

Chapter 42 - Detective Bathwater

Grugg sat back in the hot bath and relaxed, closing his one eye. He hadn't realised how tense and achy he had been, and the soreness of his battered and weary body melted away as he soaked. The muffled echoes of Claudia and Gregor droned on in the background, and despite his wanting to be involved in the conversation, the bath was just too nice to want to leave. It was a rarity for him to have warm water up in the mountain, let alone as piping hot as this was.

I'm glad it seems like the two of them get on well. I mean, Claudia has been nothing but charming, but Gregor is... an acquired taste.

"Probably terrible taste," Grugg agreed slowly, the warmth lulling him to a sleepy state.

It was easy to fall into being suspicious of our now Deputy, but he seems to have your best interests at heart.

"Umbrella. Food. Fighting bad guys." Grugg slid down further into the bath, placing his feet out on the edge.

Huh.

"Hmm?" The water bubbled around the Detective's mouth as he enveloped himself up to his chin, the steam pouring off his exposed lower legs.

It slipped out of my mind with how hectic everything has been, but how did Gregor know to be in that courtyard for the attack?

Grugg said nothing, sinking his whole head beneath the water, including most of the wizard's hat. Why had the ratman been there? It was true that he had often given them nuggets of information regarding the illegal fighting ring; perhaps the ambush had been something else he had overheard. That seemed like a likely and reasonable explanation.

Gregor had some connection to Harold through Jacob, but the attack was by Don Kean's men. Patson said it was unlikely the Nightshade leaders would be working together, so it might be worth asking him to make sure there is nothing we should know. It would be better coming from you; he doesn't seem to be too fond of me.

The gradually cooling water sloshed around the wooden tub as the cyclops sat up, streams dripping from him as he rubbed his eye and stretched. "Okay, Bart, Grugg will ask him." Sometimes he felt that the wizard could read his mind, or perhaps they were just becoming more in sync, being constantly in the same headspace. Either way, he was hungry now.

A knock at the door echoed through the room.

"I'm just leaving your new clothes by the door, Grugg. I have to go and run errands now, but we will catch up later, okay?" The voice of Claudia, slightly muffled by the washroom door, was followed by the sound of the box being placed on the wood floor.

"Okay! Be safe, Claudia."

"I will!" came the response, and then there was a pensive silence for a few beats before her footsteps moved away from the door into silence.

Sometimes I feel bad we have agreed to include her in our dangerous work. It has been less than a week, and you have been injured several times-

"And Bart even died."

Yes, how could I forget. So what I am saying is that despite Claudia's desire to lead an adventuring life as did her mother before her... well, we just better protect her, okay?

Grugg wanted to say that she was tougher than she looked and would fit right in with the misfit group. But what the wizard said had some truth to it. Sure, he wouldn't mind weathering sword cuts and getting bloodied by all manner of odd spells, but the clothesmaker wasn't as thick of skin, nor had a wizard to heal her up. Even Gregor had been suffering after just a couple of battles. In the end, the Detective could just grunt his acknowledgement.

He pulled the plug from the bath with a soft pop and stepped out, making puddles on the hard floor. Then, as the steam danced off of his thick torso, he stood and watched the water swirl down the drainage hole. It was mesmerising, and he shivered as the last of the bath water escaped into the unknown - the chill Autumn air cooling the droplets still covering him.

Here - let me try something.

A familiar warm glow filled the middle of the cyclops, and gradually he dried off as the water evaporated from his body heat. The wizard hat reverted from its sodden state back to dry and pointed, like a felled tree in reverse.

Just a slight tweak to my Healing Ward can slightly raise your temperature without the stress of having to heal your wounds.

"Thanks, Bart." Grugg tried to hide his slight disappointment at not being able to shake off the water like an animal, but he was still thankful that he could get dressed now without dampening the new clothes. He stepped over to the door and cracked it slightly, hiding behind it just in case - but just the opposite door leading to the parlour was present to leer at him blankly. Shuffling the box into the bathroom, he closed the door once more.

It was a plain, light brown box similar in design to the one his last suit came in. Lifting the lightweight lid, he took a look at the contents and was unsurprised to find several folded fabric garments. Three pairs of light grey short sleeve shirts, two pairs of trousers in dark grey, and a pair of brown shorts. The shorts reminded him of his leather kilt, wherever that had gotten to, so he pulled those on, in addition to one of the grey shirts. The boots could stay off, for now, an old wooden home was no place for the heavy stompers.

At the bottom of the box there was something else, a lumpy shape beneath the last pair of trousers. Pushing aside the comfortable garments, he revealed a long shape filled with pouches. Then, withdrawing the item and holding it up high, it was made clear what it was.

That is a very nice looking belt.

A mix of dark leathers and muted fabrics, the wide belt had a good handful of pouches in various sizes. Most had leather flaps with a dark iron clasp, but one pouch for each hip was open-topped for ease of grasping at things. Perhaps most wonderful of all was the buckle - a dark iron rectangle with a shape embossed and polished—an eye with four swords behind it. Grugg put the belt on immediately, a wide, excited grin on his face the whole time.

Arranging the spare clothes back into the box (somewhat) neatly, he took it with him as he squeezed through the two doorways leading back into the parlour. There he found Gregor lying on the floor with his arms folded, a grimace on his face as he stared at the ceiling.

“Gregor okay?” the cyclops ventured as he placed the box on the table and squatted down to look at the ratman closer.

“Can your hat heal me yet?” the reply came, through clenched teeth.

“First, have to tell Grugg something.”

The Deputy turned his head towards Grugg and raised an eyebrow, waiting for him to continue.

“How Gregor know about ambush, and all other things?”

A sigh as the ratman returned to looking at the cobwebbed ceiling of the room, this time with his eyes closed. “Very well, trusted partners should have no secrets, right?”

“Like how Grugg drank some bathwater,” the Detective admitted both eagerly and ashamedly.

Gregor did not respond, but instead withdrew an item from inside his coat. A small, polished black gem or stone of some kind. “It’s a magic eye. It lets me view things from afar, outside my own head.” He waved it around in resignation at the lousy explanation, and then promptly hid it back away.

Oh, perhaps that is what we felt watching us yesterday - that we couldn’t see.

“Have you been watching Grugg?” the Detective began, putting his hands on his hips as he sat hunched over near the prone ratman.

“Yes, I-”

“While in bath?”

“... No?”

“I drank *a lot* of bathwater,” the regretful expression on his face added more weight to the confession.

“I keep an eye on you to make sure you don’t get yourself killed; at first, it was just because I didn’t trust you,” his tail waved in the air beside him. “But I caught one of Don’s men

following you yesterday and tailed them instead - that's where they met up with Yarren and discussed the ambush plan."

"Okay," the cyclops grinned, "So you are an Eye too, after all."

Gregor groaned and rolled his head back. "Can I get healing now, ser Hat?"

'I can give it an attempt. I can bore you with the details later, but interacting with the curse yesterday has opened up some interesting magical connections that I may be able to rewrite to enhance my current capabilities with-'

"Is experimental procedure," Grugg nodded with a wicked smile, placing his hand gently on the chest of the Deputy.

'Here goes nothing then, I guess...'

The familiar warmth filled the body of the Detective, but this time it was different. Almost like tentacles reaching out through his limbs or vines trying to grow and find purchase along his arms. An almost burning sensation filled his hand with a weird pressure, but he held it in place.

Healing Pulse

With a jolt, the pressure suddenly released, and the tendrils of warm energy flew along his hand, leaving a brief chill in his body from the temperature change. The eyes of the ratman opened wide, and he took one big gasp of air. Grugg removed his hand and took a couple of steps backwards, just in case his Deputy exploded.

Gregor rolled to his side and stood up clumsily, before turning back to the cyclops. He stretched his arms out wide and twisted back and forth to test out the results of the attempt. "A little soreness, but my bones are fixed. Thank you, ser Grugg, ser Hat." He bowed and gave a smile that was perhaps the least sinister looking one to date.

'You are welcome; I am relieved that it seems to have worked with no bad reactions.'

"How many fingers, Bart?"

About six or so, I will conserve my out-loud energy for now, as no doubt we will need it later.

"Ma- Lady Claudia was disappointed to have to leave so soon, but she still needs to run her business even though burdened with the responsibility of clothing us." He scratched his head awkwardly under the concentrated effort to get a reasonable title out for the clothesmaker. "She left you this, though." Routing around in a pocket, the ratman retrieved a small flat stone with a red circle upon it.

"So many stones for pockets, makes Grugg feel like back in mountain." He gingerly took the small magic item and squinted at it, daring it to give up the secrets it held.

"Some kind of magic like the Message stones, except this one just flashes a light. Just in case she gets into trouble." Gregor rolled his eyes and leaned against the back wall.

An Alarm stone, let us hope that she never has need of it.

Grugg hoped not too, but thought it was a shame that they didn't have a Message stone instead. Now that he thought about it, it would definitely get confusing if they each had one to each other member. He would need... three per member, so nine fingers worth, plus the one to Patson. What if he got them mixed up or grabbed the wrong one in a panic?

"So, what's our plan for today, ser Detective?"

The cyclops snapped out of his spiralling confusion and pocketed the new magical item into one of his belt pouches. Then, turning to face the noticeboard of criminals, he stroked his chin and formulated a plan.

"Lumber Yard. Should go ask questions as some criminals from last night worked there."

Excellent suggestion; we may pick up on a trail from there - see if there is a deeper connection.

"Very well. I suggest, though, that we go and see if your club is ready to collect."

Grugg was already halfway to the door before the Deputy had finished the sentence.