

Workaround

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The Fifth Night of the Third Spring Moon, in the 1698th Year of Underhaven

Bludgeon's large frame dominated the desk he sat at, and the pile of parchments upon it. Like most high-ranking trolls, he had a runner to deal with administrative trivialities, but there were certain documents that she wasn't privileged to see, including several related to the recent unpleasantness. As he'd expected they would, the Joint Heads had made the obvious and correct decision; the dead point-ear had been a Palace Keeper, or the descendant of one. *'What must the point-ears infesting the surface think of our people, those that broke the backs of their cone-headed ancestors?'*

A knock at the door, a security screen within slid out of the way to revealing the face of his assistant. "She's here," Tunnelrat stated.

He sorted the papers and locked them away. "Very well. Let her in," Bludgeon intoned. The screen closed, and shortly thereafter the small, round figure of Thumbprint crossed his threshold. She bore her House's sigil on a simple amulet; gone was the bracer used as a perch at their last meeting in closed quarters. He was glad he didn't have to look at that thrice-cursed piece of leather, at the nicks and scratches it bore, and the hideous blood-red *thing* that had made those marks.

She waited until the door was closed to speak. "Thank you for seeing me. I should begin by assuring you that the momentary unpleasantness between Redpike and myself has no bearing on my continued good will towards you and your House."

"You may dispense with the pleasantries. I'm a busy man."

"I'll get right to it, then. Certain data have become available for me to discuss in certain company since the inquest. There is a male elf scout of whom you must be aware. I admit I don't know his name, but the unofficial practice is to refer to him as The Walker."

A small pause; an attempt at prodding the male's name out of him, perhaps? He merely nodded, denying her any new information.

She continued as if nothing was missing at all, "And surely you are aware that he's known to travel with a Preserver on his longer routes? If I recall the notes correctly..." Her eyes shifted upward to an imagined list, "Skin: pale gold, Wings: dark red and/or orange. Eyes: indeterminate." She then examined her hands while her voice took on the wistful tone of a scientist waxing theoretical, "Now supposing he is the next elf to explore one of our tunnels, he is a scout after all, it seems a likely happenstance, and supposing he brings his winged companion along..." She looked dead into his eyes. "Which will you reach for first, your weapon or the ceiling?"

Nose flared, Bludgeon shot to his feet. A head taller at least, he glared down at her. "You dare..."

Thumbprint stood firm. "Yes, I dare! Do you really think I'm the only one who does? Redpike saw the same things I did at the autopsy, and he is in a much better position to benefit from it than

myself. I don't want your job. But he might, and he certainly spends more time around the right ears than I do. Whispers flow upstream, General. Someone will listen to them. Someone will turn those whispers into roars. A year hence, Hatchet may be looking for a new Chief Of Security. Your reputation, your worth as a soldier, and your status are on the line." Her expression and posture softened. "I believe I can help you."

Anger, humiliation, resentment, alarm, and more bubbled up behind his eyes. All blotted out by a single thought which rose above the fracas. A single name: Grimthorn.

Bludgeon was as apolitical as a troll in his position could afford to be, loyal first to his House -- regardless of who led it -- and to the males and females under his command. Grimthorn, however, was loyal to his ambitions. If the Second-of-House could fill Bludgeon's seat with a member of his cabal, he'd be that much closer to Hatchet's. Word that the Chief of Security had suffered a panic attack near Grimthorn's hungry ears would mark the end of his career. What could a Scholar possibly do to evade this?

Bludgeon offered his guest a seat. She took it, and waited for him to reclaim his own before continuing. "Let's call your situation what it is; you suffer from a phobia. An irrational fear which can become vanquished through exposure and effort. I have a cousin in Provisions who was absolutely *terrified* of snakes. The poor dear would curl up at the sight of one. Just the mention of them would be enough to send him hotfooting out of a room." Arms folded across the lip of his desk, she leaned inward. "Until, that is, his parents sent him to work for an animal handler for as long as it took to ease his mind. Now he traps surface-meats for us all, snakes included."

A nauseous knot formed at the pit of the general's stomach. He could guess as to the answer, but asked anyway, "What do you propose?"

"As I said, exposure and effort. I recommend that you spend some time with me at Trickleclaw's aviary. I can provide the necessary pass." A shiver ran up the big troll's back at the thought of seeing that horrid creature again, let alone on ground familiar to it, but he kept his wits and listened on. "Or we could arrange to meet at a more neutral site instead? I can give you a proper introduction to the Preserver. From a distance at first, then we work our way up to physical contact. I'm sure I can scrounge up a bracer in your size. All closely supervised, of course." She slid what must have been meant as a reassuring hand along the table, which he slid back from. "Now now, I can guarantee your safety. And what better way than to reassure those in doubt than to show them that you have faced your fears and overcome them?"

To his shame, Bludgeon's first impulse was to sidestep. "Why offer so much and ask so little? What do you really want?"

"Simply the security of knowing that me and mine are safe from what is now a very obvious threat. I don't think one with your proven record of service should have to risk losing his position due to one unfortunate incident."

Anger made a play for his attention. "Don't try to rattle my brain with flattery! Speak plainly! What aren't you telling me?"

After an embarrassed sigh, Thumbprint conceded, "It's not as though there are many trolls I can even make this offer to. I can't say I blame Redpike for his outburst. He acted from a place of true patriotism. But I do now find myself in a position of needing to show some positive interaction with

the insect outside of myself. It would be quite a gem in my hair to say my socialization project had been of service to the military. Helping you helps me."

'So that's it, then. We lift each other past any blowback from the inquest.' A reasonable bargain. But one that some quivering piece of him wanted desperately to avoid stepping in to. He swallowed. "I'll think about it. Good day to you."

The Scholar rose to leave. "I hope you do. Good day."

His skin crawled, the very existence of Preservers disturbed him so. The creatures were just so *unnatural*. Living things die! Even the ever-youthful point-ears above came and went over time. Yet that little monster lived on and on, unending! Quick and sharp and vile! Filled with an unyielding adoration for the bane of his people! What untold damage could its trickling claws do were it inclined to unleash the contempt of its true masters?

Anger turned its head again, inward towards fear. *'NO! Enough of this! Heft your belt and meet the challenge! You would expect nothing less from any soldier under your command!'* Thumbprint was but a step away from the door when he called out, "Wait! 'll do it."

She turned, smiling politely. "Glad to hear it, sir. Should I ask your assistant when you'll have the time to get started?"

He nodded. Once Thumbprint was gone, he turned his attention back to the parchments. *'What to do about Redpike?'*

...

"I trust your discussion was fruitful?" asked Tunnelrat as she produced an appointment card.

"Very," Thumbprint answered, "Thank you for expediting this meeting. I might have spent weeks entangled in military bureaucracy if not for your help. Who knows what might have happened in the meantime?" She clasped the runner's hand, slipping her a small pouch. "I do appreciate your efforts on my behalf."

"Always happy to be of service, ma'am," the runner stated, neither a hint of guile nor guilt in her voice.

Thumbprint traded goodbyes, and departed. The day so far had been very fruitful indeed, and there were yet more fruits to be plucked. Her desire to help the general overcome his phobia was genuine. As was her desire to neutralize a threat. She had simply misled Bludgeon about whom that threat was.

'Redpike doesn't know it yet, but his career ended the moment he lifted a hand to Trickleclaw and I.'

Of course, she couldn't say she blamed him for the outburst -- no, the *violence* -- he had unleashed. An official complaint was useless given the secrecy surrounding his attack upon her person. Even if she could file one, she'd likely be the party held in the wrong by ideologues on the relevant oversight committee, and she couldn't afford such a black mark in her record. But those were mere trivialities. Redpike *could not* be allowed to capitalize upon the notoriety his zealous display of patriotism had gained him among the Joint Heads. Otherwise he could rise to

a position where he could strike at her again. He was an obvious threat, and his ascension to higher status needed to be cut down ere it began. She had spent the past week gathering memories of him. She wasn't the only one he had bullied, and now it was time to put those tales to use.

Thumbprint turned at the first tunnel that would take her to the Grand Hall of Provisions. She had a few favors to call in, a few whispers to set afloat. Subtle knives that would prune away at Redpike's reputation, replacing it with one of a belligerent undisciplined brute that no House could feel safe under. A year hence, that thug would be lucky to be put in charge of guarding mess hall mushroom barrels, much less be given any kind of position that would grant access to the high-clearance realms where she worked and her little friend was confined.

And Thumbprint wouldn't leave any fingerprints at all.