

Chapter 44 - Wood Working

“Yeah, we said we'll come back tomorrow,” Grugg admonished the ratman, shaking his head.

He wasn't being literal; well, maybe he was. But also, he was using Magic Eye in there - I could sense it.

Gregor motioned for them to move down into an alley partway down the street, where they would be out of view from the forge. It was cold in the shade, and the Detective had trouble fitting down the passageway quietly with the added bulk of the club on his back. They made it a good ten feet in to be sure before the ratman stopped them. Grugg crouched down and whispered.

“What did Gregor see?”

“Marge had guests in the back room. Three-sword lady and a short man in a similar outfit.”

“Oh! Big Lady and... Paulo? Grugg met him before. We should have said hello.”

“Not a good idea,” Gregor hissed. “They will want to steal our case findings and give nothing in return. They were hiding for a reason.”

‘Gregor is right. Unfortunately, they are not our friends. Not until we know more about them.’

The Deputy winced from the sound of the voice as it softly echoed down the shadowy passage. “See, even ser Hat is right on this one.”

That's a bit of a dig. I feel I am right on most things, am I not?

“Grugg understand,” he waved his hand in the air as if to dissipate the brewing argument between Hat and ratman. “Focus on Lumberyard, then Claudia and Greyjoy on way back.”

“Yes, ser.”

‘Agreed.’

The trio followed down the alleyway, which eventually came out onto another street, the smell of baked goods wafting down with the chill breeze. If there was one thing that Grugg was enjoying getting used to, it was the constant smell of cooking that roamed around the various shops or homes. He wasn't even that hungry currently, but he salivated at the thought of stocking up the storeroom of the safehouse with all sorts of treats he had never had the chance to try on the mountain.

From here, the journey was mostly uneventful, but they did pass the warehouse, which was now boarded up and condemned. In short order, they arrived at the Southern gate. This direction seemed to get more favourable visitors, as the wide gate seemed to be left open by default.

“Afternoon, Detective,” one of the gate Guards nodded his way. “Out for a little stroll?”

Grugg smiled and recognised the man as one of the guards that had been injured in the warehouse attack. "Off to Lumberyard."

"Right you are; just follow the path outside the town - you can't miss it."

Exiting from the town onto the main road heading South, a great swathe of trees filled the majority of the view where the wide stone pathway didn't blight the natural landscape. The encroaching winter had stripped many of the trees of their leaves, the barren spindly branches looking sad mixed in with their few ever-green cousins. Any doubts as to which direction the lumber yard may be were soon quelled as to their left, a section of the woods had been cleared, and the sound of logs being cut could be heard now that they moved further from the town.

The Lumberyard was a large cleared lot of compacted dry earth, the sawdust from countless felled trees mixing in with dirt over time. On one end nearest the forest was a stack of logs with the branches cut off, piled almost twice as high as Grugg. Groups of workers stood at various stations where the logs were then cut with large metal saws in different ways. The end product being planks or blocks of wood of different sizes, which were then stored in a third section closest to the town. A couple of wagons stood at the ready with mules lazily chewing on hay for their downtime as the produce was laboured onto the wheeled carriage.

'Got any ideas of how best to approach this?'

Gregor rubbed his temples and looked up at the Detective. "You are the lead on this, ser Grugg. Show us what a good Detective is made of."

"Oh, um okay." The cyclops made off straight towards the nearest worker - a stocky shirtless man who was as sweaty as he was well built, and currently eating an apple.

"What'cher want?" he scowled as he sat on a short stack of circular log cuttings, giving the approaching Detective a couple of odd glances.

Standing there in his wizard hat, waistcoat over a short sleeve shirt, brown shorts with a utility belt, and large stomping boots, Grugg started to wonder if perhaps he didn't really look the part today. In fairness, fashion was low on his priority list and generally beyond his understanding. Far be it for him to have to rely on Claudia to have to dress him, but she did provide all the clothing, and there weren't a lot of things that went well with a traditional wizard's hat.

"Oh. Could Grugg talk to boss in charge?"

"Maybe. Who's askin'?" the man scratched his bald head and took another bite of his apple.

"Grugg just did," the cyclops frowned.

"An' who is Grugg?"

The Detective clenched his teeth. Perhaps he should just go popping arms off people until he got some answers. No, that was the anger talking again; he was better than this. He sighed and shrugged at his Deputy.

"We are Detectives, just looking to ask a few questions," the ratman tried to add helpfully. "You look suspicious. Want to confess to anything?"

"Confess? Say, yer not some religious types, are yeh?" the worker folded his arms, discarding the apple core onto the floor. "Not interested."

"No. Grugg is Detective."

"Sure, but which one of yer is Grugg?"

Okay, we are wasting our time here. Let's move on before someone gets hurt.

"If yer looking for work, the foreman'll set ya up. Oi, Red!" the worker called with a brief whistle, getting the attention of a tall, darkly tanned man currently trying to supervise a pair of lumberjacks.

The foreman wore a leather waistcoat over his bare chest, the treated hide a lighter shade than his heavily tanned and cracked skin. He was well built but looked to be past his manual labour prime, the sunbleached blonde mullet atop his head streaked with lines of silver. Red put the parchment he was carrying into a side satchel as he approached, his voice low and grisdled.

"What's going on here then?"

"Grugg would like to see boss, please." The cyclops grinned with exasperation and tried to stand in front of the apple-eating miscreant so that the unhelpful man wouldn't get a word in.

Red looked both Detectives up and down, his eyes pausing at the badges in recognition that these two misfit characters were probably not in the market for a job at the yard. "You must be here to talk about-"

"Grugg got good clothes in the shop," the interruption slipped out as the slight insecurity over his dress sense finally came to fruition.

"-to talk about Fixion," the foreman finished, his expression unchanging as he meandered his way through the sentence.

"Yes, ser Foreman," Gregor stepped in whilst the Detective composed himself. "Did you work with the criminal?"

"I did."

"...and can you tell us anything about ser Fixion?" What brief glimmer of optimism that had managed to peek through the usual dour expression of the ratman slowly dimmed in an attempt to draw information from the slow man.

"What did you what to know?" Red scratched his stubbled chin with a blank expression.

I can't tell if he is being intentionally unhelpful or not.

Grugg bore down on the man and squinted. "Did Red know Fixion was Nightshade?"

The foreman returned the look, with no obvious tells on his face. "All I knew was that he was a good worker. He was head of the outpost a little further South of here."

The direction in which the man pointed was nothing but further forest. It was a fair assumption that the sites weren't interlinked and just used the main road for transport to the lumber yard. All that Grugg knew about trees were that they were easy to knock down but hard to work with without the right tools. Oh, and also, some of them grew things that you could eat - which after a quick glance around, none of the closest spread looked like they had anything to bear. He had suspected that, given that it was Autumn, but it was always good to be prudent.

"Who owns this place?" Gregor asked, his arms now neatly crossed across his chest, the end of his tail waving slowly in the air.

"Mr Edward Gutblade."

"...Oh." The ratman pulled out his notepad and made some scribbles.

"It's a traditional family name," Red offered with a shrug, in perhaps a very rehearsed manner. "The boys call him Big Ed."

"Grugg find Mr Ed in that building?" The Detective pointed towards the two-story structure that dominated the far end of the yard. It seemed relatively new in construction, with the lighter, untreated wood comprising most of the building.

"Nah, he is in the Southern outpost at the moment. They're doing a big expansion, and he wanted to oversee it."

Potentially suspicious. I half imagined Don Kean to be the type to hide away in the safety of the high-class residential areas, but I suppose out here is as good a place as any for a spymaster.

Grugg looked around again. Trees, buildings, logs, and lots of people working with various cutting devices. No cloaked figures were trying to lurk around or ambush them, but it would be foolish to think that someone wasn't keeping track of them in some manner. They weren't exactly the most subtle of investigative groups, so tailing them couldn't be that hard.

"He doesn't tend to take many visitors, but I'm sure he would make an exception for yourselves." Red watched the cyclops glare off into the distance. "It's about a mile off; you should be able to see it from the main road."

We should have plenty of time to head that way before dusk if you still wanted to go to the Emporium and meet up with Claudia.

"Gregor okay to go see Gutward now?"

"I'm pretty sure it was ser Bigblade."

"Edblade? Didn't Gregor write this down?"

“No,” the ratman flashed him the paper showing a crude sketch of the two Detectives.

What? He didn't even draw me atop your head!

Grugg grinned as the attempted artwork was withdrawn and hidden away, the Deputy looking away and folding his arms once more. The pair, in rough sketch form, had been standing on a pile of logs, looking triumphant.

“And yes, ser Detective, we can go see ser Wood. I have something to... do this evening, but I am sure we will be finished in time.”

I hate to think about what he plans on doing without our knowledge, but that is his business.

“Do you still need me?” Red had a glazed-over look to his eyes, unwilling, or perhaps able, to contend with the odd pair of Detectives any longer.

“Yes,” Grugg folded his arms to mimic the ratman. “What is Red's favourite animal?”

A blank stare was the only response for a few beats, before his features softened. “Well, I have always been fond of gulls-”

“Boring,” the cyclops dismissed him, shaking his head. Birds were the worst - not as bad as rain, but definitely more annoying than magic. They squawked and yelled and would run into the sky when he would chase them to eat. “C'mon, Deputy, let us go see Woodman.”

It was Edward Gutblade.

They moved to head out, giving the stoic foreman a polite but disappointed wave, when suddenly - a metallic voice rang out from one of the pouches on Grugg's belt.

[High Alert. Fixion has escaped jail. Reportedly heading South. Again, Fixion has escaped; care is advised.]