

## The Kobold Thieves: Chapter 05

By: Indigo Rho

Virk took a long puff on the pipe and leaned into his pile of cushions. He let the fruity smoke swirl around his mouth a moment more before blowing it out through his nostrils, the wisps fading swiftly.

He glanced at the tapestries separating his little nook from the rest of the lounge. They were simple pieces, depicting fields of flowers and snowy mountains, but at least they were clean. Music and low chatter drifted into the space. A lithe, gray dragon danced before him, dressed only in pants and a collection of flowing silk scarves that trailed in his wake. Another dragon, teal-scaled and more toned, lay on cushions beside Virk, watching the dancer but ready to attend to the kobold's wishes at a moment's notice.

Virk held no delusions that he'd ever rise to the lofty heights of nobility. His work required anonymity, and the gossip-fueled world of the rich abhorred such sentiment. The lounge gave him the opportunity to indulge in the lifestyle, if only for a night. The companions, the smoke, the food, and the small fountain of wine would cost him a fair bit of his earnings from the heist, but he deserved a good pampering. He almost preferred the luxuries to be a rarity. He looked forward to them more that way.

The fountain of wine drew his smoke-clouded attention. He dipped a finger into it, feeling the wine flow before he withdrew and licked it off. Real wine, straight from the vineyards of the distinguished Greaves family. All for him, if he so desired. Not that he wanted to ruin the night with a swollen belly sloshing with wine.

He refilled his goblet from the fountain and raised it to the teal dragon, who dutifully copied him. "To the night," he toasted, before guzzling half the wine. The dragon sipped in moderation. "No need to hold back. My bounty is your bounty." He waved a claw at the fountain and food he'd ordered and flicked out his serpentine tongue. The dragon graciously accepted Virk's gift.

Kindness had only played a marginal role in his offer. He'd already finished off a full course meal and grazed on some dessert. A little indulgence wouldn't hurt, but he refused to glut in the same way Buckle did. Or the students from the library who'd had the misfortune of serving as his

distraction. Stuffed and fattened, simply because they'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time. They got fat while he got a fortune. Fate worked in humorous ways.

He smirked. The dragon smiled and nodded, mistaking the gesture as the usual flirtations of a drunk customer. Virk made no effort to dissuade him. Instead, he imagined the dragon's flat stomach ballooning out, filling with whatever animated culinary monstrosity Buckle could conjure. The idea of wrecking their hard-earned figure amused him. Perhaps he'd put Buckle's skills to use more often. Leaving a pile of plumped-up fools in his wake suddenly felt desirable.

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Virk left the lounge tipsy and full. Back in his room above The Cracked Coin, the satisfied kobold found enough energy to undress before falling into a deep, rejuvenating sleep. When he woke the next morning, he rolled out of bed as he always did, ready to tackle the new day.

His legs buckled at his first step and he stumbled forwards, narrowly avoiding falling over. The near-fall wiped away the sleepiness that remained in him. His movements were awkward. Something was wrong with his body.

Looking down, he saw the slight curve of his purple belly. His jaw dropped. He dug his claws into his middle and pulled, but his chubby paunch stubbornly remained. Further down, his once-loose undergarments clung tightly to his rump and thighs.

His heart rate jumped.

He grabbed his forearm and squeezed, feeling an unfamiliar softness. He swung his tail around and sensed the additional heft before he saw it. A fresh layer of fat covered his entire body. Nowhere he inspected had been spared.

Virk had become chubby overnight. Maybe more than chubby, with how much he saw his middle jiggle out of the corner of his eye. He hadn't puffed up from an allergy, he'd gained actual pudge.

Shock swiftly turned to ire. "Who *did* this to me?" he hissed. It had to be the work of magic, or maybe alchemy. Someone at the lounge? The thought didn't make any sense. He only ever interacted with the staff, and

he'd never mistreated them. They had no reason to inflict such a ridiculous offense against him. No one did. Meticulous planning had ensured he couldn't be connected to any of his crimes.

He squeezed his belly again, watching as the fat bulged between his fingers. He suppressed the urge to shout a string of furious expletives. He didn't strut around like Krix or flaunt his strength like Cleave, but he still took pride in his appearance. Losing control of his weight was unacceptable.

Virk stood in silence, stewing in the storm of emotions swirling within him. A vague semblance of calm gradually came to him. Rage alone wouldn't solve his problem. He needed to uncover who had fattened him up and settle on an appropriate revenge. Buckle and his culinary magic came to mind. An eye for an eye, a belly for a belly. Though he'd make sure the culprit ended up too fat to ever menace him again.

Unsurprisingly, none of his clothing fit properly anymore. Pants squeezed his ass and dug into his waist. He could barely button the strap that looped around his tail, and worried it'd snap off the second he sat. His tunics no longer covered his stomach, leaving a small strip of purple exposed. The poor-fitting clothes only made him look fatter, and highlighted how much weight he'd gained overnight. Obtaining a new outfit would be a priority.

Once Virk had gotten himself as presentable as possible, he left to rouse the gang. Cleave's room was across from his. The door was open, and Cleave was nowhere to be seen. He'd obviously passed out at a tavern again. Virk moved on to Buckle's room, a short walk down the hall. He found it empty as well. Buckle had a reputation as an early riser, though, and was fond of sleeping in the kitchen.

Krix's door remained shut, and a few hard knocks rewarded Virk with a mumbled acknowledgment and the sounds of shuffling around. He prayed they were putting on pants; he'd seen them nude far more times than he'd have liked.

The door only opened a crack. Krix's long snout peeked through the gap. His gaze drifted downward and his eyes widened. Virk braced himself for a snarky greeting or howling laughter. "It happened to you, too?"

Virk's carefully crafted retorts crumbled away. "What do you mean by that?" he asked, narrowing his eyes.

Krix raised a brow and instantly seemed to regret his words. “Uh, nothing.” He smiled, revealing a softness in his cheeks Virk hadn’t noticed before.

Virk wasn’t in the mood for games. He leaned into the door with his shoulder and shoved it open. Krix hadn’t prepared for the invasion, and stumbled backward to avoid the door. He had indeed put on pants, but they barely held Virk’s attention compared to the overhang of his orange belly.

Silence gripped the room as the two kobolds surveyed each other’s gains. Virk thought Krix looked fatter than him. Either that, or more of their gains had settled in their belly. He couldn’t quite decide if Krix’s sturdy tail had grown thicker or not, and their longer snout might have been hiding curves. He wondered if Krix was hungry. They certainly looked like they could use a hearty breakfast.

He closed his eyes and shoved aside the invasive thought. Krix’s appetite wasn’t important. “How did you get fat?” Virk asked, taking over the conversation in the confusion.

“Well, it’s an odd tale.” Krix cleared his throat and walked over to the messy chest he kept his clothes in. Virk assumed he was stalling for time as he debated how much to lie. “I was returning from a play when a horde of cooks fell upon me, all offering food. I tried to turn them away, but they refused to listen to reason and forced me to eat every last bite. It was as if they were possessed. I managed to break free and fled with my belly cradled in my claws. Unfortunately, I couldn’t outrun the pounds.”

The whole story sounded ludicrous. If Virk hadn’t inexplicably gained weight himself, he’d have rolled his eyes and demanded the truth. There was also the uncomfortable fact that he kept idly considering bringing Krix breakfast. “And you’re sure they fed you enough to account for all that weight you gained,” he said, pointing at Krix’s middle.

“Trust me, I felt like I was lugging around a boulder on my way home. A few more minutes with them and I would’ve dwarfed those students we stuffed.” Krix shuddered. “So, did you run into the same group of fanatical cooks?”

Virk began to wish he had. At least he’d have an answer, then. “No. I went to bed thin and woke up like this.” He gestured bitterly at himself.

“Maybe you gained sympathy weight from some kind of curse or

enchantment,” Krix suggested.

He’d considered the possibility himself, but had dismissed it. “Impossible. You clearly gained more weight than me.”

Krix scoffed. “If you say so. But do you honestly think it’s a coincidence we were both fattened on the same night? I don’t remember that ever being something I had to watch out for.”

“I never said the gains were unrelated,” Virk hissed. “We need to gather Cleave and Buckle and see if they ran into similar trouble.”

“Fine. Give me a moment to find a shirt that fits. Thank the gods loose clothing has been in style recently.” Krix leaned over the chest and began digging through the contents. Virk couldn’t help but notice how the other kobold’s soft middle squished against the side of the chest. Waking up fatter had enraged him, but finding Krix fatter as well had unnerved him. It complicated matters and raised more questions than it answered. Cleave and Buckle’s absence worried him.

After some impatient urging from Virk, Krix gave up on tunics and shirts and settled for a vest. He made one attempt to button it up before opting to leave it open.

They descended to the main room of the tavern and found it empty, with no sign of either Cleave or Buckle. Virk was just about to lead them downstairs when he heard a key clatter around in the lock of the front door.

Cleave barged in and slammed the door behind him. The plump kobold wheezed, a deep frown on his face and bags under his eyes. Large tears had formed along the seams of his pants, which looked plastered on his thick thighs. The buckle to his belt was missing, likely snapped off trying to contain his waistline. He’d ballooned to Buckle’s size.

Cleave froze when he spotted Virk and Krix, and his ears flattened. He looked between the pair, and his surly mood returned. “Why did I gain so much more than either of you!” he growled.

“Just tell me how you got fat,” Virk said. He prayed to hear a story that matched Krix’s. Instead, Cleave raged about filling up on the food and drink of everyone around them, and how they’d ended up wedged in an alley all night. They were too furious to hold anything back

“Maybe the whole city was fattened last night,” Krix said, poorly hiding his amusement at the considerable gains endured by Cleave.

“Three extreme cases of fattening, three completely different methods.” Virk sighed and walked behind the bar. He went to pour himself a mug of ale but hesitated. Until he figured out why he’d gained weight, he’d stick to lighter food and drink. He elected to have water, instead.

“Don’t tell me Buckle avoided this shit!” Cleave fumed. He didn’t move much, covering his soft pecs with his arms and sucking in his breath. The pitiful efforts did nothing to disguise his new bulk, especially with his long, fat tail trailing behind him.

“We haven’t seen him yet, but I’d say it’s a safe bet he’s also been fattened. We need to track him down immediately,” Virk said.

“I don’t even know where he likes to go when he’s not here,” Krix admitted. Neither did Virk. The gang worked well together on heists, but they hadn’t done much bonding in between.

Cleave hunched over and belched. “Someone’s eating!” he glared at Virk and Krix.

Krix tilted his snout up and sniffed. “I smell baking. It’s probably just Buckle in the kitchen.”

“That idiot’s gonna make me fatter!”

“Calm down, Cleave, we’ll get him to stop eating,” Virk said, trying to rein Cleave in. Getting fat had only made them more hot-headed.

Virk reached the stairs well before Cleave and led the way down. He stopped a few steps from the bottom once Buckle came into view.

The chef was stirring a large cooking pot and humming to himself. His ample belly jiggled as he worked, hanging over his thighs. His torn tunic wrapped around his soft chest and his pants were in tatters, having been shredded by his huge rump. From a glance, Buckle had somehow doubled in weight overnight. Just looking at him made Virk feel thin, and he didn’t doubt that Krix and even Cleave felt the same.

Buckle finally noticed his speechless companions on the stairs. The surprise on his face was short-lived, replaced by joy. “Oh wow, you all decided to gain weight, too?”

Virk forced himself to continue down the stairs. Behind him, he heard Krix hold back a snicker and Cleave release a scornful grunt. “Buckle, what happened?” he dared ask. He didn’t like how cheerful they remained, in spite of their obscene gains.

“Huh? Oh, you mean this?” Buckle stopped stirring and slapped his gut with both claws. The doughy green ball wobbled up and down, and his smile widened. “I had a revelation last night! After thinking about the wonderful effects my pastries had on those students, I realized I wanted to get bigger. Being fat feels right, you know?” No one answered. “I want to fill my belly to the brim at every opportunity. I want to wobble at the slightest touch. I want others to see my round, smiling face and wonder if they too could benefit from a few extra pounds.” He winked at the trio.

Virk had witnessed Buckle shrug off his weight often, but to see him obsess over the idea of growing even larger unsettled him. “Buckle, I believe you’re under the sway of magic. That’s why you’re fattening yourself up.”

Buckle burst into belly-jiggling laughter. “Virk, I know this is a big change,” he snorted, “but I assure you no one’s cast a spell on me. I feel better than ever!”

The thought that Buckle might be behind all their gains crossed Virk’s mind. He *was* a mage, after all. Though Virk had only seen him create and animate food, the chef might have kept some of his skills private. And of the four, he was the only one happy about the outcome. Buckle as a maniacal mage consumed with the desire to fatten others sent a chill down Virk’s spine. A single, giant animated pastry would be more than enough to overwhelm Virk and the others.

The worst-case scenario snapped Virk back to reality. If Buckle was truly the mastermind, he could’ve accomplished his weight gain goals with a single spell. The elaborate afflictions suffered by Krix and Cleave relied on luck, while his own gains paled in comparison to Buckle’s. No, Buckle was as much a victim as the rest of them, despite his claims to the contrary.

“That’s...good to hear, Buckle,” Virk needed to get information out of the hapless chef, so he avoided starting any arguments. He approached them, mostly certain they wouldn’t attempt to spontaneously stuff him. “By chance, did you come to that grand realization while out and about?”

Buckle shook his head, and of course, his middle shook with it. “I stayed in. I was working on a recipe when I figured everything out. It was very convenient, really. I ate everything I’d been cooking, and then gobbled up a feast of my wonderful creations. You should’ve seen how big my belly grew before I decided to snooze.” He let out a wistful sigh.

“Did anyone drop by the tavern while we were away?” Virk took a peek at the cooking pot. It was the beginnings of a stew, the basic sort the tavern always sold. He couldn’t sense any magic coming from it, though detection had never been his strong suit.

“Nope. Which was for the best. I doubt I’d have been able to make it up the stairs, even before I beached myself.” Buckle sounded proud.

“Alright. Something strange is happening here.” He minced his words to keep Buckle complacent and mask his unease. “Everyone upstairs, now. We need to figure this out immediately, before it gets worse.” He dared a glance at Buckle’s blubbery middle. They would all be as rotund as the chef if he failed.