

Chapter 77 - Arcane Mulch

The cold air bit at the Detective as the dark sky loomed overhead. The rainfall had abated for a short while, but the dirt ground of the lumber yard remained sodden from the efforts. Claudia huddled closer to the cyclops for warmth as they watched three wagons loaded with Guard, flanked by rows of Guard on foot, approach from the road.

Patson, along with the rest of the Alpha team, were first to arrive - and greeted the Captain warmly; their awkward attempts to try not to hug him or pat him on the back were visible in their glistening eyes.

“For anything that you could fault the Captain for, he is certainly adored by the Guard,” Claudia said from halfway beneath Grugg’s shawl.

He has a certain amount of charisma to him, as does his brother.

The Detective turned to see Silverfang himself being led from the ruined wooden structure that masked the underground lair. Restraints on his wrists, followed by similarly shackled workers as they were taken to the wagons by the arriving Guard. Neither the Nightshade boss nor the dwarven woman gave the Detective even the briefest of looks, playing their part in the charade. A few of the workers gave him dirty looks, but he supposed that was warranted.

We should let the others know what happened.

Grugg retrieved the Message Stone for Lady Valoth and gave it a tap.

“Grugg here. Not dead. Found Captain and made arrest Silverfang. Report in.”

A brief silence followed before the stone lit back up, and the static voice of Gregor chimed through.

[Lady Investigator is running errands. Suspect interrogated, will report later. Making dinner later - don’t be home late.]

“Grugg hoping Gregor would sound more impressed.”

“I’m sure he is just jealous that we had the more fun task,” Claudia smiled, “It’s not every day you get to almost die - oh, actually, I will take that back.” She stuck her tongue out at the cyclops briefly, then looked back to the road.

“Grugg had fun on adventure with Claudia,” he shuffled awkwardly.

“Well, get used to it; we’re a team now.” The clothesmaker nudged him and gestured to start walking. “What should we do now?”

If I may make a suggestion? Let’s go and see Eleanor; let her know we aren’t dead. We can pass the time safely before going home to Gregor’s... cooking.

“Bart says Eleanor shop?”

“Suits me; I might want to have a look around for more armour anyway. I’m getting tired of my blood being outside of my body.”

The pair started to set off before being quickly hailed by the Captain behind them.

“Detective! You stay safe, but we will need to catch up tomorrow. Plenty to discuss.”

“Breakfast on Captain then,” Grugg smiled with a nod to the amused half-orc.

The walk to the shop was, in a word, pleasant. Despite the waves of lethargy, the looming clouds desperate to release rainfall, and the glares of the workers as the wagons passed them by, it was a nice walk compared to being cramped up in a Dungeon, sewers, or a prison cell, or even an underground lair. It was the most freedom Grugg had tasted in over a day, and it was bliss. Even the passersby were just blurs in the background of his walk with Claudia, and even though they did so in silence, he knew she felt the same way.

Bart would probably call it Trauma Bonding and must have done so at some point for it to even be in Grugg’s head, to begin with. It was common with adventurers; the near-death experiences and reliance on each other to stay alive drew the members closer. Between the trust and the shared traumas of violence and comradeship, you became a team. The Private Eyes were certainly an odd bunch, but they had been through the rough of it and come out the other side stronger for it. Grugg hoped anyway.

The Detective pushed open the door to the shop, allowing Claudia to enter first.

“Ah, Barthelemy and friends! It’s good to see the little turtle out of his shell again.” Eleanor jumped up from her chair and leant across the counter with a bright smile across her face.

‘It’s good to see you too - we did not die in the dungeon.’

“So it seems. You weren’t down there very long?”

“Boss killed himself and Dungeon boring,” Grugg glumly exclaimed, walking over to the counter.

“Aw, I’m sorry to hear that, pup. So it was a total wash?”

‘We did find some useful information. Do you know who may have set the Magic Locks on a building in town?’

Eleanor screwed her face up in thought. “In the last year, I’ve done a couple, anything older than that, and I can’t say. Mine were just for shops in the nearby area - can never be too careful.”

‘Probably no clue on anyone that could cast a Remove Soul trap, then?’

"*Heavens!*" Eleanor stood back in shock. "To even know that spell, let alone imbed it into a trap, would take an arcane user far greater than I've ever known. You encountered that down there?"

Grugg raised his hand sheepishly.

"And you are still alive; how?"

'A mixture of things. A dispel scroll, Grugg's will to live, and I may have diverted part of the spell into myself.'

"You are full of surprises, turtle. I think you owe me some explaining."

'Perhaps if you two want to get comfortable, I can speak with Eleanor.'

The arcanist drew a wand and levelled it at a chair. With a short zap, it then grew to twice its size - big enough for Grugg to sit comfortably. Claudia put a chair next to the Detective and sat, taking out a needle and thread to start to work on repairing her dress.

"Where should we start? Just start explaining stuff, and I'll catch up; I'm sure you ain't had the chance to prattle on about the arcane to your friends."

'So let's start with... thank you for the earring; unlocking that extra bit of magical capability has been outstanding for my growth. Just in the last day, I have regained the use of Mending and Flame Weapon, my mana pool has increased and recovers quicker, and I'm taking grasp of things I hadn't even learnt before.'

"All that from just the earring," Eleanor leant back in her rocking chair. "You want the upgrade, right?"

'You have that? I thought they had stopped producing those after all the... accidents.'

"They did, but I kept one for the novelty. Only made me queasy, so it has been sitting collecting dust."

The sound of Grugg snoring began, as Claudia now also lay asleep with her head on the Detective's arm where he had removed his spiked gloves.

'Honestly, the prospect is overwhelming. This whole process has been exhilarating, but it scares me. I haven't had a sleep in over a week - I am constantly on, but I don't get tired, just lost in the patterns around me, the ebb and flow of magic.'

"And you said that it's different for you now?"

'In a way, it is like water. I can feel the changes, the texture of the arcane energy. When I absorbed some of the curse, it was like adding a cup of water to an ocean - the components of it spread out, diluted, but still there. With effort, I can move these split parts together and reorganise them into functional spells. In a way, it is like having segments of a poem or song and trying to get them to make sense or sound right.'

“Fascinating,” Eleanor rocked slowly as her eye gleamed with excitement. “Far be it for me to treat you as a guinea pig, little turtle, but I am very intrigued as to how far you can push. I would like to invest in your success.”

‘You mean you want to throw free things at me until I pop, or the town does?’

Eleanor chuckled a dry laugh. “You sound just like your brother sometimes. But yes, in a way, although I am sure you would not ‘pop’.”

‘I will have a limit, though, or at least I hope I do. I don’t want to go crazy or end up firing a continent-destroying beam.’

“Turtle, please. That’s only happened once - you are safer than that. Here, let me get the buckle; just *try* not to destroy yourself or your friends.”

The aged arcanist lifted herself off the rocking chair with a snap of joints and went over to one of the many drawers behind the counter, humming a soft tune to herself. After a brief shuffle around, she brought out a small buckle shaped like a skull with inlaid emerald eyes.

‘They should have known. Why make it a skull?’

“Not quite the image you want to invoke as a spellcaster, but should fit at home atop your companion.” Eleanor reached over and popped the buckle on the ribbon around the wizard’s hat, a snorting snuffle coming from the cyclops as he was briefly disturbed.

‘Thank you.’

“These two, alright? The Dungeon must have taken it out of them, poor kids.”

‘Well, they were arrested straight after the dungeon, then Miss Claudia barely survived an attempted murder last night, and then just earlier, they both got pretty bloodied fighting the Nightshade.’

“*All that is above!* You really need to take care of them better, Bart!”

‘I do my best! Unfortunately, I cannot stop them from stomping straight into danger, but... this buckle may help...’

The Magic Lock on the shop’s front door hummed as it closed, and the lights in the room flickered and dimmed.

“*Barthelemy*, I did not give you permission to access my defences; why the nerve!”

‘You wanted me to improve some of the wards, right? Currently, your Lock only covers the doors and windows... but if I - woah, hang on... There. It now covers the whole bottom floor walls and ceiling too.’

Eleanor waved her hand in the air, and a light flashed across her eyes before fading. “How did you... the mind never ceases to boggle. You could just exert excess arcane energy from around you into the spell to increase the potency?”

'Exactly on the dot, Eleanor. I would be smiling now if I weren't a hat. Although it would probably be one of those smiles that gradually look more sinister the longer I hold it.'

"You turn evil, and your friends will be the first ones to deal with; they're a good bunch of kids."

'Sometimes I wonder what my life has become. I am a hat wizard stuck atop a cyclops who is now a Detective. Along the way, we have picked up a very pleasant clothesmaker, an exceedingly grumpy ratman, and the most intimidating maybe-vampire Inspector the Crown has under their command.'

"But you're most worried about protecting them, right, little turtle?" Eleanor smiled sadly as she sat back in her chair.

'Naturally. I am a Defensive Ward expert after all, or at least I'm supposed to be. Although I set out on my own to find Harlan's murderer, I feel like I've almost become more of a spectator in the story, a guide to assist this crazy group in defeating Nightshade. I feel guilt and responsible for dragging them into this as well.'

"Always worrying too much," Eleanor smiled, "Some things never change. They may be beaten up, but they're happy. They've found companionship and friends to fight against this unjust and cruel world together. It's thanks to you that they are on this adventure, and you need to suck up those feelings of inadequacy and be the weird wizard-talking-hat that the group needs."

A brief, contemplative silence filled the air, save for the soft breathing of the two napping Private Eyes. Eventually, Bart broke the pause in the conversation.

'Harlan was a fool ever to let go of you.'

Eleanor chuckled warmly, shaking her head with a smile.

"Don't I know it, turtle."