

The Kobold Thieves: Chapter 07

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Rage consumed Cleave. He'd had bad days before. Bedridden with a broken leg because he hadn't dodged a club well enough. Pounding headaches from too much ale. The afternoon spent locked in the stocks under the scorching sun as passersby mocked him. All had involved temporary nuisances or been bolstered by some kind of success. None came close to matching the sheer humiliation brought on by the horrid, fattening magic afflicting him.

As the plump kobold barreled down the street, he felt every ounce of his new burden. Up and down, up and down, his belly relentlessly bounced. He couldn't take a single step without it wobbling, without it reminding him that it'd buried the muscles he'd built through years of aggressive physical activity. Lost in a single night and replaced by embarrassing pudge. He didn't dare wonder how long it'd take him to lose the weight. He hadn't merely softened up, he'd ballooned out, and such heft could rarely be shed with ease.

The pounds would only keep coming if Cleave didn't act fast. A bit of a bounce in his step would be the least of his worries. He'd be struggling to squeeze through doorways and looking like a ball of dough. He shuddered, every strand of his silvery mane bristling from his head to the tip of his tail.

His chunky, sluggish tail.

Its extra bulk hadn't gone unnoticed. He kept having to consciously lift it off the ground as it tried to drag behind him. If he were lucky, there'd be more force behind its swings, but he doubted it'd move with the same speed he'd grown accustomed to. He clenched his fists tight. How could he fight well when his body felt so different? He'd be clumsy and make mistakes. He'd lose fights he should be winning. The spell took too much from him.

Cleave desperately needed to destroy something, but doing so in broad daylight would only bring more trouble. Instead, he imagined everyone who needed throttling. Buckle had soared up his shit list because they refused to stop gorging. His middle would be a little rounder thanks to the chef, and he wouldn't soon forget that.

But Virk had earned the majority of Cleave's ire. They were the one

who'd chosen the heist, who'd praised its potential and shrugged off all dissent. Books. He was gaining weight because of a stupid pile of magical books! He didn't give a damn how valuable they were, books were nothing but trouble. If they'd stuck to robbing stores and fools flaunting their wealth, they'd have never set off such an absurd trap. In the time it'd taken Virk to plan for the heist, they could've made the same amount of coin simply robbing people.

Virk was a conceited blowhard. He'd spend eons creating intricate plans for mundane issues and *still* overlook something obvious, like a school known for its magic using magical traps. And to make matters worse, the idiot intended to solve the crisis with the very same method that'd caused it. Plans. Stupid, pointless, endless plans. He'd talk and talk until they all ballooned out and filled the tavern.

Or at least that'd be Cleave and Buckle's fate, since the chef had lost his mind and descended into a feeding frenzy at Cleave's expense. He wished they could trade places. *He* could've resisted the temptation to glut. The rest could become balls of blubber for all he cared, but he'd be damned if he'd let himself round out like a spoiled, lazy noble.

Cleave wouldn't put up with the gang's bullshit any longer. At long last, he'd take the initiative and fix a problem his way. The others all assumed he was a lughead who only knew how to punch things. Snide remarks never went over his head, he just ignored half of them. He wouldn't deny favoring brute force, because it worked. Words alone would only get a person so far if they lacked the strength to back them up.

A lifetime in the Vastport underworld had given Cleave a few connections of his own, people who either respected him, or knew better than to get on his bad side. Most were as straightforward as him, but a couple had bothered to learn a thing or two about magic. They'd purge the spell that'd been cast on him, and maybe help him find the mage responsible so he could repay the favor a thousand times over.

If the others wanted his cure, they'd have to agree to his demands. For one, the gang would be his from then on. No more convoluted plans, no more working for rich folk. They'd finally be genuine thieves, and he'd be able to smash in all the skulls he wanted.

Fury and fantasy took hold of Cleave. His legs carried him out of habit

towards the haunt of a shifty mage who owed him a favor, leaving his mind to wander at the worst possible time. He hurried right into a neighborhood at the edge of the port that was dense with inns, taverns, and restaurants.

Within seconds, the distracted kobold's stomach started to fill. A bit of egg snagged from a sleepy merchant at an inn. A taste of stew swiped from a confused cook at a tavern. A swig of ale from a courier's flask. Cleave stole a hearty meal one bite and gulp at a time. The sensation of fullness in his belly couldn't break through the frustrated state of his mind. Shirtless, there was nothing to impede his steadily bloating middle, and he paid no heed to the heavier swing of his belly.

Cleave felt a lump in his throat and a quelched belch puffed up his cheeks. His breath smelled of wine and a half dozen things neither he nor Buckle had been eating. He stopped in the middle of the street and looked down at his gut. He poked the side of it with two fingers and heard a messy *gurgle* echo out.

"Would everyone in this city stop eating for one damn minute!" Cleave fumed under his breath, earning stares from bystanders.

He picked up his pace, practically jogging down the street. He loathed how his gut wobbled and jiggled, drawing attention to him. Every ten feet he found himself suppressing a burp. With time of the essence, he barreled onward. Too many people were out and about. Some stumbled out of his way while others froze in shock or amusement at the round kobold charging them. He squeezed between groups who refused to disperse, wincing at the tight fit. Any who dared talk back to him earned a fierce smack from his tail. His swings missed far too often, provoking laughter.

Cleave breathed a sigh of relief as he passed the cluster of eateries. He didn't even make it a block before he found himself flanked by taverns.

He knew the city's layout by heart, but couldn't recall the location of every last eatery. Vastport had become a fattening labyrinth where any wrong turn would swell his belly out an inch or two.

There wasn't time to think, only act. He bolted down an alley onto a quieter street. His swelling slowed but didn't cease. Whenever he spotted the hanging signs of taverns and restaurants up ahead he'd divert his course, sometimes into worse situations.

People were scarfing down snacks as they walked along, quenching

their thirst at public fountains, and swiping fruit from busy market stalls. Never before had he observed how ravenous a city could be.

What should've been a brief trip dragged on as Cleave weaved between roads and avoided popular squares. He backtracked, dashed, and sniffed around for the aromas of cooking. His efforts slowed the swelling but failed to halt the onslaught. Inevitably, Cleave's belly ballooned halfway to his knees, becoming a churning ball of everything culinary the city had to offer.

Fueled by a volatile mix of anger and desperation, Cleave relentlessly continued on.

It didn't take long for the kobold's swollen gut to prove as distracting to himself as it had everyone else. He darted past a wagon to distance himself from a loud tavern, and plowed face-first into something firm, yet with a bit of a bounce. He fell onto his rump, kicking up dust and belching. A lengthy string of curses filled his head as he glanced up at the fool who'd gotten in his way. He quickly bit his lip and held them back.

A sturdy grizzly bear with a barrel of a belly loomed above him. He wore the colors of the city guard, with a chain shirt that didn't quite cover his middle. His love handle pressed against the sheathed sword on his belt, which, in turn, had become buried under his overhang. He looked like he'd get along well with Buckle.

"Watch where you're going, little...one." The bear raised a brow as saw Cleave's bulging gut. "Looks like someone's been eating since sunrise," he mumbled.

Cleave clumsily stood, his middle bobbing and swaying the whole time. He put on the best apathetic face he could manage. "Sorry," he grunted with considerable reluctance. He didn't have time to get on a guard's bad side, especially one big enough to flatten him.

The guard continued looking Cleave over, far too long for his liking. "You wouldn't happen to have a stolen meal crammed in there, now, would you?" he asked, giving Cleave's middle a sharp nudge with a heavy paw.

Cleave's face contorted as the guard casually jostled him. "Of course not!" he snapped, barely refraining from slapping the bear's paw away.

"Strange. It sure seems like you were pulling a dine and dash to me." Cleave's hasty response hadn't earned the guard's trust in the least. "Maybe

we should wait a while just to make sure no one comes racing after ya.”

Ale poured into Cleave’s stomach, expanding his belly a little more. The guard’s baseless accusation was a threat to his waistline. And who knew how they’d respond if they noticed he was inexplicably growing rounder. They’d probably accuse him of stealing air or eating a market stall while they blinked. If not for his damn gut, he’d have sucker-punched the guard and bolted. Thankfully, he had more than his fists at his disposal.

“Do you really think I could outrun anyone stuffed like this?” Cleave grabbed the sides of his belly and shook it to distract the guard. As soon as the bear’s eyes began to follow the wobbles, Cleave made his move. He spun around and slammed his heavy tail into the guard’s legs. In the past, such a strike had always knocked his foes off their feet. The large bear merely faltered and fell to one knee.

“Fuck me,” Cleave grumbled, then raced off past the guard.

“Come back here you round little clown!” the guard roared. He got back to his feet and gave chase.

The engorged kobold and overweight bear were at an equal disadvantage in a race. Cleave fought to keep his gut in place, feeling it swell little by little in his grasp. Behind him, the guard labored in his heavy gear, unused to running after anyone.

Bystanders scrambled to get out of their way lest they be trampled. Cleave tripped as many as he could, hoping to slow the guard down, but they proved surprisingly persistent. His legs ached and his heart pounded as he tapped into every ounce of energy he had left. Unfortunately, the bear began to close the gap.

Cleave took a turn on a whim and ended up on a narrow street. Ahead, a low wagon carrying an enormous keg had stalled as the driver argued with a carriage coming in the opposite direction. “Cider” was written on the back of the keg in faded paint. People loitered around, passing by the jam only one at a time. Cleave lumbered up to the wagon, and realized right away he’d never be able to force himself through the crowd to the other side. He turned around in time to see the guard arrive. If he had to fight, then so be it.

The bear was snarling between heavy breaths. “It’s going to be a long day and night in the stocks for you, food thief.”

“Are you gonna carry me yourself, tubbo?” Cleave sneered. “You’ll collapse before you carry me a foot!” He lifted his gut and jiggled it as a taunt.

“Who said anything about carrying you? I’ll be dragging you by the tail once I’ve knocked your lights out.” The guard raised his large fists.

Cleave backed against the cart as the bear closed in on him. The odds were against him. Tired or not, the bear had the advantage in reach and muscle. One solid punch could drop him. But to reach him, the bear would have to swing low, and Cleave doubted he had any experience fist-fighting kobolds.

The guard swung first. Cleave ducked and tilted his head, baring his horns. The guard pulled his fist back to avoid them as Cleave swatted him in the thigh. Undeterred, the guard went on the attack, again and again, forcing Cleave to focus on defense. Cleave felt the battle turning in the guard’s favor as clearly as he felt his middle swelling from someone else’s lunch. Every swing came closer and closer to connecting, and Cleave’s back brushed against the keg.

“Nowhere to run!” the guard bellowed in triumph, and threw a punch straight at Cleave. Cleave ducked just in time. The guard’s fist went right between the kobold’s horns, skimmed their mane, and then plowed into the keg. Wood cracked and the whole cart rattled from the blow. The guard withdrew his fist, howling in pain. Cider leaked from the dent he’d made in the back of the keg. Enraged, the guard roared and lunged.

Cleave threw himself to the ground, swiping the guard’s legs with his tail on the way down. The guard stumbled and plowed into the keg, their head breaking through the dent their fist had made.

Cleave had come to rest atop his bloated belly. His arms quaked as he pushed off the ground, refusing to let gravity get the better of him. His unruly gut swayed and rolled, intent on humiliating him further, but he beat it in the end and got back up. He saw the guard twitching, their head stuck in the keg, and smirked. “Looks like you’re the one enjoying the stocks now, ass.”

The guard’s twitching intensified. Below, his belly ballooned out from under his chain shirt and tunic. The bear had plugged most of the hole in the keg with his own head, but his mouth proved to be a more than welcoming

escape route for the cider, which gushed down his throat and into his stomach.

A snort from Cleave was quickly interrupted by a boozy belch. His middle had begun to blimp up nearly as fast as the guard's, and from the same source. "Shit! Shit! Shrrrrp!" Cleave didn't think, he only ran, as far from the swelling guard as he could. He couldn't even revel in how huge they'd be once the giant keg had emptied into them. He doubted the blubbery bear would be doing much patrolling for the foreseeable future.

Cleave tossed aside all thought of reaching his contact. Showing up with a belly wide enough to flatten a cart would shred every last bit of respect the mage had for him. They'd be too busy laughing at his expense to help, and Cleave would be too busy trying to crush them under his gut to understand how little he'd gain from retaliation in the long run. He had to fall back, digest the feast forced upon him, and try again when fewer people in the city were eating.

The swelling slowed, but not nearly enough. The damage had already been done. Cleave's jogging diminished to a strained waddle as he drove himself to exhaustion. He desperately held onto the little mobility he had left. Those ahead of him saw a red-scaled ball wobbling their way, while those behind saw the immense curve of his swollen belly jutting out from both sides. He belched and groaned and cursed, fighting off a drunken daze and a food coma. He took blind turns, hardly able to concentrate on a real escape route.

His instincts inevitably failed him. Cleave turned and waddled down a steep, narrow street no wider than an alley. He soon lost his footing and tumbled forwards. The bloated kobold landed on his belly and bounced, then began rolling down the street. He yelped as he picked up momentum, rolling along cracked cobblestones and past closed doors. Thankfully, no one had been coming up the street, for they surely would've been flattened by the runaway ball of a kobold.

Cleave came to a painful stop at the bottom of the street. He lay on his side, with his belly slowly swelling outward. He sighed as he felt it push against the opposite wall. Again he'd become wedged, and again he would end up fattened up like a prize hog. Only sleep quenched his rage.