

Chapter 71 - In Splinters

The door of the lumber house slammed behind the cyclops as he scowled around the room they now found themselves in. He cursed the builders of the structure for doing such a lazy job, anger getting in the way of the irony of him being an even worse woodsman. The whole building looked like it had been put together in a rush, shoddy joins and weak-looking supports somehow propping up the almost empty shell. Save for a small table, and set of four chairs, this first room was completely bare.

Claudia was already moving over to the table to shift it towards the door as the Detective leaned into it, keeping it closed as the soft thuds of paws across the lot ground grew closer.

'I'm not sure that will hold them; it looks like they could just blow this house down.'

A mixture of relief and worry washed over the clothesmaker's face as she let the table back to the floor, wincing as it grazed along her healing arms. "Then where, upstairs?"

Grugg nodded. Being up a floor should at least bottleneck their entry if there was a staircase between them - and maybe there would be something more useful than weak furniture elsewhere in this house.

Claudia opened the only door exiting the room, with Grugg now hot on her heels, as they moved into a second empty room. The next doorway at least revealed a rickety-looking staircase in an otherwise bare parlour - a terribly basic and vacant fireplace at the end. The first step onto the stairs was met by a hideous squeal beneath the weight of the cyclops and the splintering of wood as the wolves struck at the entry doorway.

You'd think a building in a lumberyard would be built the most competently.

Sweat began to run down the back of the Detective as his careful footsteps caused more groans and aches from the lumber beneath him. Claudia clung behind him, not wanting to add additional weight to their ascent but also not wanting to be first into the jaws of the encroaching enemy.

They reached the top of the staircase just as the scrabble of claws reached into the parlour, the first couple of smaller wolves sliding in almost sideways as they righted their sprint towards the stairs. Grugg turned to the landing they were on - a thin passageway that led to a window at the end, two doorways on the left wall, where the right side was an open balcony to the parlour.

He let Claudia move before him and into the nearest doorway; they had no time to be picky. Upon entering this final point of stand-off, it seemed it didn't matter either way. It was a long room that the second door opened further down. With three windows on the outside walls of this incredibly basic room, the grey light of the overcast midmorning dimly illuminated the door through which the beasts would attempt to enter. A small table and two chairs were the only furniture to accompany them in the fight about to ensue.

"Chair, corner," Grugg huffed bluntly, standing a few feet back from the door as the claw clambering up the stairs drew near.

Claudia pushed one of the chairs into the corner near Grugg and stood atop it, donning the red glove, as The Storm withdrew from its sheathe and floated in the air. From this vantage point, she could more easily see over the large cyclops, the vaulted ceiling giving lots of room for her large needle to move about.

A sudden slam as the first wolf careened into the door, the fragile wood buckling and cracking from the impact. With the second strike, claws were now visible, piercing and shredding gashes through the wood.

“Grugggg,” the wolf hissed through the splintered cracks.

“You mean ‘knock-knock!’” Grugg yelled as he swung Thud full strength into the door, the force passing through the thin wood with ease straight into the determined wolf. Both splinted door and wolf alike were thrown back over the balcony, crashing into the parlour below and no doubt destroying a swathe of planks in the process. The second wolf at the top of the stairs glanced behind at the airborne ally and then turned its glare back to the cyclops, rearing to leap forward.

Grugg took some steps back to cover Claudia’s position and raised his club defensively. Wolves would be quick and work as a group. He had fought against a couple of packs in his youth, but none that had whispered his name. As the approaching wolf leapt towards him, The Storm struck the glowing yellow eye of the beast, and the pounce fell short as it yelped in pain and tried to shake the dagger-sized blade out.

It needn’t have bothered, as the now very distracted wolf was in prime Thud range. The Storm withdrew from the wolf just as the club swung down in a large arc, catching the creature atop the head and crushing it to the floor, the wooden boards flexing and creaking at the force as the wolf went limp.

Two more, approaching slowly.

Grugg shook off the wolf remains from Thud as his electric-blue eye blazed in the dim light, the rain pattering against the thin windows gradually increasing as the two wolves were joined by a third. The door at the other end of the room burst open as another smaller beast was joined by the larger wolf. Perhaps they had climbed up the wall with their claws - either way, with Grugg stuck in the corner on defence, the attackers could slink into the room and start to encircle and pin him.

Grugg, I hope you will forgive me for what I am about to do - but please know it’s only temporary.

The Detective licked his lips as thoughts of what the wizard could mean zipped through his head. Probably nothing to do with goats, he reasoned, unless it-

‘Flame Weapon’

Thud burst into flames, almost causing the cyclops to drop the club in shock, but he did not feel the heat from the fire pulsing up the main body of the weapon. Instead, the light from the effect caused the wolves to recoil slightly as the glow filled the empty room, taking it from a dull grey to a soft amber.

“First wolfie to say *Grugg* gets to be next dinner,” The Detective growled, crouching low with hand outstretched in an open challenge.

“*Gru-*,” one wolf began before thinking better of it.

“No fair,” Claudia pouted, her eyes still wide with focus, “When do I get appropriate, time-sensitive upgrades?”

‘Flame Weapon’

The Storm lit up in the air with similar fire, a tiny spear of burning, much to the clothesmaker’s joy.

‘It won’t last as long because of reasons, a story for a more apt time.’

The larger wolf barked an order to the small ones, who had seemingly lost a little courage in the face of the spellcasting and odd hollow voice that echoed within the empty room. Upon this chastisement, they soon regained their fervour and began enclosing on the pair.

Grugg swung out in front of him in a wide arc, seemingly to ward off the predators with his aflame club, but the burning light also slightly blinded those too close - their eyes having to adjust to the change. This was enough for the first one to receive The Storm clean through the foreleg as Claudia twisted the aflame needle and looped it in a short arc around a back leg, the magic thread tightening and causing the beast to stumble.

With a short leap, Grugg landed his boot on the restrained wolf, the crunch of broken bones coinciding with a loud creak as the floor beneath them again complained at the forces being exerted on it. He swung Thud to the right to cover his attack, but another wolf jumped by at his left - fanged jaws clamping around his thick forearm.

Claudia struggled to retrieve her needle from the crushed wolf, having to pull it in an off direction to untangle the thread from beneath the beast. The remaining creatures saw the brief moment of opportunity to close in on the cyclops.

Grugg shook his left arm to try and dislodge the wolf as the sharp pains radiated up his arm. Thankfully, his spiked leather gloves partially blocked the bite, one of the pointy metal studs restricting how deep the fangs could be sunk. A wolf jumped in from the front, thus too slow to block, but the sharp-clawed attack only shredded off part of his kilt and just missed his leg. The kilt wolf rolled to the side to avoid the oncoming return attack from the club; instead, the hard metal end struck the empty floor, splitting the plank and causing the other end to snap upwards into the torso of a looming third wolf - knocking the air from it.

The Storm, now free from the entanglement, whipped around in the air and just missed the kilt wolf as it rolled away from Grugg’s attack, the smell of singed fur accompanied by a scorched mark across the floor as it carried on the path. Then, turning loops in the air to disorientate the winded wolf, the giant needle closed in for an attack.

Frustration was beginning to build within Grugg as the creature attached to his arm would not drop off as he waved it around, its legs dangling above the floor. Blood was starting to run down his arm from the puncture wounds, which did nothing but annoy him further. The

Detective opened his mouth wide and crunched down with his own teeth around the biting wolf's head. While his teeth weren't as sharp as theirs, he certainly had a lot of force in his jaw. The panic yelps of the wolf as it released his grip was a win enough for the cyclops, allowing the creature to drop to the floor as he spat out a mouthful of fur.

Big bad is waiting for an opportunity to strike, be aware.

The cyclops watched as the giant needle made ever-tightening circular loops in front of the winded wolf, putting it off-guard - before it shot up into the air. Grugg knew an opening when he saw one and launched Thud out like a rocket, striking the distracted wolf clean in the face with a sickening crunch. The club fell to the floor and rolled slightly towards the wall, the flames extinguishing as they began to scorch dark marks on the nearby floor.

I had to end that early lest we go up in fire.

Grugg kicked out at the kilt wolf, who again was spry enough to jump back away from his attack, but perhaps not perceptive enough to catch The Storm, which had made a high loop, as it also extinguished, from the ceiling around and struck the creature in the underbelly, disembowelling the beast.

"Oh! *Hells*, I didn't actually mean to do that," Claudia called, aghast from the top of the chair as she watched the wolf collapse in panic as it bled out.

The biting wolf caught the Detective by the arm again as he was distracted by the damage wrought by the clothesmaker - this time, the attacker had managed to avoid the glove and sunk its fangs fully into his skin. Grugg grunted and with his now free right hand, grabbed the beast by the neck and squeezed - the resulting crunch leaving the body to drop limply to the floor.

The large wolf growled from the other end of the room, now left with no pack to fight alongside. However, instead of retreating, the beast stood up on both hind legs and put their forepaws on their hips.

"*Grugggg*," the wolf hissed, amber colour eyes glowing in the dim light, "I see they did not lie about your prowess."

"Sometimes hard to hide it in kilt."

A mirthless, fanged grin spread across the face of the pack leader. "How rude, though; let me introduce myself. I am-"

"No, no," Grugg shook his finger in the air. "Let Grugg guess."

'It's got to be either Silverfang or Dogman, right?'

"Dogman would be so reductive, though?" Claudia shrugged from atop the chair.

'Both are pretty hammy if you ask me.'

"Grugg likes ham."

The irritated wolfman scowled at them as his posture slacked and opened up his mouth to protest.

Although, he never had the chance, as a horrendous creak came from the floor beneath them, reverberating throughout the whole house.

And then, the top floor collapsed.