

## The Kobold Thieves: Chapter 013

By: Indigo Rho

“Another ale!” Cleave bellowed as he slammed down his empty mug. The barkeep scurried over and whisked the mug away. No one was stupid enough to keep Cleave waiting.

He passed the time admiring himself while the barkeep got a refill. His abs were chiseled and his brawny arms looked like they’d been sculpted from stone. Even his long tail was muscular, a deadly weapon in itself. He was perfection in the compact form of a kobold, and everyone knew it.

The tavern door flew open, slamming into the wall with such force a hinge snapped. A jiggling ball of blubber squeezed through the entrance, belonging to a massive orca. Scars crisscrossed the rubbery surface of his middle, which was freely exposed. A red bandana covered his head, and his overhang hid a loose sash around his waist. Stools and tables rattled as he lumbered into the tavern, a crooked grin on his face.

“Looks like we found quite the shithole, lads, but it’ll do,” the orca laughed. Four more pirates spread out behind him. There was a polar bear with a giant gut, whose tight shirt looked ready to burst down the seams. A doughy alligator crushed a stool with a flick of his thick tail, which prompted a snicker from an elephant with an eyepatch. A sea otter so fat he was practically spherical rounded out the horrible crew.

Everyone in the tavern cowered in their seats at the sight of the bulky pirates. Everyone but Cleave. “Where’s my ale?!” he scowled, ignoring the rabble.

The barkeep looked between the pirates and Cleave. He chose wisely, rushing the full mug over to Cleave.

As Cleave reached for his drink, a fat hand snatched it away. He sighed, and looked up at the large orca who’d dared to cross him. “I guess your head’s as thick as your gut,” he growled. “Put the mug down and *maybe* I’ll reconsider tossing your sorry ass out the front door.”

There was a moment of silence before all five pirates burst into laughter. Their bellies bounced around with them. “This little runt’s got a bit of a bark to him, aye?” The orca laughed again. He stood as tall as he could and loomed over Cleave. His grin shifted from one side of his face to the

other. “Whatever you say, shrimp.”

The orca drained the ale in seconds and tossed it onto the counter. “There. I put the—*eeyerrrrrrrrrrrrp*—mug down, just like ya asked.”

Cleave felt his adrenaline pumping. He smiled right back at the orca. “You just made my day, blockhead.”

He grabbed the mug and smashed it into the orca’s skull. The orca was sent stumbling backward, crashing through a table. Gasps rose from the stunned crowd. The orca’s look of shock swiftly transformed into unbridled fury. “Crush him!” he bellowed, and the rest of the pirates lumbered forwards.

Cleave slid from his stool to welcome his foes.

The sea otter came first, throwing a punch that Cleave easily dodged. He swung his tail into the otter’s legs, knocking them off their feet and onto their back. He leaped onto the fallen otter’s gut, who squeaked in dismay. Balancing atop the doughy mass put him on eye-level with the polar bear.

The polar bear’s sluggish swings were laughable. Cleave barely had to put any effort into avoiding them. The polar bear panted and wheezed, blowing through his pitiful reserve of energy. Once Cleave grew bored of them, he lunged, headbutting the polar bear and knocking them out in an instant.

Furious trumpeting alerted Cleave to the charging elephant. He faced the large pirate without fear and stood his ground. A lesser kobold would’ve fled or fainted. Cleave feared no one.

Cleave pulled back his fist and threw it just as the elephant arrived. His fist struck the elephant’s huge middle dead on. Ripples spread out from the unwavering fist as it sunk deep into pudge. The elephant’s jaw dropped open and their eyes bulged. The punch reversed their momentum, launching them straight back. They plowed through table after table, only halted once they struck the stone wall. Cracks snaked out from the point of impact. The elephant groaned, then went limp.

“Pathetic,” Cleave spat. The otter stirred, but a smack to the face took them out of action. “What good is a bunch of pirates if they can’t even entertain me? I’ve seen children put up more of a fight!”

The orca rose on unsteady feet. “You still—ugh—have to go through me.” Speaking pained him. His threat lacked the bite of earlier. He lurched at

Cleave.

Cleave ducked under the first punch and leaped over the second. He struck the orca in the side with his tail, grinning in satisfaction as he heard the breath forced out of them. The orca's next swipe was so slow, Cleave didn't bother dodging. He grabbed the orca by the wrist and heaved. His muscles tensed as he called upon a fraction of his power. He felt the orca's weight as he lifted them off the ground and swung them over his head, his boots sinking deeper into the sea otter's middle. The rest of the customers watched his feat of strength with awe. He maintained perfect form, even once he released the orca.

The orca burst through the bar, leaving splinters and crushed mugs in his wake. He groaned and twitched, but could barely lift a finger, let alone himself. The rowdy pirates had been soundly defeated and Cleave, as usual, stood victorious and untouched.

"One day I'll face a competent foe," Cleave scoffed. He hopped down from atop the sea otter's gut and strolled up to the orca. They were drifting in and out of consciousness, the grin long gone from their face.

Cleave could've left him there to go find a distraction actually worth his while, but he was feeling vindictive. Trouncing the orca wasn't good enough for him. He needed to humiliate them so they'd live the rest of their life suffering from nightmares of the strongest kobold in the world.

The orca had come to rest beside two huge kegs. Cleave crouched down next to the orca's head. "I bet you're thirsty after that beating I gave you. Oh, don't you worry, your good pal Cleave is here to help. Drink all the ale you want, my treat."

He raised the orca's head and forced their mouth around the tap of the closest keg. He undid their bandana and looped it tight around their snout, holding them in place. Then he opened the tap.

A flood of ale poured down the orca's throat. They shuddered and let out a gurgled cry of surprise, but were too weak to pull themselves free of the tap. Their giant belly wobbled, ballooning rounder and rounder as ale swirled and sloshed within.

"Enjoy the drink!" Cleave cackled and smacked the orca's gut hard. "You might be too big for your ship by the time you've guzzled it all down! And while you're stuck ashore like a beached whale, don't forget the reason

your days on the high seas are over.” He slapped the orca’s middle again with his tail as he walked away from the wrecked bar and swelling pirate.

Dominance was magnificent. The customers he’d protected showed nothing short of reverence for his strength, fully aware of what he’d do if they crossed him. Thanks to his perfect form, Cleave could crush whoever opposed him.

He raised his arms and flexed. Something wobbled unexpectedly around his middle. He glanced down and his eyes twitched. Rather than brilliant abs, he sported a ball gut. A doughy, embarrassing ball gut. It didn’t make sense. He could never get fat; only gluttons and slackers got fat, not unstoppable forces of nature like him.

Disagreeing with his gut didn’t make it go away. Instead, it swelled. His pecs softened along with it, and his arms began to lose their definition. He was gaining weight by the second.

“No, I can’t be fat!” Cleave howled. He pushed down on his belly, trying to flatten it. When he let go, it bounced back rounder than before. He sucked in his gut and held his breath, but the pounds kept coming and coming.

His muscles—his pride and joy—were buried under layer upon layer of soft fat. Years of diligently caring for his body vanished before his very eyes. Everyone else in the tavern watched as well. Small smiles replaced looks of confusion. A drunk dared to snicker, and their buddies joined in.

“What are you laughing at?!” Cleave howled and threatened the rabble with a fist, but was undermined by his jiggling middle. If he didn’t immediately assert himself, he’d lose their respect and fear forever, becoming a laughingstock like the pirates. Nothing proved a point like a good old-fashioned punch to the face.

Cleave picked out a scrawny weasel in the crowd. They’d go down quick, and the rest would shut up or join them. He strode forwards with confidence, but his ballooning body refused to cooperate. The enraged kobold gained a dozen pounds with every step, puffing up with pudge like a pastry in the oven.

It wasn’t right! It wasn’t fair! He’d never done anything to deserve such a wicked curse. Cleave had rarely known fear. Fights energized him, win or lose. He cowered before no one. But the growing ball of dough

swaying from his middle sent a chill down his spine. He couldn't intimidate the gains, and they appeared hell-bent on taking everything from him. His pride, his reputation, his muscles—even his ability to walk. All crushed beneath a mound of blubber.

As if sensing his terror, the gains increased dramatically. Cleave staggered about as more inches were added to his waistline by the second. His muscles were long gone, replaced by pillowy rolls that jiggled when he moved. He began to resemble Buckle, and then swiftly surpassed them.

Snickers turned to laughter. Cleave's battle prowess was forgotten. All they saw was a kobold fatter than an elephant waddling around like a jester.

"Shut up!" Cleave snarled. "Shut up, shut up, shut up! I can still fight! I'll crush all of you, you'll see! No one crosses me!"

The shouting left Cleave short of breath. He tried to regain it, but found he couldn't stop panting. Everything weighed him down and exhausted his strength. His huge gut was a ball of fat that reached nearly to his knees and felt big enough to crush a boulder. His wide rump was too big for any seat. His tail was reduced to a useless mass of blubber. Even his face now had cheeks that pinched his snout and wobbled when he growled.

"Make it stop," Cleave begged. He looked around the room for help, but only found laughter. The pirates giggled in their sleep, no longer the fattest ones there. He took a clumsy step back and fell right onto his ass.

The swelling increased again. Cleave's belly spread over his lap and across the floor like a tidal wave of pudge. The unstoppable mass of kobold crushed chairs and flipped over tables. Onlookers backed away, filing out of the increasingly cramped tavern. They kept up their laughing and sneering till the very end. Cleave could still hear it echoing around the room even after they'd gone.

Cleave tried in vain to rock himself upright, but moving his immense body was beyond impossible. He could barely flail his thick arms. He'd never walk again. Never lift a mug of ale. Never fight. He'd never feel the satisfaction of his fist connecting with an idiot's face, or his elbow digging into someone's stomach.

The gains refused to cease. Fear of immobility was replaced by the fear he'd never stop growing. His ass and tail flattened the bar before cracking the kegs. He wondered how long it'd be before his sides pushed

against the walls and toppled them. He wasn't a kobold anymore, just an endlessly growing ball of blubber.

He felt his doughy cheeks beginning to envelop his snout. "This isn't... possible," Cleave whined. His gut doused the hearth. "I don't...want to be...a blob. Help...someone...help."

The walls groaned and the roof trembled. Cleave heard the timbers give way as the tavern collapsed on him.

\* \* \*

Cleave thrashed about in his hammock. His round belly wobbled as he swayed. "N-No, I can't be fat. I can't be fat!" he whimpered in his sleep. The flailing finally spilled him out of the hammock. He landed gut-first on the stone floor, ripples spreading across his heft. The impact shocked him awake.

"No!" he shouted, dragging himself along his belly. Slowly, his senses came back to him. He wasn't a blob swelling out of a tavern. He was just a dough ball hiding in a warehouse. Fury drowned out the fear.

He slammed a fat fist against the floor. "Plagued by nightmares like a damn child." They'd become a nightly occurrence. Somehow, someway, he'd fatten out of control. He didn't always end up as a blob, but he rarely maintained any reasonable degree of mobility. Once Buckle had force-fed him animated pastries until he filled the kitchen. The bear guard had caught up to him and shoved a funnel in his mouth, encouraging people to dump food into it. A massive, nearly spherical dragon had had him stuffed by a hoard of hefty kobolds, cackling all the while about vengeance.

They were terrible, humiliating nightmares, and he couldn't make them go away. Hiding in an unused warehouse like a petty crook didn't help.

The warehouse was as far away from other dwellings and taverns as Cleave could get without leaving Vastport. It was the only place he didn't have to fear being stuffed. But that was the only positive thing about it. The warehouse was stuffy by day and chilly by night. Bad smells assaulted his nose no matter where he wandered. The hammock didn't come close to offering the same comfort as his bed back at the Cracked Coin, and was prone to coming loose.

He'd grown accustomed to the pleasures of success. To lose them over such a preposterous curse infuriated him. He spent much of his free time raging.

Cleave pulled himself to his feet, ignoring the wobble of his gut. He was unrecognizable to himself, all belly and no fight. At first, he'd attempted to keep up with his training. He'd punched sacks and jogged around the small space. Simple exercises that'd always been effortless. Until his thighs smacked together when he ran and the bouncing of his belly threw off his balance. Until throwing even a few punches left him winded. Until he'd been fattened up like damned cattle.

His plan to find a cure had fallen apart immediately. No one could see how fat he'd gotten. Losing the weight wouldn't be enough to salvage his reputation if that happened. So he hid, sleeping while the city bustled with life and only daring to venture out between meal hours. It'd prevented him from getting beached in any more alleyways, at the expense of his dignity.

Sulking all day in a warehouse was degrading, but he couldn't go out without returning with a swollen belly. Not that he had any leads on how to rid himself of the spell. Asking Virk was out of the question. That'd be accepting defeat and submitting once again to the unbearable prick. Virk would take full advantage of that, and never let him forget it.

"I never should've agreed to that stupid fucking heist!" Cleave swung his fat tail at an empty barrel and smashed it to bits. The effort left him breathing heavily. He couldn't even enjoy the display of power. What use was a fighter who became winded after every strike?

As Cleave huffed and puffed, he felt the cord of his necklace digging faintly into his thick neck. He clutched the fang and stroked its smooth surface with his fingers. It was the only good thing to come from the heist. It didn't make up for the life-ruining weight gain, but it was a personal victory he could savor. The money earned from stealing the books could've come from anywhere. He could've robbed someone or sold his services as a bodyguard and obtained the exact same reward in due time. But the necklace was one of a kind. A treasure snatched from right under the noses of the Academy and Virk. Pissing off Virk made it worthwhile.

He released the fang and tugged gently at its cord. It'd been loose before he gained weight. He might have to replace it soon, before it became

uncomfortable. Outgrowing a damned necklace. As if his situation weren't humiliating enough.

"I'll figure something out," Cleave grumbled.

He weaved his way through abandoned stacks of junk, his heavy tail dragging behind him. There was a spot high on one of the walls, where something had broken a hole in a wooden board. Through it, he heard the distant noises of the city's nightlife winding down. The markets were empty. Most restaurants were already shuttered. Taverns and inns would be growing quiet as the last holdouts stumbled off to bed. Vastport would soon cease gorging, and Cleave would be free to wander the streets.

The kobold scowled. He was all but a prisoner to the appetites of the city. He wouldn't remain one forever. And once he was truly free, he'd get revenge. On who, he didn't quite know. Anyone who pissed him off, he guessed. And at that moment, pretty much everyone fit the bill.