

## Chapter 41 - Brief Brief

The door of the building groaned as it tried to accommodate the large cyclops, and with some awkward shuffling, he finally made it through. Grugg placed the wizard's case on the floor and made space for everyone else to enter the building as he gazed around his new surroundings.

*This seems to be some kind of parlour. It's very spacious.*

A large and very dusty oval table sat in the middle of the room, surrounded by a handful of chairs. At the far end, a fireplace sat inert, perhaps necessary for the ample space in the colder months. The wall closest to the entrance had some kind of noticeboard taking up the majority of the otherwise plain grey and white striped wallpapered walls. Empty lanterns hung along the wooden support beams at several points, and three doors led further into the house from opposite the main entranceway.

"What's this, ser Patson?" Gregor pointed with the end of his tail at a square rune affixed next to the door, all the while folding his arms and trying to conceal the aching pain in his chest.

"That is an Arcane Lock. When active, it'll stop the doors and windows being opened by brute force."

"I assume someone like ser Grugg could just punch through the wall instead?"

The Guard shrugged. "Yeah, I suppose so; it's more to dissuade the less creative criminal rather than to be a fortress."

*It's a little bit of extra security, and that's never a bad thing - certainly not in our position.*

"I will give you all a brief tour of the place before we get down to business," Patson grinned. "There is a bit more to this old building than it first looks." The Guard was in his off-duty outfit; simple brown trousers, a dark blue linen shirt, and a chainmail shirt on top. His sword was still slung by his side; it appeared he needed to be ready for trouble even on his time off. Without his helmet to rein it in, his messy thatch of dirty blonde hair looked like the nest of a particularly sloppy bird.

"Even this room is impressive in itself, beneath the dust," Claudia placed a box she had been carrying on the wide table. She was wearing an amber-red dress that matched her frizzy hair beautifully, or at least Grugg thought so, and atop this, she had a leather apron. A sheathe on her hip with a blue thread swirling out of it sat next to a red glove.

"This is the main room. It was widened to encompass the whole width of the building and has the three seating areas, which is, uh, pretty self-explanatory." He shrugged awkwardly and walked over to the first door on the long wall. "First off is storage," and the door creaked open to show a dimly lit room full of storage and shelves. "It should have been all cleared out last it was used. Can put evidence in here too."

"Plenty room for food," Grugg nodded, thinking of all the things he hadn't yet tasted.

Gregor murmured something to himself, still standing over by the doorway with arms crossed.

“Middle door leads to the upstairs, where there are three bedrooms. Basic stuff up there. There’s also a hidden doorway that leads to the basement; well, it’s basically a bunker. So if you ever need to hide out, it’ll be your best bet.” Patson scratched at his thick hair and frowned. “There was something else about that, but it has slipped my mind.”

“I’m sure it will come to you soon,” Claudia reassured as she idly wiped away some of the dust from the furnishings.

“Perhaps.” The Guard shrugged and moved over to the third door. “Kitchen here. Ugh, I’m not a very good tour guide; you’ll have to explore yourself. I’d much rather get through the itinerary that the Captain left for me.”

“Grugg okay with that.” The cyclops had looked at the various doorways and was not too keen on having to squeeze through them anytime he wanted to go to the Storage room to get food, or to the Kitchen to get food.

“If you could all grab a chair over by the noticeboard then, and I’ll begin.”

It took a brief moment for the Four-Sword Private Eyes to take a seat in audience of the ever more tired looking Guard. He had probably spent a good portion of the night tidying up the mess made with the Nightshade, and his energy was starting to lag behind.

“First order of business,” Patson cleared his throat and withdrew some notes he had prepared. “Captain Wanu is very pleased with your work so far, and in fact, his words to me were, ‘Can they not go half a day without tripping over the Nightshade?’. As you are becoming increasingly valuable, he is more worried that you are getting increasingly injured. You will all need to find more protective gear, and the Captain will part-fund some of it. I believe you had some ideas, Miss Claudia?”

The Clothesmaker nodded. “There’s a leatherworker in town that owes me a favour. It shouldn’t be hard to source an outfit for myself and Gregor. However for Grugg... I have an idea; I just need to take some measurements.” She gave the Detective a glancing smile before returning to focusing on the Guardsman.

*Bracers should be a necessity with how often you get those arms cut up.*

Patson nodded. “Fair enough, the sooner you can get them, the better if the last two days were any indication. Secondly, you need to be armed. Detective, I understand you have a weapon under repair? I have spoken to Miss Marge, and it will be ready this afternoon.”

Grugg grinned widely - he was going to get Thud back! It had only been a matter of days, but it hadn’t felt the same without the weighty club. He would have to introduce it to his new friends. And to his new enemies.

“Deputy, perhaps something more practical than a whip?” The Guard shrugged in a gesture to say that the suggestion was not something he had come up with.

"I have something in mind; I just need to get it in hand," the ratman grinned and crossed one leg over the other, turning to face away from the man.

"Okayyy. I will just tell the Captain that his request was acknowledged." Patson sighed, not having the energy for any complications. "And Miss, you are not officially employed by the town, so by law I can't advise you to be armed and ready, but just make sure you are safe if you are helping these two." He glanced warily over the large cyclops beaming over his club whilst wearing a wizard's hat, and the grouchy ratman pouting mysteriously at the wall.

"Noted," she smiled, placing her hand gently at her hip where The Storm was stowed.

Patson flicked through his notes, sighing. There were a lot more of them than he remembered. "Detective Grugg, the Captain wanted me to remind you about necessary force. Quite frankly, I think you have been going easy on the Nightshade, but he is more worried about public perception. You want to present as more of a pragmatic force of justice than a barbaric vigilante executioner, if you get me."

Grugg nodded, and his mood dampened a little. He certainly wouldn't want to end up on the wrong side of an angry mob, to be seen as a feared figure that was distrusted and eventually banished from the doorsteps he was trying to protect.

*The badge has become somewhat of a shackle in a way. Adventurers seem to get more of a pass on murder as long as they are murdering the right bad people. But, when you are part of the law, you have to give a fair trial and due process.*

"Lastly," the Guard yawned, taking out a handful of notes and starting to pin them to the noticeboard, "People of interest. At the top is Lord X, and yes, it's a silly name for an organised crime boss. Don't know who they are, don't even know where they are stationed - just not Helpart. Next up are the five Helpart leaders. Frank "The Shadow" Thilga, Don Kean, Silverfang, Dogman, and Gravestone. I am tired, so let's just focus on what we know, and I'll leave the rest of the notes for you all, fair?"

A unanimous show of shrugs and nods were acceptance enough.

"Superb. Frank is currently incarcerated and awaiting trial. Don Kean just lost two important players last night. The bigger guy - Fixion? He and a couple of the injured goons have ties to the lumber yard just outside of town. Yarlén, we have no information as yet. The Don is likely to play it safe for a bit after overplaying his hand, so he may be hard to dig up leads on currently."

"Less likely to try and send people to try and kill us too?" Gregor asked, still sitting at an angle to the proceedings.

*My thoughts - or rather my hopes, exactly.*

"Possibly not. You are both kicking the hornet's nest here, and there are a lot of potentially angry hornets that are tucked away deep inside it. The good news is that the leaders are usually vying with each other for power and control, so they are unlikely to join forces to get rid of you. The harder you are to kill, the more desperate they'll get though..." Patson stared towards the window, his eyes glazing over momentarily before sadly shaking his head.

“Any information on Dogman?” Grugg asked, less to snap the Guard out of his distant thoughts and more because he still found the name amusing.

“No. Even less than we have on Silverfang and Gravestone, which is very little. Harold Fersnitch came forward this morning for questioning. Apparently, he was out drunk somewhere when we came knocking yesterday.” With a final sigh, the man shuffled the remaining pieces of paper together, not noticing the look shared between the Detective and Deputy. “I will leave you now; you have my Message Stone. Just be aware that I am most likely going to be asleep for a while... so don’t wander into another ambush until tonight, okay?”

“No promises,” the cyclops shrugged, figuring it would not be up to him either way.

“Oh, is there a washroom here?” Claudia asked, just before the Guardsman turned to leave.

“That’s right, now that you mention it. That’s what I couldn’t remember from my ‘tour’. It’s behind the stairs and despite the run-down look of the place it should still have running water, because of... magic reasons...”

*Is he trying to convince us or himself?*

The clothesmaker smiled and nudged the Detective in the arm. “Fantastic, you still haven’t had a bath, and you’re not getting in these new clothes until you’ve had a soak. It’s no wonder Constable Patson is in a rush to leave.”

“Oh, my sense of smell was shot a long time ago; I had a rather bad Giant Rat infestation job in my early guard days, and the stench burned it out.” He awkwardly glanced over at the Deputy, “No offence.”

Gregor opened his mouth but closed it, choosing to make no comment as his eyes dagged at the man.

“Bye, Patson!” Grugg beamed, standing and waving the Guard out. “Was nice to see you, but now Detective things need doing.”

“Right, oh, the Arcane Lock - press the rune down and turn it clockwise to lock, back to unlock.” The Guardsman gave them all a nod goodbye and slunk out of the building, glad to be on the path straight to his bed. The door quietly closed behind him, leaving the group of strange criminal investigators to their own devices.

“I’ll see what I can do about the small doors,” the ratman hissed as he slid lower on the chair, closing his eyes as he relaxed his muscles.

“Off you go, Grugg, go take a bath” Claudia pushed the cyclops towards the doorway leading to the promised washroom. “The Deputy and I need to discuss outfits, and a good clean will make you feel refreshed.” As stern as she was trying to be, it came out from behind a smile.

*It’s probably for the best, friend.*

Grugg grunted his acceptance, more displeased with having to fit through a couple more doors than having to take a wash. But with reluctance, he opened the door to the stairway and pushed himself through. The Detective had a brief glance over the dusty, narrow steps before heading to the sturdy door to the side. It was clearly labelled Washroom, in a bold script that he could easily read.

It swung open to reveal a modestly sized room, the small window providing little light as the sun bore down on the other side of the building. For Grugg, it was easy to pick out the large wooden tub that took up most of one side of the room, with a basin and some kind of chair on the other. Possibly for someone to read you stories while you bathed, the cyclops reasoned. A wooden cupboard sat against the wall, a thick layer of dust revealing no imprints or suggestions of recent use.

He stepped out of his heavy boots and walked over to the tub, the grain of the wooden floorboards a more familiar feeling than his recently acquired footwear. Two spigots sat at the end of the empty oval bath, with two levers on the top to activate. Despite the dust, it was clear to see that one had a red circle around the spout, and the other had a blue band circling.

*Hot and Cold. There's a faint sense of magic to it. I wonder why it is set up like that.*

Grugg shrugged and flipped the lever on the red spigot. A grinding squeal emanated from down the pipe through the floor before, at once, steaming hot water began pouring forth.

*I was half convinced it would be spiders, or blood, or maybe even a ghost.*

*The fact that it was regular water is almost just as worrying.*