

Chapter 78 - Power Surge

Grugg awoke from his nap to the sound of Claudia yawning as she rubbed her drool off his arm.

‘-and then the spell kind loops around?’

“Oh, looks like your friends are awake,” Eleanor smiled from the counter she had been leaning on. “And, yes, Bart, that is correct.”

The cyclops rubbed his eye and smiled. That had been perhaps the best sleep in a long time - even if it was just a nap that he would later regret. Claudia stretched and smiled back, seemingly having rested well too.

‘Just in time; I need your assistance with something, Grugg.’

“Okay,” the Detective stood up and rolled his head to loosen up his muscles. “Who Grugg punching now?” He beamed a wide grin at Eleanor since the wizard couldn’t see his face.

“Bart wants to try and make a spell scroll, and I’ve been lecturing him about spell stacks, so he has it in his tiny hat mind that he wants to eat the whole horse and give it a go.”

“Eating horse?” Grugg shrugged, lost most of the way through that sentence.

‘Put your hand on the blank spell scroll.’

The cyclops stepped towards the counter where the arcanist had laid out a large blank piece of parchment. The majority of the empty space was covered by his large hand. Claudia stood next to him to watch the proceedings.

This may be a little uncomfortable; I apologise.

A familiar tingling sensation ran down the Detective’s arm and through his hand. At first, there was warmth, and then it was cold. Lastly, it became sharp and painful - uncomfortable needles digging around inside his skin and scratching against the bone. Grugg grimaced but held his hand in place, closing his eye as he tried to ignore the feeling.

And done... I think.

Grugg removed his hand and flexed his fingers, trying to restore some sense of normal feeling to them. At least the pain had stopped as the arcane energy dissipated back away from his arm. Looking down at the spell scroll, it certainly had some effect - although the various scribbles and symbols upon it he wouldn’t even recognise on a good day.

Eleanor turned it around to face her, a worried frown wrinkling up her face as her eyes darted over the arcane markings. “Bart... I can’t even read most of this - are you sure it even worked?”

‘Only one way to find out - if you please, Grugg?’

The cyclops grunted; being made a guinea pig for spellcasting right after his nice nap was perhaps not what he had in mind for the rest of the day, but if it helped the wizard out, then it would eventually help him out - and the rest of the Private Eyes. He took the scroll from the shopkeep once she had rolled it up and held it tightly in his hand as he had done before.

Before we do this, I wanted to explain that Eleanor has given me something to further increase my magical prowess, and it will allow us to attempt greater things. However, it is dangerous to use, so I want you to understand what the risk is and if you want me to go ahead. I am atop your head, after all, and I wouldn't want to blow us both up accidentally. Can I briefly explain how the clasp works?

Grugg nodded, feeling the baited breaths of the two women around him - who had noticeably both moved a few feet further from where he stood.

The earring was like having a magical pie, I can take a few bites, and eventually, it replenishes - so I get nice and full and strong from the constant source of food, right?

The cyclops nodded once more, appreciating the descriptive imagery the wizard was using, with a smile and a slight bit of drool. This worried the onlookers a tiny bit.

The clasp is like a big magical pie, except every time I take a bite, the pie gets bigger. And I will want more pie, and it will get even bigger. Eventually, the bits of pie will become too big for my mouth, but I will be forced to eat. From there, the danger stems. As I am a soul trapped inside a hat, I am not sure what the repercussions may be if it goes that far. I just want you to understand there is a non-zero chance that I might melt through the top of your skull at some point.

"Grugg accepts," the cyclops sighed. It was far too long of a disclaimer and just left him wanting some pie. He hoped that Gregor might know that and bring him some later.

This is only a two-spell stack, but let's see how it goes!

A warm spark zipped along Grugg's arm into the spell scroll, which crumbled in his hand. He looked down at the ashen scraps with a sad eye as they fell to the floor. Then a rush of energy filled his body. At first, a wash of cold energy as he felt his skin tighten, and then secondly, a warm bath of soft arcane power that reminded him of the wizard's healing. The Detective stood, waiting for his head to melt away, but it seemed to remain intact.

"Incredible," Eleanor whispered.

"What happened?" Claudia poked at Grugg's arm, his skin still taut with an almost grey tone to it.

'I just cast Ironskin and Regenerative Ward with a single cast from a spell scroll that I crafted by myself.'

"Can't see it," Grugg added, "But Bart is beaming right now." The cyclops joined the supposed elation of the spellcaster with a broad smile of his own.

Eleanor clucked her tongue and shook her head. "Always full of surprises, little turtle. How you managed to pick up spell stacking, writing it to a scroll using Grugg here as a conduit, and also use it to cast spells on a living target - it's just beyond normal, even with the magic items you have to help."

"Wait, you can't usually do that on a living target?" Claudia frowned, eyeing the cyclops up and down to ensure he was still in one piece.

"No." Eleanor folded her arms. "There is something about the living that makes targeting difficult; the ebb and flow of arcane winds are ever-changing. Some poetic nonsense like that. Even with inanimate objects, you need to set up some kind of runes or tangible pathway for the spells to all hit the same place." She finished by shaking her head and raising her arms in resignation.

"Impressive," Grugg stated while studying his hands. He felt tougher, but the warmth of the healing spell mixed with the occasional lethargic wave from the remnants of the curse made him feel a little sleepy again.

'It will only last a few minutes as I didn't want to overexert myself. I don't suppose we could ply some more blank scrolls from you, Eleanor?'

"Barthelemy, you may take as many as I have. There isn't anyone else in this town that'll make better use of them. Just promise me you'll avert the eventual death beam away from the shop and myself when it so happens." The glint in her purple eyes matched the warm smile as she turned to go and retrieve the stacks of blank scrolls.

"Oh, there were a few more bits of leather armour I wanted to get, too," Claudia added as she whisked away to browse the rows of adorned mannequins.

The spell effects wore away from Grugg, the warmth subsided, and he felt... softer again. It was a shame. He felt pretty cool being all empowered - it was about time he got to see more spells from the supposed Defensive Ward expert. He leaned on the counter with a pout and watched Eleanor. "No Soul Jar?"

"Unfortunately not, Detective," she continued digging about in one of the cupboards, "Eager to get rid of Bart now?"

"Nooooo," the cyclops scrunched his face up. "Grugg just making convers-ation."

In truth, I'm not in much hurry. There's a lot more I can do in this form; with the rate I'm learning, I'll surpass my abilities in no time. Without having the downside of an ageing, frail body.

That was a rather one-sided way of looking at things, Grugg considered. However, it felt weird to judge the wizard on his selfishness. Not because he wasn't entitled to have a say - it was his head, after all - but it would be nice if Grugg was part of the conversation too. The Detective shrugged to himself; he would shelve those thoughts for later, as he moved aside as Claudia placed a bunch of assorted leather equipment on the counter.

“Oh,” she blew her hair from her face, “We need to get some things from Threads at some point - whatever stock I can salvage and some personal items. We might need to let Patson or the Captain know, and you and Gregor can help whilst we have a day off tomorrow?” She prodded an accusatory finger at the Detective, knowing full well any attempt at a day of rest would usually end up in trouble.

“Okay,” the cyclops grinned back, thinking in his head that transporting goods across town didn’t sound like much of a day off- oh, there it was. The ill-timed nap had activated his infrequently used sass. He couldn’t have just enjoyed a nice sleep where he wasn’t recovering from some harrowing injury; it had to give him the grumps. There was only one thing that could fix that, and he looked to the window to see the near dusk shadows of the mountain looming across Helpart.

“Here you are,” Eleanor brought over the wrapped bundle of scrolls. “Don’t use them all at once; my next lot in won’t be for another month.”

We need to find another source of blank scrolls.

Grugg balked at the urgency of the statement as Claudia paid for the extra armour pieces. As supportive as he was of Bart increasing his abilities, having a power-crazed wizard inside his skull might change his tune on how soon he would need to be evicted.

“Gregor said not be late for food,” Grugg reminded them both, hoping to change the subject of acquisition of more danger into the much more palatable acquisition of dinner.

“What are the chances we are still back before he is, though,” Claudia scrunched up her nose. “He is probably busy scouting for new leads or whatever he gets up to when he skulks around.”

‘Oh, that reminds me - Eleanor, did you ever find anything out about the odd afterimage of a person that was here last time we were?’

“No,” she shook her head, placing a hand on her cheek as she leant her elbow on the counter. “I should think it was something, or someone, after you.”

‘That sounds reasonable, given our brief history here. Well, it has been a pleasure, Eleanor.’

“It certainly has, turtle,” her warm smile radiating throughout her whole face. “You be safe now and keep these kids out of trouble.”

“Trouble always finds Grugg,” the cyclops grumbled as he waved to the arcanist.

“Eventually, we will run out of trouble soon, right?” the clothesmaker shrugged as she also waved goodbye.

The air of the evening was brisk, as was their walk to return to the safehouse. The cool dusk air was a little chilly compared to the warmth of the shop, and it made the desire to get home and feast on whatever Gregor had prepared all the more alluring.

“Hi Barry,” Grugg greeted the door, to no response. He stood and looked at the face carved into the door, but it did not move.

That's not right.

The Detective pulled out Thud and carefully pulled the door open, which it did without resistance. A smell wafted through the street, of cooked meat and vegetables, but also very slightly - blood.

Grugg stepped into the dark house, the shadows of dusk covering the room in inky blackness.

‘Spark’

As one, every torch in the large downstairs room lit up.

The bright orange glow immediately brought to light the furred body on the floor, wrapped in dark clothing and lying unmoving in a pool of blood.