

## The Kobold Thieves: Chapter 09

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Virk's polite smile flattened the moment he stepped out of the scribe's shop. He'd put far too much faith in his contacts. They'd readily supplied him with rumors, illicit jobs, forged papers, and discounted equipment, but none of them could come up with a reliable and discreet spell breaker. A city of Vastport's size should've been filled with them. Only the scribe who'd served as the mediator for the book thefts had given him a sliver of hope. They knew someone who knew someone who *might* know something about breaking spells and curses.

Normally, he'd never rely on such a fragile arrangement, but he'd run out of options. With his waistline on the line, he couldn't afford to be picky. Buckle had already begun ballooning out of control, and he feared Krix and Cleave wouldn't be far behind. A gang of butterballs would be useless.

Virk headed home. He maintained an illusion spell to disguise his gains and poorly fitting clothes, but it couldn't hide the embarrassment from himself. He still felt the tightness of the fabric and the warmth of the sun on his exposed scales. To his dismay, his vest had somehow grown even less comfortable since leaving The Cracked Coin. He tugged on it with a claw and heard the creaking of thread. The middle button popped right off, passing through his illusion and landing in the street. No one had noticed. He scooped up the button and dipped into an alley for privacy.

A flick of his wrist banished the illusion. Virk hissed under his breath. His paunch stuck out more than he remembered, straining buttons and bulging out a bit under his vest. When he twisted to check out his ass, a small seam on his pants tore open. He forced himself to pinch his soft middle to confirm the obvious: he'd gained more weight.

Virk was too sensible to delude himself into believing his outfit made him look fatter. The new weight was real, but inexplicable. He'd only eaten bread all day, and washed it down with water. He hadn't felt full or craved food. The desire to grow huge and fat hadn't possessed him as it did Buckle. Yet he found himself fatter, as if he'd gorged the morning away.

The nature of his gains eluded him. Without knowledge, he couldn't defend himself, and he'd only get fatter. He feared the spell was outright

causing him to gain weight no matter what he did. The worst-case scenario, aside from maybe Buckle's situation. At least he retained his wits.

Virk cast a fresh illusion on himself. His curves vanished and his clothes mended. He left the alley and continued on his way, hypersensitive to any potential changes to his weight.

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Servers darted around The Cracked Coin, preparing it for customers. The scattered kobolds glanced up at Virk when he arrived, but kept out of his way. He only interacted with them when necessary. Buckle handled their training, their hiring, and their firing. The tavern might fall into disarray if the chef couldn't be brought back to their senses. Yet another worry to weigh him down.

Virk waved down a bright green kobold who resembled a miniature gecko. "Where's Buckle?" he asked.

"He's, uh, right over there." The kobold pointed behind Virk.

Virk turned around to see Buckle lumbering up the stairs from the kitchen. The sides of the chef's blubbery belly brushed the door frame. His heavy breaths jiggled his middle and chest. The faint curve of another double chin had formed on his face.

Buckle's gains shouldn't have surprised him, but he nonetheless had to hold back his shock.

Buckle spotted Virk and frowned. "You lost the weight?"

"If only I were so blessed," Virk sighed. He did away with the illusion. The staff had experience willfully ignoring anything to do with their bosses, but more than one directed confused looks towards the heftier pair.

"You got fatter," Buckle said with cheer.

"Not nearly as fat as you," Virk snapped. "I see you've spent all day stuffing your face. Will there even be any food left for our customers to eat?"

"I've barely snacked at all, I promise," Buckle insisted. "I've been too busy gathering the staff together and getting the place cleaned up. Being closed for a few days may not seem like much to you, but it takes a lot of effort to get things running smoothly again. Servers take other jobs, food

goes bad, customers need to be attracted.” He leaned against the door frame and caught his breath.

“If you weren’t gorging, then how did you gain so much weight?”

“A pleasant miracle, I suppose,” Buckle said. He slid a claw under the overhang of his gut and wobbled it, widening his smile. “Whatever the reason, it’s affecting my cooks as well. They’ve all grown wonderfully chubby since coming in today!”

“Please tell me you haven’t been fattening the staff,” Virk hissed.

“Of course not. Stuffing people is nice, but it won’t convince them to embrace the weight. And though I’ve encouraged the cooks to eat as much as they want, none are ready to follow me. Yet.” Buckle winked.

Virk flicked a finger and gave himself a brief illusory smile to hide his frustration. “If they have any sense, they’ll show restraint. Let me see for myself how fat they’ve gotten.”

Buckle turned himself around, his thick tail smacking the wall. He took the steps one at a time, wood groaning in his wake.

Virk stayed a few feet behind them, prepared to leap back if the stairs gave in. Even from behind, the chef’s heft was on full display. Their rump wobbled and their tail dragged. Their huge gut would occasionally sway into view. The plodding journey down the staircase proved Buckle was no longer suitable for heists. A day. It’d only taken a day to reduce the gang to three.

Sure enough, every cook in the kitchen looked softer around the middle. They’d tied their aprons loose, as if expecting to grow even fatter before the end of the night. They busied themselves preparing food. Virk saw no obvious gluttony, only taste-testing.

“If you weren’t stuffing them, did they all glut during lunch?” None appeared encumbered by their sudden gains.

“Oh no, they’ve just grazed like usual. Some bread and cheese here, a ladle of stew there. I think they would’ve indulged more if they weren’t guzzling so much water to keep cool. The kitchen’s felt extra stuffy today,” Buckle admitted. He was fanning his round face with a claw.

“The chef hasn’t been force-feeding any of you, has he?” Virk asked the cooks sternly. They shook their heads and returned to work. He didn’t catch any fearful glances or hesitation from them, and decided they were telling the truth.

"I said I'd never do that." Buckle sounded genuinely hurt.

"This is a very serious situation, Buckle. I have to exhaust every lead." Virk massaged his brow. "So they didn't overeat and you didn't stuff them, yet they got chubby anyway. That's suspiciously similar to my own condition."

He considered what he could possibly have in common with the cooks. He could dismiss location right away. He never hung out in the kitchen and doubted any of them had the means to patronize his favorite lounge. None of them had had any involvement with the heist or the stolen goods. He couldn't be contagious, since he hadn't seen any of them for days.

"There *must* be a connection. I'm missing something, Buckle," Virk grumbled.

"Maybe I've accidentally found a way to make food more fattening?" Buckle offered. He grinned. "It sure feels that way."

"That would explain the gains of your cooks, but not you or myself. You'd be a ball of blubber right now if all the food you gorged on last night had been as fattening as the little you've snacked on today. And I haven't had anything prepared or even served by you since before the heist. Everything I've eaten today I've grabbed with my own two claws."

"Then maybe you've got a fattening touch?"

Virk rolled his eyes. "I have been squeezing my belly in disgust all morning. If your silly proposition were true, then I'd be rounder than you right now." A thought he shoved out of his head the second it formed.

"No, I mean that maybe your touch makes food more fattening. So a chunk of bread becomes as filling as a cake." Buckle's eyes lit up with joy.

Virk didn't like Buckle's theory at all. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't reject it outright. "Nonsense. I had nothing to do with the food you and your cooks ate before you gained weight."

"Yes you did. You dug through the pantries this morning before you called the meeting. And we've been using those ingredients to make the food."

Virk held up his claws and stared at them. He *had* scoured the pantries, poking at nearly every sack and container. A cursed, fattening touch would explain how he'd gained so much weight from eating so little. Even water might become treacherous. He remembered Buckle mentioning

all the water his cooks had been guzzling. His claws shook.

“Let’s...let’s say for a moment your absurd idea is true. We’ll need proof.” Virk took a deep breath. “The servers haven’t been begging for scraps, have they?”

“No. They just got in,” Buckle answered.

“And none looked fatter to me. Buckle, who’s the most expendable server?”

“Now Virk, some are a bit rough around the edges, but they’ve all got merit,” Buckle insisted.

Virk wasn’t in the mood to debate the qualifications of the rabble they employed. “Then who’s the least experienced?”

“Grit, I guess.”

“Bring him down here, right away.” Virk looked at the massive chef. “Nevermind. Have one of the cooks bring him.”

Buckle sent a cook up the stairs. They returned with the gecko-like kobold Virk had spoken to earlier. Their gaze wandered between the bellies of everyone else in the kitchen.

Virk smiled at the server. “Grit, is it?” They nodded. “Well, Grit, I’ve got a very important task for you tonight. You’ll be paid triple your normal wages in compensation.”

Grit’s eyes widened. “Really?” Caution tempered his greed. Virk appreciated that.

“Yes. All you have to do is drink water. A *lot* of water.” Virk walked over to a barrel of water and gestured for Grit to follow. The server complied.

“Uh, how much water?”

Virk stirred the water with a finger. “Enough to satisfy my curiosity. It’s a simple task with a handsome reward. You’ll accept, correct?” He phrased it like a question but spoke sharply so Grit understood it was an order.

“Of course, sir,” Grit replied.

“Good. Now start drinking.”

Grit was handed a cup. The confused kobold dipped the cup in the barrel and drank. Virk watched them drink cup after cup. After each one, they’d glance at Virk, expecting to be dismissed. Virk would stare back at them until they started drinking again. After eight cups, Grit started to slow.

“There has to be a faster way,” Virk sighed. “Grit, drink directly from the barrel. Buckle and I will tip it so you can drain the whole thing nice and quick.”

“The whole thing?” Grit looked like he’d been told to walk through fire.

“Yes. Otherwise, you don’t get paid tonight.” He had no patience for subtlety.

“But Virk—” Buckle began.

“This isn’t up for debate, Buckle,” Virk cut him off. He couldn’t prevent the chef from gorging, but he still held sway as the leader of the gang.

“I’ll do it.” Grit grasped the lip of the barrel and stared into its depths. He only had a head’s height on the barrel and it was too wide for him to wrap his short arms around. It outweighed him, too. Thinking of filling his belly with so many gallons of water made his head spin, but he needed the money.

Virk and Buckle took position on either side of the barrel. They tipped it over little by little, until the water began to flow into Grit’s mouth. The server chugged, clenching his claws into the lip so he didn’t pull away on instinct. Soon, his flat middle swelled and sloshed. It pushed out from under his shirt, wobbling with every gulp. He couldn’t see it, but he could feel the tingle of pressure as his stomach ballooned past its comfortable capacity. He looked into Virk’s eyes, but his boss showed no desire to cease the strange request.

Whatever reservations Buckle had about the experiment evaporated once Grit’s middle began rounding out. His eyes were glued to the server’s growing belly, delighting in every jiggle. Virk noticed, and tried to take some degree of solace in knowing the chef would be willing to fatten anyone he was asked to from that point on.

Grit winced as he felt his gut push against the barrel and then begin swelling around the curve of it. Half the water remained, and he felt ready to pop. His rubbery hide stretched and creaked, looking more and more like a balloon by the second.

The pool of water in his stomach weighed down on him. His knees quaked as he fought gravity using what little strength he had. He didn’t think Virk would take it well if he failed to drink all the water, even if by accident.

But he couldn't fend off the inevitable.

Grit's legs caved and he fell forward. He kept his grip on the barrel as his feet slipped back. Water lapped over his muzzle, so he opened his mouth wider to catch every last drop. His gut expanded faster, reaching the floor within seconds. The weary kobold relaxed and used his bloated belly to prop himself up.

Virk and Buckle lifted the barrel, pouring the last of the water into their reluctant test subject. They set it down, empty, and looked upon the results.

Grit lay atop his massive middle, panting. The sides of his belly bulged out as the rest of his weight pressed upon it, making him resemble a dumpling. His feet and claws no longer reached the floor, leaving him wobbling as the water within him splashed about. His eyes were partially closed and he frowned.

"That should be enough," Virk said. "Buckle, roll him against a wall and out of the way. I have work to attend to, but I'll be checking in regularly to see how he fares."

Buckle placed his claws on the taut sides of Grit's belly and gave the helpless kobold a playful shove. Grit yipped and burped as he was rolled onto his back, his water-logged belly swaying against his chin. Another roll brought him upright again. By then, Buckle had built up enough momentum to keep the round kobold rolling, and he didn't stop until he'd positioned Grit on the sacks of grain he'd rested against the night before.

Virk returned to his room, flipped an hourglass, and waited. Nothing seemed amiss at the first check-in. Grit was bored and bloated, while Buckle lectured the cooks on the benefits of a pillowy belly. Virk suspected a change at the second check-in, but didn't confirm it until the third.

Grit's belly had finally shrunken some, and the rest of him had grown thicker, a fact which hadn't gone unnoticed by him. A stern glare put an end to his whining. As the evening went on, Grit plumped up. His clothes tightened and tore. The cooks grew chubbier, not quite able to resist the combination of Buckle's incessant encouragement and the extraordinarily fattening properties of their ingredients.

By close, Grit had gained a sizable ball gut at the expense of his clothing. The server pondered his gains with dismay, unsure if the money or

their job had been worth the considerable gains.

“Well, that confirms that,” Virk sighed, shifting his gaze between Grit and the chubby kitchen staff. “Everything I touch becomes fattening.” Along with everything he ate. Even if he fasted like a hermit, bread and water would soften him up as quickly as pastries and wine. For as long as the spell afflicted him, weight gain would be inevitable.

“With you blessing all our ingredients, I’ll be able to gain weight faster than ever!” Buckle said with glee.

Virk didn’t have the energy to rant at the chef.