

THE ADVENTURES OF TEMPLETON'S THREE!

EPISODE 1: THE THREE

BY TROGDOR297

Autumn storms were known to be notoriously vicious when they swept across Dragon's Tooth Peninsula, and the one that gripped the tiny town of Caliban's Bay was living up to the reputation. Gale winds whipped through the space between buildings, rattling shutters, and carrying away loose debris. Rain fell in angry sheets, making anyone who stepped out into it for more than a few moments look like they'd just gotten out of the bath.

It was an unspoken rule that no one traveled when one of these unreasonably cruel storms hit, or at least it was a rule for the locals. The man who walked through the town, hood pulled low, cloak gripped tight against him, wasn't from around here, and so found himself isolated as he traversed the narrow lanes.

He didn't curse or swear, didn't gripe or complain, he simply trudged forward unwilling to yield against nature's wrath. He'd been in storms worse than this when he was young, he wouldn't let a little precipitation break him.

His destination was a tavern that lay in the center of the village known as Caliban's Rest. Caliban had been a notorious buccaneer who'd used Dragon's Tooth Peninsula as a hiding place before it'd been settled. Once civilization had arrived, he'd enjoyed a brief time as a tyrant, lording over the peasants who'd come to tame the area. If he'd been a benevolent ruler he might have gotten away with it, but his cruelty had made waves and within six months the king's army had arrived to depose him only to find Caliban hung by his ankles in the middle of the square. His subjects had been too impatient to wait for royal assistance.

The traveler stepped into a gap where two lanes met and was nearly bowled over by the crosswind that hit him. Yes, he'd been in worse storms before, but that didn't mean this one was a walk in the king's gardens. As it was, he felt great relief as he stepped up to the door of Caliban's Rest, eager for some comfort after enduring this torrential weather for far too long.

He pressed on the door but found it immobile. With a grunt of annoyance he knocked, gloved fingers rapping hard on the solid oak boards.

"Who's there?!" A nervous male voice called from within.

"Lord Templeton. I'm expected?"

From inside the sound of a wood board being lifted could be heard, after which the door swung open. "Apologies m'lord!" Said the stout balding man with a moustache who bowed before him. "I thought you wouldn't be coming, what with the storm!"

Templeton stepped in, removing his hood. He was a well-groomed man in his fifties, his silver hair tied back into a ponytail at the nape of his neck. His face bore a number of thin scars, a history of battles won long ago. The noticeable paunch at his midsection suggested that his current role in life was more acquainted with luxury and leisure.

“There’s no need to bow, I’m not the king” Templeton said as he pulled off his gloves and stowed them in his jacket pocket.

“Of course, m’lord, of course” The man said, bowing once more. He quickly realized his mistake and righted himself, forcing a nervous smile to his face.

“You’re the tavernkeeper?” Templeton said, voice curt.

The tavernkeeper moved to bow, but caught himself this time, choosing instead to only nod. “Yes, m’lord. It’s been in my family for a century.”

“Right” Templeton said, clearly uninterested. “My guests, are they here?”

“Yes, m’lord. In the back room, right this way” The tavernkeeper waved for him to follow.

The tavern was a large open room with the bar placed in the center and a blazing hearth on the right wall. A dozen sets of tables and chairs littered the room, though all were unoccupied this evening. There was a storm after all; no one went out, not even to go to the pub.

The tavernkeeper led him to a door set in the far wall and gestured for Templeton to enter. “We’re not to be disturbed” Templeton said his voice hard, steely eyes bearing down on the keeper. The man flinched slightly then nodded his subservience and promptly left. Templeton watched the cowed man leave, satisfied that he was smart enough to not eavesdrop, before he opened the door and entered.

The small antechamber off of the main room likely served as the keeper’s pantry most days, but with the promise of coin it’d been made available for this private meeting. Slinging his cloak free from his shoulders, unveiling the crisp grey suit underneath, Lord Templeton surveyed the four who waited within, handpicked by him for the vision he had in store.

Starting from the left was a rugged man sitting in a chair against the wall. He was in the prime of his life, his hair shaggy and brown, with hints of gray starting to show. He wore a leather gambeson with chain mail beneath showing at the neck and cuffs. A longsword in a scabbard rested upon the wall at his side, the pommel bearing the king’s sigil.

This was Blake Hornback, or as he’d been known when Templeton had first met him, Captain Hornback of the Royal Mounted Cavalry. That was years ago, and judging by the wear of his outfit, he hadn’t been part of the king’s army for quite some time. Templeton had already been aware of this fact; it’d been key to why the man had received an invitation at all.

Next, standing aloof next to the mantle set into the back wall, was a tall elf woman. She was curvy in build, uncommon for an elf, her tight cloth armor hugging her figure in a scandalous manner. Her dark red hair was braided in several places, with a single large braid extending down to the small of her back. Her weapon, a bow of unparalleled quality, was held firmly in her hand, as if she expected she’d need to use it at any moment.

This would be Mistwillow, the infamous Elven mercenary. Templeton had never met her before, but her reputation had reached the capital. She would be a perfect fit for his little crew.

Across the hearth, facing away from Templeton and stoking the fire with a long-handled poker, stood a dwarf. Nearly as broad as he was tall, the crown of his head was completely bald, while wild hair, black as soot, engulfed the back and sides of his skull before joining with a resplendent beard that reached his chest. He was shirtless, a condition that Templeton had been informed was non-negotiable, and had a pair of fearsome axes slung across his back.

The dwarven warrior known only as Hrovin. It was said there was no deadlier person in all the land, just as long as you kept him sober.

With those three down that left only the final member of this little party. Perhaps the most experienced and skilled amongst all of them, and the first person that Templeton had thought to invite. It was of course...a girl?

Templeton frowned, confusion setting in. Standing on the right wall with a nervous smile on her face was a young woman, likely in her early twenties. She was slender, with a youthful face, sky blue eyes gleaming in the firelight. Her hair was the colour of straw, a headband holding it tucked behind to where it fell to the small of her back. She wore...was that the uniform of Griffin Academy? A plain white buttoned blouse, with a red silk ribbon tied into a bow around the collar, accompanied by a royal blue jacket and matching knee length skirt.

This young woman was not who Templeton had invited, though he suspected she did know the actual invitee. Thoroughly displeased, Templeton crossed the room until he was standing close enough to speak to her in a whisper.

"Who. The devil. Are *you*?" He hissed.

Though his ire was obvious, the girl didn't shy away. "I'm Gabriella Fisher, though everyone calls me Gabby. It's a pleasure to meet you!"

Templeton looked down at the hand the young woman had extended. With the last name Fisher, she was a commoner, which wasn't uncommon for the academy, but it made her presence even more confusing. For the moment however, his manners overrode his frustration as he took her hand and gingerly shook it. "I wish I could say the same, Gabriella"

"Gabby" She corrected him.

Templeton continued on, ignoring her. "You are not the person who I invited. Where is Professor Reichenthrop?"

Gabby's eyes lit up, as she plunged a hand into her interior breast pocket. The hand returned a moment later clutching a small, folded piece of parchment.

"He asked me to give this to you" Gabby explained as Templeton looked at the paper distastefully. With a sigh of annoyance, he plucked it from her fingers, unfolding it and reading its contents. It didn't take long, seeing as the parchment contained only a single phrase.

She's your problem now! -Archie

Templeton cocked a simple eyebrow after reading it, as he looked up at Gabby. "Did...did you read the letter?"

Gabby shook her head. "Of course not, that would be impolite."

Templeton nodded, as he let out a sigh of exasperation. He felt like he was the butt of some joke that he didn't understand. Why would Reichenthrop do this? The professor been a loyal servant of the king for years, as well as a friend to Templeton. Why snub him now in such a ridiculous manner, foisting this naïve young woman upon him?"

No matter. He would have to make do with the three remaining. Turning around he extended his arms wide as he addressed them.

"Thank you for answering my summons, I, and by extension the King, thank you. Though the reasons each of you came may differ, it matters not. What matters is the task before us. As you are likely aware, I am Lord Templeton"

Behind him, Gabby gasped. "The King's Magistrate of Law!"

"No lass" Hrovin grunted without turning from the fire. "Law is Lord Carlsby. Templeton is the Magistrate of Coin"

"Incorrect" Mistwillow interjected, her voice soft but firm. "I've had dealings with the magistrate of coin, and it is not this man. Judging by the wear on his face, and the style of hair, I would guess that Templeton is a fellow with a history of seafaring, so by deduction the Magistrate of Ships?"

"You're all wrong" Blake said, crossing his arm over his chest, the chainmail beneath clinking. "He's the Magistrate of Foreign Affairs."

Templeton smiled grimly at his old associate. "As are you, Captain. I no longer hold that title"

Blake grimaced as he looked down at his feet. "Don't call me Captain..." he muttered.

Templeton continued "I hold no official title in the King's court at the moment due to some...unfortunate political decisions on my behalf, but that does not mean that I don't wield considerable influence, nor does it lessen the importance of my coming here. Consider me, if you will, the King's Magistrate of 'Dealing with bullshit'"

The three warriors exchanged looks but said nothing. Templeton clapped his hands before him. "Are there any more questions or may I continue?"

None of them spoke, however Blake nodded over Templeton's shoulder. The noble turned to see Gabby with a hand held upright, patiently waiting to be called upon.

"Yes?" Templeton said, his disdain palpable.

"Is...is that food for us?" Gabby said, eyes focused on the center of the room. There lay a broad wood table covered with a lavish spread provided by the tavernkeeper. Plates filled with cooked fish and fowl, piles of ripe fruit, loaves of rich bread and wedges of pungent cheese, all covered the table from edge to edge. Templeton had paid no attention to it when he'd arrived; fulfilling his mission was paramount, dinner could wait.

However, seeing this as an opportunity to preoccupy the girl who'd been unceremoniously shoved into the middle of all of this, Templeton smiled and nodded. "Of course. Help yourself, eat as much as you'd like"

Gabby gasped excitedly as she clasped her hands together with glee. Not hesitating she pulled up a chair beside the table and began to dig in, grabbing and devouring food with her bare hands.

In the King's name! Templeton thought as he watched her with eyebrows raised. *Don't they teach etiquette at the Academy?*

Templeton put the strange girl out of mind as he stepped to the other side of the table, putting his back to Gabby as he gestured for the three warriors to gather close.

"The Kingdom... is in trouble" he said gravely.

"What?!" Blake hissed. "Are we at war?!"

Templeton shook his head "No, no, nothing so grand as that. The trouble I speak of is...smaller in scale, but it is everywhere!"

"Go on" Mistwillow said, eyeing him skeptically.

Templeton continued "The smallfolk of this land are in desperate need of help! Bandit's plaguing travelers on the road, children going missing, monsters wreaking mayhem at every turn!"

Hrovin harumphed as he placed his hands upon his hips. "Everything you've described is just typical life for the commonfolk of the kingdom. I made my way halfway across the bloody continent to this gods-forsaken spit of land just to hear you moan about how shitty it is to be a peasant? I was expecting something a little more fecking specific!"

"Hrovin's right" Mistwillow added. "Nothing you've described is what I would consider trouble. Just small tragedies that come with life"

"But is that the way things should be?" Templeton asked, looking back and forth amongst the three of them.

Blake shrugged. "No, but who's going to change it?"

Templeton grinned "I'm so glad you asked. The answer, of course, is you three!"

The three warriors looked at him blankly, unimpressed by his answer.

"Pass" Mistwillow spoke first.

"I'll pay you. Well." Templeton interjected.

"Alright, I'm in" Mistwillow said.

"Wonderful!" Templeton said. "Blake? Hrovin?"

The dwarf grumbled under his breath, then nodded. "Ay, if you're paying, I'll join. But if things start to get boring, then I'm gone!"

"I'll try to keep things interesting, then" Templeton said with a nod, before turning to his fellow countryman.

"Why are you doing this?" Blake asked.

"Because it needs doing?" Templeton replied.

Blake shook his head. "I don't disagree, but why are *you* doing it. Why isn't the Magistrate of Law trying to deputize us? Or why didn't the king send out his armies as a show of force as he's done in the past?"

Templeton said nothing for a moment then smiled. "There's that keen minded Captain I remember. I was wondering whether time had dulled you, I'm glad that isn't the case."

"To answer your question, Blake, the reason the King hasn't done anything is because he doesn't care, he's grown complacent and distant. As for the Magistrate of Law, he is a drunk and a fool. He never would've had the initiative to think up a solution like this. The truth is the people do need help, but apparently I'm the only member of the King's court who can see that, and so here I am, trying to make things better"

Blake nodded "Just one more question...what's in it for you? I doubt this endeavor is solely altruistic"

"It is not" Templeton said. "As mentioned, I've fallen out of favor within the court. I need a win to help my standing. If I become the people's savior...that will buy me some goodwill."

Mistwillow tilted her chin up as she eyed him. "How will *you* be the people's savior if *we're* the one's doing all the work?"

"Well, I was hoping that you would use my name as a sort of title, so the people know who's responsible. Something like 'Templeton's Three'. Surely that's amenable? You *are* working for me after all?"

Mistwillow quietly exchanged a look with the dwarf then shrugged her acceptance. Templeton nodded back, turning to the final holdout.

"Blake? What do you say?"

Blake's lips thinned to a line as he studied the man across from him. His face was blank, and hard as stone, no hint given to which way he was leaning.

Templeton sighed "Listen, if you're thinking I'm judging you, I'm not. I have no idea what happened to you, why you left the army. I don't want to know. But if it still weighs heavy on your conscience then I can offer that if it's something that can be fixed, then I'll do my best to help make it right."

Blake shook his head "You can't fix it...but...that shouldn't matter. People do need help, you're right about that. So... I'm in. Templeton's Three"

"Templeton's Three" The elf and dwarf replied in unison, neither of them able to muster a single ounce of enthusiasm.

"Splendid!" Templeton said, their obvious reluctance to work for him not weighing him down an ounce.

"So...what now?" Blake asked. "Do we just roam about until we find some poor folks in dire straits?"

Templeton chuckled. "Oh goodness, no. I've already got a job lined up. There's a reason I hauled you all out to Caliban's bay. This town has found itself the focus of a rather unrelenting gang of bandits. Supposedly the ringleader is Caliban's great-great-grandson, here to punish the town for his ancestor's loss"

Blake nodded. Bandits were no trouble; he'd dealt with his fair share of outlaws. "Fair Enough. Where can we find them?"

"Towards the mainland" Templeton said. "They've been stopping supply runs from reaching the town. My guess is they're hoping to starve everyone out and then once they're too weak to fight, they'll storm in and take the town. The people are getting desperate; winter will be upon us soon after all. I figured you three could stop them. Any questions?"

"Umm...ayy" Hrovin said as he pointed behind Templeton. "Tell me, is...is that normal?"

Templeton gave Hrovin a confused look as he turned around. What could possibly be behind him that would make the hardened dwarf act so bewildered?

It was Gabby.

When he'd left the girl, he'd told her to help herself, to eat as much as she'd like. She'd clearly done so.

The entire table of food had been demolished, only carcasses and cores remained. Templeton wouldn't have believed that she'd eaten it all if not for the proof that sat before them.

Gabby sat with eyes closed, a content expression on her face, chair slid back slightly from the table. Her hands rested upon her midsection which was... enormous. Her belly was a great taut dome, arcing out and resting in her lap. Her blouse had ridden up, leaving the impressive swell of flesh exposed. There was no question that Gabby had eaten everything, why else would her gut be distended to the point that she appeared to be full-term pregnant with twins.

"By the gods..." Blake muttered.

Templeton rounded the table, eyes flicking back and forth between the remains of the feast and her bloated form. "Gabiella...what...what happened?"

Gabby said nothing for a moment, her brow suddenly furrowing in distress. Clearly, she was suffering from the unholy amount of food she'd eaten. Templeton was about to ask if she needed medical assistance, when she beat her fist against her chest twice.

BRAAWWP

After expelling gas, Gabby's face became content once more. It was then she noticed the Lord hovering beside her.

"Oh, Lord Templeton! I'm in too!"

"You...you're what?"

"Your team to help save the commonfolk? I'm in!" Gabby said with a cheerful smile. With one hand she affectionately rubbed the upper curve of her stomach, easing the gurgling that was audible from within.

“You’re...in? Gabriella, this task is one for warriors, not for schoolgirls”

Gabby frowned. “I’m not a girl, I’m twenty two. I can handle myself.”

Templeton shook his head, “Debate on whether or not you’re on the team, which you aren’t, can wait. More urgent to this moment is the matter of are you okay?”

Gabby nodded “Quite fine, thank you. Please give my thanks to the Tavernkeeper, the food was succulent!”

“So...you...normally eat this much?” He asked in disbelief.

Gabby shrugged. “When I can. Back at the academy they served set portions, but they were never enough, so often I’d have to sneak into the kitchens to get more, though it made Professor Reichenthrop awfully mad...He always used to say that I would eat the entire Academy one day!”

Templeton fished into his jacket pocket and pulled forth the note that Gabby had brought him. *She’s your problem now.* Is this what Reichenthrop meant?!

“This can’t be healthy” Templeton said shaking his head. “Please, tell me, can I get you anything to ease your burden?”

“Well...” Gabby said, tapping her chin with a finger thoughtfully. “I’d like some dessert?”

“You...you want to eat... more?” Templeton said.

Gabby’s stomach rumbled noisily. “Yes, please! Maybe just a cake or two?”

Templeton looked back at the three warriors behind him who hadn’t said a word. They too quietly stared in utter shock.

“I’m afraid there’s no more” Templeton said. “This was the last of the Tavernkeeper’s stores, which I paid outrageously for. The bandits have stopped him from getting any more supplies”

Gabby pouted “Oh, drat. Well, then I guess it’s a good thing we’re going to put an end to those nasty bandits! Shall we get going?”

“It’s late and the weather is still quite unpleasant” Blake said. “We’ll leave in the morning. And just so you’re aware we’ll be travelling by foot my lady, not by carriage”

“Fine by me” Gabby said with a cheerful smile. “Well, if there’s no more food, then I guess that’s goodnight? Our room are upstairs, yes?”

“They are...” Templeton said.

“Do you need a hand, my lady...um... getting up?” Blake asked.

“No? Why would I need help?” Gabby asked. Bracing one hand on the table she leaned over and heaved, standing upright in one smooth motion. Her rotund belly jostled and bounced as she stood upright, but it was clearly no hindrance to the young woman.

“See you in the morning!” She said with a cheerful wave as she headed for the door, her steps barely burdened by the weighty gut that hung off her front.

The four who remained stood in stunned silence as they listened to the creak of the wooden stairs groaning under Gabby's weight, none of them knowing what to make of what had just happened.

As the sun peeked over the eastern trees that bordered Caliban's Bay, no one in the town was awake except for the four who gathered outside Caliban's Rest. Templeton and Templeton's Three stood in the early morning light, preparing to part ways, after sorting out some final logistics.

"So, *how* much will you be paying us?" Mistwillow asked pointedly, as she inspected one of her arrows. Her fingers ran along the smooth poplar shaft, not so subtly pointing the tip towards Templeton.

"More than your standard rate, I assure you" Templeton said, an affable smile on his face, though his eyes never left the steel arrowhead.

"And will you be paying us per mission, or per day? I don't want to get shorted if you send us off to find some lost child and it takes us three weeks to find out that she'd been dead the entire time..." Her tone was casual despite the grim subject matter. In her hands she idly spun the arrow between her fingers, displaying her impressive dexterity.

"You will be well compensated; you have my word" Templeton said.

"And *how* will you be paying us? Are you going to follow us around from town to town? No offense, Lord Templeton, but I'll need more assurances than just *your word*" The arrow stopped spinning, once more pointing directly at him.

"I have agents everywhere. Your payment will be prompt and thorough"

Mistwillow tapped the arrow in the air twice, before tossing it over her head in a flick. The arrow spun thrice before landing point down back in her quiver. "Very well. I'm ready to go"

"Me too" Hrovin said with a wicked grin. "I'm ready to split some bandit skulls!"

The final member of Templeton's Three hesitated. "What about the girl?"

Templeton groaned, he'd forgotten about Gabriella Fisher. "Pay her no mind. I'll make sure she's returned to the academy where I'll be thoroughly chewing out my old colleague"

"But she said she wanted to come with us?" Blake said, eyes watching the quiet tavern. "She received an invitation just like us, she should be allowed to join"

"Don't be stupid, human. She'll only be a hindrance. Likely she'll get herself killed" Mistwillow said, her impatience showing. "Come on, let's go!"

Hrovin nodded "Ayy laddy, there's no point in waiting. We all saw the state of her last night. She ate enough vittles to last her a week! She'll probably be trapped in bed for a few days, clutching her not so wee stomach, moaning and groaning about-"

It was at that moment, the tavern door swung open and Gabriella hurried down the front steps. "Sorry! Sorry, I'm late! Who knew dawn was so early!"

Templeton, and Templeton's Three, all stared at the young woman who hurried up to meet them looking exactly as she had when they'd first met her. There wasn't a single smidge of evidence that would suggest she'd consumed more than a normal amount of food the previous night. There was no sign of a bloated gut whatsoever, her midsection lithe, her uniform fitting her perfectly.

"Are we ready?" Gabby asked with an excited smile as she looked amongst the group. All she had with her was a small sack slung over her shoulder, only large enough to maybe carry a change of clothing.

"Are we?" Mistwillow asked, shooting a look at Blake.

Blake nodded. "Yes, we are. Let's root out those bandits and put an end to their scourging of this fair town."

"Yes!" Gabby whooped, raising both fists triumphantly. The dwarf and elf just shook their heads dismissively as they turned towards the road out of town and began to walk.

Gabby hurried after them, Blake moving to follow when Templeton caught him by the arm. "Her pay comes out of your share. I'm not wasting money on a foolish girl who wants to play hero. Whatever happens to her it's on you"

Blake met Templeton's eyes, not backing down as he tugged his arm free. "As you wish, my lord." Then he too left, hurrying off to catch up with the rest of Templeton's Three...and Gabby.

The sun was starting to creep high in the sky as the foursome walked down the solitary road that led out of Caliban's bay. Templeton had told them that the bandits were in this area, and that they hadn't been subtle in their crimes. It shouldn't have been difficult for three seasoned warriors to find some sign of the gang.

Unfortunately, the fourth member of their crew was making it hard for them to focus.

Gabby walked in the midst of them, one hand placed against her stomach, a look of distress on her face. As they walked in silence the only sound should've been the crunch of boots on gravel, if not for the surprisingly loud growling of Gabby's stomach that kept making its presence known.

After a particularly long bout of borborygmus, Mistwillow whipped around to face Gabby jabbing a finger in her face. "Would you please shut up that organ of yours! The bandits are going to hear all of us coming just from your stomach alone!"

Gabby winced, shrinking away from the taller elf. "I'm sorry, I'm just hungry... I didn't have any breakfast."

"No one did!" Mistwillow hissed. "You ate *all* of the food in the tavern last night!"

"Oh right..." Gabby said. "Sorry, Misty"

Mistwillow's eyes widened and her nostrils flared as fury gripped her. "My name is Mistwillow, *girl*."

Gabby nodded, still cowering slightly, but determined to make her point "And mine's Gabriella, but isn't Gabby much nicer?"

Mistwillow breathed slowly, in and out through her nose as she stared the young woman down, her one eyelid twitching. It seemed like things were going to come to blows when Mistwillow turned and walked away. "Why did you insist we wait for her?" She hissed at Blake as she passed him.

"I got the sense that she wants the chance to prove herself. I wouldn't be where I am today if someone hadn't given me that chance" Blake said, holding his head proudly.

"Oh, ay?" Hrovin butted in. "You wouldn't be a sad sack of shit, doing odd jobs for some petty highborn?"

Blake scowled as he stomped off ahead, leaving the elf and dwarf to chuckle amongst themselves. Light footsteps on gravel followed him, and so he slowed to allow Gabby to catch up.

"Thank you, Blake" Gabby said. "You're right, I do want to prove myself. Ever since I arrived at the academy, I've wanted to prove that I've got what it takes"

Blake spared her a glance out of the corner of his eye "Takes to do what?"

Gabby's look of determination morphed into a sheepish smile "I...don't really know. I've been on the hunt for my calling for a while now. Maybe helping the commonfolk is what I'm meant to do?"

Blake hummed. "Maybe. Just...be careful. It's dangerous out here, and if things go sideways, I can't promise that we'll be able to protect...Gabby?"

Turning around Blake saw that Gabby had stopped moving. She stood in the middle of the road a few paces behind him, eyes closed, head tilted up.

"Whatcha doing lassy?" Hrovin said as he walked up beside her.

"I...smell something" Gabby said, voice distant.

Mistwillow snorted "You smell something? Is that why you're so foolish, because you're part hound?"

"I smell...stew!" Gabby said, opening her eyes.

"Stew?" Blake said, incredulously. He took a few sniffs of the air himself but couldn't detect anything other than the strong scent of pine trees.

"Yes!" Gabby said. "That way!" She pointed towards the side of the road. Following the direction of her outstretched finger led to a solid wall of tree trunks and rocks.

"This is ridiculous" Mistwillow muttered. "Come on, let's move, those bandits aren't going to find themselves"

Gabby's stomach let out another loud growl, making her face clench. "Ooo...so hungry..." She murmured softly.

"Mistwillow's right" Blake said. "The faster we find those bandits, the faster we-Hey!"

Without a word of warning, Gabby had sprinted off into the woods in the direction that she'd pointed.

"Ay, she's a runner!" Hrovin said with a hearty chuckle as he watched the blonde woman in a blue jacket and skirt disappear between the trees.

“What the hell!” Mistwillow cursed. “Bah, fine, whatever. She wants to go running off into the woods, let her. Let’s go”

Blake caught her by the wrist. “We can’t leave her.”

Mistwillow glared at him, then rolled her eyes. “By the gods, I hate humans... Alright then, after her”

Templeton’s Three took off as one, crashing through the woods on the tail of their wayward companion. Following Gabby wasn’t hard, a path of tousled pine needles marked where she’d run. But following her wasn’t finding her. After a solid few minutes of running flat out, there was no sign of the girl.

“Stonefather’s beard!” Hrovin wheezed as they stopped at the edge of a stream. “That girl’s got legs!”

Mistwillow nodded, her breathing calm, the run not enough to exert her. “She didn’t have that much of a lead on us, how the hell did she move so fast?”

“Beats me” Blake said as he leaned against a tree, trying, and failing, to hide his own winded state. “It doesn’t matter. We can’t stop. She’s still out there”

“Ay, searching for stew” Hrovin chuckled. “Do either of you smell anything?”

Mistwillow shook her head, as did Blake. “No, I have no idea what that girl was going on about. The only thing I smell is pine trees, and...” He furrowed his brow as he inhaled deeply through his nose. “...Sword oil? Why the hell would-”

He realized why a moment too late, his hand on his sword just as a blade was at his throat. Before the other two could draw their weapons, they were surrounded, the gang of bandits upon them.

Templeton’s Three had been so focused on chasing Gabby, they hadn’t noticed when they’d run right past the gang going the other way. The bandits had promptly doubled back, their first catch of the day practically falling in their lap.

“Shit” Blake cursed as he raised both hands in surrender.

The one who held his knife to Blake’s throat eyed the three of them up and down, his gaze landing on Blake’s sword. “That’s good steel. These ain’t merchants, they’re muscle. The boss’ll want to see this.”

The bandits descended on them, relieving them of their weapons and binding their hands with coarse rope. Templeton’s Three were silent as the bandits hauled them off, all of them embarrassed and ashamed of being caught so foolishly.

The three felt even more foolish when they learned how close they were to the bandit camp. Just past the stream they’d stopped at, less than a hundred yards off, was a clearing surrounded by an outcropping of boulders. Within lay the bandit’s base.

The three were hauled in and then forced onto their knees in the center of the camp. Around them were a dozen or so tents each flanked by towering piles of crates; the stolen supplies. A few of the crates had been pried open where the bandits had helped themselves to the food within.

“Templeton’s Three.” Mistwillow snorted. “What a joke...captured and slaughtered on our very first mission”

Blake sighed looking down at his knees. This was not exactly the path to glory that he'd been hoping for. His moment of self-pity was interrupted by the sound of the dwarf trying to get his attention.

"Look!" Hrovin whispered, nodding towards a cook fire that lay near the back of the clearing. Suspended over it was a large black cauldron, large enough to hold a man. It was currently full, the thick savory mixture within bubbling pleasantly.

"Stew..." Blake muttered. Of course.

The flap of the largest tent in the camp fluttered then opened, as a barrel-chested man strode forth. He was a fearsome looking chap, his face fixed in a permanent sneer, a nasty scar stretching from his left temple to his nose.

"What've you brought me, lads?" He grunted as he stepped forth, swiping an apple from one of the nearby crates, which he began to shine on his leather vest.

"Found 'em running through the forest, boss. Heading this way. They're fighters, look at their gear!"

The bandits that had caught the three dumped their weapons in a heap at their leader's feet. He kicked at the pile with a curious grunt. "Interesting. So, the townsfolk thought they could solve their bandit problem with a little outside help? How much did they pay you?"

"We actually haven't been paid yet" Mistwillow spat.

The bandit leader scoffed. "Well then, I guess the good townsfolk of Caliban's Bay got what they paid for! You three are a right sorry lot, aren't you. Tell me, what was your plan? Charge in and kill us all? The three of you against the thirty of us?"

The gang of bandits laughed uproariously at the absurdity of the suggestion. That technically was their plan, and in this moment even Blake had to admit that it sounded stupid. Of course, they hadn't known that there were thirty of them...that was information that Templeton had conveniently forgotten to mention.

"Will you kill us or ransom us?" Blake asked.

The bandit leader took a large chomp of his apple as he tromped over. "Oh, likely we'll kill ya. Hang you up by your ankles like they did me great-great-grandfather."

Apparently, the rumors of the bandit leader's heritage were true, or at least *he* thought they were.

"All I ask is you make it qu..." Blake trailed off, his mind going blank when he saw something that he wouldn't have predicted in a hundred years.

Directly across from them at the back of the camp, a little blonde head had poked out from behind one of the tents. It was Gabby... but why the hell was she here?

Was she going to try and rescue them? Maybe create a diversion so that they could escape? Was she stupid enough to think that she could fight them?

Blake quietly groaned when he realized the real answer as he watched her stealthily creep towards the massive cauldron, her gleaming eyes fixated upon the thick bubbling broth as she licked her lips.

She was here for the stew. She'd somehow smelled it over half a mile away and now she'd found it. She wasn't here for them, that was just a complete coincidence.

"Make it quick?" The bandit leader guffawed. "Why the hell would I do that! Do you think they made it quick when they killed old Caliban?! Hmm?!" The leader looked around the ring of bandits, looking for an answer. Several men yelled 'No' in response, appeasing their chief.

To his men the bandit leader was a charismatic and compelling figure, so much so that all eyes in the camp were focused on him, meaning no one but Blake noticed Gabby grab the edge of the massive cauldron of stew and tip it towards herself.

"That's right!" The bandit chief roared. "They tortured him! Made him suffer! Seems fair that I do the same to you lot. So, chum, the answer is no, I won't make it quick, quite the opposite in fact!"

Blake wasn't looking at him; he was focused on the bizarre sight at the back of the camp. Slowly Gabby tipped the cauldron more and more, which should've made it overflow with how full it was, but not a drop spilled. That means it was all going into *her*.

"Blake!" Mistwillow hissed, one eye watching the bandit chief who continued to gloat and showboat for his comrades. "What the hell are you staring at?!"

Blake subtly nodded towards the back of the camp. Mistwillow's eyes followed the direction he'd gestured in, her jaw dropping when she too spotted Gabby at the cauldron.

The massive black pot had been tipped over to the point that it had to be at least half empty. The amount of stew she'd swallowed would've been enough to easily feed every member of the camp, or perhaps just one very hungry girl. And she was *still* hungry, her stomach growling happily as she slurped up more and more of the meaty broth. She wasn't even chewing, instead just swallowing the tidbits of meat whole.

Her bloated stomach had already reached the size it had been the day before; a round protruding gut the size of a full-term pregnancy. That level of fullness clearly wasn't max capacity for Gabby, as her rate of consumption only continued to accelerate the more she ate.

Then, as if the simple display of wanton gluttony wasn't unbelievable enough, it became even more so with her next act. The young woman pulled the massive cauldron closer, lifting it up and balancing it on her belly. Keeping it still for a moment she adjusted her hands to grip the cauldron from the side, then she leaned back, heaving the entire cauldron aloft, tilting it back to her waiting lips, ensuring that not a single spoonful of stew in that cauldron would escape her maw.

With each swallow of the savory rich fluid, her belly slowly grew, swelling larger and larger, her ability to consume seemingly endless.

"Now then!" The bandit chief said, clapping his hands together, completely unaware of the goings on behind him. "Who wants to go first?"

He'd been expecting his three prisoners to cower or perhaps curse him defiantly. What he hadn't expected was them to ignore him entirely. All three of them were staring through his legs at something behind him.

“What the feck are you three looking at?” He muttered as he turned around.

As he did, the black cauldron that had held the entire camp's dinner was dropped, making an awful hollow clanging as it bounced then rolled across the rocky surface of the clearing. The cauldron was drained, completely empty.

“What...what happened to the stew?!” The bandit chief yelled.

He got his answer when he spotted Gabby.

The young woman laid on her back, eyes closed peacefully, content with her hunger sated. She'd been craving that stew ever since she'd first smelled it, and it had been as good as she'd hoped.

Her hands rested upon the immense globe that was her distended stomach that rose high above her. It was an immense sphere of smooth flesh, over three feet in diameter. It sloped straight up from underneath her chest, curving gently to where the slight dimple of her belly button resided, before sloping around to where the lower half rested upon her upper thighs.

“Urp ...” Gabby groaned. “Mmm, that was delicious...” Her stomach quietly gurgled its agreement.

“Who the hell is that?!” The bandit leader shrieked, his three prisoners temporarily forgotten.

The gang of bandits clamored closer, a hubbub of confusion quickly swelling into one of rage as realization spread through the gathered criminals.

“She... she ate all of our stew!?!” The bandit chief roared. “What in the nine hells?! Haul her over here with the others!”

The first two bandits to reach Gabby flanked her, bending down and grabbing her upper arms. Feeling their rough hands on her, Gabby's eyes shot open, flicking back and forth between the two bandits who accosted her. If she felt any fear whatsoever, she certainly didn't show it.

“Hey!” She yelled. “What is the meaning of this!? Get your hands off of me!”

The bandits ignored her as they started to haul her up, though they didn't get very far. Together they were able to lift her arms and upper back off the ground, but that's as far as they could move her. They repeatedly tugged back and forth trying to lift her, but all they managed to do was make Gabby's enormous belly rock back and forth. The gigantic gut jostled and wobbled in place with each heave, a cauldron's worth of stew loudly sloshing inside.

“Let go of me!” Gabby yelled defiantly. “Do you know who I am? I am Gabby Fisher of Templeton's Three! Now let go of me or you'll be sorr-oof!”

Gabby was momentarily silenced when the bandits unexpectedly did as she asked and let go of her, her head and shoulders falling to the ground. Her belly continued to wobble like an overfull wineskin for a few seconds before settling to stillness.

One of the bandits who'd dropped her wrung his hands nervously “Uhh...boss. She's...she's too heavy to move”

Gabby let out an indignant gasp, propping herself up with her elbows. "How dare you! I am not *too heavy*, you're too weak! Too weak to lift up a delicate flower of a woman!" As she berated them, her enormous belly groaned, noisily contradicting her argument.

The bandit leader gave an errant wave of his hand then said. "Fine, fine. If she's too heavy to move—"

"Gasp! How dare *you*?!" Gabby yelled, freshly incensed.

"—Then just slit her throat and be done with it. I'd rather enjoy my time with these three" The bandit leader turned back around, a wicked grin on his face as he surveyed his three prisoners.

As the two bandits who'd been trying to lift Gabby scampered off to fetch weapons, Gabby finally noticed her colleagues bound on their knees at the other end of the camp. "What?!" She cried "Blake, Misty, Hro...Hroben?"

"Hrovin" The dwarf grunted, miffed.

"What happened!?" Gabby asked, unbothered by her faux pas.

"We got caught...chasing after you" Blake said.

"You did?" Gabby's face fell. "Oh no, I'm so sorry..."

"Eh, serves us right for running after you" Mistwillow said.

"You don't deserve to be punished for my mistake" Gabby said, her remorse sincere.

"It's fine... It's not your fault, Gabby" Blake said resignedly. "Everyone has their time. Today is ours"

As the Three bowed their heads with resignation, accepting their fate, Gabby closed her eyes and furrowed her brow. "Not if I can help it..." She whispered.

Cheers rang up through the camp as the bandit leader returned with a simply disgusting looking weapon, featuring wholly unspeakable features, and a rather horrid handle.

"I found old faithful" The chief said rattling the repugnant instrument of torture excitedly, loose bits of gore flying free.

Blake looked up and felt his stomach drop. He wasn't afraid of death, but the nasty tool in Caliban's Great-Great-Grandson's hand was not made for killing, but for things far worse.

"Now then" The bandit chief said, leaning forward until he was almost nose to nose with Blake. "Let's have ourselves a little...par...pa..."

The bandit chief's eyelids fluttered as 'Old Faithful' fell to the rocky ground, dropped from his limp hand. Blake blinked in surprise as the hulking bandit wobbled unsteadily in place before suddenly keeling over, landing in a crumpled heap on the ground.

"What the...hell?" Blake muttered.

There should've been an outcry of shock and outrage at the sight of the bandit leader falling flat on his face, but the rest of the gang were suffering similar symptoms. All around them bodies fell, piling on top of one another, as every single bandit collapsed in place without a single shout of fear or protest.

“Are they...dead?” Mistwillow asked.

Blake shuffled forward on his knees, bending over the supine form of Caliban the Fifth.

“He’s...snoring?” Blake said, as he righted himself.

“Asleep?!” Mistwillow said. “Dead would be far more likely...how the hell did the entire camp suddenly fall asleep!?”

Carefully, Templeton’s Three got themselves to their feet. Moving quietly, they helped one another slice their bonds free using a dropped sword, after which they retrieved their weapons.

“I don’t understand...” Blake said as he gazed around the campsite. All thirty members of the gang remained unconscious, slumbering peacefully.

“Me neither” Hrovin said. “But I won’t turn down a spot of good luck!”

Blake nodded, rubbing his chin as he surveyed the sleeping thugs. It had been unreasonably fortunate timing that all of the bandits should pass out at the exact same time...

“Hello?! A little help!”

Blake turned his head towards the voice that had spoken. It was Gabby, who was still flat on her back by the cooking fire and was in the middle of trying to push herself up. However, just like the bandits, she too was struggling to make her enormous belly co-operate.

Blake trotted over, crouching down to squat beside her head. “Gabby...By the gods... Are you alright?”

“Oh, Hello, Blake” She replied with a friendly smile. “I’m fine, thank you.”

Blake shook his head in disbelief. “You’re sure? You’re not about to...burst?”

Gabby blinked, then broke into a fit of giggles. “Burst?! Oh, Blake, that is too funny!!”

Blake wasn’t trying to be funny, he’d been serious. Out of the corner of his eye he watched her immense belly with quiet concern. With each laugh it bounced, the large sphere of pink taut flesh wobbling and quaking violently. He imagined at any moment it could split open like an overripe peach.

When Gabby realized that Blake wasn’t laughing, she collected herself. “Wait... you were serious?”

Blake nodded.

“Oh, there’s no need to fret, Blake, I’m completely fine! Me bursting...how silly!” She said, patting the surface of her belly fondly as she chuckled softly.

“But...you were calling for help?” Blake said.

“Oh yes, I do require some assistance. Could you be a gentleman and help me get up, I’m just having a little trouble”

Blake looked at her enormous bare midsection. A threatening gurgle echoed from its depths as the stew inside churned and sloshed.

“I can see that” he said. “You’re enormous...”

Gabby rolled her eyes “I’m not *that* big!”

Blake looked from her gargantuan stomach back at her, giving her a stare that belied his doubt.

Gabby blushed slightly, as she gave a huff. “I mean...I’ve been bigger! Besides, I was starving! I didn’t have any breakfast!”

Blake grimaced “I know. None of us did. Because you ate all of the food in the tavern, remember?”

Gabby’s lips rolled in as she gave a sheepish smile. “I was hungry then too! I’m sorry I have a big appetite!”

“A big appetite...right” Blake said, studying the immensity of her gorged belly. “I’m surprised that you don’t seem to be very concerned about the bandits?”

Gabby’s eyes widened with concern. “Should I be? What’s wrong?! What are they doing!?”

Blake shook his head as he looked out across the camp. “Nothing... They’re all asleep”

Gabby let out a sigh of relief as she laid her head back down upon the stony ground “Oh thank goodness, it worked”

Blake’s head whipped back around to give Gabby a hard stare “*What* worked?”

“Ummm...” Gabby looked away awkwardly, her face going bright pink. “The...the miracle...yes, the miracle that I...prayed for?”

Blake studied the young woman for a moment before nodding “I see. Well, whatever happened, thank the gods it did. We would’ve been dead without it”

Gabby nodded, her blush deepening “Yes, thank goodness for that...um...miracle. Now...do you think you could help me up?”

Blake’s lips curled up at the edges “No. I think you’re fine where you are”

“What!?” Gabby said with a pout. “You’re just going to leave me here!?” Her stomach rumbled angrily, voicing its own disapproval of Blake’s decision.

“Of course not. We’ve got a lot of bandits to tie up. Who knows how long they’ll be asleep for! You just sit tight and think about what you’ve done” Blake patted her shoulder then stood and turned.

“What I’ve done?! What did I do?!” Gabby yelled indignantly.

Blake looked over his shoulder and gave her a smirk. “You ate *all* of the stew! You couldn’t have saved a bowl for the rest of your team?”

Gabby opened her mouth to retort, then wisely decided to shut it. Instead, she laid her head back and sighed, resigned to wait with only her belly full of food for company. Lucky for her, she was quite fond of this specific companion in its current condition!

And so, Templeton's Three...and Gabby... were victorious! The bandits were captured and brought to justice, while the supplies were safely returned to Caliban's Bay where a feast was held in the Three's honor. Gabby, fortunately for the other guests, did not attend, as she remained trapped underneath her own massively gorged stomach back at the bandit camp for the rest of the day, with only Mistwillow for company.

(The elf had pulled the short straw).

By the next morning her enormous belly was mysteriously gone once more, her petite figure restored with no noticeable consequences. With Gabby mobile again, she and Mistwillow returned to the road to find Blake and Hrovin waiting for them, alongside some of the leftover feast for breakfast, preparing to set off in search of more commonfolk in need of aid!

Templeton's Three...plus Gabby, will return in Episode 2: "These Negotiations are Ogre!"