

## Fattening Hex (Popping)

By: Indi

Though night had fallen, a park in the city of Rainwood was bustling as if it were still day. Magical floating lanterns lit up the crowds of masked revelers and shone off the armor of guards. Servants kept glasses filled and bellies full. The vast majority there belonged to the upper class, a mix of nobles, wealthy merchants, and prominent guild members.

And then there was Vex.

The silver lion wandered between the edges of larger groups, never actually mingling but fitting right in. He was a hexmage and modest merchant who was far better at collecting than selling—in part because he tended to acquire new goods through less-than-legal means. Which was exactly why he was at the masquerade auction. And why his invitation had claimed he was a nobleman who dabbled in selling scrolls named Chaz.

Through various contacts Vex had discovered one of the items up for auction was layered with rather potent hexes. The sellers were completely unaware of its true nature, and it was listed as a mere magic-touched curiosity that wasn't expected to start any bid wars. Aside from his own interest in hexed items, Vex wasn't eager to see it potentially fall into the wrong hands. Buying it was out of the question—he'd have no chance of matching the deep coffers of nobles—so instead he'd opted to snatch it.

The items up for auction were all displayed out in the open, so Vex didn't have to worry about breaking in to any vaults. They were still well-guarded, though, and even Vex wasn't dexterous enough to steal something out from under their watchful eyes. Once the lion had cased the party and learned the location of both his target and the guards, he was ready to cause a distraction.

Vex conveniently knew the perfect, innocent hex to use. He looked around, trying to decide who would make a proper target. There was a blue jay, an alchemist if the potions on his belt were any indicator. He might be flashy enough for what Vex had in mind, but there was also a chance potions could get dropped and cause unwanted havoc.

A hefty orange-striped zebra by the kegs chatting up the servants more than the nobles. Not oblivious enough, he'd nodded at Vex more than once. An incredibly fat lion with a pink mane, dressed too plainly to be a merchant or noble, so likely a guard of some sort. Vex's hex wouldn't last long enough on someone of his girth, so no. Another lion, far leaner than the first with white fur and mane, wearing shined armor that'd never seen battle. Clearly a paladin but also a noble. More esteemed guest than guard. Perfect.

Vex carefully meandered towards the paladin, making sure his path wasn't obvious. As he passed he purposely stumbled into him. Neither lion fell, but Vex was given enough of an excuse to brace himself on his target and stealthily apply a hex.

"Oh my apologies sir, I'm so sorry! It's all my fault, really, I can't believe I was that clumsy! Nothing was damaged I hope?" Vex was rambling, overwhelming the paladin with apologies to throw him off-guard.

There was a flash of annoyance in the paladin's face, but he was quick to hide it. "Everything's alright, no harm no foul." Rico sighed as the stranger left, the apologies fading with him. He'd never seen them before—likely just some merchant who'd come into a lot of money recently. The kind who'd lose it all within a year at most. He returned his attention to the *real* guests of worth around him—who were all rightfully paying attention to him as well. "Now where was I. Ah, yes, so it was just me up against three of the fattest horses I'd ever seen. So massive they must've spent all their ill-gotten gold on food. For someone as lithe and nimble as me, they were a piece of cake."

As Rico was gloating, a drastic change was happening to his body. The lion was gaining weight. It was hard to notice at first, pounds being added evenly all across his lean form. Covered abs vanished

as a soft, small belly formed. Chin grew slightly rounder, rump fuller. In the modest light of the lamps Rico's gains weren't easy to spot. At first.

But with all eyes on Rico, the fattening of the paladin couldn't go unnoticed forever. One-by-one the other nobles realized something was happening. They looked on with a mix of confusion and amusement, unsure if Rico was suffering a strange affliction or simply putting on a show. He *was* spending quite a lot of time describing how fat his foes were.

It wasn't until Rico was starting to get chubby that he realized something was wrong. The paladin stopped mid-sentence to adjust his belt, which was oddly tight. When his paws caused his breastplate to brush up against his soft middle he yelped in surprise. Suddenly Rico was aware of just how tight his clothing and armor felt, straps digging in where they never had before. He felt up his face and neck, gasping as he found hints of pudge.

He'd gained weight, how had he gained weight? No, he was *still* gaining weight! The uncomfortable tightness was worsening. Was it a spell? Something in his drink? A curse? There were so many potential causes—too many.

The other nobles couldn't resist chuckling at Rico's expense, his gains having become an unexpected but welcome bit of entertainment. He blushed and tried to come up with an excuse or joke, but nothing sensible came out of his mouth.

In desperate need of salvation, Rico looked around for a familiar face. The only one nearby belonged to a hefty, scowling lion. Raf. He was impossible to miss with his pink mane and immense belly. Rico hurried over to him, wincing, his movement stilted from too-tight clothes. Raf was a cleric, someone who might actually be able to stop his gains before they grew worse. And he was big enough to make Rico feel thin in comparison.

"Raf, Raf! I've been attacked, you need to help me!"

The other lion grumbled as he turned to face him. He snorted upon seeing Rico. "Yeah, sure." He grabbed the chained silver globe hanging from his belt and shook it in Rico's direction. A light mist struck Rico's chest, and the tightness instantly subsided.

Rico breathed a sigh of relief, then realized he hadn't lost any weight. His clothing and armor had merely been made stretchy enough to fit him. "That's not what I meant! Help me lose weight so I don't end up as blubbery as you!" The paladin cared about his physique nearly as much as his standing in society.

"Fat chance." For a split second Raf almost smiled, before frowning harder as he pondered his own heft a little too much.

"You're a cleric—you're obligated!"

Though perpetually grumpy, Raf was also notoriously easy to pester into doing things, and he relented to Rico's demands. He mumbled a spell and shook his focus again with a bit more force, dispersing a stronger healing mist on Rico. A chill surged through Rico's body, but before he could preemptively celebrate he felt his belly jiggle. The weight-gain—once slow and steady—had abruptly sped up.

Now the lion could *see* himself getting fatter, *feel* the weight building up. His armor disguised some of his curves, but wasn't nearly enough to hide the fact Rico was getting increasingly portly, with a pot belly and round cheeks. For once he fit in with the city's often wide nobility. It wasn't an accomplishment he took pride in.

Rico's face contorted between fury and embarrassment, the paladin acutely aware of how much attention he was getting. Word of his expansion was spreading fast, and an audience was forming. "Raf, what did you do to me! This better not be some kind of petty prank!"

"Like I'd ever willingly get near that kind of magic," Raf growled back

"Then why did it speed up!" Rico grunted, forced to adjust his stance as his middle grew doughy and round. He'd already doubled in weight, blimping past three hundred pounds and barely recognizable even to those who'd witnessed him gain the weight. Thanks to his fancy uniform and

flowing mane Rico still maintained a regal appearance, though he would've vehemently denied such a thing was possible. After all, if that were true then he wouldn't need to resist overindulging at meals or skipping training sessions.

"I don't know, maybe that's just what happens when the wrong healing spell is used on it! If I don't know exactly why you're getting fatter then I can't heal you!" Raf had been teased by Rico about his weight enough to not have too much sympathy for the paladin's predicament. Yet he couldn't help but worry about getting hit by such an affliction himself. At a little over five hundred pounds, the grumpy lion wasn't eager to get any heavier--at least not so swiftly.

Rico couldn't deny Raf's logic. He considered trying his own healing abilities on himself, but feared it'd have the same result as Raf's magic. Healing had never been his specialty, anyway.

By then the lion had grown to the size of Raf. His middle was slightly tauter, moobs more prominent. His fat seemed *too* evenly spread out, odd in a way most noticed but couldn't quite explain. Rico himself felt like a balloon that'd been inflated with blubber.

The crowd was getting denser, gawkers standing on the tips of their toes to get a better look at the massive paladin. A few offered questionable or mocking advice. One asked for the name of his armorsmith, and by the size of their gut it was a genuine inquiry. Surrounded, Rico looked for an opening to sneak away so he could fatten in peace, but none existed. It felt as if the entire party had converged on him.

Despite how large Rico had gotten, the weight gain hadn't ceased or even slowed. He swelled in every direction, becoming thicker and rounder by the second. His arms and legs were comically doughy, and Rico struggled to use them. Any time he moved his whole body jiggled. Not that he could move much. Taking a single step was an ordeal. He really *was* starting to resemble a balloon, at least at a glance.

Rico's clothes and armor finally showed signs of strain, the spell Raf had cast not meant for someone as preposterously huge as him. Straps and seams creaked faintly, and white, furry pudge peeked out from newly-formed gaps.

Bystanders poked and prodded Rico, as if to confirm his odd weight-gain was real and not some kind of illusion. The teasing left the lion permanently blushy. Snapping at them didn't work, Rico far too silly-looking to be seen as intimidating.

For once in his life, Raf wasn't the fattest. Rico actually looked to be twice as heavy as him, somehow. It brought the grump a hint of joy.

Fatter and fatter the flustered paladin grew. His neck vanished, his head with its round cheeks sunken slightly into his blubbery body. His chunky paws wiggled at the ends of the doughy masses his arms and legs had become, movement now impossible aside from a weak wobble. Rico was very nearly spherical, enough so that he could likely be rolled around.

When the growth finally came to an end, Rico wasn't in the mood to feel relief. He was immense, a ball of feline blubber decked in armor. He looked like a cannonball, something an army would use in a siege. Not a valiant, respected paladin. He wanted nothing more than to be invisible—and of course he was instead impossible to miss.

Vex had watched the show unfold from a comfortable distance. His fattening hex was a tad bit extreme, but it was also just the right thing to distract a crowd without causing panic. At last the guards around the auction items decided to check out the action. Without delay Vex swooped in.

Ignoring all the jewelry and statuettes and enchanted ceremonial weapons, Vex instead grabbed a rather plain wooden flute in a modest case. It was old and well-crafted, just nice enough to end up as an expensive gift for a child or neglected decor for a sitting room. But to the trained eye it was so much more.

The flute was covered in so many layers of hexes it practically glowed to Vex. Playing the instrument—even poorly—would cause everyone who heard to gain weight just as rapidly as the lion paladin had. Relatively innocent as far as cursed items went, but in the wrong hands it could still be

used for menace. And personally Vex was fond of collecting such things.

With the flute safely tucked away, Vex headed out. The crowd around Rico was slowly starting to spread out, the onlookers nervously backing away. At first Vex was confused—until he saw Rico rising up over their heads. The paladin was still expanding.

The hex Vex had placed was meant to blimp Rico up into a ball of blubber, but his growth should've stopped there. Instead he was getting even bigger and rounder, his gaining out of control. Armor was falling off his massive body as the straps snapped, the clothes beneath ripping to shreds. His head and paws had sunken in further. Even at a distance Vex could see the look of panic in his eyes, though.

“Oops,” Vex said quietly, with a guilty chuckle. “Might’ve outdone myself on that one.”

Rico, meanwhile, was busy wobbling in terror. He was fat—far too fat—and only getting fatter. His hide was creaking, his body struggling to hold in the absurd amount of blubber he’d packed on. Below, the ones who’d been so eager to tease him were now showing signs of worry, realizing they might be at the epicenter of something bad. His cheeks were so round they pressed into his muzzle and prevented him from begging for help. All he could do was whimper.

The blubber blimp of a lion swelled more and more, his body quaking ominously. The crowd abruptly dispersed, trying to put as much distance between themselves and the volatile portly paladin.

A fearsome pressure was building up inside Rico, causing him to squirm. The weight he felt was tremendous. He could barely move at all, simply too fat. He felt like he was about to crush the stone below his mass and sink straight through the ground. Yet what concerned him most was how he could ever possibly lose such an incredible amount of weight.

His worries didn’t last long.

The hex finally became too much for Rico. A particularly loud creak echoed out, and suddenly the lion exploded. There were frightened shouts as everyone ducked, a hex-tinged blast of air rustling robes and fur. Scraps of brilliant white fur were thrown across the park, drifting down amongst the guests. Where Rico had been there was now only a small crater.

Vex winced and looked away. He felt bad about accidentally fattening the paladin until he literally exploded, but now it would take even longer for the guards to realize the flute was missing. His escape was all but guaranteed. The hexmage thief reminded himself that Rico likely wouldn’t be gone for good. Paladin orders could typically afford to have a resurrection ritual cast on their members, and Rico was wealthy enough to front the costs as well. He’d be back to his thin self in no time, albeit incredibly embarrassed.

Still, better one blubber bomb than dozens, which is what would’ve happened if the flute were used improperly by a careless noble. And *they* probably wouldn’t have bothered bringing back any unlucky servants caught in such a blast. Vex brushed a tuft of white fur that’d fallen onto his shoulder and continued on his way, putting the eventful—but successful—night behind him.