

## Chapter 84 - Check In, Chekhov

The mid-morning weather reflected Grugg's mood quite well. Another overcast day that threatened rainfall, with a chill breeze that swung through down the mountain into the streets of Helpart. A drab grey filtered the town as though the approaching winter was draining everything of colour, ready to douse the area with snow.

"Aren't you cold, Lady Clothesmaker?" Gregor toggled his jacket tighter around himself. Her choice to always be wearing some form of dress seemed peculiar for the current season.

"Oh, no. " She shot a smile at the ratman before displaying the pendant from around her neck. "Cold Resistance. Using it for fashion is probably not what my mother intended, but..." She shrugged and returned the gemstone beneath the yellow dress.

"Figures," the Deputy responded bluntly.

"Gregor not like magic?" Grugg rubbed at his ear as his eyebrow raised. He knew the ratman wasn't too fond of the wizard but figured that was something more to do with being a talking hat part.

"Never had the need for it. Aside from my Magic Eye."

*He has made good use of my healing spells, at the least.*

"Gregor used scroll to save Grugg too," the cyclops added to half the conversation.

"That was more luck than anything. I'm sure ser Hat has told you that being able to read the scroll is only half the battle; for those without arcane aptitude, there's still a chance the spell will fail."

*It depends on the difficulty and power of the spell, but pretty much.*

"Do you think you could make some simple scrolls for me to try?" Claudia asked, putting an arm around Grugg's as they walked to her shop.

*I could; it might be a better use of our resources to purchase some basic scrolls from Eleanor - as our blank scrolls are limited at the moment, and I'd prefer to be able to make some improvements to my combat spell stacks.*

"Bart said yes," Grugg grinned with a slow nod towards the clothesmaker.

"Excellent! I don't have any aspirations of being a spell caster or anything. It would just be nice to know that in a pinch, I would be able to have that extra utility and not fumble it."

"I guess... I will do that as well," Gregor mumbled as he crossed his arms.

"Grugg won't." The Detective had no need, with the wizard being a part of him. Plus, any scroll with text large enough for him to read easily would be too cumbersome to carry. Better for him to focus on the things he was good at - like punching a ton of people to death.

A chill breeze brought with it the shudder of his recurring guilt. He felt that sometimes the line between good and evil wasn't so clear. However, if his arrival in the town had not gone so well, he could easily envisage a scenario where he had been chased out with pitchforks and torches. A Quest notice on the town's job board asking for willing adventurers to rid Helpart of the interloping monster with one eye.

The truth was messy, and he almost envied those that lived a basic, uneventful life. Sometimes it was never about good or bad, just people trying to survive and make what they could out of their existence. Had all the Nightshade criminals deserved to die last night? Grugg had neither the moral compass nor the emotional capacity to make a judgement on that. There were tribes of cyclops who would just as easily descend on the town and eat or destroy everything and everyone just because it was amusing. Goats in odd situations were enough to amuse this cyclops.

Maybe both Bart and Gregor had been right. In trying to prove his tribe wrong and attempting to make them proud at the same time, what had he achieved? A hole in a mountain with terrible furniture. No friends or social connections. No goats. But now that he had taken the chance with the wizard and his quest - he had friends, a proper home, and was part of a community. Did he still need to prove anything to his family if he was happy?

Threads looked dark and gloomy as they approached. With it only being closed for a couple of days, it was surprising how quickly the abandonment could be seen. As Claudia unlocked the door, Grugg tried to peer through the window. Without the grace of the sun illuminating the area, all he could see were muted shapes of mannequins and shelves, with the blocky colours of fabrics that languished in the darkness.

The chime over the door was still not present as the clothesmaker pushed through into the interior with a sigh.

### **'Spark'**

As one, all the candles and torches in the room lit up, casting everything into a bright glow. An attempt had been made to scrub the blood from the floorboards and rug, but the telltale signs were still there. The fabrics that had been unlucky enough to be a party to the fray still bore the crimson markings that had seeped into their woven threads.

'I could probably clear most of this up with a spell?'

Claudia clucked her tongue as she glanced around the room, folding her arms across her chest. "No... but thank you, Bart. I'll let you know if there is anything I want to keep though; most of this can be the problem of whoever buys the shop."

"Won't the new owner appreciate not having blood soaked into everything, Lady... Shopseller?" Gregor hopped up onto one of the tables and crossed his legs.

"Most likely I'll just be selling the plot to the town itself - although Helpart leases most shop spaces, but my mother actually bought the shop outright."

"Grugg bet there a tax on that."

"Probably." Claudia tilted her head to the side and raised an eyebrow. "You sure you're doing okay, Grugg?"

The Detective shrugged, looking around the shop. "Grugg will let know when Grugg knows."

"Right, let's just get this done then. Gregor, could you actually go get us some food and perhaps a small cart to transport things to the safehouse?"

"It would be a pleasure," the ratman grinned, hopping down off the table to head towards the door.

"Hold up, and I'll give you the gold for it." Claudia began to rummage around her pouch for the money.

"No need." Gregor waved her off as he left the shop and strolled around the corner.

'I do not doubt that he is going to get us into trouble eventually.'

"Getting into trouble seems to be our side job, Bart," Claudia smiled as she shook her head. "Now, most of the important stuff will be in the back room... which I may need you to clean up if possible, just for my trauma's sake."

Grugg followed the clothesmaker into the back room and passed the counter. Whatever grim feelings were settling back into him, it must be even worse for Claudia. As the wizard lit up the storage room, the blood dried into the stairs, and the area where the suspect had been pinned made it easy to take themselves back to that evening.

### **'Prestidigitation'**

Like a bad memory over time, the blood slowly vanished - Grugg didn't know where to - but the weighty feeling of dread still stuck in his stomach. Claudia looked pale, so he gently put his hand on her shoulder. With a sigh, she turned to give the cyclops a sad smile.

"Well, at least this will hopefully be the last time I have to see this place. Like it almost was that night. Wow, perhaps I am not doing okay either." Claudia shook her head as if the thoughts were a cobweb stuck in her hair before she started to point out fabrics on the shelves. "Alright - we want those leathers, this plain inlay, anything with a floral pattern... and I suppose something black if that is to be our uniform colour. I'm going to get some personal things from upstairs," she gestured over to the front of the shop, "if you put everything on the counter for when Gregor returns."

Grugg nodded and watched Claudia ascend the stairs and enter the door to the unknown floor above. Turning back to the many shelves ahead of them, he folded his arms and narrowed his singular eye.

"Did Bart see which things Claudia want?"

'I did, yes. Allow me to guide you.'

Over the course of the next ten or so minutes, Grugg had made three piles of various fabrics and materials on the front counter. The grumbling of his stomach was soon answered by the rattling of the door as the ratman entered with a small box.

"Is that food?" Grugg asked, eyes wide and almost knocking the collected fabrics to the floor as he leaned forward to try and sniff out the contents.

"Yes, ser Grugg. There is also a small cart outside, but I would advise we don't leave it to linger unattended." Gregor bared his fangs in an approximation of a grin.

*'Worried about someone stealing it?'*

Footsteps behind them indicated Claudia was making her return, and she appeared in the storeroom carrying a luggage case. "Great job, Grugg - that looks like everything. Oh-Gregor, you're back too - is that food?"

Gregor sighed through his odd grin and placed the box on the nearest table, opening the top to reveal the contents rather than answer the same question repeatedly. The other two came over to take a look.

"Gregor... isn't this a wedding cake?" Claudia frowned at the two-tiered cake covered in white icing within the box.

"I don't know what that is," the ratman shrugged, "is it not good to eat?"

"Looks good to eat," Grugg shrugged, the white frosting reflecting in his looming eye.

"I mean, it's probably not as bad as murdering," Claudia rubbed her temple, "but it's not the most nutritious of breakfasts." She walked into the storeroom before returning with a handful of cutlery.

*'We really have fallen from grace lately, huh?'*

"Have you never read a Detective novel, Bart?" Claudia tried to pass a fork to Gregor, who refused. "Detectives usually are troubled jerks that have issues maintaining healthy relationships." She then tried to pass a fork to Grugg before realising it would be way too small. With a sigh, she took her own and placed the rest on the table.

"Claudia right," the cyclops nodded, readying his hand to take a chunk of cake. "At least Grugg has Claudia and Gregor. And Claudia has Gregor and Grugg. And Gregor-"

"Ser Hat understands," Gregor interrupted, leaning against one of the tables with his arms crossed, "at least we have this... Udok thing. As long as we are in it together, we can be jerks who do good for whatever town that needs us."

"You're going soft, Gregor," Claudia smiled as she took the first forkful of wedding cake, her grin widening at the scoff and head-turn of the ratman.

*'No more secrets then, huh?'*

The Deputy turned back round to glare at the wizard with his red eyes.

“Grugg agree. Grugg dumb to go alone without telling anyone,” he scooped a handful of cake up, only pausing briefly to finish his sentence, “no more secrets.”

Gregor let out a low hiss and closed his eyes, perhaps waiting for the decision to be reversed or for the team to disperse and leave him there. On opening them, his shoulders slumped in resignation at neither of these possibilities coming to pass.

“Eat from Detective Cake and spill secret,” Grugg winked with his one eye, cake tumbling around inside his wide mouth, “is now ceremonial Udok cake.”

“Canon,” Claudia nodded, taking a second stab herself.

“Well,” the ratman sighed once more as he leaned towards their table, “funny you should say that.”

The Deputy removed an object from inside his coat and placed it on the table next to the cake box with a metallic clink. A wooden handle etched with an engraved serpent emerging from stylised waves rose to a metallic tube. The polished steel barrel was also embellished with rings of gold, and a hoop of dark metal with a small lever sat in the groove where the tube and the handle met.

‘Now, that’s not food.’