

Argyle and the Evil Rats
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Argyle no like being tied to post! Argyle no can hunt bugs when tied to post! Gypsies no see Argyle no sleep! Trolls re-gen-err-ate, no need sleep! Argyle just sometimes pretend sleep so Argyle no get fire wood! Argyle HUNGRY! OOOOO what's That Argyle see? Tasty rat? Argyle chase rat! OOOOF! Oh. Argyle tied to post. OM NOM NOM NOM NOM! Argyle free now! Go hunt rat. ARGYLE SMA.....OW OW OW OW OW!

The Band woke the next morning to find Argyle bleeding and covered in scratches.

“Argyle!” Adria screamed as she hugged the troll to her chest, “How did this occur?!”

“I try eat rat! But rat has friends!” Argyle’s eyes grew wide with fear. “Friends ambush! RATS SMART!”

Adria’s frown of concern soon turned upwards into a smile as she began to laugh.

“Rats?” Adria giggled, “You mean to tell me rats did this to you? This is almost as funny as the time you fell in that thorny bush and declared it to be evil!”

“Thorn bush evil! It hurt!” Argyle growled defensively.

The whole Band began to laugh. Strange rumors of Draco Disciple activity from Italy to the Salisbury plains had the Band on edge. It had been a great while since something small had happened. The laughter shattered the tense moments from the past weeks even though Argyle did not appreciate that it came at his expense. ‘Twas amidst their laughter that the Band heard a small cough that seemed to command authority. They turned and the Band of the Twisted Claw was faced with Lord Sussex. All members of the band quickly revered the noble.

“Thoren Grymm?” queried Lord Sussex as he held a handkerchief to his nose.

“Aye.” Thoren rose head and shoulders above the rich man.

“I have need of your Band’s expertise in- ahem- less than normal circumstances.” Lord Sussex paused as if he were trying to use small words so the Band would understand. “You see, for the past three months my wife’s jewelry and furs have gone missing.”

Thoren nodded, “And m’lord suspects more tha’ simple thievery.”

Lord Sussex arched his eyebrow but showed no other sign of emotion. “The staff has been questioned, of course, yet none have found any trace of the thieves. Nothing save the stolen objects have been disturbed. ‘Tis as if he appeared and disappeared.”

Thoren frowned. The word witchcraft hung heavy on his tongue, but he dared not use it before Lord Sussex’s sensitive ears.

Lord Sussex continued, “Last night he struck again and ‘twas I who noticed the nearly full moon.

‘Tis clear this evil must be removed before the queen arrives... and it must be removed quietly.”

Thoren suppressed a grin. “We can work as ‘quiet’ as ye like, yet ‘twill not come without cost.

‘Twas a long winter with no help...”

Lord Sussex cut him off, “Three crowns.”

Thoren smiled. With that much money he knew the man was desperate to be rid of the evil that plagued him. He could likely drive the nobleman’s price up even further. However, the man’s need seemed genuine and the money would buy the Band food enough for the warmer months.

“Aye, ye have a deal. Wit’ the full moon tonight we shall find your evil.”

Lord Sussex nodded curtly, turned on his heel and left the camp. The Band sighed with relief and finally stood now that the noble had left.

Isabella brushed off her skirts. “’Tis not that I mind the money, but ‘tis inconvenient when they forget to remind us when ‘tis proper to stand.”

“Aye,” groaned Talia as Vashta pulled her up. “Especially when one is with child.” She turned to Thoren, “You already have a plan.”

“If it is dark magic, it could be the Draco Disciples trying to throw the town into chaos before they return.”

Talia quirked an eyebrow, “You believe they would stoop to mere theft?”

“I’d rather not take any chances.” Thoren squared his hat on his head. “Tonight we shall put Gaia, Vashta, Adria and Argyle outside of Sussex’s manor.”

“I believe I have enough of Sussex’s livery for you. It should help you blend in enough once the sun sets,” Talia added.

“How did you...” Thoren began.

“Not me!” Talia threw up her hands. “Last week, the four lewd ones... we call them the bottle knights? They made a few passing comments about my... size. That night, after their drinking escapades, they dared one another to swim Lake Elizabeth. Gaia came back with their livery and said they would not bother us any longer.”

Thoren slowly turned to Gaia who grinned like a Cheshire cat.

“I foresaw we needed the uniforms... and the guards are not bad looking. Especially once their muscles were wet.” Her grin widened. “You are welcome.”

Thoren rolled his eyes. “Fine. Use them tonight – but then we give them back. Vashta? In the meantime do what you can for Argyle’s wounds. Argyle?”

“Ahhoo?”

“Perhaps you should find some armor.” There was a brief pause then the entire camp broke into laughter.

Argyle hate rats! Not fair rats outsmart Argyle! Argyle smart! Argyle remember fire hurt only third time Argyle pee in Ignis-bed. Ignis-bed bad! Pee on tree. Argyle remember he kill dumb rats and other rats run. Other rats no attack. New rats smart. No one believe Argyle. They say rats no smart... just more smart than Argyle. Adria laugh at Argyle. Stupid rats...

Argyle find armor! Use barrel like snail. Barrel big. SMASH barrel. Piece fit. ARGYLE CHARGE! Ug. Heavy. Too heavy.

Barrel taste good but smell like Thoren-breath.

Argyle need strong box for armor. Big box over there. What big box for? Water in box smell funny.

NO! Box for bath! No bath! NO BATH! Box no armor. Box evil. Argyle pee on box.

No armor. Argyle no fight smart rats if no armor. Argyle want be snail. Snail smart. Good armor.

Tasty squishy part. But Argyle no have tasty squishy part. More smart than snail. Squishy parts smell like Thoren-breath. No tasty.

The full moon elegantly rose over the Sussex manor and bathed the four in her shining silver light. Gaia and Vashta inhaled deeply and smiled as they began to feel night’s power surround them. Adria and Argyle took no notice. To them this was simply another time to fight the

shadows of the world.

Hours passed quietly and the shadows held only the soft night breezes and small animals.

Argyle's discomfort grew as each hour passed despite the numerous 'troll breaks' he took. The women struggled to stay awake in the quiet night, until Argyle growled.

"There!" Argyle started to point with his club, but realized he had left it behind on his last break into the trees.

Their head snapped around and the three women peered into the darkness to find what caused Argyle to raise the alarm. A dark shadow crept quickly across the ground. It broke through the trees and entered into the moon's glow. 'Twas forty rats that emerged, half of which were carrying a piece of parchment. The largest rat in the back of the pack stood on its hind paws and its eyes took on an eerie green glow. Gaia and Vashta sucked in their breath to utter a spell when the rat thrust both paws forward in their direction.

"Virlymn Molik" it squeaked as the parchment before it turned into ash. Gaia and Vashta fell to the ground, stunned. The remaining rats all stood on their hind paws and advanced on Adria and Argyle.

"Evil!" Argyle shrieked and bounded off into the trees.

The swarm of rats descended on Adria.

"Argyle!" she screamed in fury. "Get your cowardly arse here and help me!" Her hammer fell upon the rats with a sickening splurch. But for every rat she killed, four more would take its place. The rats were gaining ground quickly and she had no where to run. She was alone, to be killed by green-eyed rats. "Oh God in heaven," she called while still swinging her hammer, "Help me!"

"Not God, but Argyle help!" As Adria looked up to the line of trees, there stood Argyle gleaming in the moonlight. It took Adria a moment to realize that Argyle was covered head to foot in snails.

The rats turned from Adria and advanced on the blue troll. Argyle growled in response. "Evil rats! Argyle smart!" Argyle leapt into the center of the furry swarm. He swung his club without rhyme or reason and began smashing rats. Rats would try to jump on him, but the combination of the snail slime and the hard shells made it impossible for any of the rats to land a solid bite. In only a few minutes of squeaky, furry doom – Argyle stood amidst a pile of dead rats. He grinned, wiping snail goo off of his face, and padded back to Adria as Gaia and Vashta were released from the stun spell.

"Argyle?" whispered a stunned Adria. "Wherefore art thou covered in snails?"

"ARMOR!" Argyle happily confirmed.

With the rats eliminated, and the full moon sinking from her zenith, the four made their way back to the Band of the Twisted Claw. The embers of the camp fire still smoldered as Thoren sat and watched the four approach. Next to Thoren was the unconscious form of a jewelry merchant and on Thoren's lap was an old dusty spell book.

The four described the rats, and how Argyle defeated the glowing-eyed foes.

Thoren glanced at the spell book. "Here be the spell she was using to control the rats to steal her ladyship's gems." He nodded at the woman. "Her name is Alice Bartlebee. And it appears she has several secrets." Thoren spoke in an even tone.

"She's been stealing jewelry and reselling it to the town's people?" Vashta asked.

"Not quite." Thoren pulled out a black leather sack and shook it. It made the metallic noise of stolen jewelry. "I found this under the Vardo. She meant to frame us. We'd be run out of town if

the sheriff found this. Or worse.”

“But why would she want to do this to us? We’ve never offended her!”

“Aye, that be the question. Why? But we cannot answer it without leaving the egg vulnerable. Mayhaps one of the Guardians will hear of this and try to figure out who desires to set the town against us. I’ll see that she’s turned in. For now, ladies, get some rest. You’ve earned it. And Argyle?”

“Ahhoo?”

“AFTER you put the snails back... Feel free to roam around tonight. Just don’t get us into any trouble, understood?”

The troll’s eye nearly popped out of his head. He’d NEVER been trusted by Thoren to behave before. “Yah!” He happily exclaimed and bounced off into the moonlight.

So the band rested for the night, minds abuzz at a mystery only the Guardians could solve. Who had set up the Band? The answer lay beyond Bristol’s port and so did the hero who was meant to find it.