

Chapter 54 - Den of the Tiresome

Should we let her in? I guess it would be rude not to since you have already engaged in conversation. But what if it is a trap? I suppose she wouldn't be so blazé with meeting you. So I suppose- oh, you're already-

The front door moved inwards slowly as Grugg squatted down to see the visitor underneath the low doorframe. There, Lady Peony Valoth stood in her usual monochrome outfit. Her wide-brimmed hat offered little protection from the absent sun as the gloomy clouds rolled overhead but bathed her pale face in shadow - aside from the reflective light of her glasses.

"Oh, it you," the cyclops feigned surprise, covering his mouth with his hand.

"I just... Ever the jokester, Detective. It's a wonder you have time to do any investigative work". She crossed her arms and turned her head away with impatience in a manner that reminded Grugg of Gregor.

"If Grugg doesn't understand time, time can't control Grugg," he nodded philosophically.

I think our guest is waiting for you to invite her inside.

It certainly seemed that way. There was no denying that she had knocked on the door intending to enter, and if she had information or questions, then indoors would be better than airing whatever was so important out in public. Still, Grugg stood in the doorway for a few more seconds, blocking the way to see how agitated Lady Valoth would get. It was not even a whole two hands' worth of fingers in seconds before her jaw was clenched, and her foot started tapping.

"Oh, please come in, Big Lady," Grugg bowed as he moved backwards out of the doorway, allowing passage.

"Thank you," she curtly seethed through her teeth, "You could certainly learn some-"

A fuzzy magical barrier hummed as the tall Investigator walked straight into the Magic Locked door, despite it being wide open. The brim of her hat flattened down into her face; she slowly stepped backwards away from the invisible forcefield.

"Careful. Magic Lock," Grugg chuckled quietly to himself as he looked away, silently shuddering in a difficult act of restraint.

Totally an accident. All good now.

The Detective turned back to watch the woman gingerly feel for the barrier on her second attempt at entry, half expecting the Investigator to halt once more. However, the building anticipation fell off, as she had no issue entering the safe house this time. He allowed himself a quick pout before the Lady composed herself and looked in his direction.

"Please seat. Want meat pastry?" Grugg had never had to entertain before - well, the last time he had an unexpected guest, he ended up with blood on his hands. But, so far, it wasn't going as badly as that.

"No, thank you. I am a vegetarian." She sat, hoisting her long black dress folds as she bent.

"Like a goat?"

"No, that's... you know what, sure. We'll be here all day, otherwise."

"Cause goats slow at eatin'," the cyclops nodded thoughtfully. The image of a stocky, gothic goat slowly chewing on a grass cud played in his head.

Peony took off her hat and laid it on the table, the light from the lantern reflecting on her glossy black hair tied up in a tight bun. "Let's just get this over with; talking to you for too long makes my brains want to escape out of my ears."

"Okay," Grugg bit his tongue to avoid blurting out any further unnecessary comments. He had no idea how to fix that kind of ailment; even Bart wouldn't be able to put the brains back in. Plus, if she had helpful information for them, it would be unwise to scare her off with his unprofessionalism.

She must have followed us back to the safehouse, and seeing as we are almost on the same investigation, it doesn't surprise me that we may have shown up in the same places.

The Investigator inhaled deeply and crossed one leg over the other before she began. "As you are aware, we are investigating along the same lines. However, it pains me to admit that you... have made more progress - at least out in the streets." She pulled a pained expression as if the slight compliment tasted sour.

"Grugg punch a few criminals," he agreed, taking up his own offer of meat pastries and stuffing the first in his mouth.

"You seem to have a knack for falling in the right place at the right time," she mused, twisting her gaze away from the masticating cyclops. "The organisation I belong to, Oculi Gladii, knew of the main Nightshade players in Helpart, but not how they were connected to this 'Lord X'."

Oculi Gladii is roughly Eyes of the Swords. Some kind of old-time justice allegory. It does sound a bit more professional than Four-Swords.

"But at least we know there is a middleman now - Blackjack," she continued, her fingers idly playing with the edge of the brim of her hat.

"How know Blackjack?"

She jerked her thumb over towards the noticeboard. "I'm just a good investigator, I suppose."

Grugg's eye moved from the next pastry to the tall woman, then to the noticeboard, before back to the pastry. Despite cooling since the purchase, this one tasted just as good as the others. He would be a little saddened when they ran out. "So what information Lady has?" he asked between mouthfuls, "Want to join teams under Grugg?"

“It wouldn’t be allowed under- I mean, no. It is difficult enough to just a simple conversation out of you; it boggles the mind how you have a small team of your own...”

“Information,” he prompted, gesturing with his fingers for the words to come forth.

“Right. I am sure you are aware there is suspicion that Harold Fersnitch is Gravestone. We happened to know where there is a location he travels to once a fortnight to meet with an out-of-town Nightshade contact.”

And why is she telling us this? Why aren’t they doing the investigating on that end?

Grugg leaned back in his chair and frowned, brushing some of the pastry flakes off of his shorts. The wizard was right; if they were both trying to solve the murder of Harlan, why would Oculi Dia- Dis-, the Eye-Sword people give away a lead?

“I can see the confusion,” Lady Valoth briefly smiled, “The only reason we are allowing you this information is that you are very good at shaking up loose dirt to reveal the wriggling insects beneath.”

Ah, they want us to be the fire in the henhouse, so they can catch the escaping... wait, what was the metaphor again...

The Detective shook his head at all the chickens and bugs the weird wordplay elicited in his overtired head. Why did he get so imaginative the more tired he became? He stroked his chin in contemplation, giving the Investigator the most discerning gaze he could muster. “So, Lady want Grugg to beat up Harold and friends, then Eye-Swords can find where the broken pieces lead?”

“Very astute. Perhaps I should give you more credit. Are you in, then?”

For Grugg, it mainly depended on how tasty the credits were. However, he wasn’t too fussy when it came to food. The presumptive nature of the offer was a little concerning, though. “You think Grugg just big violent cyclops, only good for fighting?”

We are starting to build a bit of a reputation.

“Nothing of the sort,” she shook her head, “Far be it for me to insinuate that your group were known for violent acts of-”

A crash echoed through the house as the front door swung open, rattling on its hinges and casting the dull daylight through the room. A hunched-over Gregor, with what appeared to be a beaten and bloodied man slung over his shoulder, lumbered into the room before meeting the eyes of those seated in conversation.

“Ah, didn’t realise we had guests,” his nose twitched as a nervous smile spread across his sharp teeth.

There is no way that I could reveal myself in front of her, with how connected I am to my own brother's murder investigation. Plus, she already wanted to take me away. You'll just have to reflect my thoughts here, friend. And I want some answers from Gregor!

"Is this... within protocol?" Lady Valoth asked, the concern weighing on her voice as she watched the ratman tie the injured man to one of the chairs.

Gregor shrugged. "They never told me any rules." He cast a sideward glance at the wizard's hat and then back at the Investigator as she continued.

"Probably as they are too busy trying to track down petty thieves who keep stealing food, not to mention an artefact of a visiting noble was recently taken." Her words were cold and levelled, and Gregor's tail lashed back and forth as he glared at the gothic woman with red eyes.

Grugg squatted down beside his Deputy and the now restrained figure. A human male with rough stubble, messy dirty-blond hair that was extra dirty on account of the half-dried blood matting it, and an unhealthy dose of unconsciousness. Whatever simple garb he wore didn't clue the cyclops into where or under what circumstances the ratman had procured the figure.

"In fact, I will take my leave now," she turned away from the ratman slowly, "Before I become party to whatever illegalities are about to take place. Here, Detective." Lady Valoth brought out a round item from inside her jacket and extended it to the crouched cyclops.

Taking the object into his hand, Grugg groaned—another message stone. The likelihood of him sending a message to the wrong person just increased by several degrees.

"Message me when you make your decision. Their next meeting will be a week from yesterday." Peony gave a curt nod and turned to make her exit, pausing after opening the door to ensure that the barrier wouldn't prevent her exit. Thankfully, nothing stopped her as she closed the door behind her after awkwardly shuffling over the precipice.

Grugg tapped the Message stone, causing it to light up. "Knock knock."

No response came, but a long groan could be heard from outside.

I will give it a few minutes to speak in case she hangs around to listen in - ask Gregor what is going on, please!

"Gregor, who this?" the cyclops grinned and nodded at the restrained man as he pocketed the magical communication device.

"No idea," the ratman crossed his arms, "We should find out, though."

"Okay."

What? How is that an answer? And how are you okay with it?

Grugg sat down on the floor by the chair and huffed. His social mana was running low again. If he could just have a bath and some decent sleep, that would be perfect. But their delivery was due sometime soon, and now they had a roughed-up random person tied to a chair for unknown reasons. Rubbing his closed eye, he waited for things to make more sense.

Gregor had walked off to the kitchen as Grugg sat and moped but now returned with a handful of something. Approaching the detainee, he held his hand up under the man's nose. "Hmm, didn't work."

"What you got?" Grugg asked, with his eye half closed still, wanting to get the answer before Bart went on and on about it in his head.

"I heard smelling salt can help wake people up," Gregor shrugged, dusting off the white powder off onto his leggings.

'That's *smelling salts*; it's totally different. How did that man get injured? Why did you bring him here?'

The Deputy folded his arms and glared at the hat. "I injured him, and I couldn't very well interrogate him in the middle of the street, ser Hat." He bared his fangs in a grin and took a crumbled folder out of his jacket. "Should be a bit nicer since I also got you a gift."

He threw the folder to the floor in front of Grugg, who looked down at it so that the wizard could read the text on the light brown cover.

Autopsy Report - Barthélemy Béraud