

## Chapter 43 - Rise of the Thud

The midday sunshine danced between infrequent clouds, their obstruction in passing borne on high winds that were thankfully muted in the town by the presence of the Walpeak mountains in the near distance. Nevertheless, autumn still had a chill grasp on the north of Mubet, despite the lamentations of the star doing its best to beam heat down onto the planet known as Othea.

None of this was of direct import to Detective Grugg as he stomped his way through the residential streets of Helpart. For him, his world was currently the club he had been without for far too many days, and the fact that it may soon be in his grasp once more was the highlight of the day so far. It had only taken the repeated reminders from his confidant and hat, Bart, to remember to grab his steel-capped boots and waistcoat before he had wandered off.

Deputy Detective Gregor had also decided to come along, and was perhaps uncharacteristically comfortable with the continued social activity. The ratman was usually evasive, combative, and solitary. But, whether it had been the healing the wizard had been able to let loose or the events of the past couple of days, the Deputy seemed to at least trust the cyclops now. Plus, walking seemed to be one of the few activities where Gregor would not cross his arms and turn away from the conversation.

*It's a left down this street. No- the other left.*

All in all, it had been a relatively good morning for Grugg. Despite the gurgling of his stomach in protest of the ingested water, the bath was rather lovely. He had gotten to see Claudia and her gift of new clothes. Oh, he probably still owed her some money for all the things she had been doing. And (almost) most importantly - they had gathered their collected information on their current case and got organised.

"Gregor, know anything else interesting with Magic Eye?"

The ratman scratched his chin as if deciding which information to give up. "Well... ser Captain is not part of Nightshade, and it's unlikely Lady Claudia is either. I have done my due diligence."

The Detective nodded, understanding the first sentence at the least. He had suspected the half-orc in passing because it seemed the most prudent thing to do. There was a relief that he could be cleared of those doubts, though. Claudia just seemed too soft-hearted to be into any major crime. Part of him realised that this was a foolish belief to hold when there were so many unknown enemies waiting in the shadows, but he liked to think he was a good judge of character, if only just based on the fact that the friends he had made so far had been great.

"Bart wants to know if Gregor ever use Magic Eye on lumber yard?" the cyclops repeated the question posed telepathically in his head by the wizard.

"No. In truth, I had been using the Eye for mostly selfish reasons until recently when I oversaw some Nightshade in action and realised how much crime infested this town." The

Deputy shook his head and cast a scowl at the nearby buildings, daring them to show him their seedy underbelly.

*It could just be a coincidence, or perhaps Fixion was acting as a recruiting point for the workers there.*

Grugg grunted. In the cold light of day, it seemed so strange to have these mysterious organised crime members just toiling away under the guise of being everyday upstanding citizens. In all the stories he had been told as a child, the villain was always outwardly brazen and unconcerned about doing their nefarious deeds out in the open. Of course, they often wanted to raid your food storage too, which he was starting to realise was perhaps mostly a cyclops-centric issue.

“You seem distracted, ser Grugg.”

“Hmph,” the cyclops huffed and stood still. Then, casting his eye around them, he took in the sights. “Something feels... odd.”

The street they were on looked like any other as they reached the end of the residential section of the town. Cobbled stone ran like a river between the dark wooden houses, the dark recesses of the windows like the small holes insects would make in the bark of a felled tree. It was quiet but not unnaturally so. The whispered murmurs of conversations played in the background, most people either out at work or settling in for their lunch at this point in the day.

*Other than the three of us, I am not sensing any magical presence.*

“Must’a been the wind,” the Detective sniffed before continuing onwards with a shrug.

Gregor tightened the grip on the handle of his whip as he gave the same questioning glare around the street, walking backwards behind the cyclops. His nose twitched as he stood unblinking. The picturesque scene did little except look as innocent as it could, so the ratman turned back to catch up to Grugg.

The rest of the journey into the commerce district went as uneventful as hoped, with just two brief stops before reaching the forge. First, to buy some candles at Bart’s request, and then to pick up some food for the afternoon. Grugg relinquished some of the loose coins from his new belt pouch in exchange for the largest chunks of dried meat the butcher had.

Eventually, they found themselves back at the familiar building where Thud had been under repair. Indeed, the sound of a hammer striking metal was easily heard way before they reached the open doorway, with Gregor wincing every time the loud clang reverberated out.

“Knock knock,” Grugg almost yelled, eye already darting around the workshop to see if his club was done and awaiting him.

Marge was working on the anvil, the bright glow of the forge illuminating her red hair and beard with an amber glow. The dwarf put down the hammer and wiped the sweat from her forehead with a rather dirty cloth, smearing soot and oil atop her brow. Vana did not seem to

be present; currently, the desk where she usually sat was empty and cold looking in comparison to the forge.

“Ah, Detective! We were starting to get worried about yer till the Guard... ah-Patson, I think? He came round this mornin’,” Marge grinned and then caught sight of the Deputy. “Oh, you have brought a friend. Who is this cutie then?”

The ratman crossed his arms and turned away from the conversation, looking towards the floor.

“Gregor is Deputy Detective,” Grugg grinned, “Best one Grugg knows.”

“Well, you’re going to need all the help you can get if what I am hearing is correct.”

The Detective nodded. “Lots of Nightshade, and they are not fan of Grugg.”

“It has been awkward. After the fight was cancelled, and they have seen you coming in here...”

*Hopefully, we haven't gotten them in any trouble, or... are we now in more trouble?*

“Nightshade threaten you? Where Vana? Is Marge going to stop Grugg?” The cyclops furrowed his brow and

“No! No to all of those questions. Well, I mean, Vana is okay. She just has the afternoon off today. We aren’t being accused of anything, but we had our invitation cancelled, and they did warn us if anything was traced back to us...” The dwarf trailed off and looked back to the forge, the light slightly dimmer than previously.

“Four-Sword Private Eyes will keep you safe, lady,” Gregor stated, still turned away from the pair, head down.

“Aye, I’m sure of it,” a smile developed between her messy facial hair, “I guess we’d better keep you safe too.” With this, she turned and made her way out to the back. A clang as metal objects clattered to the floor, followed by some muffled dwarven cursing, before Marge returned with Thud in her hands.

The club certainly looked a lot better than when he had left it here. A new cap made of polished steel covered a good foot or so at the head of the club, a slight carved groove near the top and bottom circumference to give it a small bit of detail, and a similar smaller cap at the base of the weapon. The green wood gave off a clean, bright shine that reflected the amber glow of the forge. Most impressive of all however, was the Moonchaser Orb, now set properly in a recess in the steel cap, small prongs of metal stopping it from escaping its new home.

Grugg was almost speechless, and he held his hands up to his face as his mouth hung agape with only an excited tone emanating from within.

*Very impressive work; now that is quite the upgrade for Thud, huh?*

“This wood is something else, very durable... and I don’t know - it’s kinda not like any wood I’ve ever used,” Marge shrugged, still somewhat perplexed by the odd material. “But, I gave it a lacquer that should prevent some wear and weathering. Steel caps, I added one at the bottom too, so that splits in the wood shouldn’t cause functional failure - if it even can split. And yer magic ball is placed inside a proper setting, flush, so it doesn’t get caught on anything.”

The cyclops took the club into his hands, eye brimming with glee. It was certainly heavier with the adjustments done, and the steel cap was a substantial upgrade compared to what was probably some inferior alloy previously. It was not too unwieldy for him though, having lived in the mountains where climbing and lifting things was part of everyday life. Nevertheless, Grugg resisted the urge to give it a few test swings, the enclosed environment not likely to withstand an errant impact with the weighty weapon.

“Vana usually deals with the books,” the red-haired dwarf scratched her forehead, drawing clean lines through the grime. “As I doubt you’re about to skip town, come by tomorrow when she is at work. She can go through whatever was arranged.”

Grugg nodded but was too invested in beaming at his club to really be paying attention. Instead, his large, single eye widened to take in all the new shapes and minute details of Thud, the way it reflected the light. They had even added a pointed oval groove shape around the Moonchaser Orb to make it look like an eye! Thud was truly part of the team now... although he wouldn’t want to be Five-Swords. He supposed that as long as Thud couldn’t talk, then he wouldn’t count.

*We should order more things here whilst we can.*

The Detective was startled a little, as his brain first thought that Thud had spoken to him before realising it was just the wizard’s voice. He nodded to himself as the hat relayed some items to ask for before he looked back towards the dwarf, tearing his eyes away from the shiny club.

“Could Grugg also order some new things? Need: Message stone holders for belt, Alarm stone holder, a light shield, couple of daggers, and some cop-per-wire.”

“The holders shouldn’t take too long; I can fit them in at the end of today if you want to pick them up tomorrow? Daggers and a shield, a lot of our stock goes down to the Greyjoy Emporium - that’d be your best bet.” Marge paused and stroked her scraggly beard, “Copper wire, I have a spool I can chuck you, it’s mostly empty but it depends on how much you need?”

*A small amount is fine.*

Grugg nodded as the smith went to retrieve the spool of wire. He awkwardly tried to fit Thud into his old sling that he had saved, and with no small amount of effort, it finally sat into place on his back. A mote of frustration sat in the back of his mind that his Deputy hadn’t attempted to help him, with the ratman still facing away, head down.

Marge returned and handed the cyclops the small spool of wire. "Always a pleasure, Detective, Deputy, but I must return to the Forge now lest it becomes grumpy with me for not paying it enough attention." She paused as if expecting a response and turned to the empty desk with a sigh. "Ah, I miss the snappy comments sometimes, but don't tell the little harpy I said that." Then, with a smile and a nod, she returned to the anvil and picked up her hammer.

"Bye, Marge, thanks again!" Grugg waved as they left, almost having to push the ratman forward out of the workshop.

Gregor turned his head as they made their way out, glancing back at the dwarf with pitch-black eyes that were gradually returning to their normal colour. A humourless grin spread across his fangs as he spoke.

"I'm sure we will see you again soon."