quick succession, sending him onto his ass. The swelling renewed, this time slow and steady.

“I wish you’d understand that being a blob isn’t necessarily bad,” Buckle insisted. He couldn’t hide the excitement in his eyes as he watched Virk expand.

Virk flopped about on the floor trying to get back up, but his growing gut foiled his every effort, exhausting him. His belly swelled over his lap and buried his legs. It pushed him back against the counter. He feared it’d envelop him completely, trapping him under a scaled mountain. “How big are the dragons?” He begged for a miracle, that the animated pastries he’d accidentally consumed were scaled-down tests.

“Big would be a good way to describe them,” Buckle answered unhelpfully. “Big enough that I definitely wouldn’t have animated two in the same room, at least. But your stomach will condense them, so that’ll help.”

“How? How does that help?” He’d have pelted Buckle with illusions out of spite if he hadn’t been panicking.

“We won’t be outgrowing the kitchen, for one. But it’ll probably be cramped until you’ve digested everything,” Buckle said.

And how fat would Virk be after that? The longer he watched his belly expand in every direction, the more his heart sank. He’d caught a glimpse at what Buckle’s creations had done to the students at the Academy, and that was without the addition of his fattening touch. Thinking about it made his head spin, but he was denied the good fortune of passing out.

He watched the gap between his belly and Buckle’s gradually dwindle. A pastry kobold made a daring attempt to shuffle past on its way to the

pantry but got caught and flattened. The remaining creations learned to give the two enormous kobolds a wide berth.

“Too much. It’s too much,” Virk whined. He felt his gut pushing against Buckle’s. The chef’s middle was much doughier, but also much heavier. He was squeezed between kobold and counter. The pastries pushed outward while everything else pushed inward, putting immense pressure on him.

“I think you’ve only got a few more feet left to swell.” Buckle’s voice came from far beyond the monstrous curve of his gut.

A distressed, one-note laugh came out of Virk. What would a few more feet matter to someone doomed to be an immobile blob? He could glut on a platter of the dragon pastries and not feel any worse than he already did.

It wasn’t right. Quick thinking and great personal sacrifice had reduced the effects of the curse that’d ravaged the rest of the gang. Persistence had helped him end the curse while he still had a chance to undo his dreadful gains. And then, at the peak of triumph, two little pastries had done him in. The travesty was so great, he couldn’t muster the energy to curse.

A flood of worries washed over Virk, too many for him to focus on. He didn’t notice when his belly finally ceased swelling, or how he and Buckle filled most of the kitchen. He didn’t want to think about how fat he’d end up, or how he’d leave the kitchen, or how he’d ever slim down. He didn’t want to think, period.

“This isn’t so bad. It’s fun having another blob around, too.” If Buckle saw the despair on Virk’s face, he cheerfully ignored it. “It’ll be just like old times, when we’d all gather around a table and have drinks after a heist. How’d you manage to break the curse, anyway? I’ve been so focused on cooking, I haven’t been able to keep up with everyone.”

The joy of ending the curse seemed an eternity in the past. Only catastrophe had followed. “Not now, Buckle.” The ordeal had dulled his rage into gloom. He found himself wondering how everything had gone so wrong. That was better than figuring out how he could ever make things right again. Accepting his new life as a blob would be the greatest challenge he’d ever faced.

Virk waited for the food coma to take him away from all his horrible thoughts. He’d have plenty of time for them later, once he’d become an

immobile blob.