

Chapter 70 - Wood or Wood Not

'Looks like some kind of special lock.'

Grugg groaned and stood back up. He briefly considered breaking the door down to get inside the secretive basement, but damaging their own property was probably not in his best interest. Plus, if there was something spooky down there, he didn't want to give it free rein of the rest of the house.

"We'll have to ask Patson next time we see him," Claudia shrugged, equally as disappointed. "All that lead up for nothing."

"Grugg hungry anyway," the cyclops grumbled, "Don't want to die on empty stomach."

The clothesmaker smiled as they went back through the house, the Detective having to squeeze through the stairwell doorway once more. Perhaps he should do some remodelling, he reconsidered. Finally, with everything packed and ready, they exited the house in the brisk morning, the sunshine finding some space before the approaching clouds that loomed on the horizon.

Hello again, Detective. Have a good day.

Grugg turned to face the large wooden face of Barry, who now occupied the front doorway to the safehouse. A wide grin spread across his face as the hazy memory of the night before clicked in his head like the sparks of a flint alighting small tinder. "Hello, Barry," he greeted the sentient door, "Barry have good day too."

He does a good job; he can activate the Magic Lock through the house as well as being a general barrier to those wishing to intrude. The Guard they stationed here last night were quite put off, I can tell you.

Claudia linked her arm around the Detective's thick forearm as they set off into the town. One thing that was remarkably familiar to Grugg was the odd looks he was now getting - ones of distrust as news of his arrest had probably gotten around.

"Pay them no mind," Claudia reassured him. "You know, even my parents had the same treatment at first - well, my mother, at least."

"Really?"

"Mhmm. Adventurers aren't always seen as the brave heroes they like to think they are. When my mother came to settle here and set up Threads, some bad people from her past came for revenge. Caused a stir in the town." Claudia brushed some red hair from her face as she looked off at the houses as they passed. "At first, they blamed her and wanted her banished from Helpart, but she got rid of the bandits - or whoever they were, and was seen as a hero again."

"So Grugg have to beat Nightshade more publicly," Grugg scratched at his temple.

“Something like that. You’re on the right path - but not everyone will warm to you no matter what good you do. There are still some people who will not shop at Threads, even after all the time that has passed.”

The pair stopped off at an opened-faced shop and got some much-deserved breakfast, Grugg picking out a very large meat pie that still steamed in the early morning chill breeze. They walked as they ate and did so in quiet contemplation. One thing that was outside of the normal was all the Guard patrols that had passed them on their short journey. It seemed as though every man and woman available had been put on high alert with the disappearance of the Captain.

“How Claudia feel about adventuring now,” Grugg broke the silence as he finished the last mouthful of his warm meal.

“It’s been pretty traumatic, to be honest,” she smiled and wiped some crumbs stuck to the side of the Detective's face. “But that is kind of what I expected; I had a pretty soft and sheltered upbringing - and to adventure, you need to be a bit hard of heart.”

Very true; my brother was quite different after his first quest.

“Temper in fire, like sword,” Grugg said with an awkward, low tone.

“Exactly, very poignant, Detective.”

“Grugg father one-who-melt-metals,” he shrugged sheepishly. He hadn’t paid much attention to the process of what passed as smithing for his tribe, but his father always had some metalwork-adjacent advice to give him.

“I know that Detective work is probably not always so dangerous, but it seems like a fair compromise between the middle of fighting dragons and sewing clothes for boring townfolk. If you’ll have me, of course.”

“What about shop?”

“*Threads* is currently a crime scene, and I’m not sure I could bear trying to get the blood out of... everything. I’ve been pining for an excuse to leave for a long time.”

Grugg smiled and patted her arm with his other hand. “Claudia is welcome in Private Eyes. Grugg just not sure how to manage gold side of things if Captain not pay us.”

“If I sell Threads, that should keep us afloat for a while. We would need to take on some private cases, maybe do some adventuring on the side - there’s no denying between us we can be quite the team.”

We did fight off a Demon.

“Currently real dis-organ-sed,” Grugg admitted. He was the muscle, Bart dealt with the arcane, and Gregor was a good Deputy and spy. Having Claudia as the backbone of keeping everything in check might stop them from stomping straight into danger so much.

"It's a shame Lady Valoth is already accounted for; she would round out the team nicely," the seamstress mused as they reached the Southern gate.

We'll find a way, I am sure.

Unlike when the Detective and Deputy had come this way the other day, the gate was now shut. The Guard watching over the entrance to the town had doubled - as four armoured figures stood watch. One of them nodded towards the cyclops as he approached and stepped towards him.

"Hail, Detective. We have been made aware of your likelihood of coming this way. It is currently under strict watch for anyone leaving and entering, but of course, you may have passage."

"Thank you," Grugg nodded in return. "Going to look at lumber yard."

"Certainly, best of luck. It was the first place the Alpha team checked last night, but maybe they were barking up the wrong tree."

The Guard waved to the others waiting, and the gate began to be opened, revealing two further Guard standing on the outside. With the Captain missing, they really were taking no chances. Grugg wondered who was to take the place of the half-orc in his absence or if he didn't return. The cyclops had no idea how these things functioned in a large town - usually, in his tribe, positions were just chosen by a group vote or the role ran in the family. Internally he cringed, remembering this last part.

Stepping out onto the road, the chill breeze picked up in the more open area of the valley. Grugg adjusted his shawl around his shoulders, and Claudia withdrew a dark green scarf from her side bag to wrap around her neck and lower face.

"Careful not ta'wonder too fa'," one of the outside Guard drawled, his short tuft of ash beard pointed in accusation, "Been reports'a wolves in t'woods."

"Okay," Grugg replied blankly with a shrug before they headed down the side road towards the lumber yard.

'Feels so stifling being in town sometimes, unable to speak out loud.'

"You have opened up to a few new people lately," Claudia pointed out, slightly muffled behind her scarf, "Getting more confident?"

'More foolhardy, perhaps. Peony was inevitable if she was to be helping us, but Patson may be a mistake in the long run. We still don't know who we can trust, especially with Blackjack around.'

"Need Private Eye special word, like Captain's number," Grugg agreed, narrowing his eye at Claudia suspiciously.

"How about... Udok?"

Grugg grinned; that would work. On multiple levels, in fact. Well, two levels, which was a lot for him. "Udok," he confirmed.

'Udok it is. Perhaps a password for Barry to enter the safehouse too? A different one in case we are being watched there.'

"Ugh, Grugg forget too many words." The Detective huffed and looked up to the currently barely clear sky as if it would provide him relief from the burden of language.

"Let's decide that later then, with everyone else."

The cyclops accepted this delay with a shrug of his shoulders, despite the slightly relieved smile on his face. As a gust of cold wind rustled at their clothing, they now found themselves at the entrance to the wood-cutting camp. It was oddly quiet, and as more of it came into view, Grugg was confused to see that there were no workers in sight. Where before there had been a throng of sawing, slicing, and moving, it was now completely devoid of movement.

'Interesting; perhaps due to the additional checks at the gate, they are closed for the day?'

"Guard would have mentioned?" Grugg unslung Thud and stretched out his empty hand, the light mood of the day taking a turn into being overcast, almost in tune with the weather.

Claudia brought forward her shield and stood ready to don the red glove to control The Storm - wincing slightly as the leather straps of her buckler put pressure on her sore, recovering arms.

'No need to panic, but best to be prepared.'

The Moonchaser Orb pinged out, the white pulse of light not even covering a third of the wide lot. As the light faded in Grugg's single eye, there was nothing within the range that became highlighted. The Detective huffed and began walking over to the nearest hut. With the open area so silent, his heavy footsteps sounded louder than usual, even with the mix of dirt and sawdust absorbing some of the sounds. At first, it was unusual but then it brought back memories of being in the mountain. He had been in the town for about a week and had already become acclimated to living in a built-up area.

The first hut was little more than a tall awning to keep the rain off the various tools below - a couple of long, sharp-toothed saws and some manner of stands for holding the logs in certain positions. Grugg put his hands on his hips and stared down the scene, willing it to offer him up some information.

'Doesn't seem correct that their tools would just be left around - surely they'd be in a safer place?'

Claudia bent down to look beneath one of the metal stands. "Some of this sawdust is pretty light - it looks fresh, but there's not a whole lot of it."

'So they downed tools under some order and left what they were doing.'

Grugg squinted and looked around the lot - each station appeared to be in a similar state. Whilst a couple were empty, most seemed to have logs or planks in various half-worked-on forms still lying around the various toolsets and machines. His eye finally stopped at the large house-like building at the end of the lumber yard.

“Think anybody home?”

‘Let’s go find out.’

The dark clouds finally caught up with the slow-moving sun, blotting out the light and sinking the area of Helpart in a blue-ish grey that almost gloated at the amount of rain it could let loose, particularly atop the Detective. Grugg grunted and mumbled to himself. “Hate rain.”

As they reached halfway across the yard, a shiver shook itself down the spine of the cyclops. There was something about the flat open area, now bathed in half darkness as the breeze rushed through, that put him on edge.

A howl of a wolf came from the woods beyond the lumberyard.

Claudia's eyes widened as she looked around for the source of the noise.

“Don’t worry, naughty pup far away,” Grugg reassured her, “And scared of big Grugg.”

The clothesmaker nodded and seemed to relax a little as they approached the doorway of the wooden structure.

Grugg knocked loudly, inadvertently hammering on the thin door. “Oops. Er, anybody home?” he yelled. For a few moments, no response.

And then, a second howl, this one much closer sounding.

‘Seems we may have visitors of our own.’

Grugg knocked again, clenching his teeth as the door rattled in its frame.

“Grugg - look,” Claudia tugged at his arm, turning him around from the very rude doorway.

A large wolf was stalking out of the woods into the lot, followed by at least five others.

“*Gruggggggg*,” the large one hissed.

“*Gruggggggggg*,” the five behind whispered as an echo.

“Nope,” Grugg replied as he turned and kicked open the door with a crack, pushing Claudia in first before he too entered into the darkness.