

The Kobold Thieves: Chapter 03

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Cleave stormed through the crowded streets of Vastport like a hot knife through butter. He forced others to move aside for him, pushing past any who dared to assume the shorter kobold would naturally give them the right of way. He only changed direction for wagons and those on horseback, and even then with great reluctance and a flash of his fangs.

Despite his stature, he'd learned a thing or two about squeezing respect out of the bigger world around him. He couldn't loom over people or surround himself with an expensive retinue of guards. Instead, he projected his ferocity to match that of the largest dragon. He kept a frown on his face by default, shifting rapidly to a scowl or a snarl whenever the need arose, and found excuses for that need often.

Time and time again he'd proven that presenting himself as rage incarnate humbled those wanting to challenge him. Brandishing his horns and keeping a long dagger plainly visible on his belt certainly helped. He'd also heard it said that his dark red scales and orange eyes made him look devilish. He made no effort to discourage the laughable assumption.

While many kobolds were pushovers, Cleave proudly intimidated people twice his height and girth. He only wished his methods worked on Virk and Krix. The pair were too smug for his liking, always believing themselves six steps ahead of him just because they excelled at jabbering away and sucking up to others. If it weren't for the money, he'd have ditched them ages ago. Maybe he still would. They'd welcome his absence at first, then come crawling to him on claws and knees, whining about how their heists fell apart without his strength to back them. The thought brought a smirk to his face, which he diligently twisted back into a scowl moments later.

The docks of Vastport were loud and lively. Ships from every land across the sea arrived daily, bringing with them the abundance of goods that helped the city prosper. They also brought whole crews of restless sailors in need of dirt-cheap places to rest and drink. The Cudgel was such a place. The tavern occupied the basement of an abandoned candle shop, that'd replaced an abandoned tailor's shop, that'd replaced an abandoned brothel,

and so forth, as Cleave had heard the story told. While countless businesses had failed above, the Cudgel persisted below.

Cleave stomped down the warped and stained stairs leading into the depths of the tavern. He grunted at a drunk border collie coming in the opposite direction and elbowed them into the rough stone wall to clear the way. They mumbled a curse but he bared his fangs and sent them scurrying up the stairs.

The tavern was a mess. None of the scavenged furnishings matched, and most bore the scars of drawn claws and blades. Cleave had left his fair share of marks. The few attempts at mending were half-assed, like a dirty rag covering a gushing wound. It reeked of the overpowering herbs that kept worse odors at bay. All the money the place made went into booze and bribes.

And yet customers occupied every seat and boisterous conversations pounded in Cleave's ears. The people who found their way to the Cudgel weren't looking for comfort, they were looking to chug ale and fill their bellies after an exhausting day. They could find a nicer establishment by wandering in any random direction for a while, but then they'd be emptying their coin purses for the same amount of liquor. And they'd find the staff less accepting of their rash behaviors, too.

Cleave thrived in the Cudgel. No one kept secrets there. If someone had a problem with him they'd say so to his face, not behind his back, and he'd answer with his fists. With Virk obsessed with careful, non-confrontational heists, fights in the Cudgel had been Cleave's only way to hone his skills. Otherwise, he'd have softened up and lost his muscles. The last thing the gang needed was another Buckle.

Cleave eyed the busy bar. Aside from sailors, there were also dock workers, petty crooks, and the occasional pirate. He didn't care about pissing off individuals, but things would get messy fast if he pissed off a group. He singled out a lanky fox with a scarred muzzle and a fresh mug of ale. They slumped over the bar and gently swayed, obviously not on their first drink. They also lacked a weapon.

The fox didn't notice Cleave walking over. Cleave gave their stool a sharp kick. "You're in my spot, furball!"

The fox turned with a snarl, then looked down. The fury left his face,

replaced by a cocky grin Cleave had seen plenty. “The stool’s too big for you, kid. Go find a bucket to sit on or something.” He returned to his drink.

Cleave had heard far worse, but the belittling still left him bitter. He reminded himself it was a good thing the fox was underestimating him, then kicked the stool harder. The fox spilled ale on his shirt and almost fell over. He slammed his mug down and slid off the stool unsteadily. Others at the bar inched away.

“I was gonna let you run off with your tail between your legs, but now I’m gonna—” The fox’s threat ended prematurely as Cleave swung his tail right into their legs. They fell against the bar and slid down it. They were still trying to brace themselves when Cleave came up and slammed their head against the wood twice in quick succession. A yelp escaped the fox after the first strike, but the second knocked them out cold.

Heads turned at the assault, then turned back to drinks and food. The Cudgel was no stranger to fights, and the one Cleave had provoked was tamer than most. Nothing had been broken and the fox was bloodied, but still breathing. It was as close to being polite as Cleave got.

Cleave snatched the fox’s meager coin purse and tied it to his belt. He hoisted himself onto the stool and claimed the fox’s drink for himself. The ale was little better than swill, but it was free, and it’d come with the opportunity to assert himself over another while an audience pretended not to watch. Hopefully, a few would leave with greater respect—or fear—of kobolds.

The portly vulture behind the counter shook his head as Cleave took a seat. “You could at least *try* to avoid the customers still paying for drinks,” he said gruffly.

“That scrawny shit wouldn’t have lasted past this one,” Cleave said, holding up the mug.

“He was getting ready to try something stronger, you dolt.”

“Quit your whining, you’ll still be getting his coin tonight.” Cleave smacked his stolen coin purse.

The vulture scoffed and waddled off to handle a drink order. Cleave watched the bird’s rump sway from side to side as they left. That’s where the rest of the tavern’s money went. He guessed the barkeep gluttoned as much as Buckle. Their tunic and pants definitely hadn’t gotten any looser

since Cleave had become a regular. Sometimes he swore the rest of the city was fattening all around him.

Though Cleave bickered with the vulture frequently, they were a better conversation than the actual customers. His tendency towards violence no doubt prevented a friendship from forming, but he wasn't about to go soft just so he could chat while getting drunk.

The stolen ale didn't last Cleave long. He called the vulture back and used the fox's money to buy the closest thing to good ale the tavern had. "So, anyone come around needing muscle lately?"

"I run a tavern, not a guild house."

"Yeah, which is why people in need of more discreet help pass the word along here. The place is loud, but I've heard you hooking folk up with jobs before."

"Those are just rumors I sometimes happen to share, nothing that I'm officially connected to in any way." The vulture scanned the room.

Cleave rolled his eyes. "Do I look like the city guard to you? Just tell me if someone needs punching." He didn't care about the money, he just wanted an excuse to vent that didn't require him to pick a fight with random tavern patrons or people on the street.

"Check out the shops nestled around the Academy," the vulture relented. "Sounds like they've had problems with rowdy students and are tired of giving verbal warnings."

Cleave's disappointment was palpable. He didn't want to toss around dumb students, he wanted a real fight. And he'd had enough of the Academy with Virk's book heist. He shuddered, suddenly feeling a warmth that only hit after a few drinks. He held up his mug, which was still half-full. "You didn't slip something stronger into this, did you?" he growled.

The vulture scoffed. "I don't give away the good stuff for free."

"Maybe you watered a keg down less than usual."

"Maybe you had a few before you came here and punched out a customer," the vulture shot back. He let Cleave get away with a lot in the tavern, but he'd never been completely submissive towards him.

Cleave knew a fight with the barkeep was about the only way he could get permanently tossed out, so he ignored their insult. He wondered if something being smoked had caused his hasty inebriation. No one near him

had a pipe, and he couldn't pick up any obvious smell. The fox could've drugged his drink for an extra kick, but nothing tasted off about the ale.

The mystery gave him a headache. That or the booze. He cautiously raised the mug to his lips. Before he could take a drink, the chill of a long gulp hit his stomach. He put down the mug and pushed it away.

Something was wrong. The tiny hunger pains he'd felt on the way over were gone, replaced by an impossible sensation of fullness. He felt more than full—he felt stuffed. As small as he was, a drink and a half had never filled him before.

Dizzy and confused, he looked down. His middle jugged out, as if he'd raided the kitchen. He pressed a claw upon it and felt an uncomfortable increase in pressure. His belly swelled faintly as he grasped it, and he bit his lip to hold back a groan.

Something or someone was making him bloat up. He didn't know if it was a prank or a malicious attack. Either way, Cleave would make the perpetrator suffer dearly for screwing with him.

He looked around the tavern, searching for an obvious suspect. His gaze fell upon two zebras eating soup. They raised their bowls to make a drunken toast, then chugged the contents. Warmth abruptly spread within Cleave's stomach as his gut swelled.

The larger zebra eyed his bowl in bewilderment. "Huh, I tasted it, but my stomach feels empty. Was it really light for you, too?" he asked his companion.

The smaller zebra raised a brow as he patted his middle. "Nope, it filled me right up. I told you getting fat would give you a beastly appetite," he snorted.

A heavy *thud* on the counter made Cleave spin back around. The skunk beside him had ordered a towering mug of ale. He chugged the contents of the mug, and Cleave felt himself swell in turn. Cleave's cheeks puffed out and he clamped a claw over his muzzle to stifle a tremendous belch. The skunk, meanwhile, eyed his empty mug oddly, as if unsure he'd drunk anything at all.

Cleave realized with horror that the food and drink of everyone around him were somehow being transported to his stomach. Not all of it, thankfully, but enough to steadily expand his belly. He'd never heard of such

magic, and couldn't understand why he of all people would be targeted with it. Another customer might have pitied the stupid fox he'd knocked out or simply thought it'd be amusing to stuff a kobold. He clenched his jaw shut, barely able to contain his rage.

Anger didn't stop him from getting more drunk and bloated, though. The tavern was packed, and a good mage could hide anywhere. He couldn't beat them senseless if he didn't know who or where they were. Cleave had no choice but to retreat.

He clumsily slid off his stool. The force of the landing bounced his round belly up, then down, nearly taking the rest of him with it. He braced himself against the skunk's leg.

"Hey!" the skunk shouted, before his eyes were drawn straight to Cleave's middle.

"Quit your—*hic*—gawking!" Cleave growled, struggling to maintain an aura of menace as his ball gut wobbled to and fro.

Cleave stumbled forward, unused to having such an unwieldy weight around his middle. More customers were noticing how round he'd grown. Being shirtless was supposed to show off his physique, but now it only showed off the growing globe of his gut. He saw the grins and snickers, the pointing fingers and baffled looks. He'd entered like a raging bull, cementing his dominance. Now he left waddling like a cow, his reputation tarnished.

His gut sloshed as he barreled up the stairs. He loathed how it jiggled with every step, denying him even a hint of dignity. The swelling had slowed, likely because everyone was too busy staring at him to eat or drink. He kept going after escaping the Cudgel, desperate to distance himself from the magic afflicting him.

The fearsome image Cleave prided himself in collapsed the moment he gained a gut. He became a joke, a curiosity to gape at as he hurried down the street. If his middle hadn't been fully exposed, he might have been able to maintain his composure and pretend there was nothing out of the ordinary. Instead, he looked—and felt—like he'd drained half a keg.

He stopped to catch his breath after a few minutes of walking. He leaned against a wall and placed a claw on his belly, feeling for movement. Aside from his breathing, there wasn't any. The swelling had stopped.

His fists shook as he clenched them tightly. "I swear, when I find

whoever did this to me, I'm going to have Buckle feed them until they explode!" Cleave seethed. No, no, that'd be too good for them. He'd tie them up and have them stuffed for weeks, until they ballooned into a ball of blubber. Then he'd ditch them in the biggest, busiest square in the whole city. They'd be too ashamed and afraid to ever cast a spell again.

"No one fucks with me and gets awarrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrp!" The gut rattling belch made Cleave dizzy. He smelled a hint of pork. "What's—*hic*—happen—*urrrp*—happening?" he stammered. To his shock, the swelling had returned. Now he could see his middle slowly blimping out.

A nearby door opened, releasing the aroma of cooked meat. He looked up, and saw a hanging sign depicting a roast pig. Across the street, the muted singing of a bard came from a tavern sitting beside an inn. The strange spell's magic hadn't been limited to the Cudgel. Wherever he went, his stomach would steal the food and drink of others. His legs felt weak and his heart pounded. He had to get as far away from the restaurants and taverns as he could, before he ended up a beached whale.

Adrenaline fueled the frantic kobold, but his expanding gut hindered him every step of the way. Whenever he got out of sight of one restaurant, he'd find himself next to another, or a tavern, or an inn. He eyed the homes above shops and wondered how many people were settling down for dinner. Too many.

Before, his intimidating presence had allowed him to glide through crowds unimpeded. He quickly learned that a round, bouncing belly could stop a bystander in their tracks, and that slurred threats lacked any bite to them. Growls interrupted by belches only made them laugh, all while making him a fool.

Cleave's athleticism couldn't counter the growing globe he was saddled with. Whenever he'd carried heavy loot it'd been on his back, not around his middle, and he hadn't had to worry about falling flat on his face trying to move forwards. The run he'd left the Cudgel at was swiftly reduced to an awkward jog. Once his belly ballooned to his knees, all he could manage was a furious, humiliating waddle. Carrying his gut in his claws helped, but he knew it wouldn't keep him mobile forever, not while he continued to swell.

Cleave's head spun as the booze caught up with him. Simply

concentrating was a herculean effort. He hoped he was heading in the right direction, but buildings and streets blurred together. Even drunk, his rage refused to abate. There'd be no forgiveness for the mage who'd turned him into a stuffed pig and made a mockery of him.

His legs ached and his breathing strained from the frantic march. He exhausted every ounce of energy he could dredge up, intent on fleeing his magical feeding until he collapsed. Convinced he recognized a fuzzy shop sign, the engorged kobold lumbered into an alley that should've brought him closer to the docks, and potential safety.

Halfway down the alley, he tripped over a bump. Cleave had no hope of keeping his balance. His massive gut broke his fall. He felt a sharp pressure in the pit of his stomach and his eyes bulged. A painful burp escaped his lips, ending in a whimper. While he fought to recover, his belly continued to swell.

"No," Cleave groaned as he tried in vain to roll himself back onto his feet. "No, this can't be happening, damn it." He lacked the energy to yell.

The alley was so narrow, he could stick out his arms and touch either wall with the tips of his fingers. It didn't take long for the bloating sides of his belly to touch them as well. Panic kept him teetering on the edge of consciousness as he futilely attempted to escape the confines of the alley. The few coherent thoughts he could muster knew he was at the mercy of those eating and drinking nearby.

Inevitably, Cleave was saved from his woes by falling into a drunken stupor of a food coma. Unfortunately, his dreams didn't treat him any kinder than reality.