

Heroes, Inc.:

The One With the Werewolf

and Other Stories

By Kyle Crocco



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Mission 1: The One With The Werewolf



In the Late Summer of 421

According to their mission scroll, there was a werewolf problem in the town of Bolda.

But Bolda didn't look like it had a werewolf problem.

In fact, it looked rather picturesque. The main street of the town was filled with delightful ivy-covered stone buildings, their doors painted with fanciful colors. There were no people in the street screaming or fighting off a clawed monster.

"Where's the werewolf?" Grover asked Cilla as they watched their Rapid Rugs magic carpet driver take off into the clouds, leaving them alone in the grass clearing.

The two heroes glanced around the small park where the magic carpet had dropped them for their very first mission for Heroes, Inc., the professional hero company.

Grover was the tall one. He had long, flowing blond hair, a white shirt halfway unbuttoned down his chest, loose breeches, and a fancy Pointu rapier. Cilla was the wiry one. She was dressed all in black with short dark hair and had a wicked-looking dagger strapped to either thigh.

They had just been recruited by Ballah, the hero talent agent, who said they were urgently needed for this mission. Normally, a new hero team would go through onboarding with the human resources department before taking off on their first adventure. Maybe even come up with some impressive nicknames, branded colors, or a distinctive font for their business scrolls. But all the veteran heroes at Heroes, Inc. were otherwise engaged in saving people. It was down to Grover and Cilla to rescue this town for their maiden mission.

“I don’t know, partner,” said Cilla, glancing at the scroll they had been given by Ballah after they had proved their worth as heroes in the city of Jolinstive, fighting off villains and members of the System. “The details here are a bit scant in the mission scroll. But they did include a parchment on what a werewolf looks like and how a person can change into one. Want to check it out?”

Grover skimmed the mission scroll. “It says suspects can look like anybody before they change into a werewolf.” Then he glanced back at the town again.

The hills were filled with endless rows of grapevines. And even though Bolda was one of the most popular vintages in the Vardan Republic—and it was harvest season—there was no one working in the fields. But there were no werewolves wandering around, either.

“So how are we going to do this thing?” asked Cilla.

Grover lowered the mission scroll. “Maybe ask around and see who seems to have a lot of hair?”

“No, our partnership thing. Knowing our roles as heroes is paramount to saving these people. We have to get this mission right, Grover. Lives are at stake. Ours and the people of this town.”

Grover frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, who leads? Who follows?”

“I can lead if you want,” said Grover, putting away the scroll and standing up straight. “All the research says tall people make great leaders.”

“So do smart and experienced people.”

“Where are we going to find one of those?” asked Grover. “And won’t that add to our group?”

Cilla pointed at herself. “Me. I’m the smart and experienced person. I’m the one with the long hero family lineage, remember? I’m the one who knows everything about being a hero.”

“Yeah, but you’re also shorter than me. Won’t people get confused about who the leader is?”

“No, because they’ll see I’m smart.”

Grover frowned. “Are you sure? You aren’t even wearing spectacles.”

Cilla screamed. “You don’t have to wear spectacles to be smart!”

“Okay, okay,” said Grover, holding up his hands. “I have a better idea. Why don’t we co-lead? We are partners, after all.”

“How would that even work?” asked Cilla.

“Well, for starters, we could—”

But before Grover could begin his explanation, there was a loud door slam that echoed down the empty common street of the town.

A woman in regal-looking purple vestments and a tall hat ran out of a three-story stone building. She shaded her eyes, looked both ways down the village street, then pointed and waved at the heroes.

“That must be the mayor,” said Cilla.

“How can you tell?”

“Because I’m smart, Grover. And she’s dressed in the traditional purple mayoral vestments, and the crown of her hat is really high.”

“A tall hat.” Grover nodded. “I get it.”

“No, that’s not what I—”

The woman in the purple vestments stopped in front of them.

“Hello, I’m Mayor Princeps of Bolda. Sorry, I wasn’t here to greet you on your arrival. You must be the two heroes we requested from Heroes, Inc.” She put a hand to Grover’s chest. “My, you’re tall. You must be the leader.”

“Ahhh!” screamed Cilla.

“Which makes you the smart one, then,” said the mayor, pointing at Cilla. “Even though you don’t have spectacles.”

“Yes, I’m—” started Cilla.

Before Cilla could finish her phrase, there was another loud door slam that echoed down the street. A tall, skinny man dressed in a brown robe dashed out of the same three-story stone building. He shaded his eyes, looked both ways down the street, then rushed over.

“Is he your leader?” asked Grover, nodding to the man in the robe. “He’s very tall.”

“No,” said Mayor Princeps. “I’m the leader. I’m the town mayor. I just told you that. This man is my scribe.”

Grover stared at the mayor, who was about as tall as Cilla. “Are you sure you’re the leader? You’re not very tall.”

“You don’t have to be tall to be a leader,” snapped the mayor.

“Just smart, right?” asked Cilla.

“I’d say,” said Mayor Princeps. “I was born into a rich family that could bankroll my political career. It doesn’t get smarter than that. Oh, and I also wear a tall hat.”

Cilla shook her head, then sighed.

The scribe came up, holding a scroll and a quill. “What did I miss?”

“Everything,” said Mayor Princeps. “As you can see, our two heroes have arrived. So, we need to make a new proclamation to the citizens of Bolda. Tell them everything is safe and under control. Our two hero professionals will shortly take care of the werewolf infestation.”

“Infestation?” asked Cilla. “I thought it was just a lone wolf.”

“You know how it is,” said Mayor Princeps. “Where there’s one bad wolf, you usually find another.” She turned to the scribe. “Why are you not writing the proclamation?”

“Because the heroes haven’t done anything yet,” explained the scribe.

“But they will,” said Mayor Princeps, slapping Grover’s bicep, then feeling the muscle. “We must assure the citizens of Bolda it’s safe to get back to work in the fields. We need to finish the harvest so all can profit. Well, mostly the owners profit, but you don’t need to write that. Now, finish the proclamation. And, what the hell, say the werewolves are dead.”

“Werewolves?” asked Grover. “As in more than one?”

“We’re not sure how many there are,” said the mayor. “You know how these wolves all look alike.”

“I’m not sure you can say that,” said the scribe, frowning.

“But they do,” said the mayor. “They’re all hairy and dirty.”

“No, I mean, say the werewolves are dead,” explained the scribe.

“Oh, but they will be by the time you finish writing my proclamation,” said Mayor Princeps. “First rule of leadership. Overpromise and hope things will work out for the best or that people will forget what you said.”

The scribe wrote that down. “What’s the next rule? Should we add this to your new memoir?”

“Don’t write that! Wait. At least not yet. We’ll work on my memoir later. For now, write the proclamation. And remember to add, ‘Thanks to Mayor Princeps and her bold leadership for hiring these two heroes.’ Say, what are your two names again?”

“Grover.”

“Cilla.”

“No,” said the mayor, wincing. “Those names won’t do at all. We need to spruce them up. Do you have nicknames?”

“No,” said Cilla. “We didn’t go through hero orientation yet.”

“My hero partner is being modest,” said Grover, smiling. “She’s already created like a dozen nicknames so far. Shadow. Edge. Danger. Take your pick.”

“What about you?” asked the mayor.

“Oh, I’m just Grover.”

“‘Just Grover’ won’t work, either,” said Mayor Princeps. “I got your branding taken care of. Scribe, call these two heroes ‘Grover the Great’ and ‘Cilla the Bold.’” She looked at the scribe who was scribbling. “Now, go back to your office and add some pull quotes where I sound smart and tall. I have to speak to our distinguished guests alone without you writing down our every word.”

“But what about all the political transparency you promised the people when you were elected?” asked the scribe.

“What about it? Now, move along, scribbler.”

“You didn’t have to be mean to him,” said Cilla as the scribe walked off with a wounded look.

“Yeah,” added Grover. “He’s just doing his job to help your political career.”

“Which I won’t have if you don’t solve my werewolf problem,” said the mayor. “Now, come with me. I have to show you something.”

Mayor Princeps guided them down the empty street. Even though it was a warm summer day, all the colorful house doors were shut, the curtains pulled tight. There were even a few steel traps in front of some of the doors and windows.

“Look around, heroes. Do you see what this group of werewolves has done to our town? Empty streets. No one harvesting grapes. No tourists shopping for souvenirs in the gift shops. This werewolf plague is hitting our bottom line. And, oh yeah, some people may or may not have been killed. But anyway...”

The mayor walked to the town overlook. Below, they could see rows upon rows of vines on the hills, filled with ripened grapes. The aroma was intoxicating.

“Normally, at this time of the year, these fields would be full of underpaid foreign workers, picking our grapes so we can make our first great profit, I mean, wine of the year: The Primo. But, as you can see, our vineyards stand empty. No underpaid workers, no Primo. And if there’s no Primo, there’s no Primo Fest, no Primo merch, and no Primo revenues for me—I mean, the town. So, you understand, we need to kill this pack of werewolves pronto.”

“Pack?” asked Cilla. “When did it become a pack?”

“Well, you let one in, and the next thing you know, you have a pack,” said Mayor Princeps. “And you two are professional heroes, after all. Or so I was promised by this Ballah fellow. One or a dozen should all be the same to you. So, when do you think you could clear up this werewolf problem? By lunch? Dinner time?”

“So there might be a dozen werewolves?” asked Grover.

The mayor adjusted her tall hat and shrugged. “Who knows? Dirty wolves multiply like bunnies. So, do you need a few extra hours? Maybe finish by late dinner?”

“Perhaps you could tell us a little more about what’s going on here,” added Cilla, frowning at the mayor. “As in, when did this start? Where was this wolf or wolves last seen? Things like that?”

“Oh, I don’t know the details,” said Mayor Princeps, waving a hand dismissively. “I’m more of what you call a ‘big-picture’ mayor. I delegate the details to my subordinates. Like you.” She smiled.

“Is there anyone who can tell us the details?” asked Cilla.

Mayor Princeps put a hand to her chin and thought. “Well, there is my executive assistant. He’s really good at the boring detail stuff, or so he tells me. Come. I’ll show you to his office.”

Mayor Princeps brought Grover and Cilla over to the three-story, ivy-covered municipal building in the center of the common street and led them to her executive assistant’s office.

In a small, cluttered room sat a young man with short hair dressed in overalls. He looked more like a farmer than a bureaucrat. His desk was covered in scrolls, and he was scribbling in a ledger with a quill.

“This is Servus, my executive assistant.” The mayor gestured to the young man hidden behind the scrolls.

Servus swept the scrolls to one side. “I’m the deputy mayor, actually. Duly elected by the town in my own right.”

“Anyway,” said Mayor Princeps. “Servus can help with your questions about the gangs of werewolves terrorizing our town.”

“Gangs?” asked Grover, looking alarmed.

“You know, how one bad group brings in the next,” said Mayor Princeps. “Well, I have something important to do, right, Servus?”

“Actually,” said Servus, pushing aside a ledger and checking his schedule scroll on a nearby table. “On your daily calendar, it says you’re free to—”

“To work on big picture things,” said the mayor, opening her arms wide. “Thanks for doing this, my servant.”

“It’s Servus, your honor. And I’m the deputy mayor, duly elected in my own—”

But Mayor Princeps had already swept out of the room.

“I hate when she does that,” swore Servus. “You know she was only elected because she’s rich. No brains at all.” Servus put down the schedule scroll and leaned back in his chair. “So, I guess you’re the two heroes that she hired for the werewolf problem. And it’s not gangs, by the way. It’s just one wolf. Singular. So, which one of you is the leader? The tall one or the smart one?”

“I am,” said Cilla and Grover at the same time, pointing at themselves.

“I see,” said Servus, shaking his head. “And I thought Bolda had leadership problems. But enough about my horrible life. What did you need to know?”

“We need—” started Grover.

“Everything,” said Cilla, ticking off items on her hand. “*When* did it start? *Who* saw it? And *where* was it last seen?”

“And does it have any identifying characteristics?” added Grover.

“You mean, besides being a werewolf?” asked Servus, cocking an eyebrow.

“Forget my partner,” said Cilla. “Answer my questions first.”

“Well,” said Servus, pushing more scrolls aside on his desk. “The werewolf problem started just as the harvest was upon us. We had a great growing season. Awesome weather. Bumper crop. Then, we made our usual call for temporary laborers to pick the grapes. You might have heard of the Primo Festival, which happens at the end of the month. Very popular. Brings in lots of tourists and money to the town.”

“The mayor mentioned that,” said Cilla.

“I’m sure she did,” said Servus. “Because her family runs the festival. Anyway, before we could gather the harvest, one of our biggest plantation owners, Citizen Contadino, was killed. By a wolf.”

“How could you tell?” asked Grover.

“The first clue was the claw and bite marks,” said Servus. “The second was Contadino’s wife. She claimed to have seen a wolf in the shape of a man. And this story was enough to stop our seasonal laborers from working. It’s been a week since the attack, and not one grape has been picked.”

“Can we talk to her?” asked Cilla.

Servus stood up. “I’ll take you to her house right now.”

About a half-hour walk out of town was the Contadino plantation.

As they reached the plantation, they could see the vineyards were full of unharvested grapes.

As for the farmhouse, it looked more like a mansion. Built of limestone, the ivy-covered building was two stories high with a red front door and looked to have dozens of rooms. The house was surrounded by a high stone wall with a metal gate in front.

“That’s quite a farmhouse,” remarked Cilla.

“The Contadinos are the richest vintners in Bolda,” explained the deputy mayor. “Well, that was until Citizen Opulentus arrived and started buying every bankrupt vineyard in Bolda.”

Servus walked to the metal gate, where a furious dark beast with shaggy hair raced to the bars, barking and snarling.

“Werewolf!” cried Grover and Cilla at the same time, grabbing their weapons.

Cilla pulled out two knives while Grover unsheathed his Pointu rapier.

“Stand back, Servus,” cried Grover, stepping forward. “We got this.”

Servus ignored Grover and petted the shaggy animal, scratching behind its ears. “This is Beast, the Contadino’s dog. I have to ask, have either of you ever seen a werewolf before?”

Cilla and Grover exchanged a look, then shook their heads.

“Typical,” said Servus, shaking his head. “Did the mayor even check your expertise before hiring you?”

“We just became heroes,” explained Grover. “All we got was a mission packet.”

“Maybe we should check our notes,” suggested Cilla, sheathing her knives and reaching for the mission scroll.

However, before Cilla could consult the scroll, a fit-looking woman dressed in overalls stepped out of the house with a spear in one hand and a flaming torch in the other. She looked to be in her mid-30s with tanned skin, dark shaggy hair, and dark eyes. “You’re not going to run me

off my land.” Then, she lowered the spear when she noticed Deputy Mayor Servus with the two heroes. “Oh, Servus. What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be in your office making the mayor look smart by doing all of her work?”

Servus grimaced, then bowed. “Always a pleasure to get your honest feedback, Citizen Contadino. I’m here to introduce you to the two heroes the mayor hired to save the town of Bolda. They want to talk to you about the werewolf you saw.”

“Well, good to see the mayor is doing something useful for the town besides lining her pockets.” She scrutinized Grover and Cilla. “Heroes, huh? I see a tall one and a smart one. Which one of you is the sidekick?”

Grover and Cilla pointed at each other.

“Suspected as much,” said the woman. “Another cluster-monkey response from the mayor’s office.” Then she handed her spear and a torch to a servant. “Come on, Beast.” The large, shaggy dog followed as she walked toward the house. “And you heroes might as well come, too. Though, I don’t suspect you’ll be of much use.”

Grover and Cilla followed Citizen Contadino into her spacious farmhouse, while Servus returned to town, where he had a stack of the mayor’s paperwork to complete.

Inside the house, servants dressed in overalls were installing metal bars in the windows and adding drawbars to the front door to keep it secure.

“Looks like you’re preparing for a siege, Citizen Contadino,” remarked Cilla.

“Call me Donna,” said the woman. “And if you were attacked on your own land like I was, you might take precautions, too.”

Donna guided the heroes to her salon, where she sat down on a dark, leather divan while her dog, Beast, curled up at her feet. The salon was filled with carved furniture, scuffed from years of use. On the walls were oil paintings of vineyards and portraits of past owners, who all looked like versions of Donna, with shaggy dark hair and dark eyes.

“So,” said Donna, studying them. “How long have you two been heroes anyway?”

Grover and Cilla started counting on their fingers.

“Well, professionally,” said Grover. “Not counting today, it’s been—”

“But if you count from the first day we met,” interjected Cilla, “then it’s been—”

“Forget it,” said Donna. “Clearly, the mayor is doing a bang-up job hiring people, as usual. But since you’re all we’ve got to solve this problem, I’ll tell you what happened. Though you really need to talk to Citizen Opulentus. He’s the cause of it.”

“Who’s Citizen Opulentus?” asked Grover. “Servus mentioned he was buying land.”

“Opulentus is my neighbor. He arrived last year after a very poor growing season. Lots of rain, which ruined the harvest. Opulentus bought all the bankrupt vineyards. Of course, he wanted my land because then he would have the most land in Bolda and could control the grape prices. But my husband and I wouldn’t sell. This farm has been in my family for generations. Not long after we refused, my husband was attacked by the werewolf.”

“You saw it?” asked Cilla.

“No, but I saw what was left of poor Robustus. Torn to pieces. I think Opulentus thought Robustus was the rightful landowner. That I would have to sell if my husband died. But the land is in my name. And I guess that’s why he went after me next.”

“What happened?” asked Grover.

“Last week,” said Donna. “I was in town, at the local pub, The Grape Ape, trying to hire workers to pick my vines. And also trying to negotiate wine contracts with merchants once it was complete. After spending all day negotiating, I was walking home. Alone. But it was mid-afternoon on a sunny day, so I thought I was safe. That’s when I got a whiff of a strange scent.”

“Werewolf?” asked Cilla.

“No, cinnamon,” said Donna. “Very strong. I smelled it all the way from The Grape Ape. Then, I heard growling. There was something moving in the woods beside the road. I saw a dark shape. Shaggy fur. Long snout. But standing up. It ran straight at me. And if Beast hadn’t been walking along with me, it would have gotten me, too.” She scratched the dog’s ear.

“So you think the wolf followed you from the pub?” asked Cilla.

“No, I think the wolf *came* from the pub. Because that’s where Robustus had gone before he was attacked. And because of who owns the pub. Opulentus.”

“Ah,” said Grover. “I get the picture now. You’re saying Opulentus is the werewolf, and he smells like cinnamon.”

“No, that’s not the picture we’re supposed to get,” said Cilla. “She thinks Opulentus is behind the werewolf.”

“Like hiding behind him?” asked Grover, confused.

“No,” said Donna. “I mean, involved in some way. I don’t know for sure. But we need to figure it out. Because if we don’t, my grapes will spoil, and I’ll have to sell my land to Opulentus. And then he’ll win without even having to kill me.”

“So, what do you think?” asked Grover after they left the plantation. “The werewolf is working at the pub. And we should check employees for shaggy hair and a long snout?”

“Really?” asked Cilla, looking back at the Contadino’s farmhouse. “*That* was your takeaway from her story?”

“Either way, we should check this pub out for suspicious characters. Not to mention, I could use a drink.”

“It’s not even lunchtime, Grover. We should talk to Opulentus first.”

“As the tall leader of our team, I say we should check out the pub first.”

“As the smart leader of our team, I say we visit Opulentus first. We need to find out what he knows about the werewolf.”

“As co-leaders, I say we should vote on it,” said Grover, raising a hand. “And I vote for pub.”

“And I vote for Opulentus.”

“Damn,” said Grover, counting the votes. “I was sure that vote was going to go my way.”

“This co-leader idea of yours doesn’t work.”

“Well, it would if you voted my way,” said Grover, frowning. “I’m going to visit The Grape Ape and find this werewolf employee so we can win our mission.”

“Fine, leave,” said Cilla, turning in the opposite direction. “I’m going to see Opulentus and uncover his werewolf conspiracy so we can win our mission faster.”

“But I really want you to come with me,” said Grover, hesitating. “Won’t you come?”

“And I want you to come with me,” said Cilla, nodding in the direction of the Opulentus estate. “What do you say?”

The two heroes stared at each other for a long moment, almost walked toward each other, then suddenly turned in opposite directions.

“Jerk,” swore Cilla as she headed toward the Opulentus estate.

Grover would regret not following her. He would regret not listening to her. He would regret not seeing how smart she was when she proved Opulentus was behind the werewolf and saved this town. Then, he would finally have to accept her as the team’s leader.

Filled with fury, she reached the estate in no time.

The Opulentus estate was impressive. It bordered the Contadino’s place but was easily three times the size, with a farmhouse as huge as a castle, complete with towers at each corner, and decorated with gargoyles. The only thing still making it look like a farmhouse was the wrap-around veranda with hanging vines.

As for the vineyards, they stretched into the distance as far as the eye could see. But unlike the rest of Bolda, these vines had been picked, and scores of laborers filled the fields, busy carrying baskets of fresh grapes to freight wagons. Meanwhile, groups of armed mercenaries stood nearby, carrying crossbows or pacing the edge of the property.

As Cilla approached the main gate, an armed man with a short beard shouted and raised a spear. “Stop right there.”

“I’m here to talk to Citizen Opulentus,” said Cilla.

The bearded man shook his spear. “Prove you’re not a werewolf.”

“Prove I am,” snapped Cilla.

“Stop that nonsense,” said an authoritative voice. “Lower that spear and let her in. Can’t you see this young woman is a professional hero the mayor hired to save us from the dreaded werewolf?”

A tall, elegant-looking man appeared behind the bearded mercenary. He had slick black hair and was dressed in fine clothes. He didn’t look like a farmer at all. His nails were manicured, and his skin was pale.

“I’m Opulentus,” said the elegant man. “And you must be Cilla Drusus. Of the Drusus hero family.”

“I am,” said Cilla, looking surprised. “You’re very well informed.”

“It pays to be,” said Opulentus, nodding. “You seem smart. You must be the leader of your team.”

“Indeed, I am,” said Cilla, puffing out her chest.

“Come to my house,” said Opulentus. “We have much to discuss.”

Meanwhile, Grover was standing outside the pub, The Grape Ape.

It had taken him no time at all to walk back to town, either, still annoyed with Cilla for not seeing his leadership potential. The recruiting agent for Heroes, Inc., Ballah, had seen his potential. Or why else would he have recruited Grover? Villains-R-Us and the System had seen it. Or why else would they have tried to kill Grover so many times? If they could all see his leadership potential, why couldn’t Cilla see it?

You didn't have to be descended from a hero family to be a leader. He had ideas, too. And as soon as he located the werewolf in the pub and saved the town of Bolda, Cilla would have to admit her mistake.

But that was for the future.

At the moment, he was studying the various citizens who went in through the bright purple door of the pub. None of them seemed to have fur, fangs, or claws. But that didn't mean they weren't werewolves. There had to be another symptom to discover who the werewolf was.

To find out, Grover reached into his pouch and pulled out the mission scroll that Heroes, Inc. had provided him with. It included details about what a werewolf looked like and how you could change into one.

According to the scroll, a werewolf was a shapeshifter—a human who could change into an animal shape with two legs and walked erect. But like a wolf, a werewolf also had a long snout, sharp fangs, a body covered in shaggy fur, and claws on their hands and feet.

Below the description was a list of several ways a person could change into a werewolf. One: An enchanted belt of wolfskin could transform you into a werewolf when you closed the buckle. Two, a salve you slathered on your naked body could turn you furry in an hour. And, third, a potion that changed you into a fanged creature after adding it to your favorite beverage, like tea, beer, or even wine.

"Hmmm," thought Grover. That reminded him he was thirsty, so he headed into the pub for a drink, forgetting to look for any more clues about werewolves.

Meanwhile, Cilla was having her own drink on the veranda of Opulentus.

While she lounged in a wicker chair in the shade, Opulentus added some spices to a pitcher of wine and poured two cups.

“Spiced wine,” said Opulentus, handing her a cup. “My favorite beverage.”

“I don’t normally drink this early in the day, but ...” Cilla sniffed the wine. “Is that cinnamon?”

“With a little nutmeg,” explained Opulentus, raising his cup and toasting. “To finding the werewolf.”

“To finding the werewolf,” replied Cilla, joining the toast.

After they drank, Opulentus stared at Cilla. “So, I know why you’re here.”

“To find the werewolf,” said Cilla. “I told you that on the way to the house.”

“Yes, I know why you’re here at my farm. But I’m betting Citizen Contadino told you I’m behind the werewolf.”

Cilla stared at Opulentus. “Are you?”

“More wine?” asked Opulentus, lifting up the pitcher.

Cilla shook her head.

“Very well,” said Opulentus, taking another sip of the spiced wine. “To answer your question, of course, I’m not behind the werewolf. Yes, I am interested in the Contadino property. But who wouldn’t be? It’s great land. And I’m a businessman. But inviting a werewolf to kill people in your town isn’t good for business.”

Cilla gestured to the vines being picked by laborers. “Doesn’t seem to have affected your harvest.”

“But at what cost?” asked Opulentus. “I have to pay a whole company of professional mercenaries to protect my workers day and night. That’s overtime out the wazoo. And the laborers don’t come cheap, either. The only way they would agree to harvest my fields was if I tripled their wages and gave them health benefits. I’ll be lucky if I break even.”

“But you won’t lose your vineyards like the other owners.”

Opulentus shrugged. And poured more of the spiced wine. “What can I say? I’m a good businessman.”

“It’s funny,” said Cilla, sniffing the wine. “Citizen Contadino said she smelled cinnamon right before she was attacked by a werewolf.”

“Did she?” asked Opulentus, gripping his cup with fingers that had sharp, manicured nails. “So, that would put you in danger, wouldn’t it?”

Back in town, Grover kept a hand on his Pointu rapier as he entered the pub, ready to take on a werewolf if he recognized one.

But which person was the werewolf?

The Grape Ape was packed with citizens of Bolda. Vineyard owners, merchants, tradespeople, even some day laborers. The citizens were grouped at the bar, gathered at various tables, and spilled out of booths. But none of the pub’s patrons sported fangs, claws, or shaggy hair. Neither were any of them wearing wolfskin belts or standing naked, lathered in a salve. On the other hand, they were all drinking from cups of wine and eyeing him as he crossed the common room toward the bar counter.

Ignoring their stares, Grover approached the bartender. But before he could order a cup of wine, a young, red-headed woman wearing a green dress approached him. “You must be Grover the Great, the hero I heard about in the town proclamation the scribe made.”

“I am,” said Grover, smiling. “But I’m not ‘Great’ yet. Heroes don’t get to be called ‘Great’ until they have three winning seasons at least, and this is my first mission.”

She touched his arm. “You’re very tall. You must be the leader.”

“That I am,” said Grover.

A tattooed bartender with bushy hair and an eyepatch over his right eye sidled over. “I’m Luscus. I’ll be your bartender this afternoon. What will you have, hero?”

“House wine,” said Grover, studying the eyepatch. “Did the werewolf do that to you?”

“No,” said Luscus, and walked off.

“Touchy,” said Grover, turning back to the red-headed woman. “I had to ask that question, you know. I’m on an important hero mission to find the werewolf.”

“Tell me about it,” said the woman.

“I heard The Grape Ape was where the wolf might come from. I’m looking for any suspicious characters. Have you seen someone like this?” Grover pulled out his mission scroll and showed her a sketch of a werewolf. “They have sharp claws, a big snout, and lots of fur. Basically, they look like a human wearing a wolf pelt, more or less.”

The red-headed woman studied the sketch. “I haven’t seen one. But I do have important information for you. And I can’t tell you right here.”

Grover stepped next to the next barstool. “How about over here?”

“No,” said the red-headed woman. “It has to be private. If you know what I mean.”

Grover checked his mission scroll for lodging arrangements. “As luck would have it, I do know what you mean. I have a room booked upstairs.”

“Perfect.”

“Wine,” said the one-eyed bartender, pushing a cup across the counter.

“Save it,” said Grover, pushing the cup back. “I need my room key.”

“As you wish, hero scum,” growled the bartender, sliding a key across the countertop.

“What was that?” asked Grover.

“Have fun,” said the bartender, frowning.

“I will,” said Grover. “It’s been months since I’ve had ‘fun.’” He grabbed the key and the woman’s hand.

Upstairs, he found the boarding room was furnished with a feather bed, small desk, and wardrobe. On one wall was a narrow window with a view of the empty common street.

After they entered, the woman locked the door behind them. “Now, we can finally talk.”

Just then, Grover sensed danger. “You locked the door, trapping me inside. You’re not a werewolf, are you?”

The red-headed woman undid the straps of her dress. The material slid to the floor.

“Do I look like a werewolf to you?”

“No,” said Grover, gazing at her smooth body. She was definitely not a werewolf.

It turned out Opulentus wasn’t a werewolf either, despite having sharp fingernails.

Though it was clear he was hiding something. Cilla just wasn’t sure what it was.

So, after finishing her spiced wine, Cilla hitched a ride with a farmer back to the center of Bolda to find her partner.

It was growing late in the afternoon when Cilla finally reached the Grape Ape. When the farmer dropped her off, the mayor was standing by the purple door with her tall scribe, tapping her foot.

“Where have you been? You said you would be done by lunch.”

“I was investigating the werewolf sightings,” said Cilla. “Questioning witnesses.”

“I thought heroes fought werewolves.”

“I have to find one first.”

“So, where is my werewolf army?”

“I’m not even sure there is *one* werewolf, let alone an army,” said Cilla. “I’m beginning to think this whole werewolf thing is a hoax. That the victim, Robustus Contadino, was attacked by a real wolf.”

Mayor Princeps turned to her scribe. “Did you hear that, scribe? Our heroes discovered the werewolf attack was a hoax perpetrated by Donna Contadino. Bolda is safe once again. Put that in the new proclamation.”

“That’s not what Cilla told us,” said the scribe.

“It was implied,” said the mayor. “Read between the lines, scribbler. The danger is over. Once we issue this new proclamation, we can have our laborers back in the vineyards by tomorrow morning. Send that message to all the local villages by express pony.” She turned to Cilla and shook her hand vigorously. “Good work. I always knew you were a great leader.”

“Uh, thank you,” said Cilla, glowing from the compliment. “But I’m not done with our investigation. My ... uh ... side-partner is investigating The Grape Ape connection.”

“As far as I’m concerned, your work is done,” said the mayor, handing over a bag of coins.

Cilla looked inside and was astonished to see a pile of gold.

“I know we paid Heroes, Inc. directly for your services,” said the mayor. “But this is for a job well done and all that.”

“I don’t think the job is done yet,” said Cilla, hefting the bag. “We should wait until—”

“Remember to have some wine to celebrate,” said Mayor Princeps, turning away. “The spiced Primo is excellent.”

Cilla watched the mayor disappear down the street with the scribe.

Then she walked into the pub with her bag of gold coins.

Upstairs, Grover was in bed with the red-headed woman.

Their clothes lay heaped in a pile next to the feather bed.

It had been months since he had ... uh ... you know ... and he was impatient to end that drought.

“So, what’s your name again?” asked Grover, remembering to do a little small talk first. “You know, for the memoirs.”

“I didn’t say,” said the woman, smiling.

“Oh, yeah, right,” said Grover, patting the spot next to him on the bed. “Keep it discreet.

Good idea. Fair warning, though. I recently took some dragon gonad to cure ... uh ... a certain

‘condition’ I had. So if our fun lasts more than—say—four hours, we may need to consult an apothecary.”

“Before we do that, I have something important to tell you, Grover.”

“Couldn’t we do the talking stuff after?”

“No, you need to know this first.” Then, the woman leaned over the bed and came up holding a knife. “I have a message for you from the System.”

“Is it about my father’s death?” asked Grover, staring at the long dagger she was holding in her small hands. “Or my destiny as a hero to save the republic that he told me I had?”

“If you want to know your destiny,” said the woman, “then look closely at this knife.”

“Let me see,” said Grover, turning to his side to get a better look at the blade as the woman stabbed with the knife. The sudden shift in position threw off the woman’s aim, and the knife embedded itself into the backboard of the bed with a ‘thwack.’

“I’m sorry,” said Grover. “You moved the knife too fast. I couldn’t see what it said about my destiny.”

“It says ...” cried the red-headed woman, yanking the knife out. “You can die, Grover, son of Fabius.”

Downstairs, Cilla heard a thumping noise on the ceiling. It sounded like someone was jumping on the mattress of a bed. It better not be, Grover.

The thumping stopped, and Cilla looked around the common room of The Grape Ape. The room was packed with people huddled around scarred tables or hunched over the bar counter, drinking from cups.

As she crossed to the bar, she swore she heard some merchants mutter, “That must be the sidekick. She’s not tall.”

“I’m not the sidekick!” snapped Cilla, and the merchants laughed.

At the bar, Cilla spotted a man with bushy hair, arms covered in tattoos, and wearing a dark patch over his right eye.

“Welcome to The Grape Ape—and your doom,” said the one-eyed bartender, frowning.

“What was that?” asked Cilla, placing her bag of coins on the countertop with a clank.

“I’m Luscus. You must be the other hero, I take it.”

“I am. And I’m looking for my ... uh ... side-partner. Has he come in?”

“Went upstairs with a red-headed woman a moment ago for a private conference, if you know what I mean.”

There was more thumping from the ceiling. Luscus and Cilla glanced at the rafters as dust fell from the beams.

“And having a good time of it, from the sound,” said Luscus, wiping down the bar. “You seem smart. I’m guessing you’re the team leader.”

“I am,” said Cilla.

“Wicked.” Luscus grabbed her bag of coins. He turned to the rest of the pub and shouted, “Drinks on the house to celebrate the leader of the heroes who is going to save us from the pack of werewolves.”

“Hey!” shouted Cilla, reaching for the bag. “That’s our bonus.”

The citizens crowded the bar as Luscus poured spiced wine into cups one after the other. People thanked Cilla for the drink, slapping her on the back.

“Nothing for me?” asked Cilla, looking at the empty wine cups in front of her. “Considering I paid for it.”

“Oh, you’ll *pay* for it,” said Luscus, scowling. “As the hero leader, you’ll pay for what you did in Jolinstive when you killed all of our villains. At Villains-R-Us, we don’t forgive, and we don’t forget, but we do stab you in the back. Just like it says on my tattoo.” That’s when Cilla noticed that one of his arms had a Villains-R-Us tattoo with the phrase, “We don’t forgive, and we don’t forget, but we do stab you in the back.”

“Hey,” cried Cilla, pulling out her knives. “I’m not the leader you want to kill.”

“Don’t care,” said Luscus. He ran out the back door with her bag of gold and pulled it shut. She heard a lock click.

Cilla leaped over the bar and yanked on the door handle, but the back door was sealed. From the outside.

She ran to the front door of The Grape Ape and yanked on the handle. But it, too, was locked—from the outside.

When she pulled the curtain aside on one of the narrow windows in the common room, she could see metal bars had been installed. There was no way out. And Luscus, the one-eyed evil bartender from Villains-R-Us, was on the street, pointing and laughing.

“Ha, ha, you’re trapped, Cilla! Hope you’re not allergic to werewolves. Or maybe I do.”

That’s when Cilla heard the sound of ripping fabric, buttons bursting off shirts, and a growling sound.

Followed by a loud thumping noise as someone pounded down the stairs.

Grover appeared in the common room, stumbling, pulling on his breeches, bare-chested. “I’m not the team leader. I’m not the team leader. You got the wrong person.”

“Stop running,” cried the red-headed woman from upstairs. “And let me deliver the message from the System.”

A dagger landed with a “thunk” in the bar countertop, right next to an open pouch of cinnamon powder.

That’s when Cilla realized all the people in the bar were currently turning into werewolves. The creatures stood around, wobbling on their hind legs, covered in shaggy fur, baring their teeth, and growling at Grover and Cilla.

“Up the stairs, up the stairs,” cried Cilla, dashing across the common room.

“Up the stairs?” demanded Grover. “Are you crazy? There’s an assassin up there from the System.”

“And there’s a pack of werewolves down here.”

“Up the stairs, up the stairs,” cried Grover, dashing up the steps.

Grover and Cilla tore up the staircase two steps at a time as the pub erupted into howls and the sound of claws scratching on wood as the wolves chased them.

While the two heroes dashed up the stairs to the next floor, the red-headed assassin ran down, half-nude, pulling up her green dress.

“Holy hells,” cried the red-headed assassin, stopping in her tracks. “No one said anything about an army of werewolves.” Then, she ran back to Grover’s boarding room and locked the door with a click.

“Damn!” swore Grover, tugging on the handle. “The key’s on the inside.”

“Break the door,” shouted Cilla, seeing the werewolves pounding up the steps.

“Or,” said Grover, pulling on the door handle next to his room, which opened. “We could go inside here, partner. Come on.”

But instead of running in, Cilla screamed, “Grover!”

Grover turned to see a werewolf dragging Cilla away. The wolf had a claw around Cilla’s boot, pulling her downstairs, as the other wolves howled. Cilla reached out a hand, and Grover yanked, tearing her from the werewolf’s grasp and pulling her into the open boarding room.

“Thanks, partner,” said Cilla, slamming the door shut and locking it as the werewolves slammed on the door panels, clawing at the handle, unable to turn it.

“That was close,” said Grover, checking for any bites or scratches on his skin.

Cilla looked at Grover’s bare chest. “You just had to fool around with an assassin sent to kill you, didn’t you?”

“Hey, if you had my special condition for the past few months, you would have done it, too.”

Cracks began to appear in the middle of the door as the wolves slammed their claws against it.

“We need to get out of here,” said Cilla, opening the window shutters and peering out. “To the street.”

“Down there?” asked Grover, looking over her shoulder. “That’s a big jump, partner.”

“Or we could fight a pack of werewolves.”

“It doesn’t look so far after all,” said Grover, leaning out, holding on to the frame. “And there’s that one-eyed bartender, laughing at us.”

“That’s because he works for Villains-R-Us, Grover.”

“Oh. That settles it. I’m giving him a poor review.”

“Is he armed?” asked Cilla, bumping into Grover, who was still leaning out.

“Hey,” cried Grover, losing his grip. Cilla reached for his hand to pull him back inside, but instead of stopping Grover’s fall, his momentum carried them out the window, crashing on top of the villain bartender.

“Oomph,” cried Luscus as the two heroes landed on his chest, knocking the wind out of him.

“We got you, Luscus,” cried Cilla, straddling his chest while Grover rolled off.

Grover turned back to The Grape Ape. On the second floor, he could see the wolves caught in the narrow window frame of the boarding room, unable to squeeze through with their broad shoulders. They were safe. For now.

“We did it!” cried Grover, overcome with joy. “I’m sorry for not following you earlier. Without you, I was tricked by a sexy assassin and almost killed. You should be our team leader.”

“And I’m sorry for not listening to you, either,” said Cilla, slapping the bartender’s face to rouse him. “Without you, I was fooled by this villain bartender and almost killed by werewolves. You should be our team leader.”

“Co-leaders?” suggested Grover.

“Equal partners,” replied Cilla.

“Well, isn’t this a sweet moment?” remarked Luscus, getting his wind back, then spat out some blood. “Now, get off me.” He struggled to get up.

Cilla pushed Luscus down. “Not until you tell us everything you know about this little werewolf plot.”

“I won’t,” said Luscus, sneering. “I won’t say a thing.”

“Maybe we should encourage his powers of speech,” said Grover, reaching for his rapier.

“I like the way you’re thinking, partner,” said Cilla, laying her knife near Luscus’s good eye.

The one without the patch.

Luscus grimaced. “I might have been hired to be a werewolf as a plot for Opulentus to take over the farm of his main competitor, the Contadinos.”

“And?” asked Cilla, waving the knife.

“Oh. And the pub was a trap to kill the leader of your hero team, all part of a Revenge Trip commissioned by Villains-R-Us. But that’s all I know.”

Cilla waved the knife again.

“Sorry,” said Luscus. “That’s all the betrayal I have left in me.”

Grover looked at the werewolves padding about the common room on the ground floor, thrusting their snouts through the barred windows and growling.

“And what about those innocent people?” asked Grover.

“Them?” asked Luscus. “The potion will wear off in a few hours. And if it doesn’t, just consult an apothecary.”

A half hour later, Cilla and Grover were explaining everything to the deputy mayor, while Luscus sat outside the office in chains.

“And that’s it?” asked Deputy Mayor Servus, after they had finished their story and were sipping some mugs of Primo wine to celebrate. “The whole werewolf attack was a plot to kill you two heroes the whole time?”

“Not the whole time. First, it was a plot by Opulentus to take over the Contadino farm,” added Cilla, taking another sip of wine. “The villain Luscus admits to being the werewolf who attacked the Contadinos. Only later did Villains-R-Us and the System decide to use this scheme by Opulentus as a trap to assassinate us. So, you can take care of Opulentus through your justice system. And we’ll take care of Luscus through our hero system. Unfortunately, the red-headed assassin got away in the chaos.”

“Either way,” said Grover, refilling his wine mug. “Your town is safe, and the werewolf problem is over. When the potion wears off in a few hours, you should have your citizens back to normal.”

“And here’s some gold to fix up The Grape Ape,” said Cilla, handing over the bonus gold she had been given by the mayor. “You need it more than we do.”

“Thank you,” said Servus, taking the bag of coins. “But one thing still bothers me. If it was a trap, how did the villains know you would be the heroes hired to save Bolda?”

Mayor Princeps stepped into the room, followed by her scribe. “And we need to issue a statement about the death of those brave heroes killed by the werewolves. It’s so very sad.” The mayor stopped in her tracks and looked at Grover and Cilla. “Wait. You two are still alive.” She turned back to the door. “But Luscus, you told me you took care of them.”

Luscus appeared in the doorway, wrapped in chains, but smiling. “I guess I had one betrayal left in me after all.” Then he laughed evilly. “You didn’t think I would go down alone, did you, mayor?”

Mayor Princeps turned pale. “Oh, I think I’m needed elsewhere.” She knocked Luscus aside and fled the room.

“You know,” said Cilla, turning back to the group. “You think she might have noticed Luscus was wrapped in chains when he lied to her.”

“She wasn’t that bright for a leader,” remarked Grover.

“Nor that tall.” Cilla turned to Servus. “So, what are you going to do about her?”

“The usual,” said Servus, sighing. “This isn’t the first mayor who has gone evil in Bolda. They say there’s something in the wine.”

Grover and Cilla turned to each other, then poured their wine on the floor.

About the Author

Kyle Crocco is the author of the *Heroes, Inc.* fantasy series. He lives in Santa Barbara, California. For more author updates, visit kylecrocco.com.