

Chapter 40 - With Fresh Eyes

Grugg looked down at his hands with his one central eye. Blood. He blinked several times, but the red smears remained. Slowly turning over in his bed, he tried to process what was now before him. Laying next to him on his bed, the figure of Gregor was sprawled, motionless, mangled. Blood soaked through the rough straw mattress, turning it a foul shade of brown. Panic and adrenaline surged through the cyclops as his heart rate pulsed inside his skull, reaching a crescendo.

And then he woke up.

Grunting through the headache that persisted from his nightmare, Grugg turned to see that the bed was empty. He had not slain his friend in his sleep. With a sigh, he laid back down and covered his bleary eye with his hand. As existence started to filter into his brain, he tried to process what had happened the night before. Despite it only being a sleep away, it had felt like weeks since being in that rainswept courtyard.

He recalled the Town Guard showing up, and Patson joking that they would run out of empty cells at this rate. Gregor had a few fractured ribs and would have to be on bed rest for a bit, again. The cries and groans of the injured Nightshade henchmen had echoed in his tired mind until they were able to be tended to or taken away. He had felt so numb, so totally drained after his outburst of anger. The medic had wrapped his arms in bandages, slightly surprised at how healed they were already from the damage the day before. Bart had been silent, but once Grugg had returned to the barnhouse, a familiar warmth had filled him and made sleep easy to slip into.

"Bart back yet?" he called out to the empty room. A brief moment of silence followed, where only the pounding in his head was the response.

I am; good morning. How are you feeling, Grugg?

"Feel like head was broken," as he tried massaging his temples, he found the brim of the wizard's hat got in the way of the full motion.

Unfortunately, I can't heal emotional hurt. You took that pretty hard last night, my friend.

Grugg sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed, placing his hands over his face to make sure his brain didn't explode out of his eye socket. "Some bad memories; Grugg prefer to stay calm. Would have been dead if not for Bart."

I had mentioned that I was an expert in Wards and defensive spells. That was the only reason I was able to dispel it so quickly, despite the high cost of the crude attempt. It was interesting, really, it almost appeared to me like a pattern I could visualise. There was a familiarity to it, and truth be told, I had actually redirected it to myself rather than cancelling it outright.

"Must'a been why Yarlen was so confused." Grugg rubbed at his itchy forearms through the bandages where they had healed overnight.

One of the reasons I did not follow my brother into being a combat mage. Without enough people around you to allow protection, you are very vulnerable. It was only a matter of his arrogance that he thought he could just Slow you and have his goons finish the job. He probably hadn't come up against a fellow magic user before.

"Do you think we can have day where no fighting?"

I certainly hope so; we are at a disadvantage where people know who we are now. But I feel that once we get-

A heavy thump as the barnhouse door swung open, allowing a wave of blinding sunshine to burst into the dim room. The sound of a cart getting caught in the doorway, and some unintelligible curse words, proceeded to Gregor's entrance.

"Breakfast, ser Grugg," he hissed through clenched fangs bringing the cart to a stop by the end of the bed.

You were supposed to stay in bed, Gregor.

The ratman stood clutching at his side as he caught his breath, giving the hat a glare at hearing the odd hollow voice. "Unless you are going to feed the Detective, it is my duty".

Grugg opened up the lidded part of the cart to reveal the bounty his Deputy had brought. A rather large pile of bacon sat next to a second plate of steamed root vegetables and mushrooms. The smell of the delicious food was enough to break the cyclops out of his sombre mood as he dug in by taking a generous handful of the cooked meat.

You are no good to us if you are constantly injured, and we don't know where you are getting all this food.

"Ey Bart," Grugg managed to speak between mouthfuls, "Can talk normal now?"

For short conversations, I should be able to. It seems that straining my mana capacity appears to help increase it. Like working a muscle, I suppose.

Gregor folded his arms and looked towards the door, a frown over his small eyes. "Don't take too long. I have already spoken to ser Patson and arranged to meet at our new headquarters. Clothesmaker will be joining us, with some new clothes."

"Claudia." Grugg nodded, his mood lifting once more.

"I am aware," the ratman scratched his chin, "I often avoid addressing adult female names as the Denspeak prefix doesn't translate well". He shrugged awkwardly.

"Grugg find hard to translate sometimes too," the cyclops nodded knowingly.

Ser sounds similar to the Common 'Sir' - is the female equivalent similar?

The Deputy licked his fangs and gave the wizard's hat a sideways glare. "Mam."

"Mam," Grugg repeated, finishing off what looked to be potatoes and swede.

That doesn't sound too bad; it is similar to Ma'am.

"Dens are often matriarchal societies, so it reflects on our respect for those that rear and provide life to the group." Gregor closed his eyes, still looking towards the doorway. "Ser is for an adult male. *Mam* - adult female with no offspring, *Mah* for those that do." His tail swished in the air around him. "But this is not the time for Den history, and we have to leave."

A rare and interesting insight into our secretive Deputy, but he is right - let's get ready.

Grugg hopped out of bed, his earlier woes seemingly fading away with most of his headache. It was a wonder what a bit of good food and time with friends could do for the mood. He rolled up the split sleeves of his undershirt and put his waistcoat back on. Double-checking that his badge was present, he then put his heavy boots back on. The umbrella stood near the door frame, with his jacket discarded in a pile on the floor. They could both stay there; if the sun that streamed its way through the doorway was any indication, they might be relieved from the rain for a brief time.

"Gather up everything, then we don't have to return to this stinking pit," Gregor winced and clasped his side at the admonishment. "I have to tell ser Jacob that I won't be returning to work. Now that I am an official Deputy Detective." He tapped at his polished badge before turning to the cyclops. "You did ask about my pay, right?"

"Yes," Grugg nodded blankly, "Gold."

The ratman sighed and tapped his foot.

We should be able to fit all our things in my case, and then we should notify the Innkeep about our departure - I am sure he will be pleased.

The Detective attached his sack to his rope belt and packed up the wizard's case as neatly as possible. Which wasn't very. With one last look around the dim barnhouse, the trio left, shutting the door behind them. It was indeed a relatively bright, sunny day where the rain clouds of the previous day were sinking over the horizon. Only a handful of fluffy light grey clouds hung in the air, occasionally but briefly obscuring the bright light of the early morning. The smell of the dew on the muddied grass in the morning was refreshing.

The door of the Wise Goat squealed as it opened, a disjointed creak as it slowed upon its apex. Grugg and Gregor entered to find a stark empty tavern before them, save for Jacob standing behind the counter. His hair and beard were messy, and dark circles clung to his eyes.

"Ah, Detective and - Gregor? Where have you been, you-"

"That's Deputy Detective Gregor now," the ratman grinned, flexing out his chest to show off his badge. He twitched in pain at forcing the movement, but his expression didn't falter.

The innkeeper stood with mouth agape and said nothing.

"Grugg will no longer need room," the cyclops began, "Thank you?"

“Oh- err, you are welcome. Your time here has been... eventful, and I wish you well wherever you travel next.” A forced smile spread across Jacob’s face, although his eyes shimmered with relief.

“Just one question first,” Grugg approached the counter and loomed over the man. “Jacob knew attack was coming?”

The fake smile quickly faded into a look of panic as the innkeeper recoiled from the posed question. “W-what, no! I mean... y-yes?” He looked nauseous now.

“Ser Detective. I believe what ser Jacob is trying to say is that with the planned illegal activity being cancelled, the criminals decided to instead were going to take the problem out,” Gregor proposed, flipping out his notepad as he continued. “Ser Innkeep was not privy to exact plans, only wanted to warn you of reprisals likely to come. Is that correct?” He looked back up at the pale man, who just nodded quickly in response.

Seems about right to me.

“Oh, okay,” Grugg shrugged and placed a single gold coin on the counter with a clink. “For th’ trouble.” With a nod and tip of his hat, the Detective turned to leave with his Deputy in tow.

Despite the best intentions of the gleaming sun, there was still a chill breeze to the day that became more apparent as they set out through the more open streets of the town. Gregor led the way, only stopping briefly to catch his breath or hold his side every so often. The town was abuzz with people making use of the break in the terrible rain, and a few of them in passing greeted the Detective by name. He nodded awkwardly in return, not yet used to being well-known and, most oddly, actually liked.

Their walk took them out of the mountain side of the town and down to the more residential district. The majority of shopfronts and open stalls made way for simple houses and community gardens, most of which were two-story wooden structures, white and dark brown. Grugg had no idea where they were going, having still not read the note that the Guard had given him, but gradually felt more out of place the further he was from the places he had come to know on the other side of town.

It was not long though, as they traversed through winding streets of clothes hung out to dry across the terraces, kids playing outside, and the smells of home cooking, that they finally arrived at their destination. By far, the first thing that gave the safehouse away was the two figures standing outside the front door - Patson and Claudia. With a huge grin on his face, Grugg sped up his pace down the road to the building, overtaking his Deputy.

What a quaint area; it should undoubtedly be more of a home away from home than the tavern.

The building itself was wider than most of the surrounding houses, perhaps seemingly intended to be two attached residences given the pair of front doors. Somewhat awkwardly, the doors looked to be closer to human size than what he had been used to with the broader

doorways in the commercial area. It had the same white and dark brown wooden design as all the houses around it and looked like it hadn't seen a good deal of maintenance in a while.

Grugg and Claudia beamed a greeting at each other as Gregor grumbled through clenched teeth behind. Patson nodded his greetings and gestured his arm towards the building.

"Welcome to your new home, Detectives."