

Chapter 97 - Same, but Different

Grugg awoke with a snort, disorientated. The safehouse main room slowly came into view, and the waking world made sense once more. He turned from the couch to see the wizard sitting at the dining table already, steaming mug of coffee in one hand as he stared intently at the table.

"Morning Grugg," Bart muttered, unflinching.

"Good morning, ser Grugg," Gregor emerged from the kitchen, "coffee?"

"No thanks," the Detective rose and stretched out his sore arms. At some point during the night, he had thought it a good idea to put his kilt on, which was a smart idea given the state of what remained of his suit.

"Fair enough. I was just telling ser Ha- ser Bart here that it was ironic."

"What that?" Grugg shrugged and moved to sit at the table too.

"He once was a hat with the power of a wizard, and now he is a wizard with the power of a hat."

"Be nice," the Detective frowned at the ratman, who sat at the table and had the decency to look a little apologetic.

"No, no, he is right," Bart finally drew his gaze away from the empty space, "I went from limitless, almost unheard of power... to this. I can't even light candles anymore."

Grugg wrinkled his nose. This was clearly a sore spot for the wizard. He had always imagined him to stand tall and exude the confidence that he had when they first met. The Bart sitting before him now was a very confused old man. The wizard continued before the cyclops could come up with some reassuring words.

"It's odd... despite my current appearance, I am still not human. Whatever a shapeshifter may be, my form is unlike both my time spent as my previous self... and the hat."

Grugg nodded but glanced over to the ratman, hoping for some kind of moral support. Gregor looked like he was partially enjoying the wizard's discomfort but caught the eye of the Cyclops and cleared his throat.

"It's definitely something new, ser Wizard. But you are still a part of this group, and I am sure you can find a way to help that doesn't involve you pulling your weight magically." He ended with a shrug and an attempt at a smile towards the distraught Bart.

A dull Thud came from the stairwell, followed by muffled cursing.

"Need to fix stairs," Grugg grumbled to nobody, rolling his eye. Although, in fairness, they would be leaving the town in - he assumed - a manner of days.

Claudia pushed into the main room with a slight limp. "Morning all. I perhaps shouldn't be jumping around on the ankle that is still healing up, huh?" She smiled sheepishly at Grugg and joined them at the table.

Gregor scratched at his chin. "We were just talking about how ser Bart is having an existential crisis on account of not being either a hat or a wizard anymore."

"Oh, Bart," she tightened her silk dressing gown to fight off some morning chill, "it's not all that bad, is it? You could learn again?"

"It's not impossible." The wizard rubbed his fingertips across the table, feeling the texture of the worn, lacquered wood. "I still have a tether to the world of the arcane, even if it is an obscure, limited one. It would basically mean learning everything from scratch."

"Whatever you need, ser Hat, we will help you." The ratman stood from the table and turned around. "I need more coffee."

Grugg started to think as the murmurs of conversation sunk away from him. It had been quiet in his head since the wizard left, and the difference didn't stop there. While he wouldn't ever consider himself a big thinker, there was undoubtedly more activity going on between his ears than previously. Whether this was because of his integration into society, unlocking the dusty parts of his brain - or perhaps something had been left behind from the wizard's departure... he had no clue.

What he did know, however, was that he needed to support his friend just as Bart had helped him through the growing pains of becoming a Detective. Even without the use of his arcane prowess, the wizard was just as a big part of their Udok and Investigative group as always.

"Bart," the Cyclops began, "Grugg need your help finding box today."

"Yes, of course," the wizard nodded, a smile forming on his wrinkled face in the midst of his beard.

"I was planning on staying put today; I need a bit more rest, and uniforms aren't going to sew themselves." Claudia grinned and looked to the storeroom where all the fabrics had been kept.

"And I am doing the same, although not sewing. I just need an extra day to ensure my lungs will stay inside my body, and I don't want to be the third wheel." Gregor returned to the room with a fresh cup of coffee.

"Speaking of wheels," Grugg nodded, "should see if Lady is okay soon."

"She looked exhausted yesterday," Claudia agreed, "I shouldn't imagine today will be any easier."

Grugg tried to imagine it. There must be all sorts of paperwork due for the amount of chaos

the fight at the courthouse had wrought. Accounting for the dead on both sides, the crimes and punishments enacted and dispensed with violence and damage done to the building itself. Although he didn't know how much of that would fall to the Captain, Lady Valoth was in the thick of it due to the Nightshade investigation.

"I'm ready when you are then, Grugg," the wizard smiled weakly at him.

Goodbye!

Grugg waved to the smiling wooden door as they left the safehouse. The town was still damp from the downpour from the night before, but the dark grey clouds had turned into a lighter shade of overcast. He adjusted his kilt and smiled down at the thin wizard.

"Time for breakfast, Grugg thinks."

"An excellent idea; I... haven't tasted anything in so long!" Bart stood taller, the thrill of finally getting to enjoy food breaking his melancholy mood.

"Let's go cafe where Lady threaten owner?" A wide grin formed on the Detective's face.

The walk down from the residential sector into the part of town where the cafe was located took over twice as long as usual. Occasionally, a towns person would stop the pair to thank Grugg for his efforts at the courthouse. It had not taken long for word to pass around about the monster and Nightshade bosses' attack, that had been thwarted through the actions of the large Detective and Town Guard.

When not being accosted by thankful residents, Bart would occasionally stop to take in the surroundings. Either to enjoy a new smell or texture, to shiver in the cold breeze of the more open streets, or even - as he would repeatedly mention - to view things from his own height for a change. Grugg smiled and was patient, more happy to humour the wizard than to have praise lavished upon him.

Eventually, they made it to the cafe, and although the inside wasn't as empty as before, Markus came rushing over to them as they took a table.

"Lady Valoth said you might return," he nodded a greeting nervously, "apparently, this will go on her tab."

"Being an Investigator sure has perks, then," Bart murmured under his breath, "oh, technically, I'm not one. Meat pie, with a side of... uh, apple pie. You do a lot of pies here."

"It's our speciality!" Markus animatedly declared, gesturing to a pie-specific menu standing over at the counter.

"Grugg will have same, but bigger," the cyclops grinned as the owner wrote down the orders and headed to the kitchen.

The Detective looked around the room. Just under a dozen other patrons were in the midst

of having their own breakfast spread around the other four tables in the cafe. They all seemed content minding their own business - although the occasional glance over to the hulking cyclops and burgundy-clad wizard was a given. He leaned in low to the table, whispering to his opposite.

“So, how Bart going to kill?”

“Huh, you mean who? And why” Bart furrowed his brow.

“No, how. Who comes later? But if Bart not powerful with magic, how going to kill to get more...” Grugg circled his hand in the air, “book picture pages.”

“As much as it would be interesting to have a library of characters that I could... be, perhaps that is just something best left for dire times. The choice of murdering just so I could steal someone’s identity is currently not sitting well.”

Grugg pouted at this admission. Perhaps his was not the best moral compass to be advising in this regard. “Does it have to be Bart kill, or can take from already dead?”

“It’s something I’d have to research or try out if the opportunity comes up... organically,” he emphasised the last word with a frown at the sudden eager expression of the cyclops. “Far more pressing today, though, is where do we put the keys?”

“In the lock,” Grugg nodded sagely as Markus brought them their plated pies.

“Thanks, Markus,” the wizard nodded to the no-less nervous owner as he left their table. “And where do we find the lock?”

The Detective rubbed his bare head. Much like Blackjack himself, the box and the place where it resided could be anywhere. No doubt the Nightshade boss would have been as elusive as possible, fitting for one of his station and abilities. Grugg drew a blank. He shrugged to the wizard in resignation - perhaps just distracted by the pie, too.

“I suggest,” Bart said, picking up a fork, “that we start investigating places already on our suspicions list.”

At first, Grugg returned a blank stare, mouthful of half-chewed food. Then, swallowing it down, he grinned. “Harold’s place?”

“It’s mostly been cleared out of anything incriminating by now, but we have to do our due diligence, don’t we?”

“We do the do-dilly,” Grugg nodded, albeit slowly.

“Let’s get our strength up then; this food tastes great!”

Grugg yawned as they walked through the town to Harold's stables. In truth, he could probably have used a day or two more rest. The medics had said the amount of damage his arms had taken was very concerning, but somehow the multitude of deep wounds and burns that had enveloped them had healed remarkably well. Usually, he would like to excuse it as just his hardy nature, but his thoughts had again turned to how much of the wizard had indeed left him.

Bart had been quiet since leaving the cafe, declining the offered ride atop the Detective's head despite looking tired after the filling meal. It wasn't out of the ordinary, to some degree - at least in the grand scheme of all the out-of-the-ordinary things that had come to pass recently. The wizard was once again experiencing life in a totally new body after a few violent weeks. It stood to reason he would want to adjust and get through things at his own pace.

"This must be the place," Bart finally spoke as they rounded past some of the larger buildings that once housed the many horses or whatever Harold actually did.

To think that Grugg would have been doing menial chores for the almost-certainly Nightshade boss in apology for breaking the stables all those years ago...

"Yup," the cyclops agreed. Here was the door with the crossed swords logo on it, just as the blacksmiths had mentioned. It was a shame that he hadn't been able to join in on the fighting area. That would have been a lot of fun.

"Shame about the fighting arena. Would have been a lot of fun." The wizard echoed his thoughts, giving the Detective a devious grin.

"Would have been too easy," Grugg scoffed again, putting his hand on the doorway out of habit. "Oh, yeah."

"We will just have to do this the old-fashioned way, pal."

Grugg took several steps back, readying his steel-plated boot.

Knock knock, he thought to himself with a wide grin.