

The Kobold Thieves: Chapter 015

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Walking away from the furious Virk brought Krix more joy than he'd expected. Virk always had to be the smartest person in the room, always needed others running around at his beck and call. Krix had been fine with that while they were still pulling off profitable heists. As complicated and boring as they were, they gave him the chance to hone his craft in other areas at his leisure. He finally accepted he'd grown beyond them.

More intimate ploys would serve him better.

He heard no shouts from Virk nor frantic footsteps. His former boss was too shocked to chase after him. Krix figured out a route home void of food stalls and picked up his pace.

His excess weight was a problem that now had a solution. As with most things in life, money was the answer. An obscene amount, true, but not an impossible amount. At least not for a thief with his guile and ambition.

Yet again, Krix would twist his curse to his advantage. It could work as a powerful distraction in the right circumstances. Anyone obsessed with feeding him wouldn't be watching their valuables. He'd seen cooks plow right into each other trying to reach him, and afterward appeared more bewildered than angry. With their attention on him, they lost sight of all else. He wouldn't have to be subtle when plucking a noble's purse if they were busy forcing a pastry down his throat.

So what if he gained more weight while robbing the elite of their riches? The compression ring kept the bulk of his bulk at bay and ensured a bulging gut would never slow him. He'd steal until he had enough to break the curse and afford a weight loss spell. Or a better compression ring. No belly was too big for money to deal with.

He'd keep some of the heft. Not because he cared for it, like Buckle, but because it gave strength to his lies about being a merchant. If he wanted to strut around with a flat middle, he could always wear the compression ring.

Krix no longer cared if the others were cured. Watching Cleave's growing gut blow up his ego was amusing and Virk was too conceited for

him to emphasize with. Buckle saw the gains as a blessing, and he saw no need to take that joy away from the chef. He also wanted to see if he'd outgrow the whole tavern eventually.

Besides, in times of dire straights, it was every thief for themselves.

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Krix flashed a smile as he pulled his forged invitation out of his pocket and waved it at the doorman. The doorman—a stout hyena in a breastplate that managed to contain his wide frame—showed only the faintest hint of a smile as he took the invitation and looked it over. His eyes darted over it too fast to actually be reading its contents. He likely focused on the attached seal alone, as that's what he'd recognize.

A quick nod confirmed Krix's deception had worked. He strolled into the mansion. Gaining the acceptance of the doorman was a simple matter. It was the guests he'd need to worry about.

His clothing was adequate, but respectable. Krix hadn't had the time to replace the expansive wardrobe he'd rapidly outgrown. The one ensemble that fit comfortably at least matched. It was only one color—a pleasing shade of light blue—and lacked the decorative silver lining he favored. He'd eschewed the half-cape because it'd looked silly barely wrapping around his soft chest. His belt was too short to be fastened, but the overhang of his belly conveniently hid the fact. Last-minute stitchwork had discreetly widened his boots.

The few pieces of jewelry he had left were polished and on full display. The compression ring was among them. His mask fit snug on his doughy snout and highlighted his round cheeks more than he'd have liked, but obtaining a brand new one would've taken time.

Krix would rely on his brilliant beret and his charms to pull attention away from the rest of his unimpressive attire. The considerable curvature of his gut would help as well.

He'd never attended any party at that particular mansion before. They all varied so greatly, reflecting evolving trends in style and endless attempts at one-upmanship. The decor was subdued. There weren't portraits or busts of family members. No scenes depicting historical events. No obvious works

by popular artists. Plenty of wealth was on display in the form of elegant furniture and elaborate frames, but it was lacking in the personalized excess Krix had grown accustomed to seeing at such events.

It was strange, but he'd learned to expect surprises when mingling with nobility. They were fickle when it came to trends. If a sparse home got enough people talking, it'd suddenly become fashionable.

He followed the sound of music and the scurrying of servants. They led him to a spacious and lively ballroom. He preferred to arrive a little late so that he could quietly add himself to the festivities without getting bogged down as the only source of entertainment for some bored noble. Gliding between groups prevented him from being singled out as an intruder and allowed him to scope out ideal marks.

Flowing robes and gilded masks provided only the illusion of anonymity amongst the guests. At a glance, one could still recognize a wolf or a giraffe or a bison. From there, they could deduce the noble's identity by their laugh, their stature, or the gaudy accessories they could never do without. That didn't stop everyone from pretending to act surprised when they first conversed with one another.

Krix began by circling the ballroom. He drifted around the outskirts of small gatherings as if he were part of them, all the while taking in his surroundings. He noted the number of guards. The bare minimum, in poofy ceremonial garb that'd slow them down if they had to pursue a thief. Like the doorman, they tended to be broad, with round middles and thick limbs. Clearly, their employer didn't fear intrusion. A moderate threat at most.

No tables had been set out with food. Instead, servants patrolled the ballroom with platters of snacks and drinks. They would be harder for Krix to avoid, but he wouldn't have to worry about everyone clamoring to feed him an entire feast. So long as he kept moving, he'd avoid anything worse than a plate or two of finger foods and a few glasses of wine. Manageable gains, all things considered.

Confidence returned to the thief. His debacle in the harbor had left him questioning if he could truly handle his curse. Numerous close calls had plumped him up, while gorging on the bounty of the sea had ballooned him to the edge of mobility. Further accidents had taken even that from him.

But throughout the gains and troubles, he'd endured. Now he would

prosper.

He had a feel for the guards, the exits, the targets, and the most immediate threats to his waistline. It was time for him to work his magic.

Merging into the existing conversations was easy. Krix took inventory of purses, jewelry, and any dangling valuables the guests had on them. Elaborate masks wooed onlookers while creating convenient blind spots. Pickings would be good.

He'd ventured between three different groups before the first server fell under his spell. "Wine, sir?" The plump rat leaned over and held a goblet out to Krix.

Krix accepted it without hesitation. "Thank you," he said, before scurrying behind a few of the wider guests and out of sight. Haste was essential to avoiding a stuffing. Once they could no longer see him, any potential feeders would lose interest and return to normal.

The tactic worked. Krix was only forced to take two goblets of wine and a half-dozen treats. By night's end, he'd be leaving with more loot in his pockets than food in his belly.

"Lorenzo? Is that you?"

Krix turned his head at the name of his alias out of habit. He cursed the impulse. For once, he didn't want to be recognized. Explaining away his gains would be a challenge. He hurriedly tested a few excuses in his head as he heard footsteps heading his way.

A dark green dragon had called for him. He was the dragon from the theatre, who'd been with Krix the night his curse kicked in. The worst possible person to stumble into. Not only had he seen Krix recently before his rampant gains, he'd been part of the mob that'd tried to stuff him to immobility. His excuses fell apart before he could even begin to put them together.

He clung to the desperate hope the dragon would take another look at him and be convinced he had the wrong kobold. But he kept approaching instead, and looked more certain with each passing second.

"Lorenzo!" The dragon held his arms out wide and grinned at Krix. "It's wonderful to see you again!"

"And you as well, Trazer." Krix forced a cordial tone as he considered his options. He briefly sucked in his gut before admonishing himself for the

pointless gesture. It did nothing to disguise how round he'd grown. "Did my costume throw you off?" Beating around the bush would do him no good. He needed to know how Trazer felt about his gains immediately so he could abscond if necessary. Missing out on a profitable party would be disappointing.

"Not at all," Trazer laughed. "But for a moment, I wondered if you had a somewhat wider relative."

Tame words to describe his new heft. But the dragon sounded curious, not appalled.

Krix contemplated lying that his weight was an illusion. Magical flair was uncommon but not unheard of among the nobility, and they were at a masquerade ball, after all. Perhaps he really did have a rotund relative, and his false size was a playful jest towards them.

Such a lie wouldn't hold up under scrutiny, though. If Trazer had even an inkling of magical talent, he'd see right through it. Or if he asked how the spell worked, or how long it'd last. It'd provoke too many questions, none of which he'd have good answers for.

Obviously he couldn't say he'd been indulging. He needed the alias to maintain a degree of dignity, and even the elites gathered at the party would raise a brow at someone gorging themselves non-stop for days on end. They needed to maintain the illusion that their own gains were a natural side effect of their wealth, not the result of losing control.

The truth wouldn't work either, but a similar lie might.

"Ha!" Krix hid his nervousness behind laughter. "I have blown up a bit since we last met, haven't I? I'm ashamed to admit I fell victim to a nasty curse. I was browsing a selection of magical trinkets at the market and became enamored with a large crystal carved to resemble a pie. The merchant swore that if I clutched it in my palm and repeated an incantation, then I'd feel like I'd just eaten a fresh pie. They were right about that, at least. Upon following the instructions, the strong flavor of hundreds of pies graced my tastebuds. Then my aftermath of consuming hundreds of pies ballooned my belly. And everything else, for that matter." He laughed again, hoping to portray his situation as a mere innocent nuisance, not humiliation.

"One little crystal did all that?" Trazer asked in awe as he pointed at Krix's middle. "How did it feel to grow so fat so fast?"

“Honestly, I didn’t notice until I ripped a few seams, and by then I was already doughy!” He hadn’t expected Trazer to be so interested in the details of his transformation. Most would’ve changed the subject. But now that he’d built some creative momentum, adding to the lie was easy. “Took me days to get used to lugging all this heft around, but I had no other choice. The weight loss mage who was recommended to me is booked for months, so I’ll simply have to be fat for a while.”

“Circumstances aside, you make those extra curves work. A kobold with a belly your size is impossible to forget—in a good way, mind you.” Trazer sipped his wine. “No doubt you’ll be foremost on the minds of every trader here when they consider who to do business with.”

Krix beamed at the compliment while holding back unease at the truth Trazer spoke. He’d be exceptionally memorable to anyone he chatted with at length. People might go as far as to mention him to others. Questions would be asked about his origins, and his backstory might actually be looked into for once.

The majority of the social scene regulars were content to ignore relatively unimportant people like him, but it only took one overly curious noble to unravel his false identity.

Change of plans. Krix would keep his direct interactions with the guests to an absolute minimum. No interjecting into conversations. No making up business ventures. No attempting to woo anyone with stories of non-existent wealth. He’d have to rely on others to serve as unintended distractions while he plucked jewelry and swiped purses. A less fun approach, but sometimes that’s how the dice fell.

But first, he needed to find a way to ditch Trazer, and hopefully avoid the dragon for the rest of the party. “I’ll keep that in mind next time I get wedged in a chair.” Krix wanted to keep the mood light. No business, just jokes about bad luck and good food. “Though thankfully, it does not appear that I’ll have to worry about that here. I suppose walking around will do me good.”

“Yes, I thought a more open event would encourage more mingling. That’s why I decided on a ball rather than a formal dinner tonight. Everyone seems to have embraced the party, so I suppose I chose well.” Trazer glanced around the room, but his gaze didn’t leave Krix for long.

“You’re the host?” Krix asked, raising a brow. He hadn’t had much time to investigate the ball, only learning the theme and the location.

Trazer’s smile grew, and he nodded. “I *had* to host at least one party while I was visiting the city. My estate out in the countryside is rather isolated, so I rarely get guests, let alone a chance to have bustling parties like this.” He waved a claw.

So that was why Krix had never seen the dragon before and why the mansion seemed so sparse. And, perhaps, why he’d been so open about conversing with him. He was a visitor to Vastport and its established social circles, eager to connect with anyone to stave off the boredom of the countryside. He wouldn’t stick around long enough to see through any of Krix’s lies.

“You chose wisely, I can assure you that.” Krix raised his goblet in a half toast and checked to make sure no servants were meandering his way. “Everyone’s been so busy trying to outdo each other with stuffy dinners that they haven’t hosted a ball in months. This is quite refreshing.”

“If it pleases you, then it was all worthwhile.” He took in the room once more. “Would you have the time for a tour of the mansion? I’ve already made my necessary introductions, so I’m free for the rest of the evening.”

Krix could barely contain his joy. A tour would reveal every single valuable in the mansion, while also giving him a better idea as to how many servants and guards there were. He could pocket any trinket he wanted while Trazer was busy rambling on about the place. His luck was on the rise.

“I’d be honored to accompany you,” Krix tipped his head in a small bow. “Besides, it’ll keep me away from the delicious treats you’ve provided.”

Trazer chuckled. “Then follow me.”

Trazer led Krix along the outskirts of the ballroom. Only once was the kobold forced to accept a few bites to eat from a servant. Trazer encouraged him to eat as well, just as he had the night of the play. Krix brushed it off as an eagerness to win over others. Living in the countryside, Trazer wouldn’t have many chances to impress his social equals and potential business partners. He had to make every little act count, from keeping guests fed to giving them personal tours.

Before they left the room, Trazer pulled away to talk with one of the servants. Krix couldn't hear their brief conversation, but guessed it had to do with keeping the party running smoothly in his absence.

Outside the ballroom, the music and chatter slowly faded away. Krix and Trazer walked side by side, the dragon maintaining a slow pace so his guest didn't have to overexert himself.

"I apologize for the mansion being somewhat austere," Trazer said once they were alone. "I'm always finding excuses to expand my main estate, so this one unfortunately gets neglected. I can go a whole year without stepping foot in it."

"Estates are a difficult thing to balance." Krix feigned any experience in the matter. He'd never had more than a single room to worry about. Perhaps that'd change one day. "But I've always believed that when it comes to parties, the people are more important than the decor."

A bottom-heavy horse servant nodded as she passed. Krix supposed Trazer's staff must not face many difficulties out in the country, considering how out of shape they all were.

"If only more thought as you do. You're different than most merchants I've met in Vastport, Lorenzo. In a good way, mind you. You have an eye for the theatre and take a very sensible approach to things." Trazer looked down at Krix, grinning. "It's refreshing."

Krix had heard plenty of shallow praise during his times masquerading as a merchant, but there was something different in Trazer's tone, something genuine. "I was just about to say the same to you, though perhaps not so eloquently." Praise in response to praise. He needed to butter up Trazer for his scheme to go off without a hitch. After all, how could the dragon ever believe his new acquaintance could be responsible for a missing treasure or two?

"Flatterer," Trazer replied with a friendly smile.

The pair leisurely wound their way through the first two floors of the mansion. Trazer would introduce a room and comment about its appearance, often in jest. He habitually mentioned how much larger its counterpart at his estate was, and how much better the views were. Fields and forests as far as the eye could see, with plenty of privacy.

But mostly they talked about the theatre, and any other interests they

were willing to offer. Trazer claimed to be a patron of the arts, with multiple painters living on the grounds of his estate. He rarely found time to travel, so he did his best to bring elegant views of far-off places to his home.

Krix crafted a story about only recently being able to find the time for anything more social than the occasional play. His business demanded his attention and dominated his life, so much so that he preferred not to discuss the details of it. Trazer complied, securing Krix's lie.

Rather than take the grand staircase, Trazer offered the use of a sizable lift ordinarily meant for transporting furniture and art. It was a marvelous machine that ran smoother than any lift Krix had taken before. Even the gears sounded more melodic than grinding.

As the tour went on, Trazer's frequent compliments gradually turned flirtatious. Krix had gotten a glimpse of the dragon's admiration for him the night of the play, and was delighted to see it return. He responded with some subdued flirting of his own. It'd been a while since he'd so thoroughly enraptured a mark.

Only a single guard roamed the second floor, while the servants were few and far between. Krix noted the locations of anything small that might fetch him a fair price. He'd settled on three by the time they returned to the lift.

"Before we return to the party, why don't I show you my bedroom?" Trazer suggested. "It's the one room here I've actually put effort into maintaining."

And the room most likely to have an abundance of easy-to-steal jewels. "It'd be a pleasure," Krix said, in awe at his own luck. He'd steal everything he could and return with Trazer to the party. Then he'd make an excuse to slip away and be gone long before his duped host noticed. The score from tonight would fund a better disguise and put him another step closer to a cure.

The gate of the lift opened on the third floor, revealing a sitting room as sparse as any other room in the mansion. At the far end was a set of wide double doors. No guards were on duty. They were alone.

"It's been far too long since I've had visitors up here," Trazer said as he led Krix to the doors, not bothering to make small talk about the sitting room. "Though meeting a special person calls for a special occasion."

Trazer pushed the doors open and strolled inside. The bedroom was huge, with most furniture placed against the walls. Large tapestries depicted vibrant scenes of everyday life. There was a busy marketplace, a ship being unloaded at a dock, workers in the fields, and a noble hunting party, amongst others. As he couldn't squeeze them into his pockets, Krix gave them little thought.

A miniature chest of drawers stood on a table before a tall mirror. Silver and gold shined from the open drawers. It was an elaborate jewelry box, messy from Trazer picking out what to wear earlier. Krix let his eyes pass over it so he wouldn't get caught ogling the treasure he planned to steal.

But the kobold's grin wavered when he saw what else awaited them in the bedroom. A table overflowing with food had been set up. The feast atop it included platters full of the various finger foods he'd seen downstairs, along with bowls of fruit, a roast pig, loaves of bread, wheels of cheese, meat pies, and quite a few pastries. A cluster of wine jugs sat at one end. What Krix didn't see were plates or bowls of any kind.

"I can always count on my chefs to go above and beyond," Trazer remarked with pride as he headed straight for the table of food. He plucked a few grapes from a bowl and ate them. "I sent word for a spread to be prepared ahead of our arrival. Somewhere along the way, they seem to have misunderstood I intended to feed two, not twenty." He laughed, and Krix anxiously joined in.

Krix surveyed the table over and over again, in the hope he was imagining the abundance of food atop it. Instead, he kept noticing more treats squeezed between dishes. Remaining in the room was dangerous. Soon Trazer would feel compelled to feed him, and he'd have a whole feast at his disposal.

But while a new lie swirled around in the kobold's head, he caught sight of the jewelry box once more. His future was in the box. Once Trazer fell under the spell of the curse, he'd be blind to anything that didn't have to do with feeding him. If Krix played his cards right, he might be able to stuff his pockets with far more valuables than he'd intended. Maybe enough to almost completely fund the curse's removal.

The risks he faced were, well, hefty. He'd have to let Trazer become

overwhelmed by the curse, which would mean eating everything the dragon passed his way. Too much resistance, and Trazer would resort to aggressively force-feeding him, denying him an opportunity to steal. He'd have to walk a fine line between gluttony and restraint. Success would still require him to consume a considerable amount of the feast.

A few extra inches around his waistline were a fair price to pay for a fortune in jewelry.

"It smells marvelous!" Krix didn't have to fake his enthusiasm. Though Trazer scrimped on the mansion's decor, he seemingly spared no expense on food. At least tonight he'd be glutting on something elegant, and not raw fish.

"The way to anyone's heart is through their stomach. Nothing eases tense negotiations quite like good food. I'm proud to say I've collected one of the finest teams of chefs in all the land. They tackle every challenge I throw at them with relish, no matter how big or small. Please, dig in." Trazer waved Krix over with a claw.

A few pounds for the greater good, Krix thought. He hid his lingering unease as he approached the table. It only looked fuller the closer he got. Platters were crammed with food, favoring quantity over presentation. Buckle would've been overjoyed.

"There's so much, I don't even know where to begin," Krix said, buying himself a moment to pinpoint the least fattening dishes on the table. He settled on bread. Tearing off chunks and adding a topping of preserves wasted time.

"I promise you won't regret a single bite, no matter what you choose." Trazer popped open a jug of wine and poured them each a goblet. "I know you're intending to lose weight, but surely there's no harm in indulging while you wait to have those pounds spirited away by magic. I'd think there'd be no better time to."

A sensible observation, if Krix had truly been in line for such a spell. He *would* be eventually, once he'd dealt with the curse and obtained a more efficient compression ring. "True, true." He delayed a bite as if contemplating Trazer's words. "And I'd be a fool to miss out on such wonderful hospitality. This is a feast fit for a king."

Trazer's tail happily flicked about. Adulation was the other way to a

person's heart. "You should see the meals at my estate, then. They're even grander."

Krix steadily moved down the table and towards the side of the room with the jewelry box, under the guise of taste-testing new dishes. Trazer wasn't shoving anything into his maw yet, but the dragon hovered around him and talked up every single dish, preventing him from skipping any. If he tried to move on after a single bite, the dragon would talk him into a second and third. Krix allowed himself to be convinced to keep up the charade.

Before long, the samples and wine weighed heavily in his stomach. The compression ring kept his belly from bulging visibly further for now, but, from past experience, he'd eventually start to appear stuffed if he gorged enough. He'd be left cradling his gut if he had to consume the whole feast, but at least he'd still be mobile. If that's what it took to secure Trazer's jewelry, then so be it.

He grazed across half a dozen platters and multiple refills of wine before coming up with his next move. "Delicious. Simply delicious." He tapped his belly and took a step away from the table. "But where are my manners? You brought me up here to see your room, and yet all I've done is stuff my—*urrrrp*—face." The unexpected belch made his face heat up in embarrassment. "It's all very lovely."

"Never apologize for enjoying a proper meal. I'm fine with waiting until you've finished." Trazer stepped around Krix. "You should try the turkey next."

"Don't let my belly fool you, I'm perfectly capable of eating on the go." Krix grabbed one of the turkey legs and wandered a few steps further from the table. He kept his attention on the side of the room with the jewelry box.

"If you say so," Trazer joked. "But allow me to bring along a plate so you don't have to deal with the hassle of going back and forth." The dragon gazed over the table and selected a platter stacked high with pastries, one Krix had planned on avoiding for as long as possible. A minor setback. "As I'm sure you've noticed, I chose tapestries over paintings here. They take up less space in the wagons, so I can transport them between the estate and the mansion with ease. They help me feel at home.

Krix nodded and kept his mouth full of food so Trazer would continue

talking. It worked well until he picked the bone of the turkey leg dry. He was forced to start accepting pastries afterward, which proved too delicious to chew idly. With each one that went past his lips, he reminded himself of the reward that awaited his patience and sacrifice.

Through subtle questions, Krix nudged Trazer closer to the jewelry box and the mirror. Only when they were right in front of them did he dare mention them aloud. "I see you were in a rush before the party," he said, pointing to the open drawers as a pastry was plopped into his free claw.

"If only I could use that excuse. I'm afraid I tend to get horribly indecisive while selecting accessories. I've got so many places to put them, and I can never decide if I'm wearing too much or too little." Trazer shook his head and laughed.

If the dragon had put on any more jewelry, he'd be clanking like a knight in a suit of armor. And yet a veritable trove of jewelry remained on display. It might be days or weeks before he noticed a few pieces missing, if ever.

Krix carefully picked up a large bangle and turned it over in his claw. "I don't envy the substantial decision you must make every morning. Each of these pieces looks gorgeous." Precisely chosen words, just shy of directly complimenting Trazer's appearance. He couldn't seem too eager to please. He held the bangle out to Trazer instead of putting it back.

Trazer traded Krix a pastry for it. "Thank you. I prize them nearly as much as I do my...hmm, my chefs." The thought amused him for some reason.

While the dragon briefly focused on the bangle, Krix snatched a golden necklace and pocketed it in one swift movement.

"And you have a tail net, too." Krix unfurled the net of silver chains. "I've been debating buying some sort of tail net forever, but I'm not sure if my ridges would get in the way." Another mixture of truth and lies. He avoided them because he worried they'd catch on something while he fled.

Again he handed the large piece of jewelry off to Trazer, creating a window of opportunity to steal something more concealable. Jeweled horn rings made their way into his pockets. It only cost him two pastries, which he devoured with haste.

Krix repeated the straightforward ruse over and over, securing

expensive trinket after expensive trinket. He was only content when his pockets were full. Coincidentally, so was his belly. Trazer had managed to coax every last pastry into him.

The gluttony left Krix feeling a little sluggish. The compression ring held back his weight, not food comas. With his loot obtained, he needed to find a diplomatic way to retreat downstairs and escape the feast. He'd ask to see something on a lower level again and put up with whatever snack Trazer brought along. Perfect.

"It's a lovely collection, it really is." Krix let out an appropriately appreciative sigh. "Oh, that reminds me! I saw a little table in a sitting room on the first floor that I just can't seem to get out of my mind. Beautiful woodwork. Could we head back down and give it another look? I'm interested in commissioning the crafter myself if possible."

Trazer placed the empty platter on the table beside the jewelry box. "Of course. But first, there are a few more dishes I'd love for you to try. We don't want them getting cold, after all." He slid an arm around Krix's back and guided the kobold back to the feast table.

"We could load a few things on a platter and take them with us," Krix suggested.

"Perhaps. I couldn't help but notice your wonderful taste in jewelry. Especially your rings." Trazer gently raised one of Krix's claws. "They compliment your scales nicely. Though I think you could do without this one." The dragon gripped the compression ring and pulled it off Krix's finger.

All Krix managed was a gasp as his body ballooned free of its magical containment. He winced as his clothes suddenly felt horrendously tight, relief coming in the form of a chorus of rips and tears. A whole row of buttons snapped off simultaneously and his gut billowed forth. His pants were shredded in an instant to make room for his massive rump. Stolen jewelry flew free from their ruined hiding places, clattering to the floor around him. He lost his balance and fell backward onto his butt, flailing his blubbery arms all the way down.

In seconds, Krix went from a fat merchant to an immobile thief. His dreams were annihilated along with his disguise.

Not a single sound escaped his lips. He was too shocked at his abrupt reversal of fortune to react. Dread pressed down upon him, threatening to

flatten him like a bug. Jiggling from his trembling, he dared to look up at Trazer. Fury. Confusion. Dismay. He'd probably see all three on the face of the dragon.

Instead, he found joy.

"I knew that was a compression ring, but to think it was hiding such magnificent bulk." Trazer shuddered. "I've never seen a kobold grow so fat before. How long have you been this big?"

"I...I." Krix's mind was in shambles. He fumbled with an explanation. "Not long. The curse, it...it did this. Can I have my ring back?"

"That's a powerful curse, if you're telling the truth." Trazer grinned wide. "But I'm not sure you are. After all, an honest merchant wouldn't stuff his pockets with my jewelry while stuffing his face with my food."

Krix glanced down at the floor around him. His treacherous heft hadn't had the decency to cover up his crimes. "It all must have gotten caught on my tail." He didn't know if he'd ever told a worse lie in his life.

Trazer laughed. "Continuing to claim innocence after getting caught in the act is bold. I should probably inform you I know you're not a merchant, either. After we parted ways so swiftly last time, I began searching for you so we could meet up again. But no matter how many people I asked, no one could seem to offer up an address of any sort. Certainly no guild claimed you, and the harbormaster had never done business with you." He crossed his arms and tilted his head. "I worried I'd somehow misremembered everything about you, or that perhaps I'd hallucinated you. My head did feel a bit cloudy that night. But then fate brought you waddling up to my party."

His life was over. Trazer would have him hauled away to the largest cell the city guard could find. At least they wouldn't have much food to feed him while he awaited his doom.

"My heart skipped a beat when I saw how fat you'd grown in so little time. And then to see you expand so greatly after removing that ring." Trazer clenched his jaw shut and growled. He knelt down and placed his claws on Krix's doughy middle, then squeezed. "I've never been so blessed."

"Huh?" Krix had no idea what the dragon was talking about. He almost sounded like Buckle, and that scared him nearly as much as being locked up.

"I have secrets of my own, you handsome ball of dough." Trazer's claws raced across the surface of Krix's gut, rubbing it. "I happen to have a

fondness for making people fat. *Incredibly* fat.”

“Ah,” Krix squeaked. He’d stumbled across another Buckle.

“I’ve never been content giving others a little paunch or a ball gut. They need to be immobile. They need to be blobs.” Bliss tinged the dragon’s words. “So fat they’d need a whole score of mages to slim them back down. So ravenous they can think of little but eating nonstop to sate their demanding stomachs. But I’m not cruel. I care for each blob I nourish, and provide them with a room and all the food they could want. And I’ve always wanted to add a kobold to my collection.”

Krix’s jaw dropped. A cell suddenly seemed ideal. “I’d make a poor prize!” he insisted. “I’m merely a humble thief who’s good with words. Better to send me away in humiliation than sully your collection!”

“It’s your size that matters, not your origins.” Trazer wobbled Krix’s belly, sending ripples across the blubbery surface. “My collection contains farmers, guards, cooks, bards, and even a bandit or two. Now they’re all blobs gifted with a lifetime of pampering. You’ll fit right in.”

“I’m too small! A kobold will never reach their potential!” Krix squirmed, but had no hope of lifting his immense body off the ground.

“With enough time and food, you’ll surpass them all. Something about you intensifies my desire to feed, Lorenzo.” Trazer snorted as he squeezed Krix’s sides. “That’s probably not your name, is it? Oh well, that’s not important right now. You’ve still got a feast to finish off. I’m sure even *my* cooks were surprised by my request, but I’m in a mood. We’ll be testing the limits of the lift when we roll you out of here tomorrow morning. I’m glad I brought a reinforced wagon along on a whim, too. It’ll make your ride to my estate much more comfortable.”

Krix watched helplessly as Trazer stood and returned with a platter of food. He struggled to find someone—anyone—to blame aside from himself. Virk should’ve tried harder to obtain his aid. He might have agreed to help him if he hadn’t been so unbearable.

Trazer forced the first bite into Krix’s mouth. He followed with the second the moment the kobold had swallowed. He kept a steady stream of food and wine tumbling down Krix’s throat. Krix whined as he was fed platter after platter. After a few, he stopped resisting. There was no point. He began to eat automatically, earning praise from Trazer.

“See, it’s nice to get pampered, isn’t it? Soon you’ll be living in luxury, and all you have to do in return is grow big and fat.” The dragon’s claws squeezed whatever rolls of pudge they could find.

Rich, fattening food slowly swelled the kobold’s massive gut. Trazer’s enthusiasm never dimmed. When Krix grew groggy and slowed down, Trazer stepped in to help his treasured captive continue gluttony. He’d clamp Krix’s snout shut with one claw and tickle his throat until he chewed and swallowed. Then he’d do it all over again.

Eventually, Krix lost the willpower to worry any longer. He ate, because it was easy, and because that’s what Trazer wanted him to do. From that point on, his life would revolve around eating. He’d have plenty of time to get used to it.