

The Kobold Thieves: Chapter 014

By: Indigo Rho

“You look fine. Not perfect, but fine.”

Virk stood before his mirror, meticulously adjusting every inch of his outfit. He tugged on sleeves and smoothed small creases.

“Being...*plump*, isn’t the end of the world.” He practically spat the word out. “You’re not even the fattest kobold in this building, let alone the city.” A dangerous comparison. He could be too fat to move and still be slimmer than Buckle. He avoided the kitchen now. The sight of the immense, brainwashed chef horrified him. As long as the mysterious spell continued to plague him, he’d keep stuffing himself and growing. His mountainous gut might one day push against the walls and collapse the tavern. No more safe haven. No more backup source of income. No more chef.

Virk growled. No, he could never be rid of him that easily. The stones and timbers of the tavern would bounce right off the mass of blubber that’d once been shaped like a kobold. And even then, he’d still keep eating and eating and eating.

Virk’s chunky tail smacked the floor. Snapping it took too much effort anymore. He shifted his attention back to himself.

His middle had grown tragically round. It hung a little over his belt and seemed to delight in straining buttons and seams alike. Its only redeeming quality was that it drew attention away from all the other curves he’d gained. He couldn’t pinch any part of his body without finding a soft layer of pudge.

As he’d feared, his precautions had merely impeded his gains, not halted them. His cursed touch was too powerful. He could only enjoy regular food if someone fed him, and he couldn’t think of anyone he’d trust such a task to. Buckle would never show restraint, and his gaggle of increasingly doughy cooks was more loyal to him than Virk. Krix would either refuse outright or abuse the position. The servers didn’t have the time, as the tavern’s ravenous customers kept them waddling from table to table nonstop.

So instead, he endured the humiliation of gaining a few extra pounds and ate as normally as a kobold with a cursed fattening touch could.

Two heavy knocks rattled the door, followed by a lighter third knock. Virk made sure his gut wasn't showing before he called out. "Enter!"

The door creaked open, and a kobold as soft around the middle as him leaned in. Virk had seen him attending the tables before. He was one of the leanest servers left. "A message arrived for ya. Uh, sir." He held out a small scroll.

Virk snatched the scroll out of his claw. He recognized the blue wax seal on it immediately as that of his contact, the scribe. "Dismissed," he said, eyes still glued to the scroll. The server zipped away, his belly and butt bouncing as he returned to his duties downstairs. Virk shut the door.

He clutched the scroll tightly in his claws. The scribe had come through for him. At last, his nightmare would be over.

He tore the wax seal off and unfurled the scroll. The message was uncomfortably brief, and began with a rambling preamble detailing the scribe's efforts to aid him. Despite the flowery language, Virk recognized a complaint when he saw one. He didn't care.

Eventually, Virk reached the true message. The scribe had made a few inquiries, but only one had born fruit. There was a hexmage named Vex up in Eastwall who understood the importance of being discreet. So he was no stranger to shady work. Few who did business in Eastwall were.

Virk frowned at the news. He struggled to believe a hexmage hiding out in Eastwall would have the know-how to undo such a persistent curse. He wasn't even sure it *was* a curse. Enchantments could be just as nasty. But what choice did he have? The hexmage was better than nothing.

There was no time to waste. Virk pocketed the scroll and filled a pouch with money, enough—he hoped—to please the hexmage. He'd have no way of knowing what they considered adequate pay until he asked. He spent another minute fussing in front of the mirror. Illusions could hide the gains from others, but wouldn't rid him of his frustration. No, he'd conserve his energy and go as his actual self. Besides, he didn't want his magic interfering with the hexmage's work.

As ready as he could ever be, Virk marched out of his room and over to Krix's. Only a fool would venture into the unknown alone. Numbers would discourage thieves. And if they didn't, then he could always shove Krix into their path and make his escape.

He banged on the other kobold's door. "Krix!" he shouted. "Stop napping and get out here! I've secured a lead that may rid us of this curse!"

"One...one second!" came Krix's strained reply.

Virk crossed his arms and waited. And waited.

He could hear Krix shuffling around. Floorboards groaned on the other side of the door. Krix had been reclusive lately, and Virk feared the worst. The cocky crocodilian might have ballooned larger than their gluttonous customers.

When the door swung open, though, Krix didn't look any plumper than usual. For a second, Virk even thought he looked a little leaner. He concealed his disdain that his companion had somehow managed to lose weight. "You're still mobile. Good."

The corner of Krix's mouth curved into a grin. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Because you keep throwing yourself into the path of feeders so that you can gloat about being stuffed full of overpriced food," Virk grumbled in disapproval.

"And yet I'm the slimmest of our unlucky gang of doughbolds," Krix smirked. Despite the boast, he was panting more than Buckle ever had before his descent into immobility. No doubt he'd been secretly working out when Virk had come knocking.

"Don't refer to us by such a humiliating nickname!" Virk hissed.

"What, doughbolds? It's what the customers call the servers. Which is funny, considering how much rounder than the staff most of them are." Krix exhaled sharply and rubbed his brow.

"You can call the others whatever you want, just leave me out of it." He didn't want the nickname to stick. He glanced past Krix, and noticed the sore state of his bed. The legs had broken off and the mattress was warped. Even Buckle hadn't caused as much damage before moving permanently into the kitchen. "What did you do to your bed?"

Krix looked over his shoulder. "Ah, that." He spoke as if noticing it for the first time. "It was unfortunately done in by a strike of my tail. Sometimes I forget my own strength." He smacked his tail on the floor a few times in demonstration.

"Of course," Virk said, doubtfully. He suspected the bed had actually been flattened during a tryst. The walls weren't thick, and he regrettably

had a good idea of how loud Krix got in the heat of the moment. His eyes darted around the room, searching for out-of-place clothing or a poorly-hidden paramour. To his relief, he spotted neither. "Collect yourself. I've learned of a hexmage in Eastwall who might be able to cure us." He tried to act more confident about their odds than he felt.

"Why do you need me to go along?" Krix crossed his arms. They covered his soft chest, but seemed to make his gut jut out further.

"Because the more of us around to examine, the better his likelihood of figuring out what's wrong," Virk bluffed.

"Why don't you hunt down Cleave and drag him there. Or roll him," Krix snickered. "I've got plans."

"What could possibly be more important than getting people to stop cramming food down your throat?"

"Snatching the coins from their pockets while they do it," Krix answered. "There's a grand masquerade ball going on tonight, and I've forged myself an invitation. I'm planning on returning with my weight in jewelry."

"Or the city guard will be hauling you off to a cell while you groan and belch your innocence, your belly burst free of your doublet and your pockets full of nothing but crumbs," Virk growled. He jabbed Krix's middle with the tip of his tail. "You'll only grow fatter if you ignore this curse, and the pounds will inevitably do you in!"

Krix rolled his eyes. "Relax, Virk, I've got everything under control, unlike the rest of you. My weight will never stop me from being the best thief in the city." He raised a claw and admired a gaudy, silver and gold ring on his finger, one Virk had never seen before.

Virk grabbed Krix by the wrist. "You're the stupidest thief in the city if you've been wasting your time stealing trash like this rather than finding a cure!" He plucked the ring off Krix's finger.

"Wait, don't touch that!" Krix pleaded as he lost the ring. He shuddered the second it was off.

Krix's belly violently ballooned outward, forcing Virk to stumble back. Virk watched in stunned silence as his companion swelled all over. Billowing pudge tore his shirt and pants to shreds. He swayed his arms before toppling backward onto his thickening rump with a yelp. His orange gut spilled out

over his lap and his tail widened. As swiftly as they'd begun, his gains ceased, though the blubbery kobold continued to jiggle for a while afterward.

Virk could only stare, his mouth ajar. Krix wasn't merely huge, he was immobile. Not to the tremendous degree Buckle had reached, but he clearly couldn't sit up on his own. Had the curse mutated somehow? Would he balloon out of control next?

"What...what happened?" Virk mumbled.

"You removed my damn compression ring, you ass!" Krix snarled. The beached kobold wobbled in fury. "And ruined decent clothes in the process!"

"Compression ring?" Virk looked at the ring still in his claw.

"Yes, my compression ring, the thing that was slimming me down. Give it back!" Krix swayed a doughy arm at Virk, but didn't come close to reaching the ring.

Virk recovered from the shock of seeing Krix blimp up. "First, why don't you tell me more about how this little trinket works." He closed his fist over the ring.

Krix realized the futility of trying to take his ring back by force and gave up. He lay his arms on the enormous curve of his belly and pouted. "I don't know, it's magic." His answer received only silence from Virk. He sighed. "It compresses a person's weight so they look and feel a whole lot thinner than they actually are!"

"Strange that I've never heard about it."

"Yeah, well you've never been fat before, and you don't hang around those who *do* get fat. The nobility love to gorge themselves but hate being too heavy to make appearances at parties, so of course mages found a way to profit off that. I've also heard rumors one or more members of the royal family are actually immobile, and rely on compression magic to maintain a hint of dignity." Talking winded Krix.

"Considering how round some of those royals are, this magic can't be that great. And it left you plump as well," Virk snorted.

"That's because my ring is fairly weak. I couldn't afford anything stronger," Krix admitted, looking away from Virk.

"Fascinating." Virk opened his fist and took a closer look at the ring.

Now that he was focusing on it, he could sense the magic within. It was surprisingly subtle. “So did you decide to follow in Buckle’s blubbery footsteps before or after you got the ring?”

“I didn’t get this fat on purpose,” Krix insisted.

“What did you think would happen if you waddled into every restaurant in town and dared the brainwashed masses to stuff you?” Virk looked upon him with scorn.

“I made a few mistakes, that’s all.” Krix tried to cross his arms again, but his sheer bulk got in the way. “I was ambushed by some...some seafood, so I got the ring. But I overlooked the fact it’d conceal my gut from me when I ate meals as well, so I unintentionally gorged more than I should’ve.”

Virk wished he could’ve seen the look on Krix’s face the first time he took off his ring and witnessed his gut swell right to the floor. “You have only yourself to blame.”

Krix flashed his fangs, not that the ball of dough intimidated Virk. “I’d like to see you avoid getting fat when the whole city’s obsessed with feeding you! I can’t even walk through our own tavern without being given a snack or two by drunks or the servers. And unlike Buckle and Cleave, I found a way to negate the worst effects of the curse!”

“So long as you never lose this ring, which even I had no trouble swiping,” Virk said, dismissively. “And why, may I ask, did you keep this valuable information hidden from the rest of us?”

“It slipped my mind,” Krix replied without hesitation. Smooth, very smooth. If Virk didn’t know Krix better, he may have believed him.

“You overcame immobility. You’d never miss out on a chance to rub that kind of triumph in our faces. Were you embarrassed by how fat you’d gotten? Or were you waiting for the rest of us to become helpless blobs so you could offer knowledge of the compression rings for a hefty price?” Virk watched his face like a hawk, looking for any signs of deceit.

“I didn’t want to deal with you lecturing me over such a silly thing as my weight. Turns out I was *right* to assume that,” Krix scowled. “Besides, you’d throw a fit at the cost. I had to spend all the coin I had saved up, pawn a handful of jewelry, and call in a favor, and I *still* was only able to afford one of the least powerful rings available! It only works for a few hours at a time, which is why my bed hasn’t survived.”

“It’s a miracle you haven’t crashed through the floor.” Virk listened for any ominous creaking, but heard nothing. “This ridiculous expenditure wouldn’t have been necessary if you’d bothered working with me to deal with this curse or enchantment or whatever the hells it is. Which is why you’re going with me to see the hexmage.”

“I told you, I’ve already got plans. You’re free to chase rumors in Eastwall on your own.” Krix’s smug grin pinched his fat cheeks.

“And you’re free to wobble to that party on your own, without your precious ring.” Virk closed his fist and crossed his arms behind his back.

Krix looked aghast. “You can’t hold my ring hostage. I need that to move!” He wiggled and rocked as he tried in vain to retake his ring, but was thoroughly weighed down by his bulk.

“Which is exactly why I can hold it hostage. Agree to come with me to Eastwall, and I’ll give it back. Otherwise, I’ll start sending the servers up here with loaded plates of Buckle’s food. You won’t be slimmer than our chef for long on a diet like that.” Virk imagined Krix swelling to fill the whole room, and smiled. A second later, he returned to his senses. He rather disliked the infrequent urges to feed Krix.

The threat made Krix cower. “Okay, okay! I’ll go on your fool’s errand, just give me back the ring!”

Virk held the ring in the air. “Good. And don’t think about darting off once you’re mobile again. A few well-timed illusions and you’ll be running into walls.”

Krix gave a short snarl. “Fine.”

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Eastwall hadn’t improved since the last time Virk had been there. The buildings were all still topped with flimsy additions that blocked much of the sun. The streets were all still cracked and uneven, the gutters in desperate need of clearing. But most importantly of all, the city guard was still scarce.

Virk only spotted two guards on the journey through Eastwall; a graying border collie plump around the middle, and a blubbery grizzly bear with a gut big enough to crush a barrel. Or a thief, if he somehow caught up with them. The guard didn’t bother sending their finest to Eastwall.

“Guess we’re not the only ones struggling with our weight,” Krix said after they’d passed the waddling bear.

“I doubt he needs a compression ring to walk,” Virk mumbled back.

“Give it time. He looks like the sort who’s easily bribed with food to look the other way, and Eastwall’s got more food to spare than coin. He’ll need to be rolled back to the guard house one day, and then he’ll only be good for blocking gates.” Krix snickered. He acted as if he wasn’t already enduring the same terrible future himself.

“I’d rather he stay fat and barely mobile. If he becomes a blob, the guard will replace him with someone fit and capable of causing us trouble.” And more than capable of catching them, now that half their gang was blobs. “If only we could unleash this spell upon all of them.”

“Or the entire city,” Krix suggested with a grin. “Nobles would swell right out of their jewels and purses would slide free of snapped belts. It’d be a thief’s paradise.”

It’d be a nightmare. The wealthy would waste their fortunes on food rather than jewels. Instead of vaults filled with gold, they’d find pantries filled with pastries. “Are you sure you aren’t caught up in Buckle’s mania?”

“Buckle thinks being fat will make everyone happy. I assure you, I only have the most selfish reasons for wanting to see the city fatten up.” Krix tightened the compression ring around his finger. “So, what can you tell me about this hexmage we’re meeting?”

“His name is Vex.”

There was a moment of silence before Krix spoke up. “And?”

“What more do you need?” Assuming Krix would be too winded to chat had been a mistake.

“Way more than just his name and occupation. What species is he? How skilled is he at breaking hexes? What does he cost?”

They were smart questions, which infuriated Virk. “He’s a snake. I’m not sure about the rest,” he admitted.

“We’re going in blind?” Krix sounded more amused than annoyed. “And here I thought you loathed a lack of preparation.”

“I do, but the circumstances of our ongoing humiliation leave me little choice. Vex is our only lead. If he fails us, we’ll need to search elsewhere.” He didn’t have a clue how he’d go about that, and prayed Krix didn’t ask.

“Nice to see you finally lighten up.” Krix snorted.

Up a hill and down a quiet road, Virk spotted the sign for Vex’s shop. “Curses and Curiosities” was scrawled on the sign in gold. The windows were shuttered and the door closed.

“Looks like he’s not in,” Krix said.

“Or he likes his privacy. Hex magic isn’t the most reputable trade.”

Virk pushed the door, and it opened with an arduous groan. The first thing he noticed was the pungent haze of incense that rushed to escape the shop. He covered a cough with the back of his wrist and went in.

The shop was dreary. Dull glow globes worked no better than candles. Junk filled shelves and cabinets along the wall. Virk felt dirty just being there.

A thin, light gray snake stood behind the counter in the back of the shop. His gaze drilled into the pair of kobolds. He flicked out his tongue and winced. “I hope you both know you’re cursed,” he said gravely.

“He knew right away,” Krix said. “Must be good.”

Good at bluffing, maybe. Virk wanted to slap Krix for confirming what could’ve been a mere guess. He’d have rather led Vex on until the hexmage offered proof of his skills.

“Even a novice would be able to sense the curse oozing from you. It’s like you’ve walked in out of the rain and started dripping water all over the floor.” There was caution and curiosity in Vex’s voice.

“Wait, are we leaking curses?” Krix asked.

“No, not literally,” Vex politely corrected. “Though if I focus on you too much, you light up like glow globes. I can’t remember the last time I felt such an unsubtle curse.”

The hexmage didn’t know the half of it. “We’re looking to get it removed, if you can manage it.”

“I’ll need to know more about it first. How’d you get it, how long have you had it, and what’s it doing to you?” Vex raised a finger with each question.

Virk had had the foresight to come up with a cover story. “My associates and I found an abandoned crate of tomes while doing salvage work. We sold them the following day. That’s when we first noticed the effects of the curse.” He let out a deep breath. Rehearsing the story hadn’t

made it any less embarrassing. “The curse is making us fatter.”

Vex raised a brow. He glanced at their round middles and nodded. “An unusual use of a curse, but one I’ve started seeing more lately. Would you mind going into more detail? About how it’s making you fatter, I mean.”

“The effects are different for all four of us. One has become obsessed with gaining weight and has stuffed himself into an immobile blob. No matter how fat he grows, he continues to insist it’s the best thing that’s ever happened to him.” Buckle was no doubt full of food at that very moment.

“Another appears to have a random portion of food and drink consumed by others nearby teleported to his own stomach. He’s gone into hiding, but he was rounder than me when last I saw him.” Virk wondered if the grouchy kobold was also a blob now.

Krix spoke on his own behalf. “People are compelled to give me free food. Well, strangers are, at the very least. They can get pretty insistent about it, too.”

“Oh.” Vex looked away and scratched his head. “I’ve been wondering if I had anything upstairs for you to eat ever since you walked in. I guess that’s why. Let me just suppress that urge real quick.” The snake traced something on the back of his wrist. There was a brief glow of gold. “There. Now I won’t try to feed you.”

“It’s a shame the rest of the city can’t hold back so easily,” Virk said. Maybe he’d still have some semblance of a gang, then.

“But then I would’ve missed out on all the exquisite food! I’ve taken advantage of the finest restaurants in the city thanks to this curse.” Krix gave his plump middle a satisfied pat as he boasted.

It wasn’t the time nor place to be gloating, so of course Krix did. “And the only thing keeping him mobile is a compression ring. Otherwise, he looks like this.”

With a flick of his wrist, Virk cast an illusion around Krix that mimicked his true size. Krix jumped in surprise, and his illusionary body bounced and jiggled appropriately. Vex kept quiet, but his eyes had widened noticeably upon the revelation.

“The illusion is a lot more unflattering than reality, trust me.” Krix’s smile had lost some of its luster.

“And as for me, everything I touch becomes incredibly fattening.

Pastries, water, bread—*everything*.” He longed for the days when he didn’t have to fear water of all things. “The curse has been a tremendous nuisance and is causing us irreparable harm.” Buckle would only leave the tavern kitchen if he outgrew it, and Virk doubted Krix would lose any meaningful amount of weight as long as he had the compression ring to fall back on. He dispersed the illusion around Krix so he wouldn’t be reminded of his potential fate if uncured.

Vex steepled his fingers and braced his chin on them, thinking. “That’s one of the oddest curses I’ve heard of. Wildly varied effects depending on the victim, but they all create the same result: weight gain. Potent. Able to manipulate the surroundings of the victim. No apparent cut-off point. The closest thing it reminds me of is Karth the Insatiable’s curse.” He spoke with a hint of awe. “Have either of you heard of it?”

The name sounded vaguely familiar to Virk, but he couldn’t quite place it.

“Yes, of course,” Krix replied with a grin. “I saw a lovely new play all about it, hosted by Fletch’s Company. Incredible production values, by the way. Karth cursed a city to forever be fat because they fattened him up and kicked him out.”

“It’s one of the most infamous curses in the world. Certainly one of the strongest, too. You haven’t been to that city by chance, have you?” Vex leaned in over the counter. His long tail whipped about behind him.

“Never,” Virk answered. He didn’t even know its name, let alone where it was.

Disappointment flashed across Vex’s face. “I guess we can cross off that as a cause, then. Let me get a closer look at you two.”

Vex came around the counter. He towered above the plump kobolds, eyes shifting from one to the other, over and over. “Hmm.” He nodded gently. “Yep, it’s a beast of a curse. I’m sorry, but this is well beyond me.”

“What do you mean?!” The blunt rejection shattered Virk’s composure. He’d placed all his hopes in Vex.

“There’s no way I could handle a curse of this magnitude on my own.” Vex kept his cool. “I’d need assistance from other hexmages, and unfortunately I don’t belong to any guild. I prefer to keep my work low-key, anyway. I have a feeling you two can relate to that.”

“You don’t have any connections, none at all?” Virk refused to give up.

“None with the necessary skills to deal with this curse. I’m not exaggerating when I say your curse is strong. I *felt* you two walking up the street, and I wasn’t even trying to sense anything. I was expecting a crowd of cursed folk to burst in, not two kobolds.” Vex shuddered. “And even if I did have a team of expert hexmages I could bring in, I’d have no clue what to bill you.”

Vex threw out a number that wiped the grin off Krix’s face and dropped Virk’s jaw. “That’s ludicrous!”

“That’s per person,” Vex added.

Virk felt like he might faint. “There *has* to be another way. If the pounds keep piling on I’ll become a blob! I’ll be ruined.” He shook in panic. “I can’t end up like that.”

Vex sighed. “There’s a small chance I could tackle the curse alone if I had access to the items that cursed you to begin with. No guarantees, but it would certainly make it easier to analyze the curse and break it with precision rather than brute force. And if I were allowed to keep the cursed items, I’d lower the cost of the ritual considerably.”

Virk nearly smiled, but it didn’t take long for him to dash his hopes on his own. Obtaining the books he’d sold to the scribe would be a challenge, perhaps even impossible. The alternative was watching himself grow plumper and plumper with each passing day, until inevitably he woke up too fat to move. And what would he be then? A ball of blubber running a shoddy tavern from his bed.

“That may be viable.” Virk couldn’t bring himself to fake any certainty in the daunting task. He took a series of deep breaths. “We’ll return once we’ve collected the books in question. Thank you for the appraisal of the curse. It has been...enlightening.” In a terrifying sense.

“Always glad to be of service.” Vex stared at the kobolds again and winced. “Uh, good luck.”

Virk ushered Krix out of the shop. He had to squint when he walked into the sunlight. He’d forgotten how much he missed relatively fresh air.

“Didn’t you sell those tomes?” Krix asked once they were outside. Virk thanked the gods he’d had the common sense to wait until then, and not when they were in front of Vex.

“Yes.”

“Then we’re going to buy them back?”

Of course Krix had gained a fondness for questions at the worst possible time. “No. My contact has to have sold them by now. He had the buyers already lined up before we even stole them, remember?”

“Then how are we going to get them for our cure?” Krix wouldn’t back down.

“By stealing them from the buyers, naturally.” Virk’s tunic had shifted when he lost his cool, and he felt the breeze on his belly. He quickly tugged his tunic down to cover himself up.

“You know who they sold them to?”

“My contact would never reveal such sensitive information to me. Just like he’d never reveal our identities to the buyers.” Having a middleman ensured the anonymity of all involved, while making the scribe a tidy profit in transaction fees. A win for everyone. “But he’s certain to have ledgers detailing the sales. Once we’ve stolen those, we’ll have all the information we need to retrieve the books.”

Krix laughed. “Ah, I see. And who’s going to pull off this string of heists? Cleave’s missing and potentially beached, while Buckle could very well fill a wagon. Are you going to go on a daring burglary spree all by yourself?”

“The two of us should be more than enough. My illusions will get us past security.” They always had before.

“But will it get us through locked doors?” Krix asked. “Or take out guards and any other witnesses we can’t simply sneak around? What about keeping watch to ensure we’re not caught unawares?”

Point after point crumbled the foundations of Virk’s desperate plan. He couldn’t come up with competent counters fast enough. “We’ll...we’ll figure something out, damn it!”

“No, we won’t. I’m not getting dragged into this madness,” Krix said defiantly. “You’re free to get yourself caught. I’m sure the guards will be baffled when you manage to balloon off meager rations of water and bread.”

“You need to break this curse as well, remember!” Virk hissed. “If you don’t, you’ll end up so fat that even your compression ring won’t be able to

keep you mobile. What then?”

“I’ll be cured long before that happens. All I have to do is find a better-connected hexmage and have them work their magic on me.” Krix smiled.

“You heard what Vex said about the price—you’d never be able to afford that on your own!”

“I’m a thief, Virk. With a bit of effort, the wealth of the city’s nobility is at my fingertips. I’ll secure the payment with sleight of hand while you’re busy recklessly throwing yourself at doomed heists.” Krix flipped his claw and revealed a coin purse. He tossed it in the air a few times, jingling the coins within.

Virk watched the purse, then noticed the smaller one still attached to Krix’s belt. A claw darted to his side, confirming the purse Krix was flaunting was his. When had the bastard swiped it? Had he truly let his anger distract him so much? He snarled at Krix.

Krix snickered and tossed the purse to him. “Worry about yourself, Virk, not me.” He turned around and started down the road. “Good luck. Maybe after I’m cured I’ll drop by the Cracked Coin to see how much fatter you’ve grown.”

Virk was too furious to snap back at the other kobold as they strolled off. Krix was a fool. Gloating wouldn’t earn him the money needed to break the curse. At best, he’d pull off a few small successes before he was either caught in the act or became too fat to sneak anywhere. He wished for Krix to fail. He needed to be humbled, to have everything fall apart around him. When he came crawling back to beg for forgiveness, Virk could laugh and rebuff him. After he’d spent a year or two as a helpless blob, then Virk would consider helping him.

The high from his vengeful plotting didn’t last. Virk watched Krix vanish down the street, and his hopes of breaking the curse vanished with him. He was on his own now. A faint rumble of hunger echoed from his stomach.