

## Chapter 65 - Curiosity killed the Cyclops

Barthelemy broke the silence filling the small office-den.

‘So, it seems pretty likely that this is Don Kean.’

“He... activated a Great Ancient? And then it did this?” Claudia gestured around the dust-filled room.

Grugg shrugged. It didn’t make much sense to him. The diary mentioned a wizard that was killed; was that Bart’s brother? And there were secrets that he held that the Nightshade wanted? It was too much for the Detective, and the unanswered questions filled his head, threatening to spill out forth lest his brain explode.

‘This is speculation on my part, of course, but whatever Don Kean did to activate the... Great Ancient, it did not give him the power he sought. I have not encountered magic that can rapidly age a person, let alone a whole Dungeon.’

“Yeti didn’t look old,” Grugg sighed, feeling stifled by the enclosed space.

‘They probably hadn’t activated it, as they were still digging it out.’

“I feel like there is a lot of context I am missing here,” Claudia frowned, adjusting the straps of her heavier side bag.

‘We will need to have a catch-up, but I suggest doing it topside-’

“What’s this?” Gregor prodded one of the cluttered items on the desk as he knelt down beside it, red eyes level with the targeted bit of debris.

Claudia reached down with a gloved hand and retrieved the item, brushing the cobwebs and dirt off to reveal a small metal statue. It was a bird, similar to a heron, with a round textured stand.

“I suppose more than one person can like animal statues,” Gregor shrugged before scribbling in his notepad.

Grugg didn’t like where any of this was going. Bad things about Captain, bad things about more giant skulls hiding in the ground, and no decent Dungeon heroic story to hold over his tribe when he returns. He clenched his teeth and glared down at the inert body of the former Nightshade boss.

The cyclops flung his fist into the defenceless Don Kean, pulping the skull and sending the chair to the floor as the decaying legs gave way. A puff of aged dust clouded the air as it clattered to the floor.

‘Always best to make sure; undead are very pervasive in this age.’

The rest of the party nodded, even if their facial expressions were taken back by the sudden act of violence from the Detective. Grugg was mostly disappointed. How was he meant to

punch all the criminals if they went and died first? The spymaster of the Nightshade organisation is reduced to a dried-out husk because of his own ego and folly. At least Fixion had been telling the truth, and now they knew the reason why contact with the Don had dried out recently.

“Okay, Private Eyes,” the cyclops growled, “Gregor and Claudia find any important or neat things and take. Grugg and Bart will open secret drawer. Then time to go.”

“Yes, Detective.”

“Okay, ser Detective.”

The pair got to task as Grugg knelt by the drawer that the Moonchaser Orb had highlighted. It looked unassuming; it matched the rest of the dark wooden furniture and had a small metal handle with no further markings or details. He placed his hand on the front of it so that the wizard may take a look.

*Hmm. The draw itself is neither locked nor trapped. The magic surrounding the drawer is more of a protective enchantment - like a magic-proof shell. As such, however, I can't see what lies within the drawer.*

Grugg grinned. A drawer filled with something to be kept safe and hidden from magic, in the personal desk of the elusive grand spymaster - it had to be something good! Without hesitation, he pulled it open, his stubby fingers struggling to find a good grip on the human-hand-sized handle dent. He peered into the revealed hiding space.

*Empty?*

But then, a weird feeling suddenly washed over him. Did he feel... tired? No, it wasn't lethargy, but a weakness. Grugg dropped to his knees and leaned against the desk from support as his vision darkened, knocking dust-laden stationery and paperwork to the floor.

“Grugg? Grugg??” Claudia's panicked voice was loud but felt so distant to the cyclops.

‘Hells! He has been cursed... I can't... I - grab the grey ribboned scroll; one of you will have to use it whilst I work, quick!’

Gregor had already started before the wizard had finished the sentence, leaping and sliding across the desk, sending thick gatherings of dust and the remaining paperwork to the floor as he landed next to the Detective. The ratman grabbed and unravelled the spell scroll, licking his lips as his eyes darted over the arcane words.

Grugg felt like he was floating in the night sky, darkness enveloping him. Each star slowly dimmed and went out, just as his limbs increasingly felt numb. There was a burning sensation in his chest, but even that started to fade slowly. And all he could think of, as his brain slowed to a crawl, was...

How dare he?

The burning sensation flared up again.

He had brought his friends down here to risk their lives for justice and glory, and for what? A dried-up foolish corpse and the bones of an ill-thought-out dungeon. Grugg was downright furious. There was a giant skull here! Plus, the dead criminal still thought he could hurt Grugg? He still needed to get his friends out of this place and find answers from the Captain!

The warm energy started to flow to his extremities, and he could feel his fingers ball into a fist as his brow furrowed down on his closed eye.

Bubbles of rage built up in him, and the dark night sky lightened as if the veil was parting and sunlight somehow lit the entire empty universe. With a clenched jaw, he tensed every muscle he could and fought against the inevitable draw of the unending nothingness.

And suddenly, he could breathe again. He gulped down a lungful of the dry, stale air, but it felt lifegiving to his burning lungs. The office of the spymaster was around him again as he lay on the floor face down. Soft hands pawed at his head, trying to turn him. Trying to blink the dust out of his eye, Grugg could see the gloves of Claudia lying on the floor beside him. Pushing himself up to his knees, the clothesmaker hugged onto him, tears running down her face.

‘That was a bit too close for comfort...’

Oddly, the wizard’s voice felt dull in his ears as they slowly regained purchase in the living world. Finally, the Detective turned his gaze to the side to see Gregor leaning against some of the shelves, eyes wide and panting heavily, with a scroll grasped tightly in his clawed hands.

“Maybe Grugg... should have punched Don... after this...” The words came slowly and disjointed, but he put an arm around the sobbing clothesmaker and stumbled awkwardly back to his feet.

‘That was no normal curse; even in my normal body, I don’t think I would have been able to stop that in time.’

“Team effort,” Grugg sighed, sitting against the desk as it creaked in complaint.

*You’ll be weak for a while, friend. The scroll was only the bare minimum to dispel that curse, and I’m a little surprised it was even able to, if I am honest.*

“Next time you plan to die, ser Grugg, could make it less stressful, please.” The ratman dropped the inert spell scroll to the floor and began brushing the lines of dust off of his dark jacket and trousers. Despite the chastising statement, the worried look hadn’t managed to fade from the Deputy’s face yet.

“I agree,” Claudia sniffed, stepping back from the cyclops to wipe her tears on her handkerchief. “It’s supposed to be a blaze of glory, right?” Her relieved smile made Grugg feel a little guilty for making everyone worry so much.

“Grugg having bad time with furniture today,” he shrugged apologetically, the table beneath him squealing a threat to break under him from the movement.

'Whatever the Don had in there, he didn't want someone taking it.'

The Detective looked down towards the drawer, which had remained open. At this moment, he didn't feel much like sticking his hand in there to retrieve whatever was there. In fact, there wasn't anything in there before, but now there clearly was. His previous dislike and distrust of magic was beginning to rear its head once more.

"Is it safe now, ser Hat?" The ratman asked in earnest, giving the wizard a brief allowance of respect.

'There's a strong amount of magical energy coming from there; now that the Magical Shell has been opened, I can sense it. There is too much background noise to tell if it is now inert and that is just residual emanations or if there is still something untoward. I have a higher-level Detect spell I can cast without needing Grugg to touch, but it would leave me mostly drained for-'

"A simple 'maybe' would have sufficed," Gregor rolled his eyes, and the admonishing glare towards the hat returned.

"Don't waste spell," Grugg shook his head and attempted to stand up straight, wobbling as he tried to shake the weakness that lingered within him. He unslung Thud and before anybody had the chance to object, struck at the drawer with a clumsy swing.

A fizzing noise as arcane sparks flew out from the impact between the two magical objects, with the wooden frame of the old drawer relenting and shattering under the weight of the impact. Grugg stumbled forward as he weakly tried not to follow through with the attack, almost stepping on the contents of the exploded furniture.

He stooped down to retrieve an ornately crafted box with inlaid gemstones in a circular pattern on the top. It had some kind of lock with a small, oddly shaped keyhole. Grugg held it out to the Deputy. "Put in bag, deal with later." After Gregor took the box from him, the cyclops grabbed one of the healing potions from his belt and popped the cork. It tasted warm, and the glowing feeling that flowed through him as it worked its way into his system did renew some of his vigour.

*It will only help a little; unfortunately, what you need is a few days of rest - your spirit needs to recover.*

Grugg cast his gaze slowly over the remainder of the room. Anything they had left behind would have to stay that way, their packs were full, and he was tired of the experience. And almost having his life drained away. "Let's go," he grunted and led the party towards the door, to no arguments.

They travelled in silence on the way back through. Skirting around the edge of the dried-up sludge pool Grugg paid no heed to the monster dead within. He stomped, almost tripping, over the books that lay on the floor in the pulp fiction study. Into the Tax Demon room, where the furniture had to be moved from the doorway for them to head back. To his shame, he required the ratman to help him lift the table, the strength in his muscles waning as his physical lethargy caught up with his spiritual exhaustion.

The fire trap room was a breeze now that the flame spouts were still disabled, and the mimic room was also quiet as the pile of dead furniture had sensibly stayed put where it left. Grugg paused at this point and groaned.

“Everything okay?” Claudia asked, putting her hand on his shoulder.

“Grugg told Barry could come home.”

“I’ll deal with him, ser Grugg. Let’s just get you through the sewers.” The Deputy led the way through the back of Barry and turned to face the living door as the others filtered through. “Oh?”

The face that previously filled the entryway was now gone; a simple wooden door sat plainly in the place where Barry had once been.

*‘Odd, but perhaps in our favour.’*

The group continued on into the sewers. Grugg was sad, partly because of his missing new friend but also with having to stoop against the curved tunnels once more was painful. In his weakened state, it took all that he had not to stumble into the flowing muck, which did little but panic Claudia each time as she tried to guide him to stay on the narrow path. A turn and a quick break on the open bridge once again. Some time to stretch and refresh with some water and dried meat.

And then, after a few minutes of pained stumbling more, the air was getting fresher - the sewer outlet was just ahead and opening up to the evening sky. Grugg almost rushed to the edge; as he finally broke through into the outside world once more, the lungful of air was exhilarating - despite it causing him to feel dizzy. Then, throwing caution to the wind, he turned and clambered up the staircase - party members left behind to soak up the cool breeze of the town.

Reaching the top of the stairs in short order, it quickly clicked in his mind that the doorway was unlocked and open, which they had surely closed before heading in. As Grugg topped the steep ascent and lumbered weakly onto the cobbled street, he was very surprised to find a large group of Town Guard present to greet him.

“Detective Grugg,” Patson stepped forward from the group, “You and your team are under arrest.”