

## Chapter 49 - Candle in the Dark

“What? Where?” Eleanor’s voice brimmed with concern as her eyes darted around the emporium. “That would be impossible with my door enchantments.”

Grugg cast his eye slowly around the room too, drawing Thud from the club's sling on his back. He stepped closer to Claudia, who clumsily stuffed her hand into the red glove on her waist.

‘I don’t know,’ the wizard hesitated, ‘It is close, but the figure is... out of focus, blurred.’

Reaching beneath the counter, Eleanor slammed a retrieved book onto the counter, knocking a couple of empty pouches to the floor. The enchantress flicked through a few pages and then firmly placed her hand on a page laden with arcane symbols.

“**Safety Protocol One**,” she spoke firmly, her eyes glowing like two sunlit amethysts.

The Detective felt a warm wave of energy pass from his feet up through his body until it passed above his head. There was a crackle in the air, and a brief hum filled his ears before abruptly stopping. A calm pause filled the room as they each looked on edge.

‘The presence has gone. That felt uncomfortable though; what was that spell?’

She chuckled and shook her head. “All these years, the famed Ward wizard hasn’t even heard of Stacks?”

‘No... but let me guess. A sequential array of spells that are cast in order under one incantation? It would probably need some kind of set structure, maybe something to give it enough power to-’

“Yeah, yeah, alright smarty hat,” Eleanor waved her hand in dismissal. “Don’t make me regret giving you that earring. But, correct enough. The shop itself has various enchantments and spells woven into the structure, but I won’t tell you any more than that.” She folded her arms with a feigned pout.

Grugg scratched his head at the still-empty emporium before tapping Thud to the floor to activate the Moonchase Orb. A brilliant white light filled his vision as the wave of light pulsed through the emporium, leaving a large swathe of outlined objects. With a quick squint in all directions, he determined there were no humanoid shapes showing themselves. Something about it itched inside his brain though. It reminded him of the Shadow - although with fewer cut-up clothes. A thought struck him, and he turned to the old arcanist.

“Eleanor, is Grugg magic now?” he pointed up at the silver ring earring.

“Oh, bless you, Detective. I’m afraid you don’t have a magical bone in your body. I was honestly surprised Bart was able to get the effect of it; you seem to be a wonderful conduit, at the least.”

It was now the turn of the cyclops to exaggerate a pout. Not that he particularly wanted to be able to cast spells, magic being exceedingly icky, he failed to remind himself. Nevertheless,

magic had actually saved his hide on more occasions than one hand of fingers. And if Bart could hurry up and learn some more fun stuff...

"Can Eleanor help Bart learn better magic?"

The enchantress laughed and settled into a coy smile as her eyes twinkled. "Perhaps. If there is something in it for me."

'You want me to learn my Wards again, to use for the Emporium Stacks?'

"Ah, always too smart for your own good, little turtle." She strummed her fingers on the book before her and then closed it with a snap. "I will part fund components or whatever a hat needs to learn spells, in return for- yes, for Wards for the shop."

'Deal. I don't suppose you have Soul Exchange materials laying-'

"We both know that I do not," Eleanor shook her head in exasperation. "How you managed to weave such a high-level spell and then make a complete pig's ear of the execution, I don't know."

"Bart had some help," Grugg looked down at his feet, putting Thud away to hide his guilt.

"Last time I saw the right kind of imbued glass vessel, it was three thousand gold. Just for the vessel." The enchantress spoke sternly with a pair, "So you best come out of that Dungeon with some treasure and alive."

'Yes, ma'am.'

"None of your lip, Bart," she shot back. "I will help you get into a real body, but this is a mess of your own doing."

Claudia bit her lip. "Bart, will you age as a hat?"

'Unlikely. I would continue to exist, easily outliving Grugg. Then, I would either be worn by someone else or sit unforgotten and slowly lose all sense of sanity and self over the expanse of time.'

"Grugg think should take earring off."

'Let's get our things and go; I have drunk a bit too deeply of this cup of being able to talk freely.'

Claudia pushed the remainder of the gold owed across the counter as she picked up the fallen pouches. "Are you able to deliver these to where Grugg is staying? We won't need them for a couple of days."

"Certainly, I have a pair of trusted men who are due back tomorrow - I'll have them run everything over to you in the evening."

Grugg stared around the emporium again as the clothesmaker passed on the delivery address. Part of him wished he could fit into some of the nicer-looking things, especially all

the metal armours. He imagined stomping down a doorway and wading through groups of Nightshade thugs like an avalanche, swinging Thud all the way. For a moment, he was lost in the imagery, the crunches and yelps of surprise and defeat from the darkly garbed bad guys, before Claudia drew him out of it.

“Are you done, Grugg? Care to walk me back to Threads?” She nudged him out of his stupor, the Detective just nodding reflexively.

‘Thanks again, Eleanor, for everything.’

“My pleasure, turtle. You take care of each other, okay? And hurry up and learn the Message spell, Bart; I’ll be waiting.” The enchantress leant on the counter with a warm smile and a wink.

The wizard said nothing in response as Grugg awkwardly waved goodbye, and they exited onto the streets once more, the chill air of the evening biting into them. Again the doorway had seemed to stretch to accommodate the cyclops, as he did not struggle to fit through despite the size difference. He shook the thought from his head as Claudia wrapped her arm around his and walked close to use him as shelter from the breeze.

It did not take them long to make the journey back to the clothes shop, and they stood outside the door as Claudia unlocked it.

“I... I am nervous about the whole Dungeon thing,” she turned back to the cyclops, looking him in the eye.

“Grugg keep you safe,” he felt his face warm, “A-and Bart, and Gregor too.”

“Good,” she smiled and stuck her tongue out, “Else, who is going to keep you clothed?” Her face flushed, and she turned to enter the shop, pausing at the threshold. “Good evening, Detective, be safe.”

The cyclops nodded and waved to the closing door, slightly tongue-tied, before heading off towards the safe-house.

*What an interesting day.*

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Grugg squeezed through the front door of the safe-house, entering into the darkness of the large main room. The setting sun was now on the other side of the house, and barely any natural light found its way into the wide seating and planning area.

*Oh, this is the perfect opportunity. Remember we grabbed those candles earlier? Put one on the table.*

The Detective did so without as much as a grunt. Truth be told, his mind was elsewhere, and he was beginning to feel the mental burnout of another socially packed day. At least he

hadn't had to contest with blood loss for a change. After knocking the lone candle down twice, he took a deep breath and concentrated, this time the wax stick standing in place.

*Okay, now grab that copper wire from the forge and point it at the candle - take a few more steps back.*

Grugg did so, standing about seven feet from the table where the unlit candle stood. He took the small spool of wire from one of his pouches and grasped it in his palm, pointing his finger at the candle.

And he waited.

Standing in the dark, his eyelid began to feel heavy, his arm tired of pointing outwards. But then, gradually, he started to feel the almost familiar feeling of energy building along the inside of his arm - slight pressure building up in his hand.

**'Spark.'**

The pressure released, and the copper wire grew warm suddenly in his hand, the weird smell of magic filling his nostrils. But nothing happened.

*Oh. It seems I have some issues with spells that travel through the air still. But, perhaps I am getting ahead of myself.*

"Should Grugg stand closer?"

*Let's try wrapping the wire around your finger first, like a ring.*

The Detective did so, the wooden spool dropping to the floor and bouncing across the floorboards as he wound the wire around and around his index finger. He wasn't dextrous enough to tie a knot in it, but the wire was stiff enough to stay put. The end of the wire he adjusted to run along the side of his finger a short distance.

He waited, hand outstretched again, and the tingling pressure began to build in his hand once more.

"Spark!" Grugg yelled, and the energy dissipated. "Aw."

*Wow, you startled me there, and I dropped the spell. You are still not able to cast spells, remember.*

A grunt as the cyclops pouted. But, with a sigh, he pointed at the candle standing inert before him. He tried to think of ways to help the wizard, but if yelling and punching wasn't going to do anything for the process, then he was fresh out of ideas.

*One last try then, I'll draw down on my reserves since we are soon to sleep.*

Grugg looked around the room now that his eyes had gotten more used to the dim conditions, the dark shapes of the various chairs about the room sitting in shadowed

judgement of their failed magic experiment. He would give them a stern finger-wagging come morning, he promised himself.

*Alright, here goes.*

A slightly stronger buzz of arcane energy began in Grugg's core before passing along his arm and building in his hand. He squinted through the darkness to aim his pointed index finger at the tip of the elusive candle as best that he could.

**'Spark.'**

A tiny flickered of light darted from the tip of the Detective's finger and soared across the short distance guided by the magic cast. It struck the exposed wick of the white candle deftly, which burst into light as it caught aflame, sending an orange glow of light throughout the room.

*Amazing, I just had to change the delivery method; through your finger instead of the wire!*

Grugg cheered, raising his arms in jubilation before being startled by a slow clap emanating from the other end of the room.

"About time," Gregor shook his head, eyes shining red in the candlelight. "I was about to get the matches." The ratman slouched in one of the more comfortable looking chairs by the hearth.

'Must you always lurk in the shadows?'

"No," the ratman replied, "Any luck at the emporium?"

"Don Kean lives in *DUNGEON*," Grugg exclaimed, walking closer to the Deputy.

'So we have a bunch of dungeon delving supplies coming in tomorrow, just before our new outfits. Well, not for me.'

The ratman shrugged, "Can't wait to get my new clothes dirty then."

'They are to protect you, and I won't use Healing Pulse on you if you are going to be a grouch.'

"Hat talks a lot now," Gregor grimaced to the cyclops, seemingly more annoyed at that rather than curious about the now dungeon adventure before them.

"What about Gregor? Get what you wanted?"

"Oh yes," his dark eyes gleamed. "I got exactly what I wanted."

With a clawed hand, he patted the small lump of something hiding under his coat as a sharp-fanged grin spread slowly across his face.