

The Kobold Thieves: Chapter 06

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The gang sat at the same table they had the day before, all at least a little softer around the middle. Krix and Cleave had poured themselves ale. Virk stuck with water and bread he'd nabbed from the pantry downstairs, cautious of what he consumed.

He'd taken a moment to examine their food stores, to make sure Buckle hadn't demolished them during his feeding frenzy. Thankfully, the ravenous chef had stuck to glutting himself on magical creations, so they'd still be able to offer food once the tavern reopened. Crisis or no, it couldn't remain closed for long without drawing suspicion and losing customers. He'd also hoped to uncover some obvious trinket or magic sigil to blame for their woes. All he'd found was a leaky keg in need of mending.

A loaded platter of bread, cheese, pastries, and stew sat before Buckle, along with two mugs of cider. He'd called it a snack while offering the others similarly excessive meals. They'd turned him down.

Virk pulled his eyes away from the glutting Buckle and calmed himself. Deep breaths in and out weren't as effective as before, since they emphasized the tightness of his shirt, but he made do. "Last night, all four of us were fattened in various ways, much to our surprise and dismay." He ignored the glances toward Buckle. "People feel compelled to stuff Krix, even at their own expense. The rest of us seem to be immune to such compulsion, fortunately."

"Sure you don't want a bite?" Buckle asked Krix. "There's plenty to go around. And you're carrying the new weight well."

Krix grinned, unable to turn down a compliment. "The trick to countering curves is confidence. If you act like a few extra pounds is normal, no one will notice."

"Please just eat so I don't have to hear you talk," Cleave groaned.

Krix tactfully pretended not to hear Cleave. "I think I *will* have something to eat. Thank you for asking, Buckle." Krix plucked a pastry off Buckle's platter and scarfed it down.

"Alright, so maybe the rest of us aren't *completely* immune." Virk caught himself thinking about offering Krix some of his bread, and frowned.

“Perhaps the effects are stronger with strangers. That doesn’t mean you should be accepting fattening food from Buckle, though.”

“It’s *one* pastry, Virk,” Krix said, eyeing Buckle’s platter. “I’m not going to balloon up from eating it.”

“We can’t be certain of that, yet. Whatever curse or enchantment has been cast on us is designed to make us fat. Look at how it’s made Buckle obsessed with gaining weight.”

“I’m not obsessed,” Buckle insisted between bites. “I’ve embraced a side of myself I needlessly suppressed.”

“Stop pigging out!” Cleave slammed a fist on the table, rattling the mugs and platter. “Half of whatever you shove into your greedy maw ends up in my stomach, and I refuse to become a ball of useless blubber!”

“And yet you were just encouraging me to stuff my face,” Krix smirked. “Who knew you’d have a preferred feeder?”

Cleave clenched his teeth and growled. He looked about to throw a punch when a belch interrupted him and drew his fickle fury.

Deep breaths, in and out. The strained fabric of Virk’s pants creaked faintly. “A random portion of all food and drink consumed in Cleave’s vicinity ends up in his stomach. Line of sight apparently doesn’t matter, and we don’t know the range of the effect, either. I’m simply growing fatter, with no obvious cause.”

“You got chubby, what a damn tragedy,” Cleave growled. “Meanwhile, I’m having all my hard work stolen from me because some idiots don’t know restraint!” He shoved away from the table and slid out of his chair with a *thud* and a jiggle. He grabbed Buckle by the shoulder and pulled them back. Their chair scraped along the floor but didn’t move far. “I said, stop eating!”

Buckle didn’t cower like most did when faced with the brutish kobold’s wrath. Instead, he smiled. “It’s not polite to interrupt someone’s meal.” He flicked a ball of dough at Cleave as they prepared to belt out a few curses. The dough stuck to their bare chest and then burst into a slew of tendrils that wrapped around them.

Cleave stumbled backward, his arms pinned to his sides. He tensed his muscles and pulled at the bindings. They stretched but didn’t snap. In a bout of rage, he fell over.

“Let me go, damn it, or else I throw you into your own—*mmph!!*” A

tendrils of dough coiled around Cleave's snout, muffling his threats.

Satisfied that Cleave was secured, Buckle returned to eating. Krix covered his snout with a claw, hiding a snicker.

Virk couldn't remember a more chaotic meeting. The conflict made them look like amateurs, and didn't bode well for solving the problem plaguing them. "Back to the matter at hand," he started talking again as if the whole meeting hadn't become a mess. "Since we were all afflicted at around the same time, it's safe to assume a single source is to blame. As the tavern's been closed the last few days, the only thing we've done as a group lately has been the heist at the Academy. Clearly, that's when we were targeted. There might have been a security measure we weren't aware of. An enchantment on one of the tomes or even something disturbed in the storeroom." He shot a glare at Buckle and Krix to see if they'd admit to a misdeed that'd explain everything. Neither expressed any hint of guilt. "It's a strange method of protection, though."

"No stranger than us plumping up potential witnesses," Krix said. He snatched another pastry from Buckle, who was all too willing to share.

"We don't wait a day to plump them up, and we don't use a hodgepodge of methods, either," Virk countered. He struggled to make sense of it. "Regardless, we need to undo this magic immediately, before our gains get out of control."

"I still think you're making a huge deal about nothing," Buckle said. He'd cleared off most of his platter, along with a handful of animated creations. His gut had swollen during the course of their brief meeting, and he showed no signs of being full. On the floor below, Cleave's belly bulged between the doughy tendrils holding him at bay. "If anything, I'd love to thank whoever did this to us. Learning to accept my heft has been a blessing."

"You're not accepting anything, you're being brainwashed," Virk objected.

"I think I'd know if I was being brainwashed."

"No, you wouldn't. That's the whole point."

"Oh, whatever. It's not worth making a fuss over, so you can count me out." Buckle covered up a belch. "I'm going to continue to enjoy all the wonderful food I've denied myself lately as I figure out my ideal size. I

suspect we'll be needing to widen a doorway or two soon." He grinned and gobbled up the last of his snack.

Cleave's gut snapped his bindings, releasing him. He had to rock back and forth to stand back up. He was enraged, humiliated, and somewhat stuffed. Virk feared violence, but Cleave simply bristled. "I'm done wasting my time with stupid meetings and plans and all that other bullshit!"

"Get ahold of yourself, Cleave. We're trying to figure this out," Virk hissed.

"We're not *doing* anything!" Cleave smacked his thick tail hard on the floor. "You're just saying what we already know and acting like it's some revelation only you could come up with. If we do things your way and you keep rambling on about motives and why shit doesn't make perfect sense, then I'll end up a blob!" He snarled at Buckle, but made no attempt to confront him. He didn't care to embarrass himself again so soon. "I'm gonna get rid of this curse *my* way. I'll worry about pummeling whoever did it later." He stomped away from the table, smacking over any chair he passed with his tail.

"You can't do this alone!" Virk insisted.

"I can, and I will!" Cleave shouted. He shoved open the tavern doors and left without another word.

"That idiot's going to end up filling another alley." Virk clenched and unclenched his fists, failing to hide his fury. He turned to Krix. "Alright, it's up to us then."

Krix looked away and scratched the back of his head. "Honestly, I don't see a reason to bother."

Virk's jaw dropped open in disbelief. "What? You can't possibly want to get fat like Buckle, can you?"

"Oh, goodness no," Krix laughed. "You said we probably fell victim to a security spell of some sort, and I agree. Based on how powerful the effects have been, it's bound to burn out and fade away on its own. We just have to wait it out."

"And if you're wrong, and the effects endure, then we'll all become too fat to leave the tavern, let alone pull off any more heists." Virk resisted the urge to call Krix stupid. "Look at how much Buckle is stuffing himself." He pointed to the chef, who had leaned back in their chair and started

rubbing their bloated belly with an almost euphoric passion.

“As ridiculous as Buckle’s acting, I’m sure the decision to grow fat is as much his as it is the spell’s. I mean, he’s not trying to make any of us fat,” Krix said.

“I really think you all should embrace the heft. Being fat is fun,” Buckle insisted. He squeezed his gut and gave it a gentle wobble, giggling at the ripples that ensued.

“I’d like to point out that that’s merely a *suggestion*, not an attempt to force-feed us,” Krix added. “And we both know he’d be more than capable of stuffing us silly if he wanted to.”

Virk winced. He’d been thinking the same thing, but hadn’t wanted to mention it out loud lest he give Buckle any ideas.

“But force-feeding you guys wouldn’t be any fun,” Buckle said. “Well, it would be, but more for me than you. You’d pass out too quickly and wouldn’t get to experience the joy of a steady stuffing. It’s not just about eating a lot. There’s the sensation of being weighed down by your own belly and trying to see how many more plates you can pack away before you’re grounded. And knowing all that food you gorged on will eventually become pure fat.” He shuddered. “Words don’t do it justice, you *have* to experience it yourself.”

“You can’t tell me that’s the reaction of someone who retains free will,” Virk said, pointing a finger at Buckle.

“He’ll get over it in a few days.”

“Or he’ll remain under the spell’s sway and end up wider than he is tall!” All the menace Virk put into his voice did nothing to stop Buckle from blushing at the prospect.

“So what, he’s a mage. They don’t need to be thin to do their job,” Krix said with a shrug. “Your illusions can conceal him.”

The thought of wasting his precious mana to hide the blubbery chef appalled Virk. But if the worst came to pass, it could be done. He refused to humor Krix by agreeing.

Buckle drained the last of his cider and set his mug on the table. “I should really get back to preparing the day’s food. Adjusting to all this wonderful new weight will take time, so I can’t slack off.” He sluggishly scooted his chair back and slid down with care. His large middle swayed like

a doughy wave as he landed, but his fat tail kept him balanced. He waddled over to the basement stairs at a relaxed pace, the curve of his gut barely visible from behind.

Virk shook his head in frustration and turned to Krix. "Please, Krix, we need to work together on this. Hoping the spell will go away is too risky."

Krix stood up and stretched. "It's no riskier than wasting time and effort trying to undo the spell. For all we know, messing with it will cause us to blimp up immediately. What would you tell the city guard if four kobold blobs crushed a tavern and every building around it?"

Virk imagined he wouldn't be able to say much with massive cheeks pressing his snout shut. "If we approach this in a sensible manner, that won't be a problem."

"And I am. By not bothering. You're free to panic over a few extra pounds. I'll be thinking of the perfect way to twist it into a conversation starter at the next party I sneak into. Laughter always loosens purse strings." Krix winked at Virk and walked back upstairs to his room.

A thousand curses coursed through Virk's head, and it took every ounce of will in the kobold to hold them back. He'd always questioned the intelligence of his gang, but their approach to the potential disaster of their steadily widening waistlines left him dumbfounded. If nothing were done, he'd be left with a gang of useless gluttons.

At least he retained some semblance of common sense. He had plenty of contacts throughout the city. No doubt one would be able to direct him to a mage capable of identifying and removing the magic afflicting him. And once he no longer had to worry about gaining weight, he'd dangle the cure before the others to get them back into line. Hopefully they'd all still be mobile by then.