

The Kobold Thieves: Chapter 08

By: Indigo Rho

The sun shone brightly upon Vastport, piercing the thin white clouds that drifted above. A light, infrequent breeze kept the heat at bay. It was a gorgeous day, too gorgeous to stay cooped up inside worrying about a silly little curse or enchantment.

Krix walked down the street without any particular feeling of dread. Virk and Cleave were overreacting, as usual. Magical traps weren't rare. From what he'd heard, the Academy taught entire classes merely on how to avoid them. The gang had set off their fair share of such traps in the past, too. One had made them reek of garlic for days. Another had turned Cleave plaid. And of course, there was the trap that'd instantly made them drunk.

The spell he and the rest of the gang endured was a bizarre one—he couldn't deny that—but he could think of at least one similar incident. A mouse who frequented the Cracked Coin had showed up two months back sporting a brand new belly. After a few drinks, he'd opened up and grumbled about a guard automaton stuffing him silly at a villa he'd broken into. He'd barely been able to waddle away.

Perhaps weight gain traps were becoming a new trend. A short-lived one, hopefully.

As embarrassing as the trap was, the effects would wear off eventually. Only absurdly powerful magic could persist for long. The average malicious spell would last days, maybe weeks at most if the caster were both dedicated and strong. Weight gain traps were designed to make thieves panic and return stolen goods in exchange for a cure once they'd gained a few pounds. A smart thief would ride out the gains like a ship through a storm and triumph. Meanwhile, their victim would be left wondering if their trap had worked at all.

Krix delicately adjusted the sash he'd wrapped around his plump middle. It concealed what his small shirt couldn't. Colorful scarves covered the torn seams in his pants. An open vest added a bit of style, still looking good despite the fact he couldn't button it up. Given his limited resources, he was rather proud of the outfit he'd tossed together.

It couldn't hide the fact he'd grown soft, though. He hadn't realized

how much he'd liked his slim figure until he'd puffed up. He felt his belly and rump fight his clothing, as if eager to be exposed to the world. He'd wobbled plenty the night before while escaping the obsessed cooks. That wouldn't happen again, for many reasons.

Being lean was advantageous in Krix's line of work, so he saw the extra pounds as an inconvenience, even if he chose not to panic like the others. Sneaking around was easier when he didn't have to worry about his middle bumping into things and making noise. So was hiding, and slipping through the gaps in fences. But he also believed that being thin made it easier to woo potential targets. Most of them cared more about wealth and prestige in the long run, but a charming grin and a lithe figure could distract them for a night, which was all the time he needed to work.

A properly tailored outfit would keep his curves at bay. Krix supposed it'd be a reasonable investment while he shed the excess weight.

A horse carrying a basket of apples on his back glanced in Krix's direction and froze. He smiled, as if recognizing an old friend, though he was unfamiliar to the kobold. "Sir, please have one of my apples! They're fresh from the market." Without waiting for an answer, the horse reached into his basket and grabbed an apple. He tossed it to Krix, who caught it in one claw.

"Thank you," Krix said, picking up his pace. The horse only continued walking after Krix took a bite of the apple, apparently content.

There *were* advantages to everyone wanting to give him free food. He needn't worry about paying for any meals so long as the enchantment remained. The only problem was the extreme enthusiasm to feed him that overcame some people. If he could avoid that, he could turn the enchantment from a curse into a boon.

A devilish thought came to Krix. He'd heard merchants talk of a restaurant called the Golden Stag on many occasions. Like most things those merchants gushed about, it was well beyond his means. He could walk among them and pretend his nonexistent business did well. Still, he couldn't actually travel far inland to the extravagant Sapphire Hot Springs, commission the famous sculptor Olimeo, or dine in a restaurant worthy of a king. At least not without spending every last coin he had.

But if strangers felt a magical desire to keep him well fed, then perhaps the staff of the Golden Stag would be as eager to provide him with

complimentary food as the cooks had. He only needed to bluff his way in.

Intent on taking advantage of his odd predicament as much as possible, Krix set course for the Golden Stag. He took a meandering route to avoid markets and any streets he knew were packed with food stalls. Still, he ended up snacking on a few free fruits and vegetables, and had to slip away from a persistent baker.

The Golden Stag was impossible to miss. A gilded statue of a feral stag occupied an alcove above the entrance. Brilliant flowers filled planters along the second-floor windows. The elegantly carved doors were propped open. A bulky moose with a sword at her side stood guard beside the doors. Krix gave a smile and a nod as he passed. She nodded in kind, but her stern expression remained.

The host—a jackalope in finer ware than Krix—offered a reserved smile in greeting. Their eyes swiftly darted all over him, no doubt making snap judgments on his clothing and how he presented himself. “Welcome to the illustrious Golden Stag, sir. How may I help you today?” Though outwardly respectful, their tone was stiff. They seemed ready to call forth the moose if Krix proved to be anything but a questionably dressed guest.

Krix reached for his pouch and retrieved a gold coin. “Two of my ships just returned to port, and I’d like to celebrate.” He handed the coin to the host and patted his pouch, letting the coins within jingle loudly. Most weren’t gold, of course, but the host wouldn’t know that by sound alone.

The host’s smile grew more genuine. “I assure you, sir, nothing compares to the cooking of the Golden Stag. If you’d follow me.”

The interior of the restaurant astounded Krix. The walls were painted a soft yellow and covered in large landscapes and mirrors. The ceiling was sky blue and dotted with golden stars. Guests were seated at individual tables topped with fabric. Their chairs were cushioned, the backs intricately carved. A brilliant, massive hearth dominated the center of the room, unlit. Statues related to the deities of harvest and trade supported its four corners. Four musicians played on a small stage along one wall.

A dedicated server dutifully stood beside each table, refilling drinks and switching out plates when prompted. Looking around, Krix realized all the staff sported antlers. Aside from the obvious deer and eastern dragons, there was also a snow leopard and a wolf. He assumed they were hybrids

until he spotted the decorative harness keeping the wolf's antlers in place. He briefly considered asking the host about the curious requirement, but thought better of it. The Golden Stag's clientele were there to eat, not ask questions.

Krix was seated at a table across from one of the ornate mirrors. Seeing his reflection, he tried not to shudder at how out of place he looked. They'd already admitted him, at least. "Is there anything you'd recommend?" he asked.

"Where to begin?" the jackalope laughed. "Fresh lamb and beef arrived this morning. We have a variety of pasta that are the best you can get outside of the palace. Oh, not to mention the meat pies!" He listed off everything the restaurant had to offer, from the food to the drinks, praising each with equal passion.

"That's a daunting selection, as to be expected." Krix ran through the list in his head, attempting to guess the least expensive. If his spell didn't work, he'd have no choice but to give up a substantial amount of coin.

"Then why not have everything?"

Krix chuckled, unsure if the host had been joking. "If only fortune would be so kind. But I did not secure my wealth by spending recklessly."

"Sir, I would never dare suggest you drain your coffers. As a first-time guest, your bill will be on the house, I insist!" The host's passion intensified with every word.

Krix recognized the eagerness, in both tone and appearance. It was the same eagerness that'd overcome the cooks the other night. He smiled, knowing for certain his plan had worked. "How could I possibly refuse such hospitality? I'll leave my meal in your capable paws, then."

The host hurried off to the kitchen as if he'd just seated a member of the royal family. Krix wished he could be openly giddy about the success of his scheme. He couldn't risk it by causing a scene or acting out of character. The spell was powerful enough to put the host at his beck and call despite his lackluster appearance, but he wouldn't test its limits in such a grand establishment.

An elk left the kitchen with a platter of pasta and a bottle of wine. His eyes darted to Krix for a second, then his pace slowed. He abruptly diverted to Krix's table and presented the kobold with the meal. "You should try

these, sir.”

Krix doubted the food had originally been intended for him. He also doubted the noble waiting for it would be pleased. He didn't care. He simply thanked the server and started on the pasta. A single bite widened his grin. The stories he'd heard about the Golden Stag hadn't been exaggerated.

A few bites later, another server appeared. She left a basket of bread and praised its taste. Krix took a break from the pasta to sample the bread, and wasn't disappointed.

Krix had finished half of his gift before the host returned with a silver cart loaded with plates. He laughed in disbelief at the sight of the smorgasbord. The portions were exorbitant, and gave him the impression the cooks had shoved everything they could onto each plate. He could only imagine what they had thought as the host had given the order for such a ridiculous feast. Did they even know the jackalope meant it all for a single kobold?

“It's an incredible spread,” Krix said, deftly shifting his laugh from one of amusement to awe.

“This is only the beginning!” the host declared. “The kitchen is working tirelessly to prepare the remaining dishes on our menu. And once you've told me your favorites, I'll have seconds and thirds made with haste. Let no one claim our guests go home unsatisfied.”

Or home at all, if you expect them to gorge on such a feast, Krix thought to himself. Now that he understood the passions the spell would induce, care would be needed to avoid a repeat of the previous night. He'd keep an eye on how persistent the staff became and the size of his belly. He'd make a mockery of the silly curse yet.

“I look forward to it,” Krix said, only half lying. The host pushed aside the unfinished pasta dish and set two new ones down in front of Krix. Three glasses of three different wines were poured.

Krix looked upon the massive meal and didn't know where to start. He felt like a king faced with so many options and resisted cackling in joy. He decided to graze, switching plates between bites so he wouldn't miss out on anything. There was no telling if he'd be able to abuse the spell again, and wanted to get the full experience of the Golden Stag in a single meal. He'd remember all he could of every dish so that he could use the knowledge to

gain the trust of future targets.

Why yes, he *had* dined at the famed Golden Stag. His favorite dish? Oh, it's so hard to choose! But the salmon was exceptional and the host matched it with the perfect wine.

As the smug kobold gleefully rehearsed the boasts he'd utilize in his next venture, his caution waned. He'd stick with a dish for multiple bites before moving on to something new, and drift back to it before long. Strategic grazing steadily shifted more and more to gluttony. The host constantly moved plates around, urging Krix to try this and that. After clearing the first plate, they swiftly replaced it with a full one, giving Krix the impression he'd eaten less than he actually had. The wine in his goblets never dipped below the halfway mark. Liquor bolstered his sense of security in his plan while simultaneously unraveling it.

Servers continued to divert from their intended paths to drop off more food, despite his table being increasingly cluttered with plates and goblets. The outrageous display didn't elude the attention of the other guests. A stocky beaver with a scowl on his face marched up to the host, his belly jiggling fiercely. "My server has failed to deliver my order twice. What is the meaning of this absurd delay!"

"Sir, feeding this fine gentleman is our top priority. Certainly you understand?" The host spoke politely yet firmly. Falling under the spell's sway hadn't diminished his authority.

"What? How could you possibly believe I'd accept such a...such a..." The beaver glanced down at Krix with a confused look on his face, as if he'd forgotten where he was. "Oh, I didn't know." He quickly collected himself, shrugging off all hint of disdain. "Keep it up, then. He looks terribly famished." He waddled off.

Had Krix not been stuffing himself, he would've snickered at the way the spell had so smoothly warped the beaver's mind. Not even the most self-centered personality could resist the desire to see him fed.

No dish disappointed Krix. The ingredients were of the highest quality and the presentation was superb. He sprung at new dishes to see how they compared, his eyes glued to the royal feast arranged before him, not the swelling below.

Course after course vanished down the kobold's throat and into his

rounding belly. The sash tightened before coming undone, exposing his taut orange middle. It jiggled sluggishly in his lap as he reached for distant plates and drained goblets of wine. Faint sensations of fullness reached Krix's brain, but he promptly dismissed them as an inconvenient truth. Overeating a little was fine. He might never have another chance to indulge in the cooking of the Golden Stag, and he'd regret cutting the visit short. Excess weight could be shed.

The extent of his gluttony eluded him. His middle had ballooned, squeezed between his chest and the table's edge. Leaning forwards nudged him back, little by little, but he inevitably filled the expanded gap. Even when he had to press down on his gut to reach for an enticing plate of pasta, he found excuses to keep eating. It'd shrink once he digested everything. He'd still be thinner than Buckle and Cleave. A bit of pudge would only add to his disguise as a wealthy merchant.

A voluptuous fox in a flowing dress placed her untouched plate of fish on an empty corner of the table. "You have to try this, it'll be the talk of the city soon," she said.

A bottom-heavy otter arrived on the other side of the table and added his basket of bread and cheeses to the feast. "You can't pass this up!"

Krix looked from one to the other and stifled a belch. "Of course. You both have my thanks."

More guests converged on the table as curiosity and then compulsion got the better of them. They had paid a considerable sum for the privilege of dining at the Golden Stag, but they gave up their expensive meals to Krix without a second thought. Gradually, Krix became the center of attention, and he once again foolishly got caught up in it.

Krix gazed upon the seemingly endless feast and understood why royalty tended to grow fat. With the coffers of an entire kingdom at their disposal, they could glut on such meals whenever they wanted. He wished he could have such luxury. He wouldn't even care about the weight that'd come with it.

By chance, his eyes glanced beyond the food and to the mirror across from him. An orange ball blocked his view of everything below his chin. It wobbled as he leaned up to get a better look, and a dreadful realization struck him. The ball was his belly. He looked down, and his face flushed red.

“How did I eat so much?” he hissed under his breath. “The food’s too damn delicious for its own good.”

“Is something wrong, sir?” The jackalope was instantly at his side, switching out an empty bowl with a fresh stew.

“No, no, of course not. The food was spectacular. I fear I must take my leave, though. There is work to be done and food to digest.” Krix patted his belly and let out a nervous laugh.

The host looked aghast. “Sir, you can’t possibly leave before finishing everything. We haven’t even gotten to dessert!”

“Another time, perhaps.” Krix tried to scoot his chair back, but the weight of his bulging belly transformed even the simplest tasks into an ordeal.

“There’s plenty of time left in the day. If we all work together, you’ll finish your meal swiftly.” The host grabbed a slice of bread and shoved it into Krix’s mouth, forcing him to swallow. The crowd of servers and guests nodded in agreement. The shapely fox found him a large bite of pasta, while the beaver crammed a baked potato into him. He’d overlooked how many had gathered, and now they loomed above him, ready and willing to feed him every last bit of food in the restaurant until not a crumb remained.

“Wait, stop—*gulp*—this instant! I’ve—*glrk*—had enough!” Krix’s demands were promptly ignored as the spell took hold. He felt his belly slowly spreading over the side of his lap, pinning him in place. If he couldn’t escape soon, he’d be too bloated to move and completely at their mercy.

Krix scrambled for his smoke bombs, but his belly had swelled over the pouch they were in, denying him access. He resorted to any desperate form of resistance he could think of. He snapped his gator-like jaws, but hands forced them open so food could be shoveled in. His heavy tail smacked against legs, but they all proved too sturdy for him to fell.

He shoved a server away with enough force to tip over his chair. The crowd gasped and backed away as Krix fell backward. He hit the ground with a jolt and rolled head over tail, coming to an aching rest atop his swollen middle.

Krix tried to leap to his feet, but merely wobbled as his belly held him down. “No no no!” he cried, fearing the worst. The crowd closed in. Arms grabbed Krix by the shoulders and pulled the stuffed kobold to his feet. He

belched as his gut swayed from the sudden movement, still eager to pull him back down.

“Sir, let me lead you to a new chair,” the host said, pulling Krix in one direction.

“No, he should eat at my table, there’s more space!” the beaver countered, pulling Krix in the opposite direction.

“My table’s closer to the kitchen, he’s coming with me!” the fox declared, yanking him backward.

The crowd squabbled over Krix, pulling him back and forth with such strength the kobold feared he’d be torn limb from limb. He shook them off and bolted for the exit. Fleeing while engorged hadn’t gotten any easier, but at least he had a feel for how his belly would bounce as he ran. The crowd was slow to follow, as eager to argue over who deserved to feed Krix as to actually feed him.

The moose barged into the restaurant upon hearing the commotion. The moment she saw Krix wobbling towards her at full speed, she moved to block his path. Then she wavered, the same confusion spreading over her face that Krix had seen on the beaver. “Do you want me to grab you anything to eat?” she asked.

Krix took a chance. “Yes, there’s a huge pie in the kitchen. But you’ll need the host and everyone else’s help to carry it, so round them up!”

She nodded and let him scurry by. Then she strolled up to the mob and halted them with her sheer size. “You heard the man, we’ve gotta pie to get!”

“The pie can wait, we have to get him to a table!” the host insisted. A thick arm kept him at bay.

Krix didn’t wait to see how long his desperate ruse would last. He ran down the street and turned at the first alley, and didn’t stop until he’d zig-zagged a few blocks away. Huffing and puffing from the exertion, he slid down against the side of a building to recover his energy.

“Too...too close,” he wheezed. He looked at his round gut with half-lidded eyes. Without a doubt, he’d let things get out of hand. But the food had been phenomenal. He let out a small moan as he remembered the various tastes. Even if he could never return to the Golden Stag again, the memory of the food would stick with him for the rest of his life. He couldn’t

regret his recklessness, not while he remained mobile. A carefully placed sash and an open vest wouldn't be able to handle the gains awaiting him, but at least he could rightfully claim a fortune had gone into his fat.

He slowly rubbed a claw over his swollen belly. He'd lose the weight, eventually. Once the spell faded, there'd be nothing to stop him from returning to his old self. Being fat for a while wouldn't hurt him.

* * *

Krix napped in seclusion as he digested most of his extravagant, once-in-a-lifetime meal. More seams ripped as he plumped up further. His shirt barely reached past his pecs, leaving the doughy curve of his middle exposed. He awoke sore, but more nimble than he had been immediately after his stuffing at the Golden Stag. If anyone tried to feed him on the way home, he'd be able to outrun them.

Still, Krix decided to stick to the backways.

Walking around with his gut sticking out got him plenty of stares. He chose to ignore them, acting as if nothing were out of the ordinary. With the right amount of confidence, some might assume his midriff was intentional, and not the result of wanton gluttony. Whenever he spotted the glazed-over look in anyone's eyes he scurried away faster, not giving them a chance to consider whether he needed a snack or not.

Down a narrow, winding street, the sound of snoring reached Krix's ears. He assumed he heard a passed-out drunk. The belch that interrupted the snores only seemed to confirm it. But when he turned the corner, he found a dark red boulder in the middle of the street.

The confused kobold's eyes slowly recognized a silver mane and doughy limbs. First shock, then delight spilled over Krix. He burst into uncontrollable laughter.

Cleave woke with a start and a snarl. His eyes widened and his jaw dropped open once he saw the source of the laughter. Krix couldn't remember the last time he'd seen such distress on Cleave's face. It might have been the first.

"Shut it!" Cleave growled, scrambling to compose himself.

"You're *huge!*" Krix giggled. He leaned around, confirming his

companion remained beached on their bloated belly.

“You’re not thin, either!” Cleave barked.

Krix shrugged. “But I’m still mobile.”

Cleave furiously rocked back and forth atop his belly, clearly failing to prove Krix wrong. “It’s the damn magic’s fault! And I had to fight off a guard! What’s your excuse?”

“I don’t need any. I was running a little experiment, that’s all.”

“So you let yourself get stuffed like a pig. You might as well let Buckle fatten you up if you’re that desperate to become a useless blob,” Cleave sneered.

“This is courtesy of the Golden Stag, perhaps the most expensive restaurant in the whole city,” Krix said, gesturing at his round middle. “While you were blimping up on watered-down ale and stew and whatever dregs cheap taverns had thrown together, I was being treated to a feast worth a small fortune. Nobility surrendered their food to me and servers treated me like a king.” At least until they’d started force-feeding him, but Cleave didn’t need to know about that. “I have tasted the finest food the city has to offer. You just passed out in the street like a gluttonous drunk.”

A stream of expletives spewed from Cleave’s mouth, only ending when the enraged kobold let loose a thunderous belch that echoed up and down the street. Krix merely laughed at the explosive display.

“Stop being a smug prick and help me up!” There was as much pleading in the tone of Cleave’s voice as there was threat. As angry as the kobold was, he needed Krix’s help.

But Krix wasn’t in a generous mood. “How could I possibly lift someone as stuffed and bloated as you? After all, you’ve told me time and time again how weak I am.”

“Pull me up, damn it!”

“I fear you’re on your own, Cleave. Just like you wanted.” Krix grinned and walked around Cleave, avoiding a pitiful swipe.

Cleave looked over his shoulder as he struggled in vain to overcome his belly and get back up. “You can’t leave me here! What if I’m not up before the neighborhood starts eating dinner! I’m too fat already!”

“That means you’ll have plenty more weight to throw around. Sounds like a dream come true for you. Fatten well.” Krix waved as he continued

toward home.

“Krix, you bastard, come back! Krix! Screw you, Krix!”

Cleave’s increasingly frantic shouts followed Krix as he walked up the steep street. He’d undoubtedly earned Cleave’s wrath, but he was beginning to think they wouldn’t be a threat for much longer. With how swiftly they were ballooning in size, they’d likely be immobile by the time the spell wore off. All because they couldn’t stay out of range of taverns and restaurants. A foolish fate for a foolish oaf.

Krix tapped his round belly with a finger. Compared to Buckle and Cleave, he’d handled the spell admirably. If Virk gave in to panic and managed to swell, he might be left as the only member of the gang capable of fitting through a door, let alone pulling off a heist. All because they let their fears get the best of them. Or their passion, in Buckle’s case. He wasn’t quite sure what had gotten into the ravenous chef.

Whatever the outcome, he’d endure. They could deal with their hefty mistakes on their own.