

The Kobold Thieves: Chapter 04

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Vastport contained many theatres, but few could match the grandeur and reputation of the Vast Market Theatre. The building was four stories tall and shaped like a ring. Its exterior was painted sky blue and accentuated with white. Arched colonnades along the front recalled the classical style of the city's ancient past, now rarely seen on anything other than temples. Colorful banners depicted the coat of arms of the guilds and families that supported the theatre.

The doors remained closed so the guests roamed outside, reaffirming old connections and trying to make new ones. Many were merely there to be seen by the rest, as proof they frequented the upper echelons of society. They dressed in the latest styles and wore expensive jewelry. They talked of expansions to their villas and of the courts they'd visited. It was all a complicated game of one-upmanship in the guise of a night of entertainment.

Krix couldn't think of anywhere else he'd rather be. He'd dressed in his most formal doublet and pants, all shades of blue with silver trimming. His beret sported a perfect peacock feather. He'd shined his silver nose ring and wore a collection of matching rings and bracelets, including a trio on his tail. His scales and teeth were polished and the light scent of lavender hovered around him.

He wouldn't be mistaken for a noble, but he'd pass for a modestly wealthy merchant, and that was all he needed. People were always a little less suspicious of those who looked like them. As long as he nodded in agreement to all the popular complaints and offered the right amount of praise, none of the guests would suspect he was there to rob them.

Thieves like Virk preferred to sneak around in the shadows, wary of ever being seen and jumping at any unexpected sound. Cleave only wanted to use brute force, witnesses be damned. Krix liked to hide in plain sight.

Being a kobold *did* make him stand out more, but his kind weren't strangers to the upper class. There were several prominent kobold families in the city's blacksmith guild, and a kobold dynasty ruled a duchy to the north. He spotted three other kobolds among the guests, all more opulently

adorned than him, all with their own entourages. And all fairly rotund. If any kobolds were remembered that night, it would be them. He'd be able to fade away, fast forgotten and not connected to any missing valuables.

Krix drifted from group to group, searching for a potential mark. He wanted someone who'd take control of the conversation and distract themselves to no end. They couldn't be the center of attention, though. Someone new or simply visiting, who wouldn't mind the company of a merchant while counts and lesser princes eluded them. And, of course, they had to be flaunting wealth for Krix to deftly relieve them of.

The search didn't take long. He spotted a dark green dragon he'd never seen before chatting away at a group of prominent guild leaders. Bands of gold crisscrossed his tail and he kept his coin purse poorly hidden.

Krix quietly joined the group. The dragon dominated the conversation about recent plays and operas. The rest came across as woefully uninformed. Those who had actually seen the performances remembered little about them, and Krix held back a smile as they mixed up crucial details. Fortunately, plays were a passion of his.

"The Queen's Company *has* been improving rapidly," the dragon said, responding to a portly boar in the silk trade, "but they still can't compare to Fletch's Company. They've created the best comedies in generations, and know how to breathe life into the old classics. And the fact they exclusively employ kobolds makes it all the more impressive."

The boar nodded politely and without conviction. "Yes, yes. Of course."

Krix saw an opportunity to officially slide into the conversation. "What did you think of *The Price of Pride*?" It was the most recent play he'd seen performed by Fletch's Company, but hadn't achieved the prestige of their other work. Bringing it up would show the dragon he actually knew something about the plays they spoke so fondly of.

A grin spread across the dragon's face, as Krix had hoped. "Ah, the misfit of their repertoire. Blending comedy and tragedy but without any hint of the usual romance was a bold move. Watching the heroic paladin gradually succumb to the temptation of excess once he becomes king is bittersweet. All his friendships abandoned in favor of wicked advisors intent on keeping him fat and docile so they can do as they please." He let out a

pleasant sigh.

“And what of the rumors it’s meant to be an allegory of the current court?” Krix asked.

The rest of the group shifted in mild discomfort at the gossip, but the dragon’s grin didn’t falter. “I’d say the parallels are incredibly shallow at best and could relate to any court, even if our liege and the paladin both share a fondness for fattening feasts.” The comment forced a few snorts from the others. “Besides, Fletch’s Company swears it’s based on a historic event, like tonight’s performance is.”

“Yes, but there are quite a few similarities between the paladin’s advisors and some at court. The names and species may be different, but the personalities and waistlines are familiar.” All Krix knew of the royal court came from gossip he’d overheard while infiltrating high society. Aside from the usual complaints about taxes and titles, there’d been plenty of comments on how portly the advisors had gotten. Not to mention the Prince. He’d noticed the merchants and nobles rounding out more as of late, too, as if adopting the heft of the royal court like they would any other fashion trend. The idea amused him to no end.

“Perhaps.” The dragon shrugged, but his tone hinted that he agreed with Krix’s observation to some extent. “Unless my memory fails me, I fear we haven’t been introduced.”

“Lorenzo,” Krix answered with an alias. Lorenzo was a sporadic guest at parties and performances, a humble spice merchant who did well enough for himself. Few ever pried him for information on his false trade and never seemed interested in talking about it. He was charming, but ultimately forgettable. An ideal cover.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lorenzo. I’m Trazer. Do you have a favorite actor amongst the troupe?” Trazer asked.

“Icarus, by leaps and bounds. I have never seen a more perfect jester or priest. He steals the show in any comedy.” It was a popular opinion, but one Krix wholeheartedly believed.

“Yes!” Trazer vehemently agreed. “And he sings so well, too. I’ve heard Fletch always writes a role for Icarus in his plays, even if it only appears in a single scene.”

As Krix and Trazer vigorously discussed plays, the rest of the group

gradually departed, finding more influential conversations to hang onto. Krix hadn't intended to isolate the dragon, but he wasn't one to turn his back on good luck. He took a more thorough inventory of Trazer's obvious valuables and considered what he could steal. Their coin purse would be the easiest, but also the most obvious. Their jewelry would take finesse, but the absence would take longer to notice, while not necessarily being attributed to theft. Sometimes, earrings and bracelets fell off, especially once the liquor began to flow.

The doors to the Vast Market Theatre swung open and a bell announced the guests could move to their seats.

Trazer took a step towards the doors but then stopped, turning to Krix. "Where are your seats?"

"Ground level, wherever I can fit. I was negligent and failed to secure anything better beforehand." Krix dipped his voice in melancholy.

Trazer fell for it. "You'll never be able to see the stage that way," he said, bluntly. "I have a private box on the third level. I insist you join me so you can see the play in full."

"Truly?"

"Truly."

Krix held a claw to his chest and put on his best smile of disbelief, all while hiding the smug sense of success pouring through him. Winning over Trazer had been a trivial task.

The pair joined the crowd filing into the theatre. Krix resisted the urge to snatch a pouch or two on the way in, despite the close quarters offering him ample opportunities to do so. He'd have few avenues to flee if he got caught, and any victim would have plenty of time to notice something had gone missing while watching the play. While Virk and he didn't always see eye to eye, they agreed on the importance of caution.

Trazer's box provided privacy and a seemingly endless supply of wine.

A yellow, serpentine kobold with curved horns walked onto the stage. He cleared his throat loudly and a hush gradually came over the theatre. "I welcome you all to the inaugural showing of *The Downfall of Karth the Insatiable*. May you witness the indomitable spirit of those faced with tyranny and the tremendous power of wanton gluttony." He walked off stage to polite applause as the play began.

The play was based on an old story, one Krix had heard of in passing before. A terrible dragon named Karth—played by a stocky kobold with large fake horns—conquered a town called Evington and forced the populace to cater to his every whim. The first act ended with Karth triumphant and the people despairing.

In the second act, Karth steadily descended into lethargic overindulgence. He ate in every scene, and the actor appeared to be getting fatter. An illusion, naturally. All the popular acting companies used a bit of magic here and there to enhance their plays.

The third and final act focused on Karth's downfall. The dragon's gluttony inspired the populace to fatten up their oppressors to weaken them. Once Karth and his minions were all suitably hefty, the people rose up and stuffed them silly. The scenes were presented in a comical fashion, with some actors giving long monologues about freedom while others crammed pastries into the mouths of others. Kobolds ballooned on stage, their round bellies bursting belts and snapping armor straps. Those who'd been stuffed groaned dramatically as they spoke their lines, lamenting how incredibly fat they'd become.

The dexterity of the stuffed actors impressed Krix. No matter how much they waddled around the stage, they never toppled scenery, their fellow actors, or themselves. Icarus—who'd portrayed a corrupt priest loyal to Karth—performed an entire monologue while cradling his immense belly, which had swelled wider than the pink kobold was tall.

Karth was stuffed well beyond any other character, ending up beached atop his absurdly huge gut. Krix snickered extra long at the sight, reminded of the students from the library. Humiliated and defeated, Karth was rolled off stage, but not before belching out a terrible curse. The remaining characters described how Karth's curse would eventually cause them all to become tremendously fat, along with anyone else who dared to step foot in the city.

The play earned a standing ovation from the audience, who approved of the whimsical tale.

Trazer clapped louder than anyone there. "It's incredible, isn't it? A city where everyone's cursed to grow fat. I can only begin to imagine what it'd be like to see so many rotund people in one place. I'd love to visit it one

day.”

Krix wondered how drunk the dragon was. “Don’t forget, you wouldn’t be immune to that fattening curse.”

“The gains might be worth it, just to say I’d walked the streets of a cursed city.” Trazer smirked. “Or waddled, I guess. Would you risk it?”

“If I was that desperate to get fat, I could glut in the comfort of my own home.” And for free. Buckle was always eager to have his recipes taste-tested.

“Not the adventurous sort?”

“I’m plenty adventurous. I simply don’t care to risk my lovely figure in the process.” Krix gestured at himself.

“I’m certain you could handle a few pounds.” Trazer’s gaze lingered on Krix’s flat middle, and the kobold pretended not to notice. Friendly banter and wine had been enough to woo them. He underestimated how charming he could be at times. “I’d love to have you over for dinner tonight. Though I must warn you, my personal chef cooks the best food in the city. There’s a chance you’ll end up as round as the actors down there.”

Krix glanced at the stage. The stuffed kobolds were making a show of rolling onto their swollen bellies as they tried to bow. They’d flail helplessly for a moment, before gracefully bouncing back onto their feet. “I’m honored by your offer. I hope your chef won’t feel offended if I show up with a decidedly mundane appetite.”

Trazer grinned. “You’ll be fine.”

They rose and left before they could get stuck in the crowd. Krix couldn’t remember a time he’d been luckier. The valuables in Trazer’s home would dwarf anything he had on him. With the dragon hopelessly infatuated, he’d be able to pocket treasure at his leisure and then vanish into the night. He’d even get a good quality meal out of the venture. And some action, if Trazer were as into him as he suspected. One-night stands could be profitable in the right circumstances.

They shared their thoughts about the play as they leisurely walked to Trazer’s home. Trazer adored a scene in which Karth’s guards were overwhelmed and stuffed. The glee in the voices of the servants and terror of the guards were perfect. Krix favored an early monologue of Karth’s, before he spent the rest of the play mostly gorging. The actor had achieved

an excellent degree of menace despite his stature.

They came to a street lined by small restaurant stalls. Cooks leaned over counters open to the street and boasted of the fine food they prepared.

“You, good sir, with the scales as bright as the sunrise!” one bellowed. Krix turned to him. He was a hippo in an apron that squeezed his round middle tight. “Yes, you! You must try my kebabs, they’re the best in the city!” He held a trio of kebabs, loaded with steaming meat and vegetables.

“I’m afraid I’ve already got dinner plans,” Krix politely declined.

“Oh, but you must! They’re free for the taking!” The hippo leaned over and his belly spilled across the counter. He waved the kebabs at Krix.

“Go ahead, they look delicious,” Trazer urged him on.

Krix didn’t want to argue about free food. If the hippo believed he’d purchase more, though, was about to be sorely mistaken. Krix reached up and grabbed the kebabs.

He offered one to Trazer to keep up the charm, but the dragon shook his head. “They’re for you, so eat up.”

Krix did as he was told. A single bite proved he’d made the right decision. He finished the first kebab and—after Trazer once more refused to have any—swiftly devoured the rest.

“They’re great, right?” the hippo asked with a wide grin.

“Very well done,” Krix confessed. “Rest assured I’ll return in the future, but for now, we must get going.”

“Don’t be a stranger,” the hippo said, letting them continue without any further sales pitch.

“That was odd,” Krix said. His stomach was still pleasantly warm from the kebabs.

“What’s so strange about free food?” Trazer asked.

“There’s usually a catch when a shop is involved. He didn’t even try to sell me on anything, he just gave it away.”

“He probably just saw how hungry you looked,” Trazer said.

Krix laughed. “I don’t see why I’d give that impression to anyone.”

“Seriously?” Trazer playfully tapped Krix on the back with his tail. “You look like you’re starving. I’ve got half a mind to drag you into the nearest restaurant so you can have a proper meal immediately.”

Before Krix could continue to deny the claim, a crow from a nearby shop cawed to get his attention. “Kobold! Try some of my bread, please!”

“Sir, I already have—”

“He’d love to have it,” Trazer interrupted. The dragon snatched the bread and pushed it into Krix’s claws.

Krix looked between the eager crow and dragon and gave up on arguing. He gobbled up the fluffy bread and gave praise to the crow, if only to quiet them. Not even a minute later, he was accepting a complimentary sampling of cheese.

“You’re rather popular today,” Trazer mused as they stepped away from the stall.

“I’m sure it’s just a peculiar approach to advertising. They’ll shower me with free food knowing that I’ll mention it to others, who’ll investigate for themselves. It’s creative, I guess.” Krix hid how gratifying it was to receive such attention. His disguise had never prompted others to be so desperate to curry his favor before. He only wished the merchants were as interested in giving him clothing and jewelry as they were snacks.

The free samples kept coming. Not a single cook would let the pair pass until Krix had eaten or drunk something. They presented him with bread, cheeses, and meats of every sort. Fresh fruit and vegetables appeared as often as pastries and candies. Wine bottles were popped open and kegs tapped. As long as it was edible, the merchants demanded he try it.

Krix gave up on convincing them to go away. Stopping to argue with one would only give two others the time to rush over and advertise their cooking. Trazer didn’t mind the delays, or that he was never offered even a bite or sip. He encouraged Krix to sample as much as the cooks did, and Krix was eager to please the dragon he intended to swindle later.

Krix found the attention addicting. Whenever he’d infiltrated the upper classes, he’d had the wisdom to keep his alter ego humble, someone just important enough to be at a party but not so grandiose as to arouse suspicion. In turn, he’d been treated with only a token of respect. The merchants, though, acted as if he were riding down the street in a golden carriage and showering them in coin. He felt like a king.

The kobold’s resistance waned, and he embraced the gifts lavished upon him. Eventually, he no longer had to grab the food himself. He’d

simply open his mouth and they'd feed it to him. With a plethora of incredible tastes dancing over his tongue and praise flowing through into his ears, Krix began to daydream of sitting on a marvelous throne with a crown perched on his head and an army of servants at his beck and call.

Delusions of grandeur distracted him from the very real consequences of stuffing himself with free food. His middle steadily swelled, filling out his puffy doublet until it clung to him tight. The ties holding it closed loosened and strained, exposing bits of the white tunic beneath. His belt dug into the lower curve of his bulging belly, creaking from the pressure put upon it. He felt the discomfort but it was distant, like a nagging thought that wouldn't go away. Trazer slid a claw across the kobold's middle and carefully undid his belt. The sudden relief made Krix moan.

"Yes, it's wonderful. I'll be telling everyone at the guild about it, I guarantee you," Krix told a beaming brown bear. When the bear leaned down to shake his claw in thanks, their bellies bumped together.

Krix's eyes widened in confusion. His doublet had come open and his tunic rolled up, revealing the orange dome of a belly he knew shouldn't exist. But when he tapped it with a finger and felt the heaviness in the pit of his stomach, he couldn't deny he'd somehow gorged as much as the actors in the play. He blushed at how much he'd senselessly pigged out. Had he truly been gifted so much food?

The merchants ignored his shock and persisted in offering him more.

"Try the grilled lamb!"

"My cider never disappoints!"

"You can't go without having some pie!"

The audience of admirers suddenly seemed more like a mob to Krix. "I've had too much," he said to one. "Another time," he told a second.

His polite dismissives were promptly ignored.

"You must!"

"You will!"

"You won't regret it!"

A pastry forced its way into Krix's mouth. He had no choice but to swallow it. When he opened his mouth to scold the baker responsible, a chunk of meat silenced him. The obsessed cooks closed in on Krix, all hell-bent on cramming their offerings into him whether he wanted them or not.

The crowd loomed over Krix, sending sample after sample his way. Turning his head away from one only put him in the path of another. His belly wobbled from his struggles, ballooning out more and more. No longer did he feel like a king. Instead, he felt like a turkey being plumped up for slaughter.

He looked to Trazer for help, but the dragon expressed the same zealous approval for feeding him as the others did. He was alone against the crowd, and every second trapped in the middle made his gut rounder and heavier. Would they stop if he was immobilized, or would they continue feeding him until nothing edible remained in their stalls? His mind flashed to the dragon from the play being rolled off-stage. He refused to end up like that.

Krix squeezed a claw into a small pouch by his side and felt around for a small orb. Once he found it, he pulled it out and threw it to the ground. Gray smoke billowed forth, engulfing him and the crowd. The surprised cooks coughed and backed away, creating an opening. With one claw holding his bulging gut, Krix forced his way through and fled. He looked ridiculous, his belly bobbing up and down as he jogged, but all he cared about was escaping the feeding frenzy he'd stumbled into. Shouts rant out behind him, begging him to come back and try more food, but no one pursued him.