

Chapter 79 - Pen and Potato

"Gregor!" Claudia gasped and rushed over to the prone, blood-soaked figure.

Soft footsteps before a figure appeared at the kitchen doorway. "Yes?" the ratman asked. "You are almost late for food."

Gregor stood clutching a pot of steaming food in one clawed hand, the other holding his awkwardly bandaged chest - the linen soaked through with crimson.

Grugg moved up behind the clothesmaker and looked down at the body. While it certainly did have some colouration that matched the Deputy, this was definitely a wolfman. A hole about half an inch across had punctured through the dark Nightshade clothing and caused the attacker to bleed out quickly.

'What happened here and with Barry? Come here; I'll heal you.'

The ratman rolled his eyes but came over closer. "Clearly, ser uninvited-guest disabled the magic door along with the lock. I was busy cooking but heard the door; ser wolfie got an attack off before I was able to stop him." He held the pot of food away from Grugg as the cyclops placed his hand on Gregor.

'Healing Pulse.'

"The ones at the lumber yard didn't have clothes on," Claudia wrinkled her nose and looked at the other two, "Sounded less weird in my head."

"Let me get the food ready, and we can swap stories," Gregor turned to return to the kitchen. "Oh, and thanks, ser Hat."

That was pleasant... before we know it, he'll even start using my name.

Grugg smiled. "Bart, fix Barry and house next." Almost without prompting, the cyclops stomped over to the wall where the Magic Lock was and placed his palm against it.

Time for an upgrade.

This one felt weird, almost like tendrils were coming out of Grugg's hand and creeping into the walls like arcane vines. It was an uncomfortable tickle, but thankfully not painful like the spells at the shop. After a few moments, the sensation ended, and he took his hand away. A muffled voice from outside gave away the return of their talking door.

'Strengthened the Lock and extended to the whole house; anyone trying to disable it now will get a shock - literally.'

"Looks like he used this thing," Claudia poked at a dark tube on the belt of the slain wolfman. "Doesn't have any other identification or items on them - strange they'd send just the one person."

Grugg nodded and crouched down beside the clothesmaker. Other than the single wound and shocked expression on their face, they did have much else to them. If they sent three Nightshade after Claudia and six wolfmen attacked them at the lumber yard, it did seem a little odd for only the sole criminal to go after Gregor. Ah- but perhaps he was doing recon or came to steal something, not to assassinate the Deputy.

“Grugg wonder what Wolfie looking for here.”

‘I can’t think of anything important or worth stealing.’

Gregor stumbled out of the kitchen, both arms laden with plates of hot food. With a clatter, he slid them onto the dining table and scowled at the pair standing over the corpse.

“Sorry, Gregor, would you like a hand?” Claudia gestured towards the kitchen.

“No, thank you, Lady Clothesmaker. But unless you are both comfortable with eating around a corpse, I’d suggest moving the body.”

Grugg pursed his lips and looked down again at the body. He could think of several ways of disposing of it - perhaps not entirely moral or sensible ways, however. There was a silence as they both considered what exactly to do with a body, as Gregor stood glaring, arms folded as his foot tapped against the floor. As the Detective reached down to pick the body up, he was halted by a knock at the door - the muffled voice of Barry coming along with it.

‘Barry says it is the town Guard.’

“Naturally,” Gregor rolled his eyes, “I called for them earlier; what were you even going to do, ser Grugg? Eat the body?”

The Detective opened and closed his mouth, but he couldn’t think of what to say. He supposed it did make sense for the body to be taken by the Guard, like with how things worked at Threads. The fact that Bart could also hear what the door was saying or thinking was another jumble in his head, preventing the words from coming out.

Thanks for bringing me back, Grugg.

Barry’s wide, wooden smile swung into the room as the door opened, and a Guard poked their face in.

“Dean,” the older Guard with a long, sad moustache introduced himself. “I, uh, take it that is the deceased. Patson sent us over to retrieve the body - we should shut the building down too, as it is a double crime scene.”

“No,” Gregor shook his head, “We are about to have dinner, ser Guard, please remove ser wolf, and that will be all.”

Gregor certainly has a bit more pep in him today.

“Aye, he said you might say something to that effect. As you wish, Detective, Deputy,” he nodded and gestured for two fellow Guard to accompany him.

Grugg narrowed his eye and watched the three cover the body and hoist it onto a stretcher before taking it back outside to a waiting wagon. None of them looked to be Blackjack, but he could never be too careful. Overall, he doubted the Nightshade boss would dirty his hands with such drudgery, but that in turn made it a more potentially brilliant disguise.

I know what you are thinking, but don't worry. There's an enchantment over the house threshold that alerts if any kind of magical disguise is detected. Eleanor ran me through some of the wards in the shop, and after tapping into them, I seem to have picked a few up. There's also something I can do about the mess in there...

The cyclops waved off the Guard as they made their way off into the town, and he shut the still pleasantly content Barry gently. With the magical prowess Bart had been quickly learning, he doubted there would be a safer haven for the Private Eyes in the whole town. It was still concerning how often they had been attacked, however. He was starting to get really annoyed with his friends getting hurt.

'Prestidigitation'

Grugg watched as the blood soaked into the wooden floors slowly shrank and vanished as if absorbed by a giant sponge. With the body and any evidence of the killing now removed, it was like it never happened.

"Now we can eat," Gregor gestured to the table.

"Odd that they didn't ask for any paperwork." Claudia frowned, still looking at the now clear space of floor where the body had lain.

"Shhh! Might still hear you," Grugg put his finger to pursed lips, only half joking, as he went over to the table.

The food looked delicious. He had worked up quite the appetite, and the variety of hot meat and cooked vegetables were a welcome sight. Root vegetables were his favourite by far; you just couldn't beat a potato - something he had missed in his years away from the tribe. Gregor left towards the kitchen and returned with a large pie.

"How did Gregor know?" Grugg gasped. "None for you, Bart."

Sadly, correct.

"Is Peony going to join us?" Claudia asked as she sat at the table, pulling an empty plate to herself.

Gregor sat opposite the clothesmaker and shrugged before folding his arms. "Lady Investigator said she had some people to contact and information to get. Might be here, could be tomorrow."

The Detective held his hand out and flexed the fingers towards his Deputy in a grasping motion as he also moved the steaming food into his welcoming maw. "Details on suspect."

The ratman licked his fangs and sighed. “Just as I had thought, ser criminal was part of ser Dogman’s gang.”

‘I guess you could say you had a nose for these things.’

Gregor continued as if the wizard had not said anything. “Their hideout is somewhere in the woods South, an abandoned mine. We spoke to ser Patson, and they said they would plan a raid to route them out.”

“Soon?” Claudia waved her fork in the air, “Now that the Captain is back, they should have the manpower.”

“Maybe. When I contacted the Guard to remove the dead body, they were pretty busy with processing criminals and mentioned ser Captain had been found. Your doing?”

Grugg nodded. “Grugg and Claudia attacked by wolfmen at lumber yard, it fell down, and there was secret base.”

“Silverfang ran the lumber yard. All his workers there we arrested and found the Captain tied up,” Claudia continued, “Took Silverfang in too.” She leant forward to whisper, “He was secretly undercover.”

“Claudia murdered man,” the cyclops added, unhelpfully.

“Grugg!”

“We’ve all been there,” Gregor grinned, his sharp fangs catching the light. “It seems you had quite the day then?”

“Got injured, but went to see Eleanor and Bart got some upgrades.” The Detective finished his plate and put his hand on his stomach. “Delicious food, Gregor.”

As the ratman went to open his mouth, instead, Barry opened wide, and a tall, dark figure entered the safehouse.

“Sorry, I am late,” Lady Valoth began, removing her wide-brimmed hat.

‘Barry just let you in?’

“He knows what is good for him,” she smiled before frowning at the floor. “Who died in here?”

“Wolfman, Gregor killed him,” Grugg pointed an accusatory finger at the ratman.

Bye!

Peony rubbed the bridge of her nose as the door closed. “You can’t go half a day without getting into more trouble, can you? I saw the Captain before I came over; he availed me of the details of his rescue. Well done to the both of you.” She nodded at the cyclops and clothesmaker, pushing her spectacles back into place. “I assume Gregor has told you about Dogman and the interrogation?”

'He has, yes.'

"Perfect." She withdrew a folder from a side bag and held it tightly in her hands as if hesitating. "I also have some news for you all. I have spoken to my superior at Oculi Gladii, and they have agreed to sponsor your Detective Agency to be ratified by the Crown. As such, you would be an offshoot of my organisation but still able to act independently."

With shocked silence, the group looked between each other.

"So Lady will be boss," Grugg asked, finally, excitement and wonder building up in his one large eye.

"Not as such. I am your handler and your connection to the organisation proper. If you mess things up, it will be on my head, so don't make me regret vouching for you all. I can still join you on cases if I am not required to do something for Oculi Gladii, and there are further avenues of help they can assist with should you prove yourselves useful."

"This is a big step," Claudia stated, still slightly dumbfounded. "This is the real official deal, what we've been talking about."

"Very real," a shrewd grin crept over the Investigator's pale face. "In fact, I also took the liberty of obtaining all the necessary forms for you to get ahead of the Adventuring, Taxation, and Criminal Investigation laws that you'll need to read and sign before this can be official."

Grugg groaned and hung his head low.

"Nothing better for a recently full stomach than paperwork," Gregor rolled his eyes. "Hungry, Lady Investigator?"

"If you still have some going, Gregor," she smiled and brought the devilish papers over to the table.

The next hour or so was a time that Grugg pushed away from his memories - perhaps the most boring and tedious moments of his life, only bearable due to the close proximity of his friends and the goal ahead of them. A real Detective Agency, able to solve crimes the proper way! It was beyond belief.

Lady Valoth had waved her goodbyes once all the hated forms were filled; apparently, the sooner she could get them sent off, the better - and she made clear to advise the group to take a day or two of actual rest.

"I suppose we should let the actual Guard do some work," Claudia yawned as she retired to her now-claimed bedroom upstairs. "They'll have their hands full with both Silverfang and the Dogman raid."

"And with ser Hat's protective magic, it's not likely we'll be under attack anytime soon. They'll be out of criminals to send our way at this rate," Gregor smiled sleepily as he entered his room.

Grugg smiled and nodded them away before entering his room. He climbed into the uncomfortably small bed and rolled over to the side, eye closed. It had been a tough day, even a tough couple of days - if not a full week. Perhaps some rest did sound nice after all.

In fact, the only thing that sounded nicer...

He opened his one eye, blazing electric-blue.

...would be some *revenge*.